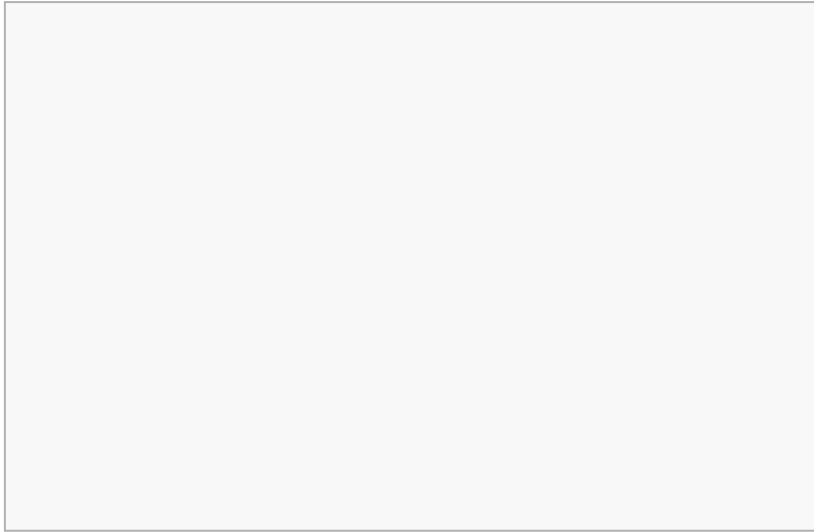


No. 12, November 2008

**State of the States:  
Mapping India's Northeast**  
*Bhagat Oinam*



East-West Center  
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East-West Center  
Washington



## State of the States: Mapping India's Northeast

On June 18, 2001, a huge mass agitation took place in the state of Manipur against the extension of ceasefire between the Government of India (GoI) and the Isaak Muivah faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM) to all the Naga inhabited areas in the region. The agitation was triggered by a subclause in the agreement which read that the ceasefire between the two parties would no longer be confined to the state of Nagaland but would be extended "without territorial limits." This meant that the ceasefire between the two parties would operate in the Naga inhabited areas of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and Manipur. Naga insurgent groups, civil society organizations, and the political leadership (Nagaland State Assembly) have been demanding a merger of "Naga inhabited areas" of these three states into a "Greater Nagaland." Greater Nagaland also aims at merging the "Naga inhabited" northwestern part of Myanmar into its projected political boundary. Within the Indian territory, the

state of Manipur is likely to be the worst affected. Hence, while a lot of disenchantment echoed from the states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, the state of Manipur experienced the largest amount of protest interspersed with violence. In spite of a state curfew, the agitation spread from the Imphal East and Imphal West districts, to the Bishenpur and Thoubal districts, encompassing the entire valley of Manipur. The protests started on June 15, one day after the agreement was signed, and intensified on June 18 when thirteen agitators lost their lives after being fired by the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel near the Chief Minister's bungalow to disperse a mob that attacked the Chief Minister's residence. The governor's bungalow was also targeted in a failed effort. Several state buildings and government properties were torched and turned to ashes. Among these were the State Legislative Assembly and offices of some political parties. More than 20 quarters of Members of Legislative Assembly (MLAs) and Members of

Parliament (MPs) were also destroyed. Two MLAs suffered severe burn injuries. The Speaker of the State Assembly, Dhnanjoy Singh, was beaten up and garlanded with shoes. Effigies of not only the Central political leaders were burnt but the Indian flag was burnt and trampled. In its place, a seven-color flag representing Manipur was hoisted.

In the next few days, different ethnic groups like Rongmei Naga, Hmar, Paite, Vaiphei, Kuki, Maring, Nepali, and Manipuri Muslim, etc. joined the protest. Liangmei Naga Students' Union, however, supported the ceasefire extension. There were also other Naga groups that supported the ceasefire. These supporters threatened many Naga bodies who joined the protests. By June 26, Manipuris in Assam and Tripura joined the protests and showed solidarity. Manipuris in Bangladesh started rallies at Sylhet. Nonresident Manipuris in the United Kingdom (UK) joined the protest and created "Save Manipur Association" on July 2 in London. Other ethnic groups in other states such as Dimasha in Hafflong joined the protest. NSCN-K declared that NSCN-IM did not have the people's mandate. On June 29, the All Assam Students Union (AASU) threatened to intensify the protests against the extension of the ceasefire. Eminent personalities in the fields of sports, art and culture declared their intention to return the national awards. The well-known theatre personality, Ratan Thiyam, returned his Padma Shree award to the GoI. Union Home Minister of State, I.D. Swami, arrived in Manipur on July 5 and began consultations on the territorial issue with political parties, civil society groups, and ethnic community representatives. With the situation deteriorating I.D. Swami was airlifted from the Governor's bungalow to the Imphal airport and finally to New Delhi. RSS also pledged to protect the territorial integrity of Manipur. MPLF, the joined body of three insurgent organizations PLA, UNLF, and PREPAK (which is of course non-functional today) on July 24 reaffirmed its resolve to continue

liberation struggle against the Indian state and protect the territorial integrity of Manipur. In the state of Manipur attacks on local MLAs and political offices continued. Finally, on July 27 the GoI unilaterally rolled back the Truce Extension leading to normalcy of life amidst protest from NSCN-IM and several Naga organizations.

This event is a landmark in the history of Northeast India, highlighting the complex nature of the region, and the political dynamics that involves the communities, states and also the Indian state. The burning of Indian flag and hoisting of the Manipuri seven-color flag was seen as resurrection of Manipur's old national pride. It was also seen by many as handiwork of some insurgent groups entering the mass agitation in disguise. But little did this section of agitators realize that the seven colors only represent seven clans of the majority Meitei community and thus could not be expected to represent the ethnically diverse people of Manipur. Further, there was no earlier record of the use of this flag during the preceding British colonial period. It certainly seems it was an invention by some of the Meitei nationalists. It was an attempt to reinvent a past—an old heritage of the kingdom of Manipur—destroyed by the British but the act of destruction continued by the Indian state. While Manipur has a long recorded history as a sovereign kingdom, the memory of this past is marked by symbols and narratives that are very much present. There is nothing unique about this enterprise; it only shows how history (of a community) is written (Ricoeur 1994: 127). Creation of a new Bharat in the India during the later part of British colonial rule is a well-known phase in Indian historiography. Similarly, creation of the seven-color flag is one such invention. But what is of immediate importance is that this invention is the outcome of a sentiment of anger from the sense of the loss of the past, and was largely witnessed among many sections of the protestors of Manipur. The GoI was seen as a villain—as the source of all the menace. It is this sentiment that was shaped

into a politically structured form in the voices of the insurgent organizations in the region. If one looks at how the insurgency started in the states of Nagaland, Manipur or Assam, even though the emergence of the phenomena may vary from one social dynamic to another, one still invariably finds an undercurrent of defiance of a lingering colonial force. There is also a lurking belief that by freeing oneself from this colonial yoke, one can recover one's "lost past." This defiance and insurgence is a major crisis that the region is currently faced with. The target invariably is the Indian state. Even the regional states and their governments are seen as an extension of the Indian state. The violent protests of June 18, largely targeted against Manipur's political leadership, clearly show this perception. The expectation from the local politicians was that they, being the leaders of the regional state, must stand up to the Union government in interest of the people. The government had failed the people. Why they failed is a difficult question, one beyond the comprehension of the local politicians.

Another major highlight is the internal tension among different ethnic groups, which became overtly manifested. While most of the Naga civil society organizations hailing from the hill districts were in favor of the ceasefire extension, many in the valley and the adjoining areas opted to join the majority Meitei in protesting against the ceasefire extension. The event not only sharpened the hills-valley divide but also highlighted internal dynamics generated by the logic of survival and co-existence (Oinam 2002). The smaller ethnic groups (Nagas included) in the valley were quick to join the protests largely due to fear that majority community, the Meitei, may see them as taking side with NSCN-IM and the GoI. In fact, many Nagas fled Nagaram and Dewlahland in the heart of Imphal city out of fear of a possible Meitei backlash. However, not a single instance of interethnic violence was reported. The protests remained invariably disciplined. The violence was targeted only towards the state

and its machineries. In the similar vein, civil society groups in the hills where NCSN-IM has its stronghold came out sharply against Meitei chauvinism and dominance. They criticized the GoI for succumbing to the pressure by the Meiteis. The divide of the peoples on ethnic line came out openly.

The two types of crises;—(i) of responding to the challenges questioning the legitimacy of the Indian state by the non-state (insurgent) forces, and (ii) of handling the ethnic conflicts and political claims on ethnic line—have emerged in the form of challenges to the Indian state as well as the regional states.

To elaborate the first point, the status of the Indian state as a politically legitimate state that possesses the region and represents the people has been questioned by all of the insurgent and separatist organizations. Their modes of protest range from armed struggle to seeking diplomatic support from the international communities. For instance, NSCN-IM has gained membership of the steering committee of the UNPO. RPF submitted representations to the Decolonization Committee of the United Nations on December 11, 1996. RPF, the political organization of PLA, also attended sessions organized by the United Nations Group on Indigenous People. Even several civil society groups and some academia have questioned the legal and constitutional validity of the Indian state in the region citing historical reasons and interpreting political events through international legal framework.<sup>1</sup> Narratives that come out prominently are about Nagaland and Manipur. Naga rebel leaders starting from Angami Zapu Phizo have been stating that Nagas became independent from the British one day before India. Gandhi stated that if Nagas wanted to stay separate, they were free to do so. A referendum stating that 100 percent of Nagas wanted to remain an independent country was summarily rejected by the new independent India who with its military might annexed Nagaland into India. Protestors in

Manipur, too, trace the history of protest to the Communist leader Irabot Singh, who rebelled against Manipur becoming part of India. This was followed by forced annexation of Manipur into India in 1949 where Maharaja Bodhachandra was made to sign the Merger Agreement under duress. However, the major reversing of the trend of questioning the legitimacy of the Indian state has come from the NSCN-IM, once the strongest among the insurgent organizations in the region. After a decade long peace negotiation with the GoI that started in 1997, NSCN-IM has recently extended the truce on July 31, 2007 into “without any time limit” and seems to have somehow reconciled with the fate of history. It has also recognized India as a sovereign entity whose presence in the region is to be accepted in principle. This may be seen as a major setback to the secessionist movement and a gain for the GoI.

The second challenge is addressing the grievances of the ethnic communities, which have often become manifested in civil or political societies. Increasing manifestation of civil and political societies into the public domain, either targeting one or the other ethnic group, or the state, is visibly witnessed today. The conflicts in pair, say between Nagas and Kukis, Hmars and Dimashas, Dimashas and Karbis, Tangkhuls and the Nagas of Nagaland, Bodos and the tea tribes, Assamese and Bengalis, not only seems to increase but also getting sharper.

In the light of these challenges, the need to renew the questions on state structure in India has been strongly felt. Most of the political protests in the Northeast, both violent and democratic, have been directed towards the state—either as refusal to accept the legitimacy of the existing state(s) or protest against nonperformance of the state(s). Unless these aspects of dissent are addressed, studying about the functioning of regional governments will remain partial and limited. The conflicts generated by grievances and protests are manifested in various forms. These are driven either by the issues relating

to land and territoriality, political representation and administrative control, or population influx and loss of demographic equilibrium. While the issue of migration has rocked Assam, ethnicity and representation are major problems in Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura. The claim for autonomy is often on ethnic line. Take for instance Karbi Autonomous District Council and Bodo Autonomous District Council in Assam, Bru Autonomous District Council in Mizoram, or Kangpokpi District Council in Manipur. The issue of land and territoriality is a major contention for almost all the ethnic communities in the region. Economic criteria hardly find a place in these claims except highlighting economic interests of the claimant communities. Rather, what has developed in the entire region is a political economy that is guided by a client-patron relationship (Dev 2006: 194). But contrary to Dev, I see it as leading towards emergence of a parasitic elite class who further perpetuate the policy of subsidies and grants through a false idea of “development.” The result is a subservient economy has thus been generated that cannot visualize the conception of “self-sustenance.” This has led to adopting the dream model of development as vertically defined leading to environmental destruction and erosion of traditional worldviews and polity.

The crises in the region may be mapped through what I would call “crises of the receiving communities.” The receiving communities of the Northeast have not been able to negotiate with the packages of modernity induced by the colonial administration. The two major crises as highlighted above are largely impacted by the kind of negotiation these communities are engaged with. This applies equally to the Indian subcontinent as a whole. An explanation through “derivative discourse”<sup>2</sup> might lead us to better understand the crises.<sup>3</sup> The state of the Indian state in its northeastern region as manifested in the functioning of the Union and regional governments is marked by paradoxes of



democracy and federalism that a modern liberal state in the developing world is likely to encounter. For a country like India with its vast multiethnic, multilingual, and multinational population, and divides and aspirations, a successful blending of democracy and citizenship alongside ethnicity as lived experience of various collective ethnoses is a daunting task. The tussle between these two supposedly incompatible sides has generated much of the crises in the region in different manifest forms. One manifestation is visibly witnessed between the state and its antithesis, the non-state (insurgents). The other manifest is the ethnic crisis as is already highlighted above. The widening hold of invisible forces behind the crises lies amidst the visible violence.

### **Some Methodological Concerns**

At the outset what may appear to the readers is a possible highlight of how the eight regional states have individually performed during the crises. It is reasonable for one to argue that the state of affairs in the region cannot be understood by negating the regional states/governments. To be meaningful, a study on the region should be state-centric, not just in terms of merely seeing states as machines for governance but as sites of power. If this is to be accepted, it throws a greater challenge on understanding the region. However, let me pose the challenge through a supposedly intriguing question: How far can regional states of the Northeast be considered as sites of power independent of the Indian state?

Let me take up two cases to put the above questions into a proper perspective. Though law and order is a state subject, the Center has all the power to intervene and bypass the regional state governments. The first case is: (i) state government can declare an area as a "Disturbed Area" consequently upon which Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) is in operation in those "disturbed areas," and (ii) the Center can also through the Governor of the state declare an area within the state as "disturbed" by virtue of which AFSPA is

brought into operation and military sent in to deal with the internal unrest. During the time when Justice Reddy Committee was reviewing AFSPA, the Meghalaya government came out categorically that some parts of the state adjoining Assam were declared "disturbed" and AFSPA introduced without the knowledge of the Meghalaya government. This shows where the real site of power lies.

The second case is more intriguing and shows the operation of power at the time of confrontation between the Center and state forces. In June 2007, violence escalated between two insurgent organizations, UNLF and Kuki National Army (KNA), which was the culmination of a covert tension building up for quite some time. The reasons are clear. One, the route through Moreh that opens up to Myanmar, and further to China and Southeast Asia is a gateway to international trade. It is a site of contest among insurgent organizations trying to acquire maximum monetary benefits out of the trade. The infamous Naga-Kuki clash started from this Moreh town out of tussle for supremacy between insurgent groups representing the two communities. Two, KNA, which is largely based in Myanmar is outlawed by the Myanmar government. But it also operates on the Indian side, often taking (informal) support from the Assam Rifles. UNLF, which is mainly based in India, is outlawed by the Indian government but receives informal support from the Myanmar army and partly operates in Myanmar. A politics of power equation operates between the four parties. Three, tussle for control of territory between the two insurgent outfits in terms of areas of operation has led to escalation of tension. These led to a fight between KNA and UNLF with each group targeting the sympathizers of the opponent camp. In June 2007, a pregnant Kuki lady married to a Meitei (an ex-cadre of UNLF) was killed by KNA with her stomach cut open and fetus taken out. In UNLF retaliation, a Kuki lad, supposedly an innocent victim, turned out to be one among the Kuki victims. In response, KNA beheaded six

innocent Meitei laborers. A spark of tension was generated leading to fleeing of the Meitei and other minority communities from the Moreh into Naphalong in Myanmar. Instead of taking control of the situation, Assam Rifles gave shelter to the KNA cadres. Manipur government sent a battalion of IRB, which was attacked by the KNA cadres, who later fled into Assam Rifles barrack. On the contrary, the Assam Rifles refused entry to IRB personnel chasing these KNA cadres. A situation developed where IRB was almost ready to confront the Assam Rifles. To their surprise, IRB was withdrawn from the site under the pretext that they were hand-in-gloves with the UNLF. The whole episode shows the irony of (i) the role of the Indian Central forces as well as (ii) the tussle for power between the Central government forces and the state government forces.

These cases take us right to the heart of the debate on democratic federalism on the location of power and legitimacy between the Central/Federal and regional governments. The issue gets complicated in the case of the Indian state structure where constitutionally it uses the term "quasi-federal" to describe its structure of governance. Though the Indian constitution proclaims itself partly federal and partly unitary, the latter has taken over the former in the span of the last sixty years of the country's postindependence existence. The above instances are only illustrations to highlight the site of a unitary power structure.

The site of power is also visible in the functioning of the Central government, particularly in invoking of Article 356. In its different historical existence as part of India, states of the Northeast have, for instance, faced the wrath of Article 356 being invoked several times. Instances could be made of the states of Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, etc. In the case of Manipur during 1972–2002, the state has experienced President's rule seven times with change of chief ministership on eighteen occasions. This is in the backdrop that there ought to have been exactly six assembly terms during this period. It is only in

post 2002 that a frequent fall of governments has been checked by the Anti-Defection Law. That is how Chief Minister Okram Ibobi Singh of Manipur got his second term. While political stability in terms of reducing frequent change of governments has been ensured to a large extent, the seed of instability and indifference sowed during 1949 is showing its result today. Since 1949 instability in the minds and spirits of the political leadership had started taking its natural course.

To understand this phenomenon, one needs to look at the historical trend set on October 15, 1949 when the kingdom of Manipur was merged into India. Since then the control of the Central government over the state of Manipur has been overwhelming and complete. A look at these fifty-eight years of Manipur's existence in India shows how a maturing polity has been reduced to a mostly backward, corrupt and politically volatile state. Seeing the present state of affairs, it is hard to believe that the state of Manipur first exercised its adult franchise way back in 1948 under the Manipur State Constitution Act 1947, a couple of years ahead of what the Republic of India practiced. The most humiliating story for the people of Manipur is that such an old Asiatic State was reduced to a Part C State after it was forcibly merged into the Indian dominion. Taken as an "infant" into the world of modern political values, Manipur was promoted to the status of a Union Territory in 1963. The goodwill finally prevailed over the GoI when it thought fit to further promote Manipur into a full-fledged state in 1971, exactly nine years after Nagaland got statehood. But the real game of politicking started when the first state government run by the regional party, MPP, was brought down in 1971 through horse-trading and the President's rule was imposed. The subsequent election in 1972 again saw MPP coming to power, which was again brought down by the ruling Congress party at the Center. This act of the Central government showed how the Indian state summarily subdued the general will of the people. It not

only snubbed the democratic voices of the people of their regional aspirations, but also destroyed the process of democratization in the state. Several ruptures in the process of democratization starting from 1949 have completely corrupted the political institutions destroying the practice of democracy. Money, muscle power, nepotism, and favoritism have finally become the password of state politics. Stability in terms of checking frequent changes of government has not been able to contain corruption and mal-governance. In fact, it is extremely hard to imagine undoing a political culture that has slowly developed over decades. It will require a more persistent and concerted effort to change such a culture.

The trend of failing democracy has also been witnessed in the states of Mizoram, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. Even though one may argue that democracy was never practiced in these states, the thrust of my position is that democratic polity was never allowed to take a start in these states at the first place. Take the case of Mizoram. Mizoram has experienced the wrath of the Congress Party played through then chief minister of Assam, Mr. Chaliha, to destroy the regional aspirations of the Mizos. The pro-Congress Mizo Union, which was claiming for the statehood of Mizoram was subdued through partisan politics by encouraging Laldena, the leader of Mizo National Front (MNF). Later, not only the Mizo Union was merged into Congress but several divisive politics was played onto Peoples Conference and MNF. Several local politicians were lured of power and privileges if Mizoram was turned into a Congress ruled state. Nagaland too experienced the wrath of President Rule with democratic governments being dissolved and Governor made the administrator. State of emergency was declared several times.

The invoking of Article 356 is not only exclusive to the northeastern states. The states of Jammu and Kashmir, and the southern state of Tamil Nadu have faced the wrath of the Center. Though this is often seen by many as largely due to the tussle for power between

political parties, a deeper surge of political consciousness was influencing the functioning of political leadership at the Center where fear of a possible disintegration of the country was, and is still is, large. The fear is generated with certain conception of "regional party" as an other than being Indian. DMK, National Conference, People's Democratic Party (PDP), Manipur Peoples Party, Mizo National Front, Asom Gana Parishad are parties seen to carry the tag of "otherness."

Considering the unitary character of free India as it has unfolded in the last sixty years of its existence, it would be important to clearly delineate between what we call "governments" (in plural), implying both the Central/Union/Federal government and regional/state governments, as distinct from the "Indian state." In many places, the term "regional states" implies the regional governments as administrative units rather than regional states as power centers as may be thought of in an ideal federal state structure. As the term "state" though has been used interchangeably, one needs to focus sharply on the context under which it is shown as either meaning "state as power center" or "government as institutional mechanism." The two, of course, are invariably linked. But differences between the two need to be delineated as well for the sake of understanding the Indian state structure and its responses to the Northeast. This is required as the crises and remedial measures of the state(s) are directly or indirectly linked to the capacity and role of the state governments. While the Central and regional state governments operate separately as distinct administrative entities, "state" as holding the legitimate power structure has remained concentrated with the Indian state with very little sense in talking of "regional states" as the sites of power. What is being described by the term "regional state" is the regional/state government as institution of administration or governance representing the Indian state. This distinction, though obvious, needs a reminder particularly keeping in view

India's complex state structure of being termed as quasi-federal, and more so towards understanding the political dynamics of the Northeast India.

### **State of Affairs, State Responses, and the Limits**

Broadly, I see two types of challenges to the Indian state in the region: insurgency and ethnic strife. Even challenges to development of the region are seen under the policy of counterinsurgency. While insurgency becomes the major concern for both the Indian state and its regional states, ethnic strife turns out to be the recurrent problem for all the regional states without exception. Insurgency in the region directly confronts the legitimacy of the Indian state in the region. All the nonstate forces that include insurgent/extremist organizations and several bodies of civil and political societies have been raising protests against the Indian state under different capacities through armed rebellion and democratic voices, respectively. The twin protests have made the nature of this antistate stance complex and difficult to handle. On the other hand, ethnic strife with different textures and targets seems to head towards the balkanization of the region. Claims for autonomy and territorial administrative units based on ethnic line have threatened to destabilize the existing state boundaries towards possible new configurations. This means a loss of legitimacy of the present state governments though the newly claimed configurations may be to the advantage of few existing governments and detrimental to few others.

I shall put the other related issues such as national security and militarization, illegal migration, deteriorating economy, development, etc. under either of these two broad categories of challenges. Take, for instance, militarization of the region under the concern for national security. I would see this concern largely propagated by the Home and Defense establishments of the country within the larger

challenge thrown up by the secessionist movements. It is the fear over possibility of the country disintegrating that the thesis on national security becomes a significant discourse. Thus, the challenge before the Indian state is to overcome the tussle between itself and the nonstate forces. Another instance of migration may be taken up as a part of the larger concern over ethnic strife. Illegal migration of Bangladeshis (particularly the Muslims) leading to a major shift in the demographic composition of Assam has been seen by many as a threat to ethnic equilibrium in the state. While Assam's experience of ethnic strife is very complex, the experience of ethnic violence between the Nagas and the Kukis in the early part of the 1990s spreading over several states in the region can be seen as a case where migration and occupation of new land for habitation and subsistence could lead to a clash of interest over ownership. I would see this twin issue of migration and land within the larger discourse of ethnic strife that challenges the existing states in the region.

### **Challenges from the Nonstate Forces**

#### *Canvas of the Challenges*

The major threat to the Indian state in the region has come from the secessionist movement. The movement has gained strength and visibility from its capability to inflict violence on a large scale leading to the destruction of life and property, both to the state and the individuals. Since Home Affairs is a "state subject," regional states largely carry the legal responsibility to handle the crises. But the police forces of the regional governments have been extremely inadequate, both in terms of arms strength and skill to counter insurgency. This has led to a large number of Central paramilitary and military forces being deployed jointly by the Central government and the respective regional states. In spite of large scale positioning of defense forces at major sensitive locations, the movement garnered by around twenty active insurgent groups has kept insurgency alive in

the entire region.

Though I have used the term "movement" in the singular, it is not homogenous. The region has witnessed different forms of insurgent movements either guided by ethnic nationalism, ideological predilection, or operational pragmatism. The Kangleipak Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL), for instance, strongly believes in Meitei nationalism. It believes not only in a strong Meitei consciousness, but also in the coexistence of several such consciousness in the state of Manipur centering around the Meitei nationalist ethos. Similar but slightly "broader" in outlook is the UNLF aspiration for a pan-Manipuri identity and consciousness. UNLF's Central Committee Annual Statement, 2006, highlights the aims for a strong Manipur that accommodates coexistence of different ethnic communities, identities and beliefs is a major highlight among the positions held by important secessionist outfits in the region. In spite of such a declaration, UNLF is still seen as a Meitei nationalist organization that believes in subsuming smaller communities under the Meitei ambit. Recent episode of violence in the Moreh town of Manipur in June 2007 which nearly led to ethnic clash between the Kuki and Meitei reflects deep rooted hatred that lies covert in sections of Kuki population, particularly among the Kuki insurgents. The way in which UNLF has been projected of its high handedness and asserting Meitei chauvinism, though possibly mere propaganda, needs to be taken seriously. This is keeping in view that such charges are recurring in recent times. Earlier, Hmar groups had charged UNLF cadres of raping their village women in Parbung and Lungthulien. UNLF has countered these charges as a nefarious design of the Indian army played through sections of opportunist tribal civil society groups. However, the seriousness of the charges intensifies when such episodes become recurrent and protesting voices increase. United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) is also built on

Assamese nationalist ethos. But over the last few decades, Assamese identity has undergone a major shift leading to the loss of form of Assamese national consciousness. Today, Assamese national identity has become extremely amorphous, with ULFA's concerns largely guided by operational pragmatism. The linguistic nationalism upon which Assamese nationalism is built is facing a major crisis in terms of accommodation and redefinition of Assamese national character.

On the other hand, PLA is driven by the Left ideological predilection, and is projected as the only insurgent organization guided by the Communist doctrine. The present sharing of camps between PLA and NSCN-IM in parts of Nagaland and Manipur is seen as tactical move by the former to point toward its ideology to respect pluralist ethos. However, those who study insurgent movements from a close quarter see this as the organizations' loss of ground both militarily as well as ideologically. NSCN-IM is known for its political pursuit for a greater Nagaland that implies disintegration of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur. PLA's belief in a collective struggle against Indian imperialism to bring about a successful revolution in the region by all the secessionist organizations, including NSCN-IM, is yet to be tested at the face of varying conflicting goals of these organizations. While PLA also tries to share a larger communist platform along with former Peoples War Group (PWG) in Central India, it is yet to be seen how well it marries Manipuri nationalism of PLA's freedom struggle with the larger ethos of communist fraternity.

Often the ideological basis of the right to secede from India is founded on the conception of the right to self-determination. To support this position, historical distinctiveness of the communities and region as different from India as a nation state has been propounded. Naga's right to self-determination is built on the uniqueness of its history and life world very different from India. Manipur's right to self-determination too is built on the historical foundation of its

civilizational ethos, which was militarily overpowered by the independent India. An oft-cited example is of the UN declaration on East Timur's independence. Though the UN declaration on East Timur came much later than the claims of these organizations, the argument was used more as tactical reason to draw legitimacy of their long struggle. However, this was short lived since UN later put limitations to necessary linkages between the right to self-determination and right to secede. In spite of these checks and balances, the right to self-determination continues to remain the ideological basis to legitimize protests and demands by these insurgent organizations. Even the civil bodies in the region follow suit.

Operational pragmatism can be commonly seen among the smaller organizations, though many larger organizations, too, fall victim. Zomi Republican Army (ZRA), Hmar Peoples' Convention (HPC), Kuki National Army (KNA), Kuki Liberation Army (KLA), Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA), United Kuki Liberation Front (UKLF), Peoples United Liberation Front (PULF), etc. are largely guided by operational pragmatism. Though each of these organizations represents one or another specific ethnic group or section of an ethnic group, it is the pragmatics of bargaining for arms operation and material benefits, more than ethnic nationalism, that have shaped the identities of many of these organizations. ZRA, for instance, which was formed in 1997 to fight against Indian imperialism is currently under a tacit understanding with the Indian army to undergo ceasefire. So is the KNA, which was the main brain behind the recent spurt of June violence in Moreh. KRA and KLA also follow suit. While these groups have separately gone for an informal ceasefire with the Indian army, more recently forming a front for themselves under the aegis of United Peoples Front (UPF), they are in turn being used by the Indian state through this unholy alliance

However, it is not only the state, which uses the smaller insurgent outfits, but also the

larger insurgent groups that are not free from playing this game of appropriation. NSCN-IM is known for guiding, controlling, and dictating the terms with smaller insurgent outfits. It successfully keeps PLA under its ambit giving shelter and arms. It has been reported that the organization supported and armed ZRA during and after the Kuki-Paite clash. It has also armed several Kuki outfits, but has dictated terms even leading to killings and massacres. The recent killing of 10 KLA cadres by the NSCN-IM at Litan area of Ukhrul district in Manipur is a case in point. Though NSCN-IM has justified the act as a way to check KLA menace, there are serious speculations that these may be result of a failed pursuit to settle Naga villages in and around the Moreh town. Also an earlier case of NSCN-IM using Karbi militants against the Dimasha has been reported during the Karbi-Dimasha clash. Another larger organization, UNLF, has also tried its ways to encourage and support smaller organizations like PREPAK, ZRA, HPC, etc. But this tactical move has largely backfired with many of these organizations today campaigning against UNLF.

Often the smaller organizations are either helpless or less aware of their being used by the bigger organizations or the state. The state in its counterinsurgency drive not only uses them as vehicle, but these organizations are themselves target of the state. Generating of infighting among these organizations often resulting in ethnic clashes is part of the design of the state. These smaller organizations have not ventured hard enough to go for political negotiation with the Home Ministry of the GoI, but picks up negotiation with the Indian army driven by the immediacy of pragmatism. By these tacit agreements, not only these organizations have de-legitimized themselves but have also given extra legitimacy to the army.

Even larger organizations like ULFA are not free from confusion between ethnic nationalism and operational pragmatism. While it has subscribed to a fast pace of ethnic

identity formation that Assamese identity is taking place today to the extent of uprooting the traditional identity of Assomiya, it has indulged into political pragmatics of targeting the Hindi speaking communities in the region as a point to make against the GoI. Its inability, on the other hand, to address the issue of illegal Bangladeshi migration because of certain operational compulsion may be seen as sign of pragmatism that may cost not only the organization but also the entire Assamese identity heavily in the decades to come.

Irrespective of nationalist aspirations or ideological predilection, all these organizations with little exceptions are unable to shed the community or ethnic interests. The examples are many. The Nagas, for instance, see themselves as the victim of "Indian repression," the manifestation of which is found in the formation of Naga Nationalist Council (NNC), and then NSCN. In Manipur, "forced annexation" of the kingdom of Manipur into India led to the emergence of Manipuri (often Meetei) nationalism in UNLF, KYKL, and PREPAK. There are also cases where targets are on the nonstate parties, too. For instance, "repression" of the tribals of Tripura in the hands of the migrant Bengali (Hindus) led to the formation of insurgent organizations like Tripura National Volunteers (TNV), which is at present known by National Liberation Force of Tripura (NLFT), and also All-Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF). These outfits challenged the regional state and its majority Bengali population. Naga-Kuki clash of 1990s involved insurgent groups representing respective ethnic communities in concealed form. All these organizations overtly or covertly represent the interest of their respective communities or ethnos. Since these organizations serve as a vanguard of their respective ethnic communities, often negotiations with the insurgent organizations are made on fulfilling the community interests. So, political issues are reduced to community interests. Mizo Accord could be seen as an example where MNF shed violence and joined mainstream democratic

politics in bargain with the creation of Mizoram state. MNF's bargain was hopelessly poor for Mizo Union in 1960s was already aiming for statehood through political negotiation. One wonders the merit of taking up arms to gain statehood. So did the Bodo and the Tripuri insurgent outfits with smaller compensation and political agreements.

While all these movements in the region indulge in violence, not all violent movements are secessionist. But often "secession" has been used as a point for bargain. The other term "insurgent" that is most widely used sounds to be more appropriate to refer to all these violent movements without exception. Presently many groups that are either into "informal" ceasefire with the Indian army or into peace negotiation with the GoI at the ministerial level are into some forms of bargain. These organizations can no more be termed as secessionist. While ULFA, UNLF, and PLA are still holding onto their demand for complete secession from India, NSCN-IM has, after ten years of peace talk starting in 1997, agreed to a "special federal relationship" with India. The "special federal relationship" could allow New Delhi's control over defense, external affairs, communication and currency of the Nagas.<sup>4</sup> The modality is yet to be worked out. This is a significant achievement in principle that both sides have started acknowledging the "concerns" of the other party, and are also able to arrive at some minimal points of agreement. One of the minimal points of agreement is the acceptance of the "unique Naga history" by the GoI. According to the Naga side, this implies that the talk is not within the constitutional framework of India. But the other principle of "special federal relationship" cut the principle of "unique history" short. The "special federal relationship" puts the "unique" Naga form of governance within the larger Indian administration. However, working out of modalities (contents of the principle) remains far more difficult than agreement in principle. On the other hand, for the insurgent groups like UKLF, KRA, KLA, KNA, ZRA, HPC, etc.,

**Table 1. Ethnicity Based Insurgent Groups**

<b>Insurgent Organization</b>	<b>Community Representation</b>	<b>Area of Operation</b>
All-Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF)	Tripuri	Tripura
Hmar Peoples' Convention (HPC)	Hmar	Manipur, Assam, Mizoram
Kangleipak Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL)	Meetei	Manipur
Kuki Liberation Army (KLA)	Kuki	Manipur
Kuki National Army (KNA)	Kuki	Manipur
Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA)	Kuki	Manipur
Naga Nationalist Council (NNC)	Naga	Nagaland
National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB)	Bodo	Assam
National Liberation Force of Tripura (NLFT)	Tripuri	Tripura
National Socialist Council of Nagaland, Issac-Muivah (NSCN-IM)	Naga	Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh
National Socialist Council of Nagaland, Issac-Muivah (NSCN-K)	Naga	Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh
Peoples' Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK)	Meetei	Manipur
Tripura National Volunteers (TNV)	Tripuri	Tripura
United Kuki Liberation Front (UKLF)	Kuki	Manipur
United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA)	Assamese	Assam
Zomi Republican Army (ZRA)	Paite	Manipur, Mizoram

their future “political arrangement” does not seem to be clearly marked out. Most of them seem to be contained by the Indian state for the time being either through military offensive or through material and operational bargains.

### **State Responses**

As much as one finds varied insurgency movements in the region, the responses of the states to these movements have been equally varied. Many of the responses show lack of a clear understanding of the problems, and often appear knee-jerk in times of crisis. Initiatives of both the Indian state and the

regional states in clear terms are far from wanting.

Though in principle regional governments are being given major responsibilities to look after the state of affair within the respective state jurisdiction, there are complications in the exercise of power. The regional governments have limited powers not only in the constitutional allocation of responsibility,<sup>5</sup> but also in the real exercise of power where the hard facts of political decision making are tested. To elaborate the latter, observations may be made on the ways in which some special constitutional provisions are exercised which shows the site



of real power. AFSPA, which is a parliamentary act, have to be accepted by the regional government where the act is to be in operation. It is the Central government that decides the requirement of such an act. The statements by the Union Home Minister and Union Defense Minister to PTI on this issue during the height of civil unrest in Manipur are worth noting.<sup>6</sup> In the aftermath of the rape and murder of Manorama Devi by the cadres of the Assam Rifles and the subsequent civil unrest in Manipur, the statement by the Union Home Minister Shivraj Patil to PTI that "Manipur needs AFSPA" shows the indifference of the GoI to the plight of its own citizens. The attitude is further endorsed by then Union Defense Minister Pranab Mukherjee who categorically asserted that "AFSPA will stay" shows the influence of the army in the internal matters of the state. Though the constitutional provisions in order to show responsibility of the regional governments states that the Act would be passed only after the state assembly declares the region as "Disturbed Area" under the Disturbed Areas Act, it hardly happens in practice that the state government refuses to pass the Disturb Areas Act when the Center wants. But to ensure that such a possible confrontation does not occur, the Governors of the respective states are also authorized to declare the state or parts of the state as a "Disturbed Area" over and above the state assembly. I have already referred to a case with Meghalaya. The Union government has unilaterally declared parts of Meghalaya's territory adjoining Assam as "Disturbed Areas" and AFSPA made operative totally bypassing the state government.

### *National Security and its Logic*

The argument that justifies bypassing the state/regional governments and legitimizing the monopoly of violence by the Center is based on the idea of "national security." The idea of a threat to the nation is strongly propagated by the Indian state with which sanction of force is endorsed in the form of

legitimized violence. The draconian acts like AFSPA<sup>7</sup> is the logical outcome of such an idea. The region is thus engulfed by a chain of violence where each constituting party (including the state) adds further to the violence.

The logic of national security comes out of a sense of threat to the national and territorial integrity of the country. A perception of threat of such a kind is marked by an image of "violence." Separation of the country is certainly marked by violence. And what is violent in most cases invites counter violence. India's national security logic precisely follows this. It is driven by a perception or imagination inferred out of a violent past. The partition of India, wars with Pakistan and China, and the creation of Bangladesh are all very alive in the memory of the Indian state. The outcome thus is obvious. It takes a militaristic stand to counter almost every voice of dissent in the region, be it insurgency or democratic protest.

It has often been argued that such perceptions are mere imaginations and as such are unreal. But the boundary between the real and the unreal is fuzzy. What is "real" is all that we directly experience of our surroundings or what we infer or construe out of this surrounding. But what is "unreal" could also be construed or imagined out of our surrounding. In this sense, it is not only ghosts and fairies that are unreal, but say, the northeast India becoming an independent country could also be equally unreal. So is the idea of India becoming a superpower. There are perceptions that lie in the gray areas along the fuzzy boundary, where an imagination that is yet to happen remains unreal only to become real if that imagination turns to an event that could be directly perceived or inferred.

When state policies are framed based on such a perception or an imagination, violence is bound to follow, for violence constitutes the structure of the imagination or perception. AFSPA comes out prominently as a case where violence is embedded in the structure

of a state act. It creates special provisions where (i) the military of the country is seen above the civil law and that they function at a different plane, and (ii) violent internal turmoil has to be militarily contained. Some of the clauses in the Act include the right to shoot (even causing death) at a mere instance of suspicion (clause 4a), and nonavailability of judicial support for the victim against the involved defense personnel (clause 6), and keeping the security of the state over and above every possible human security of the citizens. It shows how overarching the state is over its citizens. Thus, the democratic principle upon which the state is seen as “of-for-by the people” becomes a suspect.

The greatest irony is the Supreme Court verdict on Naga Peoples’ Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR) petition against AFSPA. NPMHR, representing the long-standing plight of the Naga people, submitted a representation to the Supreme Court of India against the violation of human rights by the GoI. The Supreme Court that is primarily expected to safeguard the fundamental rights of its citizens made an about turn, upholding exercise of AFSPA. On the one hand, it states that there is no internal threat to the sovereignty of the country, and on the other, it upheld the Act to safeguard national security. What is clearly visible from this is that both the executive and the judiciary are in one voice to safeguard the “threatened interest” of the Indian state over and above its helpless citizens.

While the Central government is at least clear about its stand on the issue, the regional state governments show far complex responses. The latter’s responses are not so much to do with the dilemmas between “national security” and “democratic discourse,” but because of a compulsion generated by their dubious involvement in insurgency politics. To be able to argue for the national security concerns or plead for democratic political dialogue requires the capability of having a firm political stand free from political bullying. So far the state

governments in the region have neither the capacity to stand firmly on their own nor influence the other parties involved. While on the one hand, state governments show concerns over the repercussion of violence and call for talks with the insurgents, on the other, they tow the same line of argument taken by the Central government and its militaristic mindset. The responses of the state governments to the Justice Reddy Committee on the review of AFSPA clearly show the dubious stand of the state governments on the issue. Assam government, for instance, endorsed enforcing of AFSPA. So did Government of Arunachal Pradesh, whose two districts of Tirap and Changlang are declared Disturbed Areas under AFSPA. Mizoram government made a strange representation that if AFSPA is not to be repealed it must not be enforced in Mizoram. Dubious absence of government representations from Manipur, Nagaland and Tripura cast doubt on the stands of these states. This is significant for it was in the state of Manipur that large-scale protests took place for the repeal of AFSPA. The agitation still continues today in various forms, either through public meetings, convention, demonstration, etc. The absence of the Manipur government was in contrary to the sentiment of the people of the state.<sup>8</sup> Only the Government of Meghalaya came out strongly that it has not so far enforced the Act, but the Union government has unilaterally declared parts of its territory adjoining Assam as “Disturbed Areas” and AFSPA made operative in these areas. Most of these state governments are covertly towing to the idea of national security, and the problem of law and order. National security is still a strong ideology with an overarching control in the state’s art of thinking.

#### *Between” Law and Order” and “Political”*

National security needs to be seen as a political issue rather than as law and order problem. Until the end of the 1980s, the Indian state and its satellite regional states responses

to organized violence, which primarily consisted of activities of the insurgents and other militant organizations, was seen as a law and order issue. Often, officers of military and paramilitary forces are heard saying at conferences and seminars that law and order in the region is jeopardized by a "bunch of jokers." This had become quite a well-known phrase for a few retired defense officers based in Delhi until very recently. It shows the mindset with which the country's defense forces work to handle the internal state crises. Even if one argues to the contrary that defense forces have to primarily delegitimize the "perpetrators" of violence, such cannot be the mindset of the policy framers of the country, at least. Even if the phrase is taken seriously, sixty years is too long a period for the perpetrators to carry on with their "heinous crimes." One thing is evident from this. Either the defense forces of the country are too weak to handle the perpetrators, or that the perpetrators of violence mean serious business and have enough power to put the state in the doldrums.

Given the fact that the insurgency and its related violence are more structured and organized, responses need to go beyond the treatment of law and order. Though the GoI has periodically made attempts for political negotiations (e.g. Shillong Accord), the attempts were less consistent and less serious. The only successful outcome of political negotiations is the signing of the Mizo Accord that led to formation of a full-fledged state of Mizoram, and MNF's shedding of violence thereby becoming a democratic political party. Though the first effort of political negotiation came with the signing of the Shillong Accord peace agreement between the GoI and NNC (November 11, 1975), that was not only short-lived but also led to the formation of NSCN which immediately took up a more violent stand against the Indian state.

Political negotiation, however, does not go with complete withdrawal of military offensive. In fact, the two have been conveniently used by the state(s) either by

altering the tactics from time to time, or selectively using these against the opponent depending upon the situations that arise. Initiation of peace talks with ULFA resulting in military offensive highlights altering the responses to the convenience of the state. Yet again with the other tactics, while peace talks with NSCN-IM is in full swing, the military offensive is undertaken against the UNLF at Sajik Tampak and Khenjoy areas of Manipur. By these changes in tactics, the state(s) have been able to send the message of its ability to pilot the course of event (and also perhaps the result!) that its opponents do not possess. While these may have given immediate effective results in "containing" the insurgent movements, it is yet to be seen if the same methods could lead to long-term successful solutions.

What is still lacking in the response is a serious engagement with the discourse of political dialogue. The perception of national security has not only triggered the violent ethos, but sets out an uncompromising stand on the possibility of political negotiation. This perception, by its very structure of involving violence, forecloses the possibility of any imagination that could be innovative and resilient to dissenting voices. Therefore, perception based on the principle of democracy is bound to be absent in the thinking of the Indian state. On the contrary, political negotiation is seen as giving in to the insurgents. Selective engagement and withdrawal of political dialogues are the outcome of such a mindset.

Though peace talks presuppose mutual agreement among the parties to negotiation, the preconditions set out are not only different but also difficult to find mutual agreement. The precondition(s) often set out the tone of a dialogue as well as a possible end towards which the negotiation may head. In this regard, both the states and the claimants have allowed shifts in stands for themselves over the years. While there have been shifts on the nature of the preconditions for talks, there have also been visible shifts in the nature of

the claims. For instance, the GoI's stand against the clause "without condition" has taken a significant shift allowing talks to take place without any condition. On the other hand, the issue of secession as a part of the condition for dialogue still is fluid. While NSCN-IM does not spell out "secession" as a precondition for talk, ULFA sticks on to this precondition. The continuation of talks with the NSCN-IM and failure to have one with the ULFA is largely governed by this issue. This also reflects a less-committed stand taken by both the GoI and ULFA. The challenge before the Indian state is to initiate a more open-ended stance. The expectation is primarily from the Indian state for it is the only legitimate political power so far.

### *Politics behind Development*

Another strategy used by the state for countering the claims for self-determination and secession is the discourse of development. Though "right to development" is an inherent right of an individual and the discourse of development could be seen as a universal discourse, this does not quite happen when we discuss the issue of the Northeast. What is often thrown up for public consumption is about a choice—between "development" and "insurgency." This choice presumes that development and insurgency are antithetical to one another, and development is a remedy for insurgency. The projection is: "insurgency hinders development and development solves insurgency." The idea is being projected largely as a strategy to delegitimize insurgency or any form of militancy. It is a well-known strategy forwarded by the state against a violent dissent. It is more pragmatic than ideological.

If the argument is taken seriously the following propositions follow. Since development is going to eradicate insurgency, it could be that insurgency arises because of the lack of development. In fact, the argument is circular. Since Northeast India lacks development compared to the rest of the country, the region is bound to breed unrest and militancy. So, a

development package has to necessarily look out, in addition to infrastructure development, to generate employment. When, for instance, a new military battalion is built in remote areas, and roads are built and electrification made to run the battalion, it is bound to bring a figment of development to that area. Since tackling insurgency requires the military, and for military offensives to be conducted successfully requires proper infrastructure, development programs go along with military offensive. And the local population becomes beneficiary of the development by default. Thus, insurgency becomes a necessary condition to bring about development. Following this line of thinking, Northeast India, in order to develop faster has to have a huge quantum of insurgent movement. The argument, as is the line of thinking to which the political leaderships have been garnering all along, is ridiculous.

Keeping aside the thesis of development as "remedial measure," if the role of the state governments is to be seen in bringing about development of the state and the people to ensure economic productivity and well being, much has to be discussed beyond the above mentioned perspective. The issue of development as economic has to be dealt within the discourse of the political, with the idea of empowerment and human rights (Vizard 2003).

Creation of North East Council (NEC) could be seen as a major (though unsuccessful) move towards this alternate discourse. With its establishment in 1971 by an Act of Parliament, issues of development in the Northeast were for the first time seen with certain sense of concern. The idea was to have a single body coordinate all the states in the Northeast towards rapid development. Its aim is to be instrumental in setting in motion a new economic endeavor aimed at removing the basic handicaps that stood in the way of normal development of the region.<sup>9</sup> Though the philosophy behind its enactment was to see the entire region as one block and have policy and planning for the development of

the region and welfare of the people, perhaps the factors that led to conception of such a philosophy is the internal unrest (insurgency and violence, in particular). Several policy formulations in the region reflect this mindset. Thus, the problem still remains as to how much the governments can shed the mindset of development as remedial measure to internal unrest, and perceive development as an inherent necessity for a state to engage for the welfare of its citizens. It is high time to put an end to engaging the "myth of development" in the counterinsurgency program.

Since the Sixth Five Year Plan, under the subplan there was some emphasis given to Special Tribal Plan, and Hill Areas Scheme.<sup>10</sup> The Northeast got some attention within these plans and schemes. In addition, there were programs allotted to NEC to specially look after the concerns of the region. The idea of regional disparity figures prominently in the Ninth and Tenth Five Year Plans and the Northeast becomes a subject of study. In the Tenth Five Year Plan, for the first time a special portion of the Plan document deals with the region, where several special measures such as Prime Minister's special packages, NEC, non-lapsable central pool of resources are specifically mentioned. These Plan documents contain both guidelines as well as areas where implementation of developmental programs can be initiated. These are supposed to be finalized in consultation with experts and political leaderships of the Center and the states. Each state comes out with planning within the Planning Commission's guidelines. The states have to get approval of the Planning Commission on the allocation of plan outlay to ensure funding from the Center. Some of the common focuses of the northeastern states are to utilize the resources of the region keeping in mind the importance of sustainability.<sup>11</sup> Large allocations of funds are sought for the social services, general services, and transport. This is in comparison to agriculture and rural development. Agriculture, that serves as the backbone of

food and employment security has unfortunately not received enough attention. Compared to the fact that the agricultural sector is overcrowded with an influx of peasants due to the shrinking of employment options in other sectors and also to illegal migration, there is a lack of proportionate fund allocations to the agricultural sector. Though the Planning Commission's "approved plan outlay" earmarks the rural development sector more or less at par with "agriculture and allied sector," unless the two are coordinated properly the investment will go wasted and the growth of agricultural output will remain a distant dream.

In spite of these policies and planning, very little has been mentioned about containing revenue deficit. This remains a major hindrance for all of the states in the region. Unless revenues are tapped, for instance, from forest-based exports and excise, the problem remains far from being solved. There are still needs for the states to look out for sectors where revenue income could be generated to bring down the revenue deficit to zero as has been the guidelines of the Planning Commission.

Development strategy has also been enhanced with the idea of maximum utilization of the region's international borders. The Look East Policy is a program within this strategy, though the initial factor behind this strategy lies somewhere else. With the policy strategizing to achieve success, development of infrastructure and connectivity with the neighboring countries has been initiated. The building up of transnational highways and the construction of big dams to generate power are a few major initiatives as part of this strategizing. Attempts have also been made by the governments to lure the multinational bodies to help towards building infrastructure and social sectors. In addition to mega projects, ADB initiatives are also in community health, social services, and public finance. In short, the role of international finance in the

functioning of the public sphere is steadily increasing.

With the infrastructure development, the regional governments are identifying potential export products, items with high potential in world market particularly based on the import basket of the ASEAN. State Export Policies,<sup>12</sup> in general, identify potential items grouped into different sectors; for instance, engineering/electrical/electronics (including instruments and CKD/SKD items), textiles, gems and jewellery, chemicals and allied (including pharmaceuticals), the agriculture and allied sector (including tea, rubber, cashew nuts), and leather and footwear. This is in addition to Assam's large export of tea, timber, and oil. All these can attain success depending upon conditions, such as, mutual recognition, fulfilling domestic rules and regulations, mutual transfer and payment, transparency in transaction, and market access, etc. Sikkim has revamped the traditional route of Nathula bypass to expand the quantum of trade transactions with China. Manipur's international trade operates through the Moreh-Tammu border crossing into Myanmar. So far, officially under the Export-Import Policy, trading is allowed on 29 items. But the quantum of illegal trade (largely third country goods and items not listed) is more than 10 times the legal trade.<sup>13</sup> This requires serious attention. Mizoram government and the GoI are planning to have one more trade route, in addition to Champai, at Paletwa (South Mizoram). Nagaland government has opened two International Trade Centers (ITCs) at Longwa (Mon district) and Pangsha (Tuenshang district). This of course is in an initial stage, the trade activities being possible only with the emergence of a surplus. Nagaland government's "X" road proposal, which links the food producing areas of the state with the mineral producing areas as well as the neighboring states, and finally ending up in the border with Myanmar, is yet to be accepted by the Center (Chasie 2005). The idea is to gear up the state

in the opening of the region to its earlier trade routes.

The region's fall in trade activities should be seen from the point of view of the political shifts taking place in the region. The end of British colonial rule and the creation of three independent countries in 1947—India, East Pakistan and Burma—led to a shift in trade and sluggish economy. With new political boundaries being erected, not only were the populations displaced but their economic and agricultural activities greatly hampered. The impact was felt in the states of Assam,<sup>14</sup> Tripura and Manipur. "The advent of a new international border in the midst of the [peoples'] own area of operation brought agony and distress for which the people were not ready. It altered the production structure and marketing pattern leading not only to decline in trade but also substantial reduction in production" (Karna 2005: 147). So, it would be a valid question to rise as to how much the Look East Policy would undo the crises created during the end of British colonial rule. The GoI's Look East Policy of the projects a significant shift in the external trade policy of the country. What was seen as a most sensitive border to national security is now shown as a dynamic corridor to link up to the quickly booming economies of the Southeast Asia. But it should be noted that the change in perspective within the span of the last decade is governed largely by the increasing Chinese influence in trade and telecommunications networking in Myanmar, and not by considerations of developing the region. Though the initial factors behind the move were defense and strategic, subsequent initiation to trade and communication has somehow balanced the concerns, if not a total shift. There are also arguments that the Policy, rather than economic development of the region, is aimed at overcoming continued isolation of India in megagroup structuring of global economy, and its failure on the home front, i.e. in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) (Saint-Mézard 2003: 35–37). So, there are reasons to question

the intention and sincerity of the Indian state on the issue of development in the region.

### **Ethnic Politics and Challenges to the State**

#### *Emerging Identity Formation*

As much as caste-based identification and division mark the state of social and political structure in the mainland India, the sociopolitical reality of Northeast India can be well captured through ethnicity based identities and their dynamics. Interestingly, each ethnic community not only claims to be unique but also asserts having had a long historical lineage of its ethnic identity. However, a closer look reveals that most of the communities as they project themselves with strong exclusive claims are much more recent, as early as the British colonial rule in the region.

The British colonial rule has brought about in the region major shifts in the sites of political power and emergence of new structures of identities based on these shifts. The import of modernism is one of the packages that came with the colonial power. This has also led to a shift in the identity structures in the region. With the bifurcation of the proposed crown colony (India's Northeast as one half and the other half into then Burma) by the "colonial" powers, and in the subsequent history of dissent, new identities have been formed with new areas as one territory and many different communities as one people. Interestingly, this amorphous area also had old identities and territories (in the form of kingdoms) weakened, broken down or reintegrated with the shift in power (such as the Ahoms, Tripuris and Manipuris), and new identities have emerged with claims of old politico-administrative legacies (Nagas, Mizos, Kukis etc.).

Assam has been both the beneficiary as well as victim of these shifts in power. Ahom kingdom got consolidated during the process of Aryanisation (Misra 1999: 1264) and its encounters with the Mughals and later with the British. "Assam" as a modern political

entity emerged and consolidated during the British rule in the region. But the state also lost several of its territories in the postindependent India. Creation of Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram, and carving out of corresponding territories for each of these new political entities (states) out of Assam, led to shrinking of the state's boundary. Manipur, too, experienced the same. Manipur not only lost many parts of its territory in the 1834 Yandaboo treaty, but also gained several parts in and around the present Tamenglong district. During the span of a century, the territory of Manipur fluctuated to a considerable degree. The Kabaw valley is yet another case. The Kabaw valley, which was part of the kingdom of Manipur, was given on lease to then Burma with the assurance of annual compensation to the King of Manipur from the Burmese government. Later, in 1949, then Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, gifted the Kabaw valley to Burma as a goodwill gesture much to the displeasure of the Manipuris. What has been experienced both with Assam and Manipur is a loss of ancient sites of power with colonial shuffling of boundaries and social and political structures. Tripura, too, falls in the similar fate. The experiences of these three pre-colonial powers in the region have been that of loss and fall from political sites of power. On the other hand, Naga and Mizo political identities have been nurtured and promoted by the colonial powers leading towards conception of Naga, Mizo, and Kuki national identities. The trend has led to several corresponding claims to establishing a national character of a "people"—a land, a territory, a political site of power (state), a worldview, and a collective memory through respective "histories." The trend is not only confined to the Nagas, Mizos, and Kukis, but to all the recast identities like the pan-Manipuri, Assomiya, and Khasi-Panar, who also aimed towards inventing their respective nationhood and corresponding characters of a national life. The reinvention is still on for all

these “peoples.” Naga identity formation is still very alive. So, are the Paite and Kuki.

It is due to these historical conditions that identity formation in the region has become fluid and complex. Creation of collective identities has been largely on the basis of tribe and ethnicity. This is witnessed in the aspirations to form nations, and even in the formation of states or insurgent organizations. Assertion of nationalism can be witnessed starting from larger communities like the Assomiya and the Bangali to smaller communities like the Bodos, Kukis, Mizos, Nagas, and Chakmas. Corresponding insurgent organizations have come into existence to safeguard their respective community and “national” interests. Creation of ULFA for the Assamese (or, to some, Assomiya) identity, UNLF and PREPAK for Manipuri identity, NSCN for Naga interest, ZRA for Zomi interest and KNA for Kuki interest are well known.

The only exception to the trend is perhaps the increasing Muslim population and the formation of religious identity in states like Assam, Manipur, and Tripura. Creation of Muslim identity as overarching cuts across ethnic identities is a significant development. The emergence of Muslim insurgency has been on safeguarding religious identity and interests rather than on ethnicity. Inception of PULF<sup>15</sup> in Manipur, Muslim United Liberation Tigers of Assam (MULTA), the Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM), the Muslim United Liberation Front of Assam (MULFA), etc. are clearly based on safeguarding, and also violently asserting Islamic identity. Assertion of both the religious and ethnic identities has turned out to become the jinx within. This is not to suggest that formation of ethnic and religious identities is totally a new phenomenon, but the way in which it has not only earned significance in the contemporary politics, but also the sense of empowerment and exclusivity that the new trend has brought about, is alarming and worrisome for a democratic polity.

To consolidate ethnic identity, there have

been attempts even to form and shore up new languages as lingua franca to be owned by the newly emerging communities. Nagamese as the lingua franca of the Nagas has been often proposed. This, of course, has problems with Nagas of Myanmar as Nagamese as an amalgamated language between some Naga dialects and bazaar Hindustani is spoken only by few Nagas in the Indian side. Further, NSCN-IM has shown reluctance to put Nagamese as lingua franca of the Nagas. However, in a survey conducted in the Naga inhabited Ukhrul district of Manipur, the majority of the respondents preferred Nagamese as a language of the Nagas as against Manipuri and English.<sup>16</sup> This perhaps is supporting the traditional theories of ethnic and linguistic nationalism that nations are built on having one language to unify all the ethnos as one people. Though this crude form of identity relationship between language and nationality may not be a universal phenomenon, particularly with the theorizing on multiculturalism (Gellner, Taylor, Parekh, Mahajan) and multilingual form of nationhood,<sup>17</sup> contemporary political considerations seem to prefer the former—“one nation one language theory” for pragmatic considerations. India has witnessed right from the time of the making of its Constitution an attempt to have a national language. The introduction of Hindi as compulsory for all Indians and protest against the policy from certain corners, particularly in the South, is well known. In the case of Northeast India, the phenomenon can be witnessed at various levels of collective identity formation, often visualized in the light of formation of “national identities.” Whether one talks of Assamese nationality, Manipuri nationality, Mizo identity, or the most contested Naga identity formations, each of these carries the resonance of that dream which was put forth during India’s nation formation. The theorizing on immediate identity relation on “one nation one language” while is an attempt to unify otherwise scattered identities, also carries the plight of certain hegemonic



onslaught by the dominant constituent party/parties over other constituent parties within.

This has two significant aspects of identity formation: the first-level and the second-level. This I think is not only a yardstick to explain the Northeast but is largely inherent in any identity formation. I have used it for the Northeast primarily because this perspective explains the region more clearly than could be explained through other possible perspectives.

At the first-level identity formation, it requires "othering the other." The existence of the other, in singular or in plural, has to be invariably present. This part of the first-level identity is certainly logical. Creating an other is inherently presupposed in every identity formation. But there is another part of the first-level identity that is not logical but historical. It may not be, in that sense, a universal phenomenon, but is witnessed in many parts of the world. It is often been observed that the other is built through the language of violence. This other is seen not only as a violent other but its "inherent violence" creates a sense of fear in the constituent parties that are in the process of creating a community identity. This perception may not have a corresponding objective facet all the time, but could often be psychological. In fact, the psychological plays a significant role in the entire process of identity formation, and as such cannot be taken lightly. To illustrate this, let me begin with the Assam experience. Consolidation of Assamese national identity in the late 1970s was largely on the basis of antiforeigner ethos. Assam experienced the facets of antiforeigner agitation, which gave birth to Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) as a political party from the students' movement. It may not be important to track down the debate on whether the formation of AGP was a genuine aspiration of the movement or a consequence of a checkmate by the Central government. The important point here is that antiforeigner agitation was built into the conception of the

"other." While the Assamese national movement presupposed a violent other, historically the other was located in the Bengalis. In recent times, the reference of the other has been extended to include the Biharis, Marwaris, and Santhals. The spurt of killings by ULFA targeting the mainland laborer Indians<sup>18</sup> explains the phenomenon. In the case of Manipuri identity formation, the term "Mayang," denoting all those who speak Bengali, Hindi, Tamil, etc. as mother tongue, formed the significant other. This other is projected in all the cases mentioned above as a threat to Manipuri community and its existence. It is out of a fear generated by certain perceived threat from the other (Mayangs) that the protest geared up into a movement. Perception of the threat enabled the Manipuri community to consolidate its identity and strengthen itself as one political block. These communities thus acquired the capacity to hit back at what they perceived as a threat. The antiforeigner movement in Assam and Manipur was based on this praxis. In fact, the movement in Manipur got inspiration from Assam. Whereas the movement has been largely able to achieve its goal in Manipur, the same has failed in Assam. Irrespective of the success or the failure of these movements, one significant achievement has been that Assamese and Manipuri identities had consolidated to significant degrees.

The second-level identity formation finds a more intriguing phenomenon. The constituting group continues to carry the echo of violence within, and covertly retains the differentiating character. Thus, the other is either invented or discovered within. Manifestation of violence within the group is witnessed through hegemonic dominance of one party over another. It is creating an other within the group through the logic of violence. The spirit of violence geared up during the first identity formation continues to persist, leading to possible fragmentation of the identity within. The unity so projected against a violent other turned out to be a momentary

one. Within the unifying community, not only the subcommunity identities were retained, but also hegemony of the dominant party over the rest comes up. Minority communities in Assam started experiencing alienation from the (pan-) Assamese identity formation (Nag 2006). Bodo experience of integration and alienation vis-à-vis Assamese identity during and after the anti-foreigner struggle led to the emergence of a separate Bodo identity. Similarly, Manipur, too, experiences the alienation of the hill communities from the pan-Manipuri identity. So has been the recent violence targeted against the Tangkhul Nagas in Nagaland.

It is worth investigating to understand the politics of violence behind such unification and fragmentation. It seems that identity formation in the region in recent times is based on a violent ethos. Imagining and identifying the other is marked out in a violent form. Manifestation of this ethos is often seen in the form of a threat—such as, threat to indigenous culture through colonization, or threat to indigenous population through migration. Antiforeigner movements that led to a large forced exodus of Bengali- and Hindi-speaking populations beyond Assam and Manipur, to the extent of massacring a few in Assam, are the clearer examples of engaging violence as an ethos. The trend spread more widely than it could be anticipated.

The smaller communities follow suit. The early 1990s experienced the clash between the Nagas and the Kukis in Manipur and the adjoining states where the two tribes co-inhabited, the memory of which is still alive today. The bloodshed that continued for almost a year led to the death of hundreds and an exodus of thousands.<sup>19</sup>

The aftermath of the bloodshed has brought about two distinct and far reaching developments. Ethnic identities of the Nagas and the Kukis have consolidated, leading to the emergence of strong civil society bodies with violent ethoses and a desire to have corresponding territory to be owned and

managed exclusively by each of these communities. The demand for the latter has come ranging from “autonomous district councils” to “special federal arrangements.” While few Kuki organizations have demanded Sixth Schedule status to Kuki inhabited areas, say in the Kangpokpi subdivision of Senapati district in Manipur, few others including militant outfits like the KNA and KRA are demanding statehood.<sup>20</sup> Naga demands have been more or less consistent; its civil society bodies have not gone contrary to NSCN-IM’s demand for a special federal relation with the Indian state. Though there have been demands within the state of Manipur like merging the Naga dominated districts (often used as Naga inhabited areas) of Tamenglong, Senapati, Ukhrul and Chandel to Nagaland state, this demand is part of the larger claim to have all the contiguous Naga inhabited areas both within India and Myanmar as one political administrative unit. These demands are extended version of the NSCN-IM’s larger charter of demands.<sup>21</sup>

Two generalized trends may be observed based on the experiences of the above cases. These trends are marked by the violent ethos that has shaped the patterns of identity formation in the region. These are (1) heightened political awareness among these communities in terms of exclusive community interests, and; (2) claims for autonomy that involves territoriality on exclusive community line. The trends can be witnessed by all the communities in the region without exception. The only variation that exists is that while the bigger communities seem to show some indifference, the smaller communities are more intense about their ethnic identities.

### ***Autonomy and Constitutional Claims***

The claims for autonomy in the region have been largely influenced by the trends mentioned above. By the very nature of these trends, the claims are more political than economic. Though the success of political autonomy is closely related with the success in economy and vice versa, the two do not seem

to go together in the Northeast. That has often led to stories of miserable failures all around.

Claim for autonomy, in principle, implies demands for concession or privileges of certain kind from the existing authority. It need not amount to questioning the structure of the authority per se. If claims amount to questioning the structure itself, that would be more than a claim for autonomy. It would be a meaningful exercise first to map the varying types of autonomy claims in the political domain. Claims for political autonomy in the region ranges from creation of Autonomous District Councils (ADC) to complete statehood. Empowering of the marginalized ethnic communities, particularly the Scheduled Tribes (STs) operates both under the Fifth and the Sixth Schedules.<sup>22</sup> Though there are slight variations in the mode of empowerment, both schedules carry enough provisions to enable the marginalized ethnic groups to look after their own governance through these ADCs. The Sixth Schedule has been the springboard through which the ethnic communities have formed their own states carving out specific territories from a parent state. Creation of the states of Meghalaya and Mizoram out of Assam had gone through the journey of first being an ADC, followed by up-gradation to Union Territory, and then to a full-fledged state.

Influenced by this trend Karbi Anglong Autonomous District Council leaders have recently voiced their desire to have a separate state for the Karbis to be carved out of the state of Assam. The argument put forward has been the "failure" of ADC under the Sixth Schedule due to unavailability of a free hand in financial matters, and thus claim for complete statehood. Dr. Jayenta Rongpi, former MP from Assam has argued that ADC has failed in its objective to empower the marginalized tribal populations as financial strings are still in the hands of the state government. The real empowerment is envisaged only in granting statehood to Karbi Anglong areas (Singh 2006). Similar was the argument by the Bodos, which led to the

formation of Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) in 1996 leading to a series of violent agitations. However, with the understanding brought by signing of a Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) for the creation of the Bodo Territorial Council (BTC) on February 10, 2003 between the representatives of Union Government, Assam Government and a BLT delegation, the agitation is contained for the time being. Both the demands if granted means further territorial break up of Assam. Interestingly, the Constitution Review Committee on the Northeast headed by P.A. Sangma, cautions against further break up of the existing state boundaries in the region.<sup>23</sup> The leeway, however, has been given to the granting of Sixth Schedule status to the agitating groups. However, it is doubtful if these agitating communities would be content with this status. There are possibilities that demands for statehood may arise at an opportune moment. The reason for this doubt is that the success story of agitations and movements leading to creation of the ethnically based states of Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland. It is not merely the Karbis, Bodos and Riangs that are aiming for statehood in an opportune future, but even some of the minority communities of Manipur have voiced their desire to shift their governance from the Fifth Schedule to the Sixth Schedule. One such demand is of having a separate Kuki state to be carved out of Manipur. Creating more states obviously mean breaking up the existing states.

The trend of creating autonomy to the extent of having exclusive territories under the political structure of statehood completely on ethnic line faces some serious repercussions. While the trend carries the philosophy of empowering the marginalized, it has cut into the spirit of plurality and multicultural ethos of the country, raising serious questions on the type of democracy that can be foreseen in the coming decades. The strength of plurality and diversity, upon which the country seems to stand, is slowly losing ground, at least in the Northeast. The principle of pluralism seems to be compromised at the cost of the ideology of

exclusivism.<sup>24</sup> While the Northeast seems to be India's experimental theatre for all possible political games and gimmicks, this may in turn lead to irreparable damage to the "fragile" nation of India. Already the periphery seems to be striking back.

### *Illegal Migration and Ethnic Politics*

The ethnicity-based violence and insurgency have inseparable linkages with illegal migration, which are often seen as unconnected discourses. In fact, illegal migration has not only led to changes in the demographic composition of the region, but has thrown up new political and economic challenges that directly affect ethnic equilibrium as well as the region's planning and development.

The intriguing character of migration in the region is the complexity of the phenomena, which do not carry a monolithic character. Rather migration is a conglomerated term for several look-alike or related phenomena having the character of "family resemblances."<sup>25</sup> The term may not carry one defining character. It is the multifaceted character of the phenomena that lead to shifts in the discourse itself. The general story related with large uncontrolled migration is that the migrating population overpowers the native population whereby the latter is converted into a minority and pushed to the fringes. The new story is of appropriating the prevailing ideologies and existing identities, and subsequent recasting of the same with new contents leading to shift in discourse. The change in the migration discourse is not from the Tripura experience but from Assam. Today, Assamese identity is on a threshold where it has to face a major challenge of renegotiating and restating its identity, or accept the loss of a historically significant identity. While there are political leaderships in Assam that go on claiming that illegal migration in the state is a farce,<sup>26</sup> the helplessness with the changing character of the phenomenon is already reflected in the voices of the civil society groups and scholars. The echoes of helplessness among the civil

and political societies are witnessed at large with the increasing number of migrants from Bangladesh who are now not only Indian voters but also claim themselves as Assamese. These migrants speak Assamese, thus appropriating the linguistic politics that Assam's antiforeigner movement generated (Misra 1999). The form of Assamese identity based on linguistic nationalism as distinct from (Hindu) Bengalis remains, but the content has significantly changed with Bangladeshi Muslim Bengalis speaking Assamese and claiming Assamese status. Suggestions for work permits and dual citizenship as some of the ways to check illegal migration have become the compromising mantra<sup>27</sup> to minimize the crisis, as those who are enrolled in voters' list cannot be transported back to Bangladesh. And these new naturalized citizens cannot be dumped in a barren land. Recent expulsion of Bangladeshi naturalized citizens from Makokchung district of Nagaland back to Assam only shows the complexity of the problem. Assam, as the most resilient and indifferent state of all the states in the region seems to have become the dumping ground of these naturalized citizens.

The major reasons behind the migration are the push and pull factors between India and its neighboring countries—Bangladesh, Nepal and Myanmar. The low economic status and a life of hardship in these neighboring countries, comparative affluence in the Indian side with larger work avenue, lack of skilled labor in the Northeast India, uninhabited lands in the Northeast, and a porous border with ineffective security, are the visible factors determining this unwanted human exodus to the Indian side. In spite of attempted border fencing and large number of security forces installed along the border, illegal migration still continues to be a major concern for the country.

Though the first casualty of illegal migration is Tripura, the Tripura experience hardly figures in the national discourse on migration today. There are several reasons

behind it, some of which may have to be briefly spelled out here. Notwithstanding the fact that what is already done is a thing of the past; the phenomenon of migration in Tripura is of a limited kind. The fact that illegal migrants of yesteryear are not only the dominant community today, but also the Communist regime of CPI (M) that runs the state is the party representing the dominant community, carries significance in making migration a nonissue. The issue of migration in Tripura has to be seen within a historical context: such as the amicable relationships that existed between the Tripuris and the Hindu Bengalis much before the partition of India; the similarity and cross cultural influences of the communities; Tripuri King's encouraging the Bengali farmers (read population) from across the border to introduce wet farming cultivation (Bhaumik 2007); subsequent settlement to a few by the King that encouraged an unmanageable quantum of migration, and; creation of East Pakistan in 1947 leading to the migration of Hindu Bengalis to adjoining states of India. In the process, Tripuris became the victim, the helpless minority, as the Indian Central government not only encouraged migrants of Bengali Hindus into India but also did not show any concerns on the plight of the Tripuri community. It was a migration in the true sense where a swarm of population takes over the ownership of a land—a territory in this case. There was no confusion. It is a story of a minority Bengali population becoming the majority and a majority Tripuri population turned to a minority.

While Tripura experience was of a crude form, Assam experience is showing much complexity in terms of reshaping the migration and nationality discourses. The fact that Muslim migrants from Bangladesh, instead of forming a separate ethnic identity as in the case of Tripura, have adopted Assamese language and joined the Assamese identity formation, turns the phenomenon far more complex than the Asomiyas, or for that matter the social scientists, could ever

anticipate. The Muslim population in Assam by 2001 census is 30.9 per cent (8,240,611 out of 26,655,528). This rise in the demographic composition is certainly stunning. The trend seems to invade Manipur, where many Bangladeshi migrants sheltered by their fellow Muslim brethrens are first taught Meeteilon (or officially, Manipuri language) not only to have working knowledge but also to be absorbed as Manipuri Muslim. The increase in the representation of Muslim population of Manipur from 7.5 per cent in 1991 (135,000 out of 1,800,000) to 8.8 per cent in 2001 (190,939 out of 2,166,788) is quite significant.

Another trend involving the Bangladeshi migrants is the emergence of a new population in Nagaland by the name Sema-Miyas. This is the identity conferred on the offspring of the wedlock between Bangladeshi Muslim and the Sema Naga parents (Saikia 2003). With increasing workforces of Bangladeshi migrants in cities like Dimapur in Nagaland, partly due to hostile environment in Assam and partly due to greener pasture in Nagaland, marriage as a means for acquiring settlement has been adopted. The phenomenon has so far been successful. It is yet to be seen if the increasing population of such offspring would form a substantive part of Naga population or these population remain a community outside the fringes of Naga identity. One may as well draw similarity with Khasi experience. In the case of the Khasis, the offsprings born out of Khasi and non-Khasi parents, generally known as Khar usually possesses the surnames "Khun Dokhar" and "Khun Sheitang," were well accepted as Khasis. But the year 2008 has seen new shifts in the prevailing social norm. Recently voices have been raised in various social forums within the Khasi society that offspring of such mixed parentage should no longer be considered Khasi.

Whether it is new emerging "Bangladeshi turned Assamese Muslim" or "Bangladeshi turned Manipuri Muslim" or the Sema-Miyas, these create impact on the existing regional governments in terms of handling uneven rise

in population, which burdens different sectors of economic growth, as well as handle the mode of political representation and polity.

So far in the national discourse, the issue of illegal migration has all along been focused on the Bangladesh border, quite understandably taking into account the Assam experience and hostile Indo-Bangladesh relations. But the threat is not only from one corner. It is all along the region's international borders. Barring the Indo-China border, all other borders, such as the Indo-Bangladesh border, the Indo-Nepal border, and the Indo-Myanmar border, the threat has been all throughout and with the same quantum. The influx of illegal Kuki-Chin migrants into Manipur and Mizoram is growing at a very fast rate. So is the number of Nepalis that are coming into Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, and Manipur.

Migration of these ethnic communities is more in a crude form, as similar to the Tripura experience. The state of Sikkim, where Nepali illegal migration takes place, is a state whose dominant community is the Nepalis followed by the Lepcha. In the state of Manipur, illegal migration of the Kuki-Chins from Myanmar takes place in the vicinity of the native Kuki population. Migration followed by settlement over a period of time tends to make the migrant community into a native. The ethnic strife between the Nagas and the Kukis in the states of Manipur, Nagaland and Assam during 1993 was the outcome of this trend. Only those communities who are directly affected by the phenomenon feel the threat, and thus the crisis. Those communities whose populations increase and are in turn privileged by the phenomenon often see it as a nonissue.

The attitude of the regional states in the whole issue is closely linked with the representation the governments enjoy from the community in question. Migration has never been an issue for the Left government in Tripura. The only recognizable issue has been rehabilitation and granting of autonomy to the tribals (the Tripuris). In many of the other

regional states (for instance, Assam and Manipur) where the issue of migration has generated fights for political power and dominance among ethnic communities, the state governments' policy and programs either appeasing or reprimanding one or the other community is bound to happen. That perhaps is inevitable for any plural society.

The issue is experienced differently in Mizoram. The Mizos claim that the state is inhabited only by the Mizos, and all other communities are part of Mizo community. Of course, communities like the Meetei, Bengali, and Assamese remain different. These communities are too small to be of any threat to Mizo identity and habitation. The Mizos comprise of all the claimed nearly thirty-two subtribes. While all of them call themselves Mizo within the state of Mizoram, many retain their original tribe identity once they are in other states. Such is the case with Hmars. They are considered Mizo in Mizoram, but are Hmars in Assam and Manipur. The encompassing character of Mizo identity will face the real challenge with the constant influx of Kuki-Chins from Myanmar. As far as the Mizo population is the majority, the issue of threat may not come up. But with Kuki-Chin population increasing and slowly forming a significant force, a perception of threat among the native Mizos may emerge. It may become a significant issue if Kuki-Chins start calling themselves by their original tribe identity in Mizoram instead of being called as Mizos. Only time will decide the success or failure of homogenizing identities.

### **A Plea for Altering State Responses**

This section aims at highlighting possible state responses with the assumption that India's democracy is not only to be seen merely as a principle but as lived and experienced. Perhaps the following alternatives would have been suggested with a different tone had we been dealing with the neighboring military juntas. I shall largely reflect on three major areas that could be seen as the foremost

priority that the Indian state and its satellite regional states should seriously address. These are: demilitarization of the region, respecting the aspirations for self-determination, and empowering the civil societies through active democratization. The challenges of development and economy related issues should not be divorced from larger political goals and planning. Unfortunately, so far these three areas have not been given sufficient attention—instead these have been partly overlooked and partly appropriated in the larger discourse of development, national security, and peace talks. At present, the GoI seems to prioritize the latter instead of the former. To me, this is misprioritization of the real issue. Under the garb of development and such related agenda, the issues of self-determination and political settlement have been delegitimized and put in the fringes of the national concern on the region.

### **Demilitarization**

Foremost concrete step towards settlement of all political issues has to be demilitarization. This is not to suggest that the military has to be totally removed from the region. That surely would be bad advice. Since the region has international borders with China, Bangladesh, and Myanmar, stationing of Indian army and paramilitary forces along the border is all but obvious. There is no contestation on this issue. But the question is about using these forces to contain internal conflict and unrest. The fact that defense forces of the country are used in the domestic space, by inference, implies that the country's domestic space is militarized. The suggestion is that the country's domestic space must be free from militarization. Presence of defense forces all along the border to keep vigil over possible external aggression is absolutely unproblematic within the present discourse.

Using military forces in the domestic space is garnered only when a war or a war-like-situation erupts within the country. This can be linked to two possible conditions: (i) an

emergency is declared and the nation is on guard in the face of an external aggression, and (ii) an "emergency" is declared in the affected areas to guard against internal crises, from the enemies or potential enemies within. Since (i) is ruled out, what is left is (ii) where the army has to operate against the enemies within. This obviously leads to militarization of the domestic space. What has been witnessed in the Northeast is an undeclared war, where military is brought in to contain the enemies within; the reference of enemy often gets extended to all the citizens in the region. The logic behind AFSPA where an army havildar is licensed to kill at the very instance of suspicion<sup>28</sup> can only be said to operate in a war-like-situation. Each citizen in the region is a potential enemy to the Indian state. The act also doubly ensures that the army will work at a different plane, under a different constitutional provision.

The official response of the Indian state, however, goes for a third version, i.e. the state police being ill equipped to handle militancy, defense forces have to be deployed to assist the state police. Yet the defense forces do not wish to operate within the purview of the civil laws and legal code of conduct. This amounts to saying that the military is above the people/citizens. What is inevitable is that since the military operates at a different plane with extra civil and constitutional safeguards, violation of civil and human rights is something that is bound to happen. Further, closing down to the citizens any possible legal protection and accountability against the defense forces unless allowed by the Central government, as marked in the provision under AFSPA, clearly shows impressions of martial law in domestic space.

The impact of militarization has led to far reaching consequences. The spirit of militarization has not remained with the state and the nonstate forces alone but has percolated down to every walk of life. Starting from the state police, to civil bodies, and students' bodies, violence as a form of language—of asserting and intimidating—has

already found its roots. This is more worrisome than the episodic military outbursts. Violation of human rights is no more a prerogative of the state forces, but the nonstate (insurgent) forces, which are supposed to be fighting for the people against an “oppressive” state system, have more recently become greater violators of human rights.<sup>29</sup> Though there could be claims and counterclaims on the issue, the need of the hour is for all the stakeholders to introspect and restrain themselves from being the escalators of violence and militarization. This applies to all the parties without exception.

### **Enabling Self-Determination**

The idea of self-determination need not be seen as inseparable from secession. Secession could be one among many possible consequent manifestations of self-determination. The lurking anxiety with the state establishment to the idea of self-determination could be overcome if the concept is revisited keeping into account the changes that are happening the world around. Self-determination of the citizens can be encouraged and enabled within the larger constitutional provision, or reframing the constitution adhering to international political and legal frameworks. Let me emphasize that there are many frameworks.

While the foundational conception of self-determination lies with individual freedom, in a democratic setup the freedom and choice of the collective which emerges hypothetically through individual consents<sup>30</sup> cannot be overshadowed. The idea of “the people” and its right to self-determination has to be accepted in principle. Though the Indian constitution states that the country is a nation state with one people, this is a political claim with aspirations to extend the same into the historical and cultural domains. This has so far been the official story of the Indian state. But there are other stories as well. One among those stories is that different peoples with different linguistic, religious, and cultural practices inhabit the country; and thus the

country consists of different peoples and nations. If this proposition is accepted in principle, it should be possible to see through a meaningful perspective that yields a fruitful understanding of the conception of self-determination.

One set of political forms of governance that can emerge from this perspective is the visualization of a federal structure that would respect and enable peoples’ aspiration for self-determination. Let me take up three concrete cases: of Kashmir, Manipur, and Nagaland. A large number of civil and political societies in Kashmir have been demanding for the Special Status that Kashmir enjoyed prior to its conversion into a state. This claim does not necessarily mean cessation from India. But the claim has been misinterpreted by many as prelude to disintegration of the country. At least there is a large chunk of the population in the political, bureaucratic, and military establishments who strongly believe in this threat. Such a perception turns out to show the fragility of the Indian nation state. One of the insurgent stories of Kashmir is that persistent state resistance to such a claim have led to emergence of hardliners making larger claims such as Azad Kashmir, and merger with Pakistan. Manipur, too, has a similar story to tell. The merger of then princely kingdom into Indian dominion had several clauses where Manipur would be given certain special status that merely remained a promise. The claim of many civil and political societies in and around the state for regaining Manipur’s pre-merger status can still be met by renegotiating certain structure of federalism with special autonomy given to the state with least Central intervention. Such a possible space for negotiation is not explored by the civil and political societies, not to mention the contending parties. Nagas’ claim as can be captured through NSCN-IM-GoI peace negotiation shows that barring certain areas of governance such as external affairs, defense and finance, Nagas should be allowed to administer its own state of affairs. At least in the Naga case, the dialogue seems to explore



possible areas of negotiation. Earlier, given the high intensity of conflict between these parties, such a space for negotiation was hard to conceive.

But the journey of negotiation has come a long way, and the ideas of autonomy and self-rule under a broader constitutional provision with different contents and shades are turning out to be the negotiating points between the state and the non-state (insurgent) forces. Any form of dialogue short of "secession" from the country may be broadly put under the provision for autonomy. If the precondition of "secession" were removed, the threat perceived by the Indian state over its national and territorial integrity would not be as alarming as perceived by a few sections of bureaucracy and military establishment. If the insurgents call off the claim for secession and adhere to anything short of the idea, integrity of the nation is at least protected in principle. That should be a good reason to transcend the idea of national security. Negotiations under such circumstances would be more open, keeping a broader notion of "self-determination." With the United Nations denouncing inalienable relations between self-determination and secession, there have been attempts by the states to negotiate the claim through formulation of categories such as substates and subnations, or even multinations. Special federal relationships could be interpreted within these discourses. The idea could help in broadening the constitutional framework. There has been much talk about Kashmir and Nagaland being considered within this provision. But there are also states like Manipur where many civil society groups have been demanding for premerger status. It may also turn out to be the bargaining chip for the insurgent groups as well. Open-ended character of the provisions, keeping rooms for bargain, could serve as mutually acceptable to the state as well as the non-state forces.

Secondly, self-determination would have to incorporate economic empowerment that necessarily involves redistribution of wealth

and resources through some form of fairness principles.<sup>31</sup> This is an area where the states in the Northeast have to work hard to make a success story of the democratic polity. Findings by scholars that "democracy prevails when either economic equality or capital mobility are high in a given country" (Boix 2003) shows challenges with the future of democracy in the region. Egalitarianism as a social value is still prevalent among the communities of the region. Economic inequality has not reached the level of class/caste hierarchies as is witnessed in other parts of the country. The issue of capital mobility, however, presupposes capital formation, which the region is yet to have in a big way (except partly for Assam). Given the nature of the crises that have been mapped out, and the principles of democracy that have been the guideline, democratization of policy intervention in the Northeast is all the more required. Empowering the people has to go through empowering the regional states whose legitimacy is based on being the representative of the people/citizens.

The argument has all along been that regeneration of polity and economy in the regions can be achieved through empowering the local and regional institutions that can reshape itself in the light of modern polity and new values. It is through such dialogues and negotiations that the individual well being is realized out of the community (Oinam 2005).

Under all these conditions and transformations, there are strong reasons to re-look into two major areas—the political and the economic—in a holistic way. Though the two are closely linked, the deeper connections are not being dealt with seriously. Not only those who make protests but also those who are responsible towards peaceful ordering of the system fail to comprehend a holistic coordination of the political with the economic. While state policies have been projecting economic development to contain political crises, the approach itself suffers from lacuna. To engage development as a means to contain violence and insurgency is bound to

fail. Development has to be seen as a necessary process for achieving human well being. While the two are related, it is to be seen in the light of mutual growth and dependency, rather than seeing one as a crisis manager for the other. The idea of development has to be largely measured in terms of accessibility of material resources to an individual, opportunity to avail those resources, so that it not only empowers the individual materially but also leads to a state of well being where the individual acquires mental competence (Dworkin 1981), intellectual soundness, and the ability to make proper political decisions. To this extent, what is economic well being ought to be seen within the discourse of the political. The idea of the “political” is conceived much broader than what is normally understood. It may be put closer to the idea of “development as freedom” (Sen 1999). The idea of self-determination demands freedom towards development. Development is therefore not merely economic but rather largely political.

Enabling the peoples’ right to self-determination, which are both political and economic, can be meaningfully realized with proper form of federalism where peoples maintain their differences and right to dissent within a larger paradigm. There is strong need for devolution of power to the state governments, and further to block levels. This requires drastic constitutional review and parliamentary amendments. The fact that Northeast India is lagging behind in the developmental front, and that these states are over dependent on the Center, should not be the reason to control the states further. In fact, this should all the more reason to empower the states to let them bear the burden of responsibility that the Central government had been shouldering for too long.

### **Engaging Civil Societies**

Since the idea of self-determination in a democratic setup resides in the freedom and choice of peoples in collective, the emergence of “the peoples” in different civil societies is

quite evident. Participation of these civil (and also political) societies in the democratic space of decisionmaking will largely fulfill the aspiration for self-determination as a political and economic goal.

However, politics of appropriation and delegitimization among the contending parties mars the significance of these societies as problem solvers. The tussle is visibly witnessed in the conflict-ridden regions like the Northeast where the nonstate forces attempt to infringe and dictate terms with the functioning of the civil and political societies, and the state machineries are more than willing to delegitimize collective praxis as handiwork of a few unlawful elements. This has been the major challenge before the civil society movements in the region.

However, one of the major criticisms is that civil societies in the true sense are nonexistent in the region. Civil societies in the region are seen as not opened to individual aspiration and participation having been tied down by the collective cultural and social milieu. The issue gets reflected in the civil society debates between the maximalists and the minimalists conceptions—either to define it with an “objective” and “indifferent” individual enterprise, or individual as located amidst socio-cultural milieu.

Considering that civil society in the region does not exist in the maximalist sense, Das (2006) suggests that civil societies are situated in a zone that spans between the state on the one hand and the multiplicity of ethnic communities on the other. By being situated in the middle, civil society is expected to negotiate its way through the tug and pull that characterizes their interrelations. But what has been missed out by Das is that often in the region civil society is not the mediating force between the state and the ethnic communities but between the state and the nonstate (insurgent) forces. Civil society groups in large cases represent the voices of one or few communities.

The other alternative is to see civil society as individuals’ effort (maximalist sense). But

this cannot solve the problem of ethnicity and autonomy in the region. Space to the "individual" can be given only to the end for whom the well being is sought.

It may not always be fair to locate these civil society bodies within a given set of definitions and theoretical frameworks. What is required is to prioritize the importance of the existing pattern of civil society bodies as those are, and then redefine (if required) what civil society should be. There are possibilities of new methodological frameworks emerging in our attempts to explain specific experiences through known theoretical frameworks.

Under these conditions, the role of the civil societies is to play catalyst to bring about "communicative dialogue" among these contending parties. This can be achieved provided the contesting parties respond in such ways that the civil bodies are allowed to gain autonomy and legitimacy on its own. The sad story is that so far the nonstate bodies have appropriated almost all the major civil society bodies, and the Indian state plays a mute spectator only to delegitimize these bodies at an appropriate time. To illustrate the point, during the anti-AFSPA protest, the state intelligence "found" that protesting civil society bodies were hand in gloves with the insurgent organizations. An extended argument would be: states have every reason not to trust the civil society bodies and the people, whose voices these bodies are supposed to represent. This becomes a serious issue for it deals with the legitimacy of civil society movement in the region.

Since the conflicts in the region are of a collective nature (largely ethnic), the beginning point for a possible negotiation has to be ethnicity. Under the present circumstances, a dialogue between individuals would only alienate the communities for possible lack of representation. Though the dialogues are among individuals, they are into the dialogue not as individuals but as representative of an ethnic community. An ethnic community is not a mere conglomeration of individuals, but it is a people having

a sense of belongingness with the surrounding one is positioned with. The point to caution is that the goal of the dialogue is not supposed to end in ethnicity or the state, but towards the emancipation of the individual. There has to be transcendence from ethnicity (collectivity) to individuality, and this could be achieved only through dialogue and negotiation. Our goal has to be towards the respect for individual human dignity. But this end can be achieved only through a process of recognizing what is collectively given (ethnicity), and not through an exclusive maximalist discourse.

## **Conclusion**

Characterizing the Northeast without addressing its internal crises would be as good as telling a story without a story line. The region's state of affairs as it prevails today is marked by all-around crisis, thus making the word "crises" a pseudonym for the region. A proper understanding of the region requires a comprehensive perspective to capture these crises. I have argued in this paper that possible perceptions and roles of the state could be seen as a fruitful perspective through which the problems in the region could be addressed. It is within this perspective that different types of protests experienced by the Indian state and its satellite states in the region along with complexities branched out by those protests have been evaluated.

The series of protests that have been witnessed in the last decade or so in different parts of the region largely carry two-faceted directions. While these protests emerging from civil society space are targeted against the state for the obvious reason that the state is the legitimate political authority to look after the concerns and welfare of its citizens, there have also been counter voices emerging against such protests. The counter voices in various forms emerge from communities other than those gearing the protests. Be it on protection of civil and political space, territorial integrity, autonomy and self-rule,

malgovernance, or even in violation of human rights, voices of the civil and political society groups are not one but many, and often confronting. This creates a bigger challenge before the state(s) to effectively respond to the protests, for counterprotests to each state response to an initial protest could turn out to be equally problematic, if not more, than the initial protest. The example I have given earlier on “June 18 Uprising” is a case in point. The claim of the NSCN-IM to put all the “Naga inhabited areas” under one political umbrella has seen stiff protests from the people and governments of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and Manipur. Fulfilling this claim of the Nagas means territorial disintegration of these three regional states. So are the claims of the Bodos and Karbis and counterresponses from the Assam government. It seems that handling the problem of “claim and counter claim” is becoming more difficult than the straight claims of secession.

Studying these problems, a two-faceted crisis could be seen as the major challenge before the state. One, a clear-cut challenge with certain types of claims against the state, and two, a counterclaim to some initial claim leading to a new zone of conflict between interest groups. The two-fold conflict between the state and nonstate, and also between different ethnic groups, has almost got inseparably twined. Both, however, should be seen as challenges before the state. The state cannot avoid the latter stating it as not directly addressed to itself.

Unfortunately, the responses of the states, both the Indian state and the regional states, have been largely knee jerked and shortsighted. The challenges thrown up by the nonstate (insurgent) forces have been responded as law and order problems that threaten the internal security of the state. It is through this formulation that the state gains legitimacy to monopolize violence. The violence exerted by the insurgent forces is seen as illegitimate whereas violence by the state is shown as legitimate. Even the Supreme Court of the country upholds the legal

structure (AFSPA) that enables the monopoly of violence to the state. This distinction, however, should be seen within the backdrop that there is no difference between the nature of violence meted out by both the state and the nonstate. The other complementary response of the state is to see “development” as counter point to insurgency. As such, state development programs are garnered by security related concerns. This shows the paucity of state responses in terms of formulating innovative state policies.

The challenges thrown up by insurgency and aimed-secession are complicated with the injunction of ethnic strives driven by claims for autonomy, self-rule, etc. Today the region is flooded with claims and counterclaims leading to confrontations among these claimant groups. The irony is that these groups project themselves as legitimate representative of the peoples (community). Often linkages between insurgent organizations and corresponding ethnic groups further complicate the issue. Often the high quantum violence is driven by the nexus. The examples are many, be it between the Nagas and the Kukis, Kukis and the Paites, or between Tangkhul Nagas and other Nagas.<sup>32</sup>

While these multifaceted crises have made the state response extremely difficult, the way it has responded so far is far from wanting. There seems to be a lack of sincerity on the part of the state(s). Instead of addressing the grievances the state authorities are engaged in countering the challenges thrown up by the grievances through monopolized violence. This will not help. What is required in clear terms is the following. One, the region needs to be demilitarized. The GoI and regional state governments have to show that they care about the dissent. The state has all the legitimate power to inflict violence, but it enhances its legitimacy by not using so. The principle is—in not using violence, which it could otherwise use. Two, the right for self-determination that have been the central claim for all these claimants (from insurgents to civil

groups) need to be discussed thread bare of varied interpretations and possibilities in hand. This will include discussion from secession to constitutional autonomy. Nothing could be lost for the Indian state in initiating dialogue. And, three, for this to happen the civil and political space need to be strengthened. The states must encourage civil and political societies to come out actively and democratically in unbiased manner. This may lead to politics of appropriation of the civil society space in which insurgents have already made inroads. Here, it is the responsibility of both the states and the non-state forces to ensure that civil society space is protected to allow democratic voices to emerge. This, of course, is easier said than done. But unless the problem is addressed to the rightful place, however difficult this may be, beating around the bush will not help much.



## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Scholars like Naorem Sanajaoba, for instance, has been highlighting the constitutional flaw of the Indian state in forcibly annexing the region.
- <sup>2</sup> Reference is to Partha Chatterjee's "Derivative Discourse."
- <sup>3</sup> I have elsewhere argued it, in "Receiving Communities: The Encounter with Modernity."
- <sup>4</sup> See the report on interview with Th. Muivah, Gen. Secy. of NSCN-IM in *The Hindu*, Friday, April 25, 2005.
- <sup>5</sup> Reference is towards allocation of power among the Union list, State list, and Concurrent list within the Constitution. It is also to highlight the control of the Central government over the state government over acting on these lists.
- <sup>6</sup> See E-Pao news on August 8, 2006. [www.e-pao.net](http://www.e-pao.net)
- <sup>7</sup> The forms of military suppression are immense, ranging from killing, physical and psychological tortures, facial mutilation, rape, sodomy, disappearance after arrest, etc. The number of victims ranging in thousands all across the states in the region are hard to count. For partial details, see the reports of Amnesty International, Naga People's Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR), Human Rights Alert (HRA), Human Rights Law Network (HRLN), Other Media, etc.
- <sup>8</sup> Against the alleged rape and murder of Th. Manorama Devi, there was mass unrest for repeal of AFSPA, triggered by twelve elderly ladies stripping in front of the main gate of 17th Assam Rifles at Kangla Fort (July 15, 2004) with the slogan "Indian Army, Rape Us" becoming a marker in the history of Manipur.
- <sup>9</sup> See <http://necouncil.nic.in/>
- <sup>10</sup> Government of India, *Sixth Five Year Plan*, Planning Commission.
- <sup>11</sup> See State Annual Plans of Assam, Tripura, Manipur and Meghalaya.
- <sup>12</sup> For instance, see, Manipur Export Policy, 2001.
- <sup>13</sup> See the report submitted by the Directorate of Commerce and Industry, Government of Manipur to the Ministry of Commerce, Government of India, recently during the visit of Minister of State for Commerce, Jairam Ramesh in 2006.
- <sup>14</sup> Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram were parts of Assam.
- <sup>15</sup> PULF was conceived after the massacre of Manipuri Muslims in Manipur in 1993.
- <sup>16</sup> The findings were based on my study under the auspices of the Lokniti Programme of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) during February–March 2002.
- <sup>17</sup> Reference can be made to Punjab. For details, see, *Re-imagining Punjab, Seminar*, 567, November 2006. In the case of the Northeast, B.K. Roy Burman's thesis that there could be one nation without necessarily having one territory with reference to Naga assertion of their nationhood and demand for territoriality is a major contribution in theorizing on the region.
- <sup>18</sup> I emphasize "laborer class" because ULFA has very little targeted the rich Marwaris, Punjabis or the Biharis for they continue to pay huge sums to the organization.
- <sup>19</sup> Though the estimated figure of casualty varies from one report to another, I have quoted the figures provided by the Kukis as party that suffered more casualties. See, Kuki Inpi Report. Also see, P.T. Yamthang, *A Genocide in Manipur*, Kuki National Council (KNC) Report. However, the Naga side of the story needs equal attention. See, NPMHR, *Moreh: National Oppression: Policy of Divide and Rule*.
- <sup>20</sup> See *Times of India* report from Aizwal, May 13, 2003.
- <sup>21</sup> See [www.nscnonline.org/](http://www.nscnonline.org/)
- <sup>22</sup> While Fifth Schedule operates in Manipur, Sixth Schedule operates in Assam, Meghalaya, etc.
- <sup>23</sup> See for details, Consultation Paper 3 (ix), Vol. II, Book 2, Report of the National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution, <http://lawmin.nic.in/ncrwc/finalreport.htm>
- <sup>24</sup> This initial formulation of this idea has come from my discussion with Th. Tarunkumar, former Editor of the *Resistance*.
- <sup>25</sup> I am borrowing the conception from Ludwig Wittgenstein's "family resemblance" to draw complexity of the characters of migration.
- <sup>26</sup> Congress leadership in Assam has been all throughout claiming that illegal migration in Assam is much hyped up as compared to the reality. However, it is a proven fact that during the Congress rule in Assam, Bangladeshi migrants were not only encouraged to settle in the uninhabited areas in the state (particularly the *chars* and the foothills), but were given citizenship rights by entering their names in the electoral roll of Assam in return for which the Muslim population voted for the Congress Party.

<sup>27</sup> For details, see the writings of Udayon Misra, Sanjib Baruah, Sanjoy Hazarika, etc.

<sup>28</sup> See the clauses in AFSPA.

<sup>29</sup> During the year 2002–03, insurgent related violence had superceded the violation of rights committed by the state forces. Extra judicial killings by the insurgents were large in number. See the representation to the Committee to Review the AFSPA by Asian Centre for Human Rights. Earlier during 1992–93, NSCN-IM was charged of committing genocide against the Kukis by several Kuki organizations. During 2006, UNLF has been charged of torturing, molesting and raping of Hmar villagers at Khenjoi. UNLF was also charged of implanting landmines in these Hmar habitations resulting in killing of innocent lives. Few months back, killing of as many as 70 Hindi-speaking migrant workers in Upper Assam by ULFA has been condemned by several civil society bodies in Assam and adjoining places. ULFA killings still continues today. More recently, Kuki civil organizations have charged the UNLF and military juntas of Myanmar of kidnapping around 400 Kukis across the border. See for details the representation given to the Committee to review the AFSPA by Asian Centre for Human Rights.

<sup>30</sup> Here, I am referring to the contractarian thesis, particularly the softer version propounded by Rawls in his *A Theory of Justice*.

<sup>31</sup> I have John Rawls' "fairness principle" in mind. This of course does not exclude other reasonable principles of redistribution.

<sup>32</sup> I am referring to the recent Dimapur crisis where Tangkhul villages were burned and destroyed. The cause of the violence and the quantum of violence do not match showing indication of third party involvement.



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**Internal Conflicts and State-Building  
Challenges in Asia**

**Project Information**



## **Internal Conflicts and State-Building Challenges in Asia Project Rationale, Purpose, and Outline**

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### ***Rationale***

*Internal Conflicts and State-Building Challenges in Asia* is part of a larger East-West Center project on state building and governance in Asia that investigates political legitimacy of governments, the relationship of the military to the state, the development of political and civil societies and their roles in democratic development, the role of military force in state formation, and the dynamics and management of internal conflicts arising from nation- and state-building processes. An earlier project investigating internal conflicts arising from nation- and state-building processes focused on conflicts arising from the political consciousness of minority communities in China (Tibet and Xinjiang), Indonesia (Aceh and Papua), and southern Philippines (the Moro Muslims). Funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, that highly successful project was completed in March 2005. The present project, which began in July 2005, investigates the causes and consequences of internal conflicts arising from state- and nation-building processes in Burma/Myanmar, southern Thailand, Nepal, northeast India, and Sri Lanka, and explores strategies and solutions for their peaceful management and eventual settlement.

Internal conflicts have been a prominent feature of the Asian political landscape since 1945. Asia has witnessed numerous civil wars, armed insurgencies, coups d'état, regional rebellions, and

revolutions. Many have been protracted; several have far-reaching domestic and international consequences. The civil war in Pakistan led to the break up of that country in 1971; separatist struggles challenge the political and territorial integrity of China, India, Indonesia, Burma, the Philippines, Thailand, and Sri Lanka; political uprisings in Thailand (1973 and 1991), the Philippines (1986), South Korea (1986), Taiwan (1991) Bangladesh (1991), and Indonesia (1998) resulted in dramatic political change in those countries. Although the political uprisings in Burma (1988) and China (1989) were suppressed, the political systems in those countries, as well as in Vietnam, continue to confront problems of legitimacy that could become acute; and radical Islam poses serious challenges to stability in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Indonesia. The Thai military ousted the democratically-elected government of Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006. In all, millions of people have been killed in the internal conflicts, and tens of millions have been displaced. Moreover, the involvement of external powers in a competitive manner (especially during the Cold War) in several of these conflicts had negative consequences for domestic and regional security.

Internal conflicts in Asia can be traced to contestations over political legitimacy (the title to rule), national identity, state building, and distributive justice—that are often interconnected. With the bankruptcy of the socialist model and transitions to democracy in several countries, the number of internal conflicts over political legitimacy has declined in Asia. However, the legitimacy of certain governments continues to be contested from time to time, and the remaining communist and authoritarian systems are likely to confront challenges to their legitimacy in due course. Internal conflicts also arise from the process of constructing modern nation-states, and the unequal distribution of material and status benefits. Although many Asian states have made considerable progress in constructing national communities and viable states, several countries,



including some major ones, still confront serious problems that have degenerated into violent conflict. By affecting the political and territorial integrity of the state as well as the physical, cultural, economic, and political security of individuals and groups, these conflicts have great potential to affect domestic and international stability.

### ***Purpose***

*Internal Conflicts and State-Building Challenges in Asia* examines internal conflicts arising from the political consciousness of minority communities in Burma/Myanmar, southern Thailand, northeast India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Except for Nepal, these states are not in danger of collapse. However, they do face serious challenges at the regional and local levels which, if not addressed, can negatively affect the vitality of the national state in these countries. Specifically, the project has a threefold purpose: (1) to develop an in-depth understanding of the domestic, transnational, and international dynamics of internal conflicts in these countries in the context of nation- and state-building strategies; (2) to examine how such conflicts have affected the vitality of the state; and (3) to explore strategies and solutions for the peaceful management and eventual settlement of these conflicts.

### ***Design***

A study group has been organized for each of the five conflicts investigated in the study. With a principal researcher for each, the study groups comprise practitioners and scholars from the respective Asian countries, including the region or province that is the focus of the conflict, as well as from Australia, Britain, Belgium, Sweden, and the United States. The participants list that follows shows the composition of the study groups.

All five study groups met jointly for the first time in Washington, D.C., on October 30–November 3, 2005. Over a period of five days, participants engaged in intensive discussion of a wide range of issues pertaining to the conflicts investigated in the project. In addition to identifying key issues for research and publication, the meeting facilitated the development of cross-country perspectives and interaction among scholars who had not previously worked together. Based on discussion at the meeting, twenty-five policy papers were commissioned.

The study groups met separately in the summer of 2006 for the second set of meetings, which were organized in collaboration with respected policy-oriented think tanks in each host country. The Burma and southern Thailand study group meetings were held in Bangkok July 10–11 and July 12–13, respectively. These meetings were cosponsored by The Institute of Security and International Studies, Chulalongkorn University. The Nepal study group was held in Kathmandu, Nepal, July 17–19, and was cosponsored by the Social Science Baha. The northeast India study group met in New Delhi, India, August 9–10. This meeting was cosponsored by the Centre for Policy Research. The Sri Lanka meeting was held in Colombo, Sri Lanka, August 14–16, and cosponsored by the Centre for Policy Alternatives. In each of these meetings, scholars and practitioners reviewed and critiqued papers produced for the meetings and made suggestions for revision.

### ***Publications***

This project will result in twenty to twenty-five policy papers providing a detailed examination of particular aspects of each conflict. Subject to satisfactory peer review, these 18,000- to 24,000-word essays will be published in the East-West Center Washington *Policy Studies* series, and will be circulated widely to key personnel and institutions in the policy and intellectual

communities and the media in the respective Asian countries, the United States, and other relevant countries. Some studies will be published in the East-West Center Washington *Working Papers* series.

### ***Public Forums***

To engage the informed public and to disseminate the findings of the project to a wide audience, public forums have been organized in conjunction with study group meetings.

Five public forums were organized in Washington, D.C., in conjunction with the first study group meeting. The first forum, cosponsored by The Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies, discussed the conflict in southern Thailand. The second, cosponsored by The Sigur Center for Asian Studies of The George Washington University, discussed the conflict in Burma. The conflicts in Nepal were the focus of the third forum, which was cosponsored by the Asia Program at The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. The fourth public meeting, cosponsored by the Foreign Policy Studies program at The Brookings Institution, discussed the conflicts in northeastern India. The fifth forum, cosponsored by the South Asia Program of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, focused on the conflict in Sri Lanka.

### ***Funding Support***

The Carnegie Corporation of New York is once again providing generous funding support for the project.



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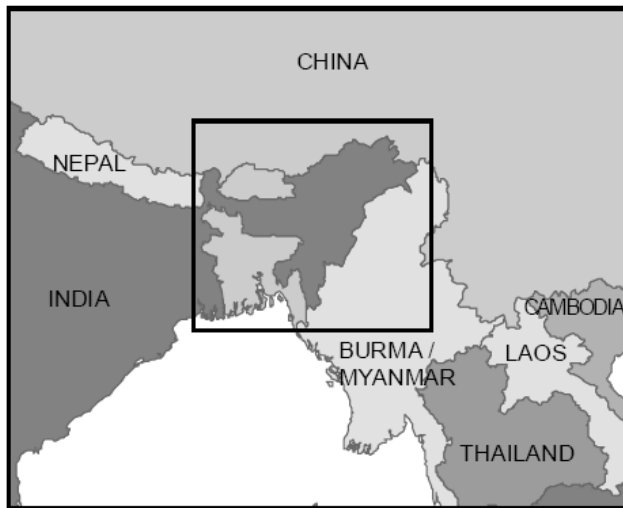
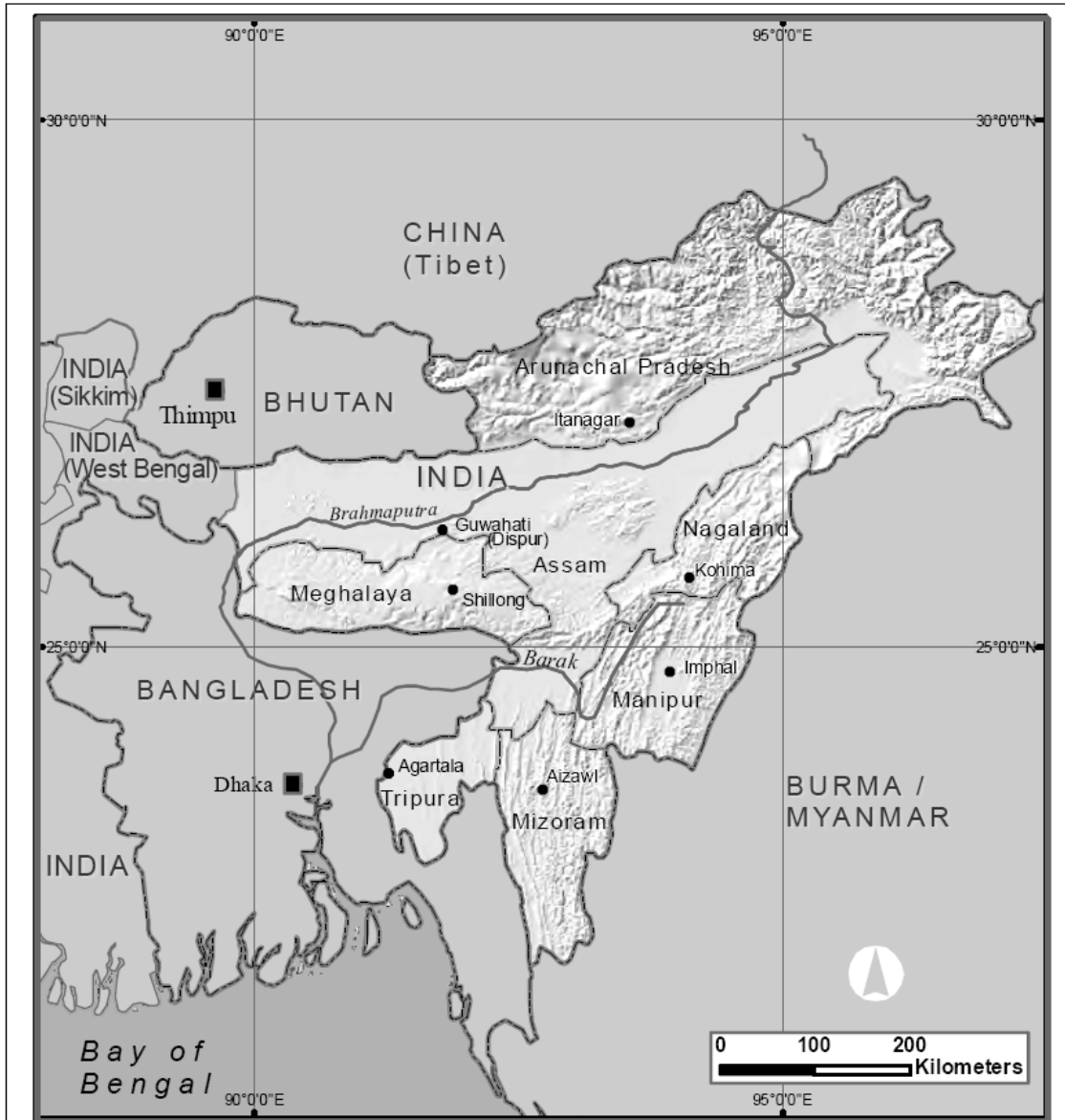
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# Map of Northeast India



- Capital Cities
- State Capitals
- ∕ Provincial Boundaries
- ∕ Country Boundaries

*Note: Map boundaries and locations are approximate. Geographic features and their names do not imply official endorsement or recognition by the UN.*

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