

Policy Studies 33

Postfrontier Blues: Toward a New Policy Framework for Northeast India

Sanjib Baruah



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Toward a New Policy
Framework for Northeast India**

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by Sanjib Baruah

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List of Acronyms

| | |
|------------------|--|
| AFSPA | The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act |
| DONER | Department for Development of the North Eastern Region |
| ICCPR | International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights |
| NCC-AFSPA | National Campaign Committee against Militarisation and Repeal of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act |
| NEC | North Eastern Council |
| NEFA | North East Frontier Agency |
| NSCN-IM | The National Socialist Council of Nagalim |
| ST | Scheduled Tribe |
| UAPA | Unlawful Activities Prevention Act |
| ULFA | United Liberation Front of Assam |

Executive Summary

A number of armed conflicts smolder in India's Northeastern border region. The Naga rebellion—sometimes called the mother of the region's insurgencies—began in the 1950s. Though dormant since a ceasefire in 1997, it is one of the world's oldest unresolved armed conflicts. With its controversial human rights record and sluggish economic growth rates, Northeast India is a counterpoint to India's image as a mature democracy, a dynamic economy, and an emerging major power. The World Bank describes conditions in the region as a low-level equilibrium of poverty, nondevelopment, civil conflict, and lack of faith in political leadership.

Northeast India's history as a frontier, and the inattention of policy-makers to contradictions rooted in this context, explain the deficits of democracy, development, and peace. Historically in this part of the world, where land was abundant but manpower was in short supply, relations between the non-state spaces in the hills and the labor-starved low-land states had a peculiar dynamic. A long history of back-and-forth movement between hills and plains provides the context for a world of multiple languages and cultures that are different yet in close proximity to one another.

This transformation of non-state spaces into state-controlled spaces provides the backdrop to many of Northeast India's conflicts. This transformation has engendered multiple forms of resistance, and in the exceptionally diverse ethnic landscape of the region has produced a politics with multiple competing agendas. Furthermore, this sparsely populated region has seen massive immigration from other parts of the subcontinent for nearly a century. Managing indigenous-settler tensions becomes an important priority in this situation. Apart from migration from the rest of India, significant cross-border migration from Bangladesh has also con-

tinued. The partition of India in 1947 could not suddenly change the logic of a frontier and turn off the flow of people from one of the subcontinent's most densely populated areas to a relatively sparsely populated region once regarded as open to new settlements, but now separated by an international border.

Insurgencies and counterinsurgency operations have become part of the fabric of everyday life. Apart from counterinsurgency operations, the Indian response has included massive infusion of development funds and a variety of ill-considered methods of conflict management. Together they have only nurtured a climate conducive to sustained low-intensity conflicts. In order to maintain a permanent counterinsurgency capacity, India's democratic institutions have acquired certain authoritarian trappings. In recent years there has been significant protest in the region against a controversial law, the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, that gives sweeping powers to security forces engaged in counterinsurgency operations. This law violates international human rights laws and norms and is strongly criticized by national and international human rights organizations.

India spends large amounts of money in Northeast India in an effort to close a so-called development gap. However, under conditions that point to state failure, some of this money easily finds its way to rebel groups. A double-edged quality to this frequently used tool of conflict management has created a number of *de facto* ethnic homelands where certain ethnically defined groups are privileged. They are the product of incremental policymaking whose origins go back to colonial-era efforts to protect vulnerable "aboriginal" peoples living in isolated enclaves. In these ethnic homelands, the lion's share of public employment, business and trade licenses, and even the right to seek elected office are reserved for particular ethnic groups. But ethnic homelands are in dissonance with the actually existing political economy of the region.

Behind legal fictions such as communal land and customary law, property rights in the old non-state spaces are going through fundamental transformation. Informal land markets are emerging and attracting many migrants. Yet little thought has been given to transition to a new, formalized land control regime. In many parts of the region, cadastral surveys have not been conducted and no official land records exist. A new land control regime would have to take into account the rights of indigenous peoples, the imperatives of the market, and the values of social justice and democracy.

This issue of *Policy Studies* proposes a democratic institution-building agenda that is sensitive to the particular dynamics of change in this "post-frontier." Rather than describing an actual condition, the concept of a

postfrontier is a tool for imagining an alternative vision of change. Taking on the task of directly addressing these context-specific challenges, policy-making for a postfrontier could be the foundation for a radical reorientation of Indian policy toward the region.

As an illustration of the postfrontier policy paradigm, this study proposes an alternative to the ethnic homeland model: multilevel citizenship both of India and of a state—not unknown to federal systems. Instead of an exclusively ethnic principle of defining effective local citizenship, multilevel citizenship could introduce a civic principle and give the right to define the rules of inclusion and exclusion to territorially defined political communities. Such a provision could be extended to all states of the region.

Seven sets of issues are identified in this analysis:

1. the consequences of the historical distinction between areas where migrant settlements were allowed and where they were prohibited;
2. fundamental changes in the actual control of land and natural resources theoretically under community control;
3. labor shortage in the historically non-state spaces;
4. subsidy as a permanent condition of many Northeastern states;
5. mobility-intensive livelihood strategies of settler communities;
6. the transnational dimension of population movement; and
7. an unsustainable two-tiered citizenship regime inherent in the ethnic homeland model.

These policy challenges cannot be addressed through national-level decision-making alone. The postfrontier policy paradigm has a transnational dimension: to turn the region's extensive international borders—with China's Tibet region, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Burma—from militarized spaces of mistrust and confrontation to spaces of cooperation.

Postfrontier Blues: Toward a New Policy Framework for Northeast India

Even as India “flexes its muscle on the world stage,” a decades-old civil conflict rages on in far-away Manipur State—the “lush, hilly swatch of land that juts out of the east toward Myanmar.” Indian soldiers and paramilitary forces “saturate” this border state, and locals hold a seething sense of grievance against them (Sengupta and Kumar 2005). Emotions against the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA)—a law that gives sweeping powers to security forces engaged in counterinsurgency operations—reached explosive new heights after the abduction, suspected rape, and killing of Thanjam Manorama in July 2004. The Indian army claimed that Ms. Manorama was a member of the banned People’s Liberation Army, and it challenged the Manipur State government’s authority to hold an inquiry, citing the controversial act. In July 2004 about a dozen Manipuri women protested the Manorama incident with an act of unusual courage and eloquence. Standing naked in front of the Indian army’s base in Manipur’s capital city Imphal, they held a banner that read “Indian Army Rape Us.” There is little more that Manipuris can do to draw the nation’s attention to the vulnerability that civilians, especially women, feel during counterinsurgency operations.

Enacted in 1958, AFSPA was originally designed to deal with “disturbed” conditions in areas that prior to the formation of the state of Nagaland in 1963 were referred to as the Naga-inhabited areas of Assam and Manipur. In other words, AFSPA was designed to combat the Naga

rebellion. Even after five decades, this conflict remains unresolved, though it has been under suspended animation since a ceasefire in 1997. AFSPA today provides the legal framework for counterinsurgency operations against numerous armed rebellions in the region. The law has been amended a number of times to accommodate changes in the names and the number of states. It now applies to all of Northeast India.

“A truly nasty and terrifying piece of legislation” (Prabhakara 2004: 12), AFSPA’s controversial provisions include the power of the security forces to make preventive arrests, search premises without warrant, and shoot and kill civilians; and effective legal immunity of soldiers implicated in such actions, since court proceedings are contingent on the central government’s prior approval (Government of India 1958). According to a fact-finding team of Indian lawyers, journalists, and human rights activists in 1997, “despite denials to the contrary,” the security forces have “blatantly violated all norms

*Militarization...had
become a “way of life”
in Northeast India*

of decency and the democratic right of the people of the region.” Militarization, said the report, had become a “way of life” in Northeast India (NCC-AFSPA 1997: 53).

Even by the standards of this restive corner of India, the recent wave of protests in Manipur was extraordinary. Sharmila Chanu has been on a protest hunger strike since November 2000 demanding the repeal of AFSPA and the withdrawal of security forces. Perhaps the world’s longest continuous protest of this kind, the hunger strike led to her arrest and force-feeding at a hospital. Outwitting security and intelligence officials, local human rights activists whisked her away to New Delhi in October 2006. Chanu tried to continue her hunger strike at a prime New Delhi location, hoping to arouse the nation’s conscience, but she was arrested and removed to a hospital, where she continued to be fed forcibly.

The protests raise serious questions about the claim that the fight against insurgencies in the Northeast is being won. It certainly becomes harder to claim that India is winning the battle for hearts and minds.¹ Interestingly enough, even though the “naked protest” was widely reported, very few newspapers carried pictures. “Either they didn’t have them—which seems unlikely,” observes the feminist writer Urvashi Butalia, “or they could not stomach the thought of showing middle-class Indian women (read ‘mothers’) naked!” Nevertheless, the protest probably made many Indian citizens wonder, like Butalia: “What is it that drives women to take this absolutely desperate step? How humiliated, how violated, how

angry must a woman feel to think that this is the only way she can make people listen?” (Butalia 2004).

Such sentiments have not been enough to get the Indian establishment to rethink its approach to Northeast India. And the events in Manipur are only one of the many controversies involving the Indian army’s conduct. Through much of its postcolonial history, insurgencies and counterinsurgency operations have been a part of the fabric of everyday life in Northeast India. And in order to maintain a permanent counterinsurgency capacity, India’s democratic institutions have acquired certain authoritarian trappings, as exemplified by AFSPA (Baruah 2005: 59–80). A recent World Bank report describes the region as “a victim of a low-level equilibrium where poverty and lack of development (compared with the remainder of India and other Southeast Asian nations), lead to civil conflict, lack of belief in political leadership and government, and, therefore, to a politically unstable situation. This in turn leads to further barriers to poverty reduction, accelerated development and growth” (World Bank 2006: 30).

The story is a far cry from the popular national narratives of “India Shining”—a slogan that celebrates India’s democracy, high economic growth rates, and new-found prestige in the global arena. To the novice, the political unrest in Northeast India might appear to be the product of tensions between New Delhi and a culturally and ethnically different region with a goal of political autonomy or separation. After all, the northeastern borderland of India and South Asia could as accurately be called the northwestern borderland of Southeast Asia (van Schendel 2005: 275). And ever since Europeans “discovered” India and China at seaports, and imagined the societies located within these territories to all be attached to inland civilizations, it has been common to view the peoples of Northeast India, whose phenotypic features are often closer to people in East and Southeast Asia, as “marginal or even alien to their surrounding ‘Indic’ civilization” (Ludden 2003: 11).

Despite the continuities with the transoceanic mercantile manner of viewing the Northeast from the perspective of the mainland, the rebellions of the region present anything but a unified voice. Nor are rebels ubiquitous in every part of the region. The states of Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram, for instance, are quite peaceful. Furthermore, even where rebels hold independentist² agendas, they do not enjoy widespread support. Not many people accept the authority of independentists to speak for all of Manipur, Nagaland, Tripura, or Assam States—and certainly not for Northeast India as a whole.

The deficits of democracy, development, and peace are best explained by Northeast India's history as a frontier, and by the lack of attention by Indian policymakers to the contradictions rooted in this context. Policy tools used to deal with the region's discontent have often been counterproductive. In particular, the ethnic homeland model that has captured the imagination of ethnic activists and become a favored tool for conflict management has negative consequences. Apart from this and other ill-considered conflict management tools, the Indian response to the region's rebellions has consisted of counterinsurgency operations, and in recent years a bloated development budget. Little energy is spent on building and nourishing institutions, especially with an eye to managing indigenous-settler tensions in the long run. Policymakers simply muddle through (Lindblom 1959), and have no roadmap for getting the region out of its low-level equilibrium of poverty, nondevelopment, civil conflict, and a lack of faith in political leadership.

I propose the term postfrontier around which a context-sensitive alternative policy framework can be developed. As an illustration of what a postfrontier policy paradigm might look like, I propose the institution of multilevel citizenship to replace ethnic homelands as a more robust and democratic way of managing indigenous-settler tensions in the long run.

Northeast India does not get much attention in the English-language Delhi-based "national press." The region's issues do not make it to the national policy agenda (Sonwalkar 2004: 390). The region for most Indians is "on the map, but off the mind"—as the title of a forum organized by the Indian newspaper *Tehelka* put it in 2006. Thus when bad news

from Northeast India reaches the global media or international human rights forums, Indians in the rest of the country find the reports to be a source of embarrassment rather than an occasion for moral anguish about the health of Indian democracy. This attitude translates into official policy as well. Foreign journalists, said the *New York Times* report from Manipur, must have permits to "even set

foot in the state," and those are only rarely issued. Nor are research visas usually granted to foreign scholars to study the Northeast. Defending the "virtual prohibition" against foreign journalists, India's home minister told a *New York Times* reporter that the restrictions are there "because you are so interested" (Sengupta and Kumar 2005). "Does anybody care for Manipur?" was the title of a sympathetic column in an Indian newspaper

for most Indians
[Northeast India] is "on
the map, but off the mind"

(Varadarajan 2006). The situation differs significantly from that in Kashmir, where similar counterinsurgency laws, travel restrictions, and human rights violations exist. But Kashmir is “more central to the national imaginary of India” than the Northeast (Tillin 2007: 58) and, unlike the latter, there are vigorous debates on Kashmir in India.

Yet unlike previous protests and criticisms in national and international human rights forums, the recent wave of protests in Manipur has led to a debate on AFSPA in official circles, although the Indian public has shown little interest. In November 2004 the Government of India appointed a committee headed by former Supreme Court Judge B. P. Jeevan Reddy to review AFSPA. Human Rights Watch includes this decision among the positive achievements of the Manmohan Singh government since it came to power in 2004 (Human Rights Watch 2005). The Reddy Committee submitted its report on June 6, 2005. Although it has not been made public officially, in October 2006 the newspaper *Hindu* posted the report on its website.

The Reddy Committee tries to find a middle ground between the “security of the nation, which is of paramount importance,” and the rights of citizens (Government of India 2005: 67–69). It recommends the repeal of AFSPA, but also the incorporation of key provisions into another law, the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), a law revamped in 2004 to tackle terrorism. Unlike AFSPA, UAPA applies to the country as a whole. The committee makes a significant recommendation to create grievance cells in districts where the army operates in order to “ensure public confidence in the process of detention and arrest.” It acknowledges that “there have been a large number of cases where those taken away without warrants have ‘disappeared,’ or ended up dead or badly injured” (Government of India 2005: 77–79). Many in India’s security establishment are unhappy about the committee’s criticism of the security forces and its recommendations of changes in the law. Apparently it is because of the discomfort of the Army and the Ministry of Defence that the government was reluctant to make the report public (Varadarajan 2006). The central government has not acted on these recommendations, although the state government has made the law inoperative within the city limits of Imphal. The fate of AFSPA underscores an impasse in Indian policy toward the Northeast.

This study is divided into five parts. The first part introduces the reader to Northeast India as rebel country (Kalita 2007: 7), where conditions point to serious weaknesses in India’s state-building and nation-building projects that are not widely recognized. Part 2 addresses the policy impasse by examining Indian official thinking on fighting insur-

gency, including the model of ethnic homelands and ideas about bridging a development gap that seems to captivate official thinking. Part 3 takes a step toward a postfrontier policy framework, arguing for a context-sensitive understanding of the dynamics of change in Northeast India. The fourth part elaborates seven sets of policy challenges related to the region's frontier history—including the unintended consequences of previous policies adopted to manage the contradictions of a frontier model of development. To spell out the implications of a postfrontier policy paradigm, part 5 proposes the institution of multilevel citizenship as a democratic alternative to ethnic homelands.

Northeast India: Rebel Country

Northeast India is part of the eastern Himalayan Mountain Range that includes a number of valleys—large and small—of the mighty Brahmaputra River system. Until 2003 the expression Northeast India was used to refer to the seven states that lie on India's eastern extremity bordering foreign countries—China's Tibet region, Burma, Bangladesh, and

Bhutan—on almost all sides. Except for a 37-kilometer corridor that Indians often refer to as “the chicken-neck,” this part of the country is separated from the rest of the Indian landmass by Bhutan and Bangladesh. The seven states are Arunachal Pradesh (or Arunachal), Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura. Indian official usage, however, changed in 2003, and the category now

*Northeast India...refer[s] to
the seven states that lie on
India's eastern extremity*

includes an eighth state, Sikkim, once an independent Himalayan kingdom, and part of India since 1973. Sikkim is not contiguous with the rest of Northeast India: Bhutan and the northern areas of West Bengal separate it from the other seven states. For the purpose of this study, Sikkim is not included in Northeast India.

The population of the seven Northeast Indian states accounts for 8.06 percent of India's total land and 3.73 percent of the population (Government of India 2007). As shown in Table 1, some of these states have small populations. Indeed, as full-fledged states they are somewhat of an aberration in the Indian constitutional architecture, as would be evident from the summary in Table 2 of the representation of Northeastern states in the two houses of Parliament.

Leaving aside Assam, the other six Northeastern states are represented in Parliament by just one or two members in both chambers. The Upper

| State | Area (Square kilometers) ^a | Population (2001) ^b |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Arunachal Pradesh | 83,743 | 1,091,117 |
| Assam | 78,438 | 26,638,407 |
| Manipur | 22,327 | 2,388,634 |
| Meghalaya | 22,429 | 2,306,069 |
| Mizoram | 21,081 | 891,058 |
| Nagaland | 16,579 | 1,988,636 |
| Tripura | 10,048 | 3,191,168 |

Sources:
a. Government of India, Department of Rural Development Website <http://dolr.nic.in/hyperlink/NE-states/NE.html> (accessed February 26, 2007).
b. Census of India, 2001. Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs Website <http://mha.nic.in/nemain.htm> (accessed February 26, 2007).

| State | Lok Sabha (House of the People) | Rajya Sabha (Council of States) |
|-------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Arunachal Pradesh | 2 | 1 |
| Assam | 14 | 7 |
| Manipur | 2 | 1 |
| Meghalaya | 2 | 1 |
| Mizoram | 1 | 1 |
| Nagaland | 1 | 1 |
| Tripura | 2 | 1 |

House of the Indian Parliament is not designed to protect the interests of states and can do little to defend the interests of states with small populations. Unlike the United States Senate, which over-represents states with small populations at the expense of states with larger populations, most

Northeastern states are represented in the Upper House by only one member. The delegations of more populous states are many times larger. Uttar Pradesh, for instance, has eighty members in the Lower House and thirty-one in the Upper House. Maharashtra has forty-eight seats in the Lower House and nineteen in the Upper House. Andhra Pradesh has forty-two and eighteen members in the Lower and Upper Houses, respectively.

A number of Northeast Indian states were created primarily in pursuit of an agenda driven by national security and not, as in other parts of India, in response to popular sentiments seeking recognition for historical regions or their fiscal viability. Responsible Indian officials have sometimes, perhaps inadvertently, acknowledged this peculiar feature of many Northeast Indian states. A former governor of Assam, Lieutenant General S. K. Sinha, speaking to an elite New Delhi audience, introduced the state of Nagaland this way:

There were many efforts to pacify the Nagas, and through concessions in 1963, the State of Nagaland was created. This State was for a population of barely 500,000—less than the population of many of the colonies of New Delhi³—and yet all the trappings that go with full Statehood, a Legislature, Cabinet, Chief Minister, and later even Governor, went with this new status (Sinha 2002: 8).

The expression Northeast India entered the Indian lexicon in 1971. However, until 1972 the state of Arunachal—the area where India and China fought a war in 1962—was called the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA). The term Northeast India, or just “the Northeast,” has its origins in the changes made to the political and administrative map of the area in the 1960s and early 1970s: the creation of new units that eventually all became states, and the formation of the North Eastern Council (NEC) in 1971. Like other directional place names (e.g., the Far East or the Middle East), “Northeast India” reflects an external and not a local point of view.

B. P. Singh, an official who held key positions both in the region and in the Indian Home Ministry, describes the 1971 legislation passed by the Indian Parliament that created a number of new political units and the NEC as “twins born out of a new vision for the Northeast” (Singh 1987: 117). The Northeast, he writes, “emerged as a significant administrative concept...replacing the hitherto more familiar unit of public imagination, Assam” (Ibid.: 8). Northeast India however, is not entirely synonymous with undivided Assam. In British colonial times, Assam included only five of the seven states of Northeast India, in addition to the district of Sylhet

in today's Bangladesh. Colonial Assam did not include Manipur and Tripura, which were "native states" (nor did it include Sikkim). Following their merger with India in 1947, they initially became what the Constitution called "Part C" states and subsequently union territories until becoming full-fledged states in 1972.

The sheer number of armed rebel groups in the region—at least according to the way official security agencies and unofficial security think tanks count them—is extraordinary. According to one recent count, there are as many as 109 armed rebel groups. Manipur State tops the list with forty such organizations, six of which are banned, and in addition there are nine "active" and twenty-five "inactive" rebel groups. The distinction between active and inactive organizations perhaps reflects adaptation by security experts to the seeming interminability of Northeast India's rebellions. The distinction appears to imply that insurgencies in the region do not end: they only become temporarily "inactive." After Manipur, Assam is next on the list with thirty-four rebel groups: two of which are banned, with six active and twenty-six inactive armed groups. Meghalaya has four armed rebel groups, of which three are active and one inactive. Mizoram has two rebel organizations, and both are listed as active. Nagaland has two active and two inactive groups of rebels. Tripura has two rebel groups that are banned, in addition to one active and twenty-two inactive groups. Only Arunachal, according to this count, has no armed rebel organizations (SATP 2006).

The groups that figure in counts by security agencies have different goals, although political autonomy is a recurrent theme in rebel narratives. Relations among them are sometimes conflictual. Not all armed groups are rebels. For instance, many locals believe that some of them have come into being at the behest of security and intelligence agencies combating insurgency. Although it is hard to confirm such charges, warfare between rival militias—especially following ceasefire agreements signed by a militia faction and the security forces—sometimes neatly serves official counterinsurgency ends of the moment. Most, though not all, armed groups can be described as ethnic militias. Indeed the names of rebel groups often proclaim the ethnic groups that they seek to defend, for example, the Dima Haram Daogah (Dimasa National Guards), Hmar Revolutionary Front, Karbi National Volunteers, Kuki National Front,

The...number of armed rebel groups...is extraordinary

Tiwa National Revolutionary Force, or Zomi Revolutionary Volunteers. Even when they do not have such names, it is quite clear that they are mobilized along ethnic lines. However, not every rebel organization is an ethnic militia: some armed groups with ethno-national projects have strong civic elements, including the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and a number of rebel groups in Manipur State that actively seek to build a multiethnic support base. The National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN-IM) led by Thuingaleh Muivah and Isaak Chisi Swu, sometimes called the mother of all Northeastern insurgencies, spearheads the five-decades-old struggle for Naga nationhood.

Whatever the difficulties of defining rebel groups in Northeast India, there is little doubt that in many parts of the region insurgent violence and counterinsurgent State violence together has created a situation not unlike what prevails across the border in Burma where, as Amitav Ghosh puts it, the people have “learned to live with quotidian violence on a scale unimaginable elsewhere until the global advent of terrorism” (Ghosh 1996: 42). The Reddy Committee, during its travels through the region, found “an overwhelming desire of an overwhelming majority of the region that the Army should remain” (Government of India 2005: 75). And such views were held not only by those associated with the security establishment. They reflect genuine insecurity of citizens caught in a situation of prolonged low-intensity conflict and their routine dependence on the army for everyday security. Thus during Manipur State’s vociferous protests against AFSPA, the hill districts were relatively quiet. According to one report, Naga villagers in the Senapati District demonstrated in support of AFSPA with placards such as “Assam Rifles, Friend of the Hill People” and “Save our Souls, Assam Rifles, Protect our Lives”—with the particular security force as probably more than a mute observer (Varadarajan 2004: 10). Rebel groups with ethnic constituencies in the hills of Manipur are often in conflict with valley-based Manipuris. For example, the integration of all Naga-inhabited areas into one political unit is a key Naga demand and it puts Nagas of Manipur State in conflict with the valley-based Manipuris. Indeed the pre-eminent leader of the Naga independentist movement, Thuingaleh Muivah, is a Tangkhul Naga from Manipur. The territorial demands of Naga nationalists are potentially in tension with the valley-based Assamese as well.

Citizens also articulate conflicting positions on the question of the presence of the Indian army. In January 2007 the ULFA, faced with the pressures of an intense counterinsurgency operation in the rural areas of Upper Assam, targeted Hindi-speaking communities of the same area for attack. The victimized ethnic communities called for the army to provide

protection. The government in response launched a tougher counterinsurgency operation. This aspect of Indian democracy—a citizenry divided, usually along ethnic lines, on the question of the presence of the Indian army, and a government-appointed committee trying to strike a balance—speaks volumes on the nature of the State.

For India, the display and use of military power has become a routine way of asserting State sovereignty in the Northeast. This situation could continue indefinitely. After all, the government can claim that it has to continue the controversial law “enabling” army deployment since many citizens want the army to be there. There is little scope in the tired security discourse that frames India’s Northeast policy for debating whether the routine use and display of military might is consistent with the ethos of a liberal democracy, or is the best way to pursue nation-building in a cultural borderland.

Leaving aside well-organized and well-financed groups like the NSCN-IM, the proliferation and resilience of ragtag bands of armed rebel groups in the region in the face of a long and bloody history of counterinsurgency would suggest that they serve certain functions, despite their incapacity to deliver on grandiose publicly proclaimed goals like “national liberation.” In parts of the region, especially away from major urban centers, when institutions of the State cannot guarantee the security of life and property, ethnic militias fill the vacuum. There is a sort of security dilemma at work, not unlike the one posited by the Realist theory of international relations. In a world of anarchy, according to Realists, states must find security through self-help, but one state’s search for security can make another state insecure. When one ethnic group in Northeast India forms a militia, a rival ethnic group might see it as a threat to its security. Since the State is not seen as a reliable provider of security, the latter group then forms its own ethnic militia in pursuit of security through self-help.

An ethnic militia, seen through the national security prism, may be part of a generalized threat of insurgency. But from the perspective of its ethnic constituency, it may be a provider of security. Indeed in an ethnically polarized situation, where the actions of Indian security forces are seen as partisan, offensives against militants who are seen as security providers by their ethnic kin may, of course, even add to the latter’s sense of insecurity, and be an incentive for strengthening the self-help form of security. In the frontier conditions of Northeast India, where there may be ethnic affinities between settler communities and security forces engaged in counterinsurgency, the sense of insecurity of indigenous communities worsens as a result of counterinsurgency operations ordered by New Delhi. The effectiveness of militias to provide security to their eth-

nic kin, at least compared to that of the State, is quite self-evident to their followers and supporters.

Access to finances, it has been shown, is a significant predictor of civil conflict. The correlation between low national income and armed civil conflict is not necessarily because objective conditions of poverty sustain rebellion, but because poverty and unemployment provide a favorable context for militias to raise money and to recruit new members at a relatively low cost (Collier 2001). For the armed rebel organizations of Northeast India, the major source of financing is what Indian officials term extortion, but in an analytical sense could fruitfully be seen as taxation by non-State organizations. Despite the proliferation of rebel groups, the people of Northeast India continue to elect their state governments and representatives to the national

*Access to finances...is
a significant predictor
of civil conflict*

Parliament in regularly held democratic elections. But it would be inaccurate to interpret this as a sign of the relative strength of pan-Indianism and of democratic institutions.

Democratic politics and the world of armed rebellion intersect in complex ways in this part of the world. The pattern is not dissimilar to what two scholars of African politics describe as the “instrumentalization of disorder.” According to Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, political actors in Africa “seek to maximize their returns on the state of confusion, uncertainty and sometimes even chaos” which characterize many African polities (Chabal and Daloz 1999: xix). In Northeast India it is hard to draw a sharp dividing line between mainstream and rebel political actors. Government bureaucrats and representatives of the pan-Indian dispensation—including those engaged in counterinsurgency operations—may instrumentalize disorder as much as rebels and pseudo-rebels. In such a political conjuncture it is extremely hard to say that a majority of the locals consistently supports the pan-Indian dispensation and rejects the rebels. Armed rebels at times could be on the same side as significant sectors of civil society and even mainstream local politicians—all united against pan-Indian authorities. At other times, antirebel sentiments may be widely shared and more pronounced.

But if a legitimate government is defined by the absence of collective alternatives (Przeworski 1991: 54–55), Northeast India’s resilient rebel organizations, the intermittent complicity of “civil society” with them, and the reliance on a permanent regime of exception by the State for asserting sovereignty, point to a chronic, albeit localized, crisis of legitima-

cy. Although the rebellions are multivocal, they undoubtedly have something to do with the challenges to state- and nation-building. The authors of a review of the political science literature on state failure warn that India should not “labour under the illusion” that it is happily immune from the “syndrome” of state failure. “While the country has the enormous resilience of a consolidated democracy, State weakness remains endemic here, even if it remains confined to certain domains and regions” (Saha and Mallavarapu 2006: 4259). Northeast India provides ample support for their claim.

Viewed from afar, India’s nation-building project may seem pluralistic and inclusive, but in a part of the country where, to borrow Arjun Appadurai’s words, one man’s imagined community can be another man’s political prison (Appadurai 1990: 6), the challenges confronting any old-fashioned nation-building project are formidable. Elsewhere I have argued that federation, understood as an aggregate of politically organized territories (Piccone and Ulmen 1994: 5), is the opposite of the nation-state, and that for a country like India, federation-building rather than nation-building is a more appropriate project (Baruah 1999: 200–13). In Northeast India there are multiple assertions of autonomous histories, and powerful resistance to the displacement or suppression of those histories by the rise of the nation and of regional subnational formations. In such a dynamic context, it is not easy to weave together “the fragments of society that come with their own sense of *ethnos*” (Ramphale 2001). To appreciate the nature of the challenge, it would be useful to first take stock of how official India has approached Northeast India and to try to understand where Indian policies have gone awry.

A Policy Impasse: Counterinsurgency, Ethnic Homelands, and Developmentalism

Ajai Sahni, who heads a New Delhi-based security think tank, believes that the debate on AFSPA has been “emotionally charged.” By this, he is probably referring to both the “naked protest” and the few sympathetic reactions it produced. In Sahni’s view, the debate over this basically black and white issue has been “extraordinarily muddled.” For the Indian army to function in a “situation of widespread internal disorder,” it is essential to have AFSPA or comparable legislation that “confers necessary powers of search, seizure, arrest and engagement.” Without such an “enabling” law, the army cannot be engaged in counterinsurgency operations. Thus as long as there are counterinsurgency operations, AFSPA or a similar law is “indispensable” (Sahni 2006). From a point of view that sees national security as always trumping—or providing the condition for—human

security, this is perhaps a reasonable position. Indeed the Reddy Committee takes this position. But an exclusively state-centric view of security is blind to the insecurities of citizens during armed civil conflicts as well as counterinsurgency operations—as powerfully articulated by the Manipuri women protesters mentioned above.

“Statism is the security blanket of traditional security studies,” as a Critical Security Studies scholar puts it, and its removal becomes a source of discomfort, since familiar and comfortable intellectual reference points disappear. The picture of grass-roots reality that emerges once the statism blanket is cast aside is certainly “more complex and confusing than those drawn by traditional security studies. Understanding this complexity how-

ever, is a prerequisite for bringing about comprehensive security” (Wyn Jones 1999: 117). In a study of the impact of armed conflict on civilians in Assam’s Nalbari District, Anindita Dasgupta found that citizens were fearful of armed rebels, security forces, and “unidentified gunmen.” In fact, these so-called unidentified gunmen—militants who “surrender” but are then

citizens were fearful of armed rebels, security forces, and “unidentified gunmen”

made to assist State agencies in counterinsurgency operations—evoke the most acute fear (Dasgupta 2004: 4464). The term death squads—associated with right-wing military dictatorships in Latin America—is a more appropriate term to describe Northeast India’s “unidentified gunmen.” In the life of a democracy, it is perhaps inevitable that rights may sometimes have to bow to security, as Ignatieff (2004) has argued. But do AFSPA and these rather murky counterinsurgency methods meet the tests of Ignatieff’s “lesser evil”?

Considering democracy’s foundational commitments to dignity, the use of coercion should always be morally problematic. Ignatieff proposes tests that laws enabling coercive measures in a democracy must pass before they are accepted. A dignity test could preclude cruel and unusual punishment, torture, extrajudicial execution, and so forth. A conservative test could ensure that a departure from due process standards is indeed necessary. An effectiveness test could ask whether the proposed coercive measures would make citizens more or less secure. A last resort test could ensure that new coercive measures are adopted only after less coercive measures are tried and have failed. Finally, all such measures would also have to pass the test of open adversarial review by legislative and judicial bodies (Ibid.: 23–24).

AFSPA has never been put to tests even remotely approaching such rigor. Instead there has been casual acceptance of the proposition that to enable counterinsurgency operations, the *de facto* suspension of basic human rights, including the right to life, is necessary. Sahni's argument in favor of AFSPA is typical. The place of this frontier region in the national imaginary—the fear of foreign and domestic enemies conspiring to harm the nation—appears to have normalized a permanent regime of exception. At the same time, few in India's military or civil establishment argue that there is a military solution to Northeast India's troubles. Indeed according to the Indian army's counterinsurgency doctrine, military victories against guerrillas are not possible. The doctrine emphasizes political resolution of insurgencies, and it recommends that insurgents be viewed as "disgruntled citizens" and not as "enemies" or "terrorists." However, it is not unlikely that the army could in the future "move towards a more indiscriminate counterinsurgency doctrine that stresses military 'victory' rather than political resolution" (Rajagopalan 2000: 64).

There are troubling signs of the beginnings of such a shift in Northeast India. In 2005 and 2006 when there was widespread popular support for negotiations between the government and the ULFA in Assam, senior figures in India's counterinsurgency establishment, notably the Governor of Assam, Lieutenant General Ajai Singh, publicly opposed negotiations on grounds that a military victory against ULFA was within reach.⁴ But despite a counterinsurgency doctrine that emphasizes political resolution, controversies like the Manorama incident have dogged the Indian army through its five decades of counterinsurgency in Northeast India. Although not every accusation of torture, rape, or extrajudicial killings is true, there can be little doubt that AFSPA creates conditions for abuse, and the culture of impunity built into it does not help the crisis of legitimacy of pan-Indian institutions in the region.

But how does official India then expect the troubles in the Northeast to end? Apart from military means, counterinsurgency has included a variety of crude political methods. For instance, members of rebel groups are given financial incentives to surrender—often leading to splits within insurgent groups, with an opportunity for State intelligence outfits to recruit members of surrendered factions for counterinsurgency operations in return for security against their former comrades. But comprehensive political settlements ending armed conflicts have

*The Naga conflict...is one
of the world's longest-
running...armed conflicts*

been rare. As a result, some of the world's oldest armed civil conflicts fester in Northeast India. The Naga conflict, for instance, began in the 1950s and is one of the world's longest-running and bloodiest armed conflicts, costing tens of thousands of lives. On the other hand, the end of the independentist Mizo insurgency following negotiations with the Government of India in 1987 is an important counterexample. Mizoram, once a district of Assam, was made into a Union Territory in 1971—in response to the insurgency that began in 1966—and into a full-fledged state in 1987 following the accord between the Mizo National Front and the Government of India. A number of rebel leaders subsequently became mainstream politicians.

However, as noted, there is a double-edged quality to this policy tool used by the government for managing Northeast India's postfrontier conflicts. Mizoram is one of the Northeast Indian states where the lion's share of public employment, business and trade licenses, and even the right to seek elected office, are reserved for particular ethnic groups—members of groups designated as scheduled tribes (ST) in the state.⁵ Thus Mizoram is in effect an ethnic homeland for Mizos, although a few other groups are also designated as STs in Mizoram. But non-Mizos by and large are treated as less than full citizens. The policy is the result of incremental policy-making, the origins of which go back to colonial times when instruments were devised to protect vulnerable “aboriginal” peoples living in isolated enclaves. Under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, many of these enclaves became autonomous districts and autonomous regions within those districts—often identified with particular STs whose names they sometimes carry. Subsequently when these territories have become full-fledged states, like Mizoram, the protected minorities have become majority groups—although the majority status may be endangered due to demographic change. The continuation of protective discrimination to ethnically defined historical indigenous majorities is built into the statutory character of these states.

In three states—Arunachal, Mizoram, and Nagaland—because of the continuation of the colonial institution of the Inner Line, there is an even stronger layer of protection against potential settlers and their descendants. Anyone entering these states is first required to secure an official permit. This mode of policymaking by muddling through (Lindblom 1959) has important unintended effects. Ethnic homelands—where certain ethnically defined groups are politically privileged—have become normalized in Northeast India both in the political imagination of ethnic militants and in the repertoire of policy tools used by government conflict managers. Yet in the context of the actually existing political economy of the region—

especially the demographic change taking place as the expected result of economic development in the historically sparsely populated areas—the ethnic homeland model becomes more and more anachronistic each day.

Indian official thinking has lately zeroed in on closing a so-called development gap as a magic bullet. Funds transferred annually from the coffers of the Government of India to Northeastern states, according to the Reserve Bank of India's Deputy Governor, now add up to more than what India gets from the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and other multilateral institutions put together. The amounts are higher than the total foreign aid that Bangladesh receives (Mohan 2003).⁶

An expert committee report commissioned by the national government, *Transforming the Northeast*, lays out the rationale. "There are four deficits that confront the Northeast, a basic needs deficit; an infra-structural deficit; a resource deficit, and, most important, a two-way deficit of understanding with the rest of the country which compounds the others." The Commission estimated the financial and organizational resources necessary to eliminate the "backlogs and gaps in basic minimum services and infrastructure in the Northeast not just incrementally but through a quantum leap." The hope is to end the region's "perceived sense of isolation and neglect and break the vicious circle of economic stagnation and unemployment which feeds militancy and, in turn, hampers investment and the harnessing of its abundant resources" (Government of India 1997). Some institutional changes accompany this reorientation. The creation in 2001 of a separate Department for Development of the North Eastern Region (DONER), headed by a central cabinet minister, is part of this reorientation.

Transforming the Northeast reiterates certain ideas—very commonplace in Indian policy circles—about the causes of Northeast India's political troubles. Its authors believe that a sense of isolation and neglect and backlogs and gaps in basic minimum services and infrastructure together produce a vicious circle of economic stagnation and unemployment, which in turn lead to militancy and hamper investment. Are these lines of causation self-evident? There are reasons for some skepticism. One cannot underestimate the self-serving role of local elites in the diffusion of the "neglect" hypothesis: after all, it translates into more money. If one goes by the "instrumentalization of disorder" argument (Chabal and Daloz 1999: xix), the fact that the thesis has many takers in New Delhi might only suggest a convergence of self-interests rather than its inherent validity.

A debate occurred a few years ago among scholars on whether "greed," the term used to emphasize the economics of rebel organizations,

or “grievance,” the kind of causal factors alluded to in *Transforming the Northeast*, explains armed civil conflicts (Collier 2001). Grievance does not fare very well in comparative statistical analyses of armed civil conflicts. Although rebels and their supporters may be motivated by grievances, theorists of “greed” see grievances as no more than the stuff of rebel propaganda—tools for recruiting members and sympathizers. The explanation for rebellions, according to these theorists, falls on rebels as entrepreneurs, who succeed when certain conditions such as roads, access to sanctuaries, and the fund-raising environment—all factors related to the state of the State—are favorable. These theorists make a persuasive case for focusing on the structural conditions that favor the actual conduct of insurgency. However, their state-centrism and discomfort with conditions where the lines between the legal and the illegal are blurred—illustrated by the use of the term “greed” to describe rebel financing—reduce the analytical value of their approach. Although structural conditions are important, so are the pleasures of agency for partisans: in other words, “the positive effect associated with self-determination, autonomy, self-esteem, efficacy, and pride from the successful assertion of intention” (Wood 2003: 235)—as a scholar of insurgency in another part of the world elegantly puts it.

Transforming the Northeast puts the explanatory burden of Northeast India’s unrest almost entirely on a convenient rendering of rebel grievances. To be sure, there is empirical evidence that poorer areas are more prone to armed civil conflicts than areas with higher per capita income. But the conditions that make insurgencies possible can be largely independent of conditions that grievance narratives focus on. Structural conditions include the state’s financial, administrative, judicial, and coercive capabilities; the level of disciplining of a terrain by roads; and state penetration of rural areas. If lower per capita income tends to favor “the technology of insurgency,” it

may only do so because fewer economic alternatives make it easier to recruit young men to the life of a guerrilla (Fearon and Laitin 2003: 80).

Is it reasonable to expect that eliminating the “backlogs and gaps in basic minimum services and infrastructure in the Northeast” will end armed civil conflicts? In the long run, the answer may be “yes.” But in the short- and medium-

term, under conditions that have an affinity to state failure, money spent to accelerate development can easily find its way to rebel groups, as it does in Northeast India. A more serious problem with using grievance narratives

*money spent to accelerate
development can easily find
its way to rebel groups*

to rationalize spending is that the condition of the state receives no attention, and institution-building objectives—and the question of the quality of institutions—are entirely left out of the policy agenda. At least for those who care about the quality of Indian democracy, institution-building has to be the priority. Splurging and closing the so-called development gap as a means to ending Northeast India's rebellions is too blunt an instrument to respond to the challenges at hand.

Although it is too early to look at the effects of the recent spurt of massive development funding in the region, the early signs are not encouraging. Economist Atul Sarma points out that while in 1993 two states, Arunachal and Nagaland, had real per capita income above the all-India average, by 1999–2000 not a single Northeastern state had real per capita income above the national average. The disparity with the national average was as high as 42.54 percent for Assam and 13.32 percent for Nagaland. Since this was during a time when the Northeastern region began receiving massive development funds from New Delhi, Sarma calls the continued deceleration of the economies of the region a paradox (Sarma 2005: 1–2).

Following the Reserve Bank of India Deputy Governor's comparison between funds that New Delhi spends in the Northeast and international development assistance, it may be useful to recall debates on international development assistance. Influential critics such as P. T. Bauer are critical of aid because, in its single-minded attention to bridging "gaps," it ignores the qualitative factors that inhibit growth. Among them are property rights, the legal system, government capacity to deliver public goods, and the openness to trade and investment (Erixon 2005: 23). It is fair to say that the critics won the battle of ideas on a number of key issues. "The problem of underdevelopment," as Philip Keefer (2003: 2) has argued, "is in substantial measure one of government failure, and therefore, policy failure, in developing countries." These policy failures are mostly the result of the perverse incentives to actors on the ground because of the unintended consequences of policies. There may be a lesson from these debates for India's Northeast policy.

The World Bank's recent Strategy Report on Northeast India sees institutional arrangements—one of the qualitative factors that Bauer and other critics of development aid emphasize—as the principal obstacle to utilizing the region's vast water resources for sustainable development. It finds a highly centralized approach that suffers

*There is widespread distrust
of...centralized structures*

from “the paternalism of central-level bureaucrats, coercive top-down planning, and little support or feedback from locals.” There is widespread distrust of these centralized structures among local stakeholders, who believe that most developmental initiatives would bring no benefits to them. The institutional arrangements are so dysfunctional that even an embankment project may be opposed by the very people it is supposed to benefit (World Bank 2006: 13–14)—providing further testimony to the impasse in India’s Northeast policy.

It is worth pausing for a moment to consider the very implications of India having a Northeast policy. “To whom, or for whom, do you have a policy?” asks philosopher Mrinal Miri, a distinguished intellectual from the region. Although the Northeast is part of this country, he says, “we think that the people of the Northeast should be made the object of a policy.” But human beings do not have a policy toward family members or friends. To be made an object of policy implies that the peoples of the region are not in a relationship of “human concerns such as love, friendship, understanding of the other,” but in a relationship of manager and the managed (Miri 2002).

In what is perhaps a sign of growing sensitivity of official India to the Northeast Indian exception to pan-Indian narratives of democracy and high economic growth, the Reddy Committee recommends the repeal of AFSPA and the incorporation of some of its key provisions into a pan-Indian antiterrorism law. Further extending the Indian army’s broad counterinsurgency powers at the expense of civil rights—powers it has had for almost as long as India’s history as a democracy—would amount to Northeast India being in a permanent state of exception. However, the Indian government rejects this interpretation of the AFSPA regime. In its verdict in a 1998 case brought by the Naga Peoples’ Movement for Human Rights, the Indian Supreme Court said that AFSPA “does not displace the civil power of the state by armed forces” and does not make use of the emergency powers of the Indian Constitution (cited in Amnesty International 2005). However, the Indian position has little support in international human rights law.

In 1997 the Human Rights Committee established under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), of which India is a signatory, expressed regret that “some parts of India have remained subject to declaration as disturbed areas over many years—for example the Armed Forces Special Powers Act has been applied throughout Manipur since 1980 and in some areas of that state for much longer—and that, in these areas, the State party is in effect using emergency powers” without resorting to the provisions of ICCPR (United Nations 1997).

Under Article 4 of the ICCPR, in times of “public emergency which threatens the life of the nation,” States may take measures “derogating from their obligations” under the Covenant “to the extent strictly required by the exigencies of the situation.” However, in such situations a state “availing itself of the right of derogation” is required to “immediately inform the other State Parties” through the intermediary of the UN Secretary General of “the provisions from which it has derogated and of the reasons by which it was actuated.” States are also required to communicate through the same intermediary the date when such derogation is terminated (United Nations 1966). Specifically referring to AFSPA, the Human Rights Committee criticized India’s use of emergency powers without resorting to the ICCPR provisions and recommended that the practice “be closely monitored so as to ensure its strict compliance with the provisions of the Covenant” (United Nations 1997). India has, of course, steadfastly resisted any international attempt at monitoring the AFSPA regime.

Let us grant for the moment that in a democracy there may be times when a government could choose what Michael Ignatieff calls the path of “the lesser evil.” But can a state stick to such a path indefinitely? And if it does so, can it still call itself a liberal democracy? As Ignatieff puts it, when one hears arguments for “destroying a village in order to save it,” it may be a sign that there is a slippage from the lesser to the greater evil. When that happens, society has no choice but to admit mistakes and reverse course (Ignatieff 2004: 19). After nearly five decades of AFSPA, it is surely time for India to ask such basic questions vis-à-vis its approach to the Northeast.

From Frontier to Postfrontier: Dynamics of Change

Northeast India’s extraordinary diversity and the in-between space it occupies as a cultural borderland help to place the region’s predicament in a historical and comparative context. All standard accounts of Northeast India refer to its linguistic and ethnic diversity. Here is an illustrative example:

The North East is one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse regions in India.... According to the 1971 census there are about 220 languages spoken in these states,⁷ belonging mainly to three language families, namely Indo Aryan, Sino-Tibetan and Austric. The Indo-Aryan represented mainly by Asamiya [Assamese] and Bangla [Bengali], Austro-Asiatic represented mainly by Khasi and the Sino-Tibetan family of languages is represented by the Tibeto-Burman and the Siamese-

Chinese sub families also there are languages of the Tea-Tribes. However the majority of languages spoken here belong to the former and the latter is represented by a few Thai [Tai] languages like Khamyang, Khamti, Aiton, Phakyal and Turung. It is worthwhile to mention here that Ahom, a language belonging to this Thai [Tai] group, has over the years merged with Asamiya [Assamese] (IIT 2006).

This extreme diversity is not the cause of Northeast India's conflicts. Language, for instance, has neither been a barrier to communication nor to the emergence of shared political projects. The Nagas, whose struggle for nationhood is one of the region's most resilient rebellions, speak as many as thirty different languages—many of them mutually unintelligible—that linguists classify as falling into “at least two, and possibly several, completely distinct branches of Tibeto-Burman” (Burling 2003: 172). Languages in Northeast India “live so close to each other,” says Mrinal Miri, that “in many cases, one gets inducted into the life of the community not just through one language but several languages, so people grow up as naturally multilingual beings.” When a person switches from one language to another and mixes different languages in a conversation, “one doesn't move from one vision of the world to another in a kind of schizophrenic frenzy; but one is, as it were, a native citizen of a multi-visionary world” (Miri 2005: 55).

Is it possible to make comparative sense of this extraordinarily large number of languages, dialects, and ethnic groups? James C. Scott's distinction between state spaces and non-state spaces⁸ gives us a handle on the phenomenon. According to Scott, one of the world's “largest, if not *the* largest remaining non-state space,” is

...the vast expanse of uplands ranging from northeastern India and eastern Bangladesh through northern Burma, northern Thailand, three provinces of southwestern China, most of Laos, and much of upland Vietnam all the way to the Central Highlands—more than two million square kilometers. Lying at altitudes from 500 meters above sea level to more than 4,000 meters, it could be thought of as a Southeast Asian Appalachia, were it not for the fact that it sprawls across seven nation states (Scott 2006: 8).

Historically this region's ethnic landscape has had “bewildering and intercalated ‘gradients’ of cultural traits.” For a person to speak three languages, for instance, was, and in many places still is, fairly common. If lan-

guage was a poor clue to identity, so were rituals, clothing, or food habits. This often frustrated ethnographers of an earlier era looking for neat boundary lines (Scott 2000: 21–22). Thus in the case of the Nagas, ethnographers and missionaries engaged in what Julian Jacobs and his colleagues describe as a struggle “to make sense of the ethnographic chaos they perceived around them: hundreds, if not thousands, of small villages seemed to be somewhat similar to each other but also very different, by no means always sharing the same customs, political system, art or even language” (Jacobs et al. 1990: 23).

Scott suggests that such a confusing ethnic landscape has something to do with swidden agriculture—the common mode of livelihood in the hills. Historically in these parts of the world, land was abundant, but manpower was in short supply. The problem confronting states emerging in the valleys was to have large enough subject populations. Wars were not over territory but about capturing subjects and slaves. The labor-starved states of the plains could not capture the dispersed and mobile populations in the hills for forced labor or military service; nor were tax collectors able to monitor their numbers or their holdings and income. Thus nontransparency in relation to the surveillance systems of the lowland States, Scott suggests, was the very rationale of the lifestyles of the hills, and might even explain their ethnic landscape (Scott 2000: 2). Of course, not all hill peoples were swidden cultivators, just as the lowlanders were not all exclusively settled agriculturalists. For instance, groups like the Angami Nagas and Apatanis transformed steep hills into rice fields through terracing and irrigation.

There was a symbiotic relationship between the non-state spaces in the hills and the state-controlled spaces in the lowlands. The favorite categories of colonial and postcolonial officialdom, such as hill tribes and valley peoples, are “leaky vessels.” Movement between the hills and the plains occurred repeatedly. Wars produced movement in both directions. Although the attractions of commerce, and what the lowlanders like to call civilization, may have generated movements of hill peoples downward, it was not a one-way flow. Thanks to the extortionist labor demands of the lowland states and the vulnerability of wet-rice cultivation to crop failures, epidemics, and famines, lowlanders also moved to the hills, where more subsistence alternatives were available (Ibid.: 3–4). This is the material context that nurtured a world where languages live so close to one another that people have multi-visionary lives (Miri 2005: 55).

The transformation of non-state spaces and peoples into state-controlled spaces has indeed taken place all through history, and in all parts of the world. However, every aspect of this change is not necessarily as

desirable as notions of the civilized and the barbarian, the primitive and the modern, and in our own times the traditional and the modern might suggest. After all, when treated as frontiers, the transformation of non-state spaces has meant the displacement, assimilation, and even extermination of prior inhabitants, and the transformation of landscapes through “botanical colonization”—for example, for drainage, irrigation, levees, roads, and bridges in order to make room for newer crops, settlement-patterns, and administrative arrangements that the state and the newcomers prefer (Scott 2006: 7).

In grand historical terms, the consequences of this transformation become most vivid in the “massive reduction of vernaculars of all kinds: of vernacular languages, minority peoples, vernacular cultivation techniques,

vernacular land tenure systems, vernacular hunting, gathering and forestry techniques, vernacular religion, etc.”

(Ibid.). Political scientists find the absence of state institutions and inaccessible terrain to be favorable to the “technology of insurgency” (Fearon and Laitin 2003), which explains why

*the state tries to...sedentarize
mobile populations*

the state has always been the “enemy of the people who move around” and why, whenever it can, the state tries to transform the landscapes of non-state spaces and sedentarize mobile populations “in settlements in which they can be easily monitored” (Scott 2000: 2).

Northeast India’s enormous linguistic and cultural diversity reflects the resilience of the logic of historic non-state spaces despite powerful odds. For precolonial states such as the valley states of Assam (the Ahom State), Manipur, and Tripura, the project of transforming non-state spaces into state-controlled spaces was, to borrow Scott’s phrase, no more than “a mere glint in the eye.” But the modern Indian State is able to mobilize resources to realize such a project. This makes the Northeast Indian story part of a larger story: the world’s last great enclosure movement taking over the vast Asian transnational non-state space “albeit clumsily and with setbacks” (Scott 2006: 4–5).

Some long-term trends in the agrarian history of South Asia give concrete evidence of this process at work. During the century after 1880, writes historian David Ludden, “when statistics appear for the first time,” permanent cultivation expanded at extremely high rates in Northeast India—“faster than almost anywhere else in South Asia.” Much of this expansion was the result of lowland agriculturalists “investing in land at higher altitudes.” Indeed “the physical expansion of cultivated farmland

remained the major source of additional increments of agricultural production in South Asia until 1960” (Ludden 2003: 17). The expansion of agriculture meant massive immigration into the region from other parts of the subcontinent and increases in the density of population, and along with it the minoritization of many indigenous communities and the fear in other such communities of becoming minorities.

This transformation of non-state spaces into state-controlled spaces provides the backdrop to many of Northeast India’s conflicts. There are multiple forms of resistance to it, and in the exceptionally diverse ethnic landscape of the region, it produces a politics of recognition (Taylor 1994) with conflicting agendas. Tensions produced by massive immigration add to the dynamics of conflict. It is not merely in the old non-state spaces that the politics of recognition dominate the agenda. Powerful national and subnational projects have developed in the old valley states—especially in Manipur and Assam. Entrapped in the “imaginary of the territorial State” (Appadurai 1993: 418), and with less and less influence over the drama unfolding in the historic non-state spaces around them, inhabitants feel marginalized and besieged in the colonial and subsequently postcolonial, pan-Indian dispensation. The third important historic valley state, Tripura, has had a somewhat different postcolonial history. There, massive migration of Hindu Bengali refugees after partition tipped the balance against indigenous Tripuris, leaving little room for a national project centered on the symbols of old Tripura to emerge. The indigenous Tripuris, however, have continued to resist this transformation, often by supporting rebels.

Colonial Assam was seen as a frontier—an area with vast tracts of “wastelands”—and the story of tea in Assam begins with those “wastelands” being made available to European entrepreneurs. However, lands allocated to tea are not the only areas that the colonial state viewed as “wastelands.” Even before the viability of the commercial production of tea was established, early British visitors to Assam were struck by the region’s land abundance next to the densely populated Indian heartland, especially populous Bengal. The idea of settling Assam’s “wastelands” with Englishmen with capital was raised as early as 1833—seven years after the British conquest of Assam. A scheme of colonization, said Francis Jenkins, one of the earliest colonial officials in charge of land policy in Assam, “offered a better prospect for the speedy realisation of improvements than any measure that could be adopted in the present ignorant and demoralised state of native inhabitants” (cited in Guha 1991: 149).

As colonial rule was consolidated, aside from making room for tea plantations vast tracks of other lands were also settled with people from

the rest of the subcontinent. However, what outsiders saw as “wastelands” had alternative uses by locals—shifting and settled cultivators as well as hunter-gatherers. With time, the political question—Whose land is it anyway?—acquired urgency. The modern politics of numbers was bound to bring this issue to the fore. Tensions between “outsiders” and those with claims to being indigenous therefore became a perennial source of conflict in Northeast India during the subsequent century.

The plains districts of present-day Assam constituted the core of the new colonial frontier. Tea plantations, oil wells, coalmines, and cash crops like jute cultivated by immigrant East Bengali peasants changed its landscape. But the rest of Northeast India too had a place in this frontier drama. The Inner Line, still in force in today’s Arunachal, Nagaland, and

Mizoram States, formed the security parameter of the colonial economic frontier. Designed partly to keep “primitives” bound to their “natural” space in the hills, the Inner Line defined the limits of the “civilizational” space beyond which the colonial state would not provide security of property. It was also intended

***The colonial state was
unwilling to spend resources***

to stop European adventurers from straying across, grabbing more land, and expanding the economic frontier. The colonial state was unwilling to spend resources to “tame” those “wild” areas and establish a governmental presence. Yet it did not want actions by private individuals to incur the wrath of the “primitives” and risk the safety of the fledgling colonial enclave economy taking shape in the plains.

Daniel Elazar makes a useful distinction between development through “modernization” and the frontier model of development. “Frontier societies assault and ultimately replace traditional societies,” and migration plays a key role in “detaching their populations from the sources of their pre-frontier traditions.” On the other hand, nonfrontier societies develop through “modernization.” There, change happens “in place so that their people have never been detached from their traditional environments; instead they have had to modify their traditions in place” (Elazar 1996: 84). Northeast India seemed destined for a frontier model of development with the advent of British colonial rule and the “discovery” of tea. However, political resistance made this policy frame difficult to sustain, and gradually, especially in the postcolonial era, development through “modernization” became the default policy model. However, this somewhat uncertain policy shift could not halt the powerful social and economic forces let loose both inside and outside the region by the frontier model

of development. Indian policymaking today, whether in the matter of economic development or peacebuilding strategies must be sensitive to this highly conflict-prone context.

Despite the ubiquity of the process of non-state spaces being transformed into state spaces, frontiers are not natural, they are man-made. Unequal political power, and often conquest, turns territories into frontiers for other people. It is not surprising therefore that political resistance in a frontier typically makes an appeal to the principle of self-determination. Yet once an area becomes a frontier, the process is not easily reversed. In a postfrontier condition, even if efforts are made to self-consciously reject the frontier model of development—particularly elements that marginalize the locals—it may be impossible to bring back old economic and political forms and traditional patterns of land use. It may be difficult, and sometimes even undesirable, to reverse certain changes in what was once a frontier landscape. For instance, development projects intended to improve conditions may face the constraint of limited labor supply in many parts of the region, thus forcing at least a reformist version of the frontier model to be revived.

The term postfrontier seeks to draw attention to challenges relevant to the legacies of Northeast India as a frontier. It is not meant to be a precise description of actual conditions but a tool for imagining an alternative vision for change. Development policy and conflict management tactics blind to the contradictions of a postfrontier have had serious unintended consequences, including fueling old conflicts and generating new ones. Taking on the task of directly addressing these contextual challenges—policymaking for a postfrontier—could be the foundation for a radical reorientation of Indian policy toward the Northeast.

Postfrontier and Its Discontents: Policy Challenges

The 2005 Arunachal *Human Development Report* features a rather unlikely class of agricultural modernizers: migrant sharecroppers who bring the technology of wet rice cultivation and introduce settled cultivation to the state. The bullock-driven plough that they use, according to the report, is the main instrument for extending settled cultivation and is therefore the symbol of Arunachal's "agricultural modernization." The innovation could have enormous consequences for Arunachal's economic future. To illustrate the phenomenon, the report includes the story of Jamir Ali. He lives in the Dikrong River Valley and had moved to Arunachal from the adjacent Lakhimpur District of Assam in the foothills of Arunachal. Ali leases five acres of land on a sharecropping arrangement, and his family of seven lives in a thatched hut he built on that land. Apart from the share

of the crop, earnings from seasonal labor, including the part of his wages as a rickshaw driver that he can keep—the other part he pays as rent to the rickshaw owner—are the family's sources of livelihood (Government of Arunachal Pradesh 2006: 64–65).

Huts that belong to migrant sharecroppers “dot the entire valley,” says the report, and “people like Jamir Ali are increasingly becoming common in the other valleys of Arunachal as well.” They are now “an important seg-

***[Sharecroppers] are now
“an important segment
of the peasantry”***

ment of the peasantry” extending settled cultivation to Arunachal. But just as the reader contemplates on how this unconventional road to “agricultural modernization” might play itself out, there comes a surprise. The contract between sharecroppers and landlords, says the report, “is only short-term and eviction may take place any time” (Ibid.: 64). Access to land in Arunachal is the domain of customary law. No official land records

exist—a reflection of its legacy as a non-state space and the extremely limited penetration of the State—and the land rental markets are entirely informal. The oral leases have no legal sanction, and even the residential rights of “outsiders” in Arunachal are restricted.

There is thus no chance of Jamir Ali's sharecropping rights becoming secure in the future, or of the improvement of his terms of tenancy through political action, as would be possible in other parts of India. Nor can tenants ever hope to become owner cultivators under the present legal dispensation. The promise of agricultural modernization therefore can be easily aborted. As in many other parts of the Northeast, those with land do not have the required labor and capital to extend settled cultivation, and those with labor do not have land (Jamir 2002: 7). Migrant sharecroppers are seen as having only a transient presence in Arunachal with no place in the state's future—at least in the future envisioned by official narratives.

The land rental markets that bring hundreds of Jamir Alis to Arunachal, and their insecure tenure, are illustrative of the peculiarities of the economic transformation of Northeast India. Fundamental changes in land use are under way, and along with them a pattern of class differentiation and a division of labor—often following ethnic lines—are taking shape. Both the demand and the supply sides of these informal land rental markets deserve attention. On the supply side are indigenous Arunachalis, those designated as STs, who take advantage of new opportunities for rental income—as a share of the crop—and in the process,

they make room for settled cultivation in land that was traditionally either uncultivated or used for shifting cultivation. Many families leasing land remain agriculturalists, and the share of the crop they get as landlords adds to the family's income. However, for many others employed in the growing government service or the private sector, leasing out agricultural land to migrant sharecroppers might mean declining dependence on agricultural income.

Unlike comparable transformations of non-state spaces in other parts of India (including, notably, Assam and Tripura) and elsewhere, this is not a case of indigenous tribal shifting cultivators losing land to clever nontribal settlers. Instead, indigenous tribal landlords employ nontribal settled cultivators as temporary tenants. The demand side of the equation is equally noteworthy: settlers make investments in assets such as bullocks, ploughs, and homes, despite the insecurity of property rights. Since land available for leasing is virtually unlimited, moving from one oral sharecropping lease to another is relatively easy, making such investments worthwhile.

Ali's situation is fairly common in Northeast India. Thousands of migrant families take advantage of land-lease markets that have grown behind the legal fiction of land governed by custom. To be sure, in many parts of the region the familiar pattern of a tribal shifting cultivator losing his land to a nontribal settler continues. But in many other parts, thanks to the rules of exclusion, land alienation is increasingly intratribal, in other words, poor tribal inhabitants lose land to better-off fellow tribesmen.

Jamir Ali's great grandfather, we learn from the report, migrated to Assam from Mymensingh District of East Bengal (today's Bangladesh) in the early part of the twentieth century, and he is probably not surprised once in a while to be called a Bangladeshi. Whether illegal immigrant or descendant of earlier immigrants, the Jamir Alis of the region play a central role in the agricultural transformation of Northeast India. However, from the point of view of human development—the focus of the official *Human Development Report*—we learn that “most sharecroppers have been able to improve their economic condition, but very few sharecroppers manage to send their children to school” (Government of Arunachal Pradesh 2006: 64). Thus in this situation, Jamir Ali is allowed a very limited capacity to aspire to a better future.⁹

Development is bound to bring more people to Arunachal and other parts of Northeast India that are still sparsely populated. Arunachal's “agricultural modernization” by migrant sharecroppers, who make intensive use of family labor, is a good example. If the goal is to bring about a tran-

sition from shifting cultivation to settled cultivation, it cannot be done without significant expansion of the labor force. Expansion of the labor force is even more of a prerequisite when it comes to other economic activities, such as building roads or introducing modern businesses, industry, or services. This issue must be confronted head-on.

To be sure, conventional visions of development are not the only way of imagining the future of Northeast India.¹⁰ For example, in the case of Arunachal—with its breath-taking natural beauty and sparse population—an argument can be made for pursuing a nondevelopmental trajectory. In no other part of the Himalayas is there so much “pristine forest and intact

*preindustrial forms of
production and exchange
are still prevalent*

mega-biodiversity.” As yet there have been few projects that could transform this large historic non-state landscape. Many preindustrial forms of production and exchange are still prevalent. Many Arunachalis continue to practice “semi-nomadic swidden horticulture, terraced wet agriculture, high montane pastoralism and traditional trade and barter.” The area is home to many endangered species, including ten distinct species

of pheasants, the great cats—tigers, leopards, and clouded and snow leopards—and all three of the goat antelopes. It has 500 species of orchids, 52 species of rhododendron, and 105 species of bamboo (Taylor 1996). It is part of one of the global “hotspots” of biodiversity, and its mountain ecosystem is extremely fragile.

A case can be made for planning Arunachal’s future primarily around nature conservation and the promotion of the well-being of its peoples, and that can be done outside a conventional developmental paradigm. Creating industries such as herbal products, high-value bamboo products, and ecotourism, which can reach external markets with a very limited transportation infrastructure, could bring significant economic benefits to Arunachal’s small indigenous population (Agarwal 1999). However, that is not the track that Arunachal has embarked on. The idea of bridging the so-called development gap that informs India’s Northeast policy is obviously not an alternative to a conventional developmental paradigm. Therefore, this monograph assumes the conventional road to development is a *fait accompli* and considers policy options within that framework.

Extending the example of the agricultural modernizers holding insecure land tenure, it is possible to identify a number of issues that are specific to Northeast India’s postfrontier predicament. These challenges can be understood in terms of the region’s history as a frontier, and the intended

and unintended consequences of past policies adopted in response to resistance to the frontier model of development. Seven sets of issues draw attention to these challenges: (1) the consequences of the historical distinction between areas where migrant settlements were allowed and where they were prohibited; (2) fundamental changes in the actual control of land and natural resources theoretically under community control; (3) labor shortage in the historical non-state spaces; (4) subsidy as a permanent condition of many Northeastern states; (5) mobility-intensive livelihood strategies of settler communities; (6) the transnational dimension of population movement; and (7) an unsustainable two-tiered citizenship regime inherent in the ethnic homeland model.

Legacy of Prohibited and Unprohibited Spaces

As noted, during colonial rule, while the region was aggressively turned into a frontier, there were distinctions made between areas carved out for economic activity and colonization and areas considered out of bounds to settlers in order to ensure the security of the zone of “modern” economic activity. Although the areas beyond the Inner Line were almost certainly out of bounds, lesser levels of prohibition applied in other areas as well, especially when the colonial state began to confront resistance to policies premised on the frontier model.

After a policy of attracting settlers to Assam from East Bengal to introduce jute cultivation began facing resistance, the Line System was introduced in 1923 to demarcate areas in the Assam Valley judged suitable for settlements. East Bengali settlers were discouraged from occupying land near local villages. The Line System was supposed to put an end to land acquisition by settlers through squatting, sale, or fraudulent land transfer. The goal was to protect tribal areas and areas demarcated as forest reserves, grazing reserves, and so forth. However, enforcing these exclusionary rules was difficult in an area where the state had a weak presence. During the colonial and the postcolonial eras, governments from time to time simply have accepted the reality of illegal settlements in prohibited areas and have legalized them. Thus forest reserves and grazing reserves are “de-reserved,” and tribal belts and blocks are turned into unprohibited spaces.

The grazing reserves of present-day Assam have almost disappeared, as have many forest reserves. Indeed as recently as the early 1970s, Assam’s present capital complex in Dispur was built after the “detrribalization” of land that had been part of a tribal belt. Thus the primary space of the colonial economic frontier—i.e., most of present-day Assam—gradually became an almost entirely unprohibited space. Outsiders tied to the new “modern” sector acquired full rights to settle and became full citizens by

default. Thus the demography of present-day Assam and of Tripura—where the refugee flow of the 1947 partition rather than economic migrants swung the balance against indigenous Tripuris—was fundamentally transformed during the past century. However, other parts of Northeast India—especially the old prohibited spaces—became frontier-like in terms of demographic change somewhat later. The process has barely begun in other parts of the Northeast.

In recent years, the inability of the government to protect tribal belts and blocks has become an issue for ethnic militants asserting indigenous rights in the region. This was a major theme in the political demand by ethnic Bodos in Assam for a separate territorial unit. Bodo activists reject census data as definitive evidence of Bodo and non-Bodo areas partly on

the ground that legally many non-Bodo settlements in historically Bodo areas are not supposed to be there. Once the government concedes this argument, it is difficult for it to do much to facilitate the return of internally displaced people to their homes in their old “illegal” settlements. This is the case with many people displaced during the height of

*the inability of the government
to protect tribal belts and
blocks has become an issue*

the Bodo conflict. Some of the camps for the internally displaced persist, even though the conflict has for the most part been settled following the signing of an accord between the government and Bodo rebels in 2003 and the subsequent constitution of the Bodoland Territorial Council.

Property Rights in Transition

The informal land market attracting Jamir Ali and other migrants to Arunachal reflects fundamental economic changes in the old prohibited spaces. Some of the changes are the expected outcome of the push for development. As noted, the political common sense in the rest of India in favor of secure tenancy rights does not apply to the migrant sharecroppers in these parts of Northeast India due to protective discrimination practices that define insiders and outsiders. Yet behind legal fictions such as communal land and customary law, the property rights regimes are changing fundamentally. The pressures for change in the land rights regime come from multiple sources. Social activist Walter Fernandes, for instance, points out that “the ideology of the inferior status of manual work” is making slow inroads into Nagaland along with modernization and education. Although push factors work to encourage immigration to Nagaland, “the culture of the inferior status of manual work,” Fernandes believes, is a strong pull fac-

tor. Land, therefore, is “passing slowly to the migrants in reality if not in theory” (Fernandes 2002: 210, 220).

A land control regime premised on the legal fiction of customary forms of land use badly serves contemporary developmental and conflict-management challenges. According to many economists, the absence of a formal land market in the hill regions, which results from strong limits on legal transfer of ownership especially to non-STs, deters investments (Sarma 2005: 14). According to a former development commissioner of Nagaland, a misconception about a constitutional provision that makes parliamentary legislation inapplicable to Nagaland has been a constraint on development due to ambiguities regarding the ownership of land and natural resources and rules about their transfer (Jamir 2002: 4). Repeated controversies in Nagaland result from oil exploration by India’s state-owned Oil and Natural Gas Corporation. Who owns minerals in Nagaland is unclear. The State’s claim to eminent domain is contested, and the payment of compensation to landowners for land acquired for development purposes has made some development projects far too expensive (Ibid.: 5).

Idealists tend to romanticize community control of land. Thus the Gandhian activist Natwar Thakar writes about the land of a village being retained within that village as a “major strength of Naga society” that “has great virtue” (Thakar 2002: 82–83). However, traditional communities have inequities that romantics tend to ignore, and often market forces provide perverse incentives to custodians of community property. In Meghalaya, according to that state’s Land Reforms Commission, there is “a great deal of trouble and confusion” because of “indiscriminate and unauthorised use of leases of *pattas* [land titles] by village headmen . . . both to Khasis and non-Khasis.” The commission referred to the leases as unauthorized because they neither have the sanction of custom nor of any duly enacted law (cited in Karna 2005: 120). Among Nagas, according to a knowledgeable Naga civil servant, land ownership is confined to a small segment of the population, and even among the reputedly egalitarian Aos, only 30 percent have land; the remaining 70 percent are landless (Jamir 2002: 7). There is also a significant gender bias in Naga customary law vis-à-vis inheritance rights (Fernandes 2002: 228).

On the other hand, there is evidence that the “customary” management of land and natural resources works reasonably well in many areas. The oral transactions that govern sharecropping arrangements by migrants, for instance, are generally recognized and respected. So are land sales taking place without legal documents. Land disputes between and within families are infrequent, and the village councils resolve them more

efficiently than Indian courts would. Yet if one looks into the future, with the economic trends under way, informal markets have limitations. The questions of equity, productivity, and the democracy-deficit raised by the rules of exclusion must be confronted.

***informal [land] markets
have limitations***

A property rights regime with no official land records also has contributed to some of the region's armed conflicts. Whether a particular population is indigenous to an area often becomes a highly contested question,

given the dominant political imaginary—where questions of justice and territoriality have become inextricably intertwined. Thus at the root of the Karbi-Kuki violence of 2003 in the Karbi Anglong District of Assam is the Karbi view that Kukis are immigrants occupying their land. Although Kukis living in the Hamren Subdivision are indigenous, say Karbi militants, those living in the Singhason-Khonbamon Hill range of Diphu Subdivision are recent migrants from Nagaland and Manipur. Since people do not have legal papers to prove property rights—and in any case, most of these lands are not surveyed—ethnic militias can displace them with brutal effectiveness and change demographic realities in support of ethno-political claims. On the other hand, depending on numbers, settler communities can also defend these new informal property rights by force, sometimes by relying on the backing of counterinsurgency forces that may be their ethnic kin. It is also difficult for the State to support or deny informal property rights in unsurveyed lands or in lands that are formally designated as forests. Sooner or later it is forced to accept such settlements as *fait accompli*.

While “custom” has adapted to new challenges and opportunities in creative ways, no policy intervention is on the horizon to bring about formal systematic changes in the land control regime in the old non-state spaces that would make them conform to the radical changes taking place beyond the gaze of official categories. To be sure, no single type of modern land control regime, such as individualized private property, can satisfactorily replace multiple forms of customary land management that exist on the ground. However, transition to a new land control regime must be high on the policy agenda, keeping in mind the rights of indigenous peoples, the imperatives of the market, and values of social justice and democracy. The question of cadastral survey and developing official land records for the hill states and the hill districts of the region cannot be postponed forever. It has to be a priority in a postfrontier policy framework.

Questions of social justice in Northeast India are significantly more complex today than what the colonial protectionist policy framework was designed to address. Equally incongruous is the simple-minded ST/non-ST distinction on which protective discrimination practices are based. There is no doubt that migrant settlers in some areas take advantage of the misery of a poor tribal and take over his land. On the other hand, in many places a tribal landlord, often empowered and enriched by positions in or connections to the state government, is in a position of power and dominance vis-à-vis a migrant sharecropper of his own tribe who is informally leasing his land. Within each tribe the class contradictions between the rich and poor are getting sharper each day. The informality of the arrangements exposes a large number of poor people to a more vulnerable legal position than that already implied in the marginal nature of the economic niches they occupy.

Areas of Labor Shortage

Immigration into Northeast India—internal and cross-border, legal and illegal—thus has conflicting dimensions. On the one hand, the core area of the old colonial economic frontier faces acute stress—ecological, political, and economic—because of continuing immigration, even though there is significant evidence of creative adaptation to these strains. On the other hand, in the areas outside this core, additional population is not a problem in the same sense. Indeed managed population movement to those areas could be part of the solution to the problem in a new postfrontier policy vision.

Labor shortage remains a major hurdle for development projects in areas where settlements historically were fully prohibited. As economist Atul Sarma puts it, “the functioning of labour market is constrained” because “in a traditional system the concept of wage labour rarely exists.” In the absence of local labor, projects such as construction of roads and bridges have invariably meant reliance on migrant labor (Sarma 2005: 14). As we have seen in the case of the migrant sharecroppers of Arunachal, migrant labor appears to be a precondition for the extension of settled cultivation, although the prevailing rules that define effective local citizenship raise troubling questions of unequal citizenship. So unless there is a firm policy decision to disallow the “botanical colonization” (Scott 2006: 7) and transformation of the landscape of Northeast India’s old non-state spaces—and there is not an iota of evidence suggesting such a shift—the changes represented by the emergence of informal land markets require a robust policy response. In the areas where there are legal

prohibitions to settlement by outsiders, behind the legal fictions of community ownership of land and customary law, a new world of informal land markets and growing economic opportunities attracts many immigrants. Given the rules of inclusion and exclusion currently in place—as evident from Jamir Ali’s story—the new settlers are not settlers in the sense of a frontier model of development. All indigenous tribals in this case do not get marginalized, because the process is mediated by India’s protective discrimination practices. Permanent residency and land ownership rights are limited to the indigenous tribal populations. However, the conflation in the public discourse between illegal immigration from Bangladesh and the movement of descendants of earlier settlers hides the contradictions of a *de facto* two-tiered citizenship regime that is emerging.

Subsidy as a Permanent Condition

Engaging with resistance to the frontier model and managing the conflicts inherent in transforming non-state spaces into state spaces using available policy tools—notably creating ethnic homelands, the use of other protective discrimination practices, and the power of the Indian Parliament to

make and break states—have by now created a distinctive Northeast Indian political culture. Most Northeastern states have few revenue sources; they are “special category states” that rely primarily on central government assistance, which they get on a concessional basis of 90 percent grants and 10 percent loans. As Gulshan Sachdeva puts it, when most of these states were created, the issue of whether “the territory in

***Most Northeastern states...
rely primarily on central
government assistance***

question must have revenue resources to meet its administrative and other non-developmental expenditure” was conveniently ignored (Sachdeva 2000: 60–61).

The problems of federalism under these conditions are entirely predictable. Without independent sources of tax revenue, the autonomy of such units is compromised. This form of financing state budgets provides an incentive to local politicians to engage in rent-seeking and encourages fiscal irresponsibility. The overwhelming dependence on the central government for funds also means that most development projects are both funded and designed far away from the region, and with little likelihood of reflecting local visions of the future. Moreover, these state governments have little power vis-à-vis New Delhi.

With the benefit of his experience as an administrator in Nagaland, Alemtemshi Jamir observes that since it was “created under very abnormal conditions” and “out of a political necessity,” there is a “lack of sense of belonging in the government by the people.” He speculates that this outcome could be because “the state government is viewed to be a temporary arrangement, pending a final political settlement.” It is in the management of public finance, he says, that “the effect of such a manner of creation of the state is being felt very acutely today.” Since the government “took upon itself to provide everything, including employment,” there is a “huge overloaded governmental structure.” All the energies and resources of the government go to the sustenance of that structure, leaving very little resources for “other activities including development” (Jamir 2002: 3–4).

Observers find a similar process at work in Arunachal, even though the conditions under which the state was created were different. Cultural anthropologist Betsy Taylor refers to “the political culture surrounding development monies.” The capital city, Itanagar, she observes, “has the feel of a boom town. The primary source of the ‘boom’ is development money from the Centre.” The people, according to her, “feel ambivalent about this money—an ambivalence that makes it seem like something external to be exploited rather than something that comes from, and should return to, their people” (Taylor 1996).

It has been argued that the income tax exemption for people designated as STs living in their own states is one of the main reasons for “the growth of unchecked corruption in the bureaucracy.” It allows the bureaucrat “to go on a buying spree and invest in real estate, far more than his salary would allow him to do.” Why should “a millionaire among tribals not be taxed?” asks Khasi intellectual Patricia Mukhim (2004). How the income tax exemption could provide an incentive for unrestrained and conspicuous accumulation was illustrated in the election of 2004, when N. Nyimthungo Lotha, the “Labour Party” candidate for Nagaland’s only seat in Parliament, claimed that his 15 square kilometers of nonagricultural land, five hectares of agricultural land, and his house in Huxtso Village had a total market value of over 90 billion rupees (*Deccan Herald* 2004). If true, he would have been the richest candidate in the country. The exemption of wealthy tribals from income tax also leaves their wealth wide open to taxation by rebel groups that can hardly be expected to respect the Indian State’s protective discrimination rules.

Jamir’s judgment, based on his experiences as an administrator in Nagaland, is that it is “very difficult to imagine a society without taxa-

tion.” He believes lack of taxation has added to the alienation of the people from the government, because it has not nurtured a sense of balance between “rights and duties.” Further, since “the state government cannot generate revenue out of the economic activities of its people,” development activities entirely follow externally determined parameters—those of the central government’s funding agencies (Jamir 2002: 5).

The perverse incentives that the State and markets provide to custodians of traditional communal property, and to others having access to land and natural resources, are immense. Stereotypes and prejudices about tribal people—essentialist ideas like tribal people being simple, honest, hospitable, and so forth—have inhibited examination of the adverse consequences of these forms of protective discrimination. Patricia Mukhim gives this portrait of the impact of the policies extending protective discrimination on Meghalaya’s economy:

Gradually, trade and commerce is passing into the hands of tribal entrepreneurs, through a policy of positive discrimination. Sadly, the tribal businessman has proved that he can drive as hard a bargain and be as unscrupulous as his rival, the non-tribal. For the common man, life is as exploitative as it was when business was driven by non-tribals (Mukhim 2006: 182).

It is unreasonable to expect public morality to grow out of the outsiders’ stereotypes about tribals. It is more reasonable for societies to try to design institutions that nurture the good and discourage the bad in all humans. Betsy Taylor has a more persuasive way of making sense of the conspicuous consumption in the region, including incentives for corruption in the context of Arunachal. “Markets find fertile ground in Arunachalese culture,” she writes. “Certain aspects of traditional culture groom people for entrepreneurialism. In some ways, people are prepared for risk taking and for business logic by long standing habits of trade. . . . For many, the good life and self worth seem increasingly to be equated with the ability to compete in larger markets. Conspicuous consumption as a demonstration of personal status was always a part of many tribal cultures” (Taylor 1996). And, of course, local elites are only junior partners in the system of corruption that has central players located elsewhere.

Policy analyst Jairam Ramesh, now a minister in the Manmohan Singh government, estimates the annual expenditure of the Government of India on the eight states of Northeast India, including Sikkim, to be about 300 million rupees. With the region’s population at about 32 million, he esti-

mates that the government annually spends about 10,000 rupees per person in the Northeast. This money is not going for development. In Ramesh's words, it is going to ensure cohesion with the rest of the country "through a series of interlocutors" that includes "politicians, expatriate contractors, extortionists, anybody but people working to deliver benefits to the people for whom these expenditures are intended." A surer way of improving the economic conditions of the intended beneficiaries, he suggests tongue-in-cheek, might be for the Indian government to open bank accounts and deposit an annual check of 10,000 rupees for every poor family in the Northeast (Ramesh 2005: 19).

The gap between legal fictions and market realities and the nexus between local political and bureaucratic elites and outside contractors in the Northeast Indian political system is nicely illustrated in anthropologist B. G. Karlsson's account of the dismal state of forests in Meghalaya (Karlsson: 2004). Karlsson does not tell a story about the failure of community management, as anyone looking at it only through legal fictions might conclude. In practice, Karlsson concludes, it is a story of the absence of community management. He points out the irony of the name of an association called the Forest and Landowners Association, which came into being in Meghalaya during the controversy over the ban on logging by the Supreme Court in the 1990s.

The very existence of "land and forest owners" as a distinct interest group reveals a situation radically different from the legal fiction of the ownership and management of land and natural resources by a "community." Although stories of how people in power get rich through the reckless exploitation of forests have wide circulation, they get lost in the political rhetoric of exploitation by outsiders. Local elites are willing collaborators in this exploitation. Karlsson points at the paradox of prohibiting land sales to non-tribals but at the same time allowing both land transfer among tribals and the unequal accumulation of land by tribals. Not surprisingly, when a land commission argued for cadastral mapping of Khasi Hills, "It was met with vocal protests and claims that a land survey would lead to taxation and increased government control over land that traditionally belongs to the people." Subsequent attempts to carry out land surveys faced active opposition, and there is ample evidence that "the landholding elite—with an interest in avoiding public scrutiny into these matters—instigate this opposition" (Ibid.: 36–37).

Local elites are willing collaborators

Accommodating the Livelihood Strategies of “Char” Settlers

Among places regarded as “wastelands” by British colonial officials and thus considered suitable for settling new migrants were the *chars*—unstable temporary islands or sandbars—of the Brahmaputra River system. At various places, the highly braided river system has multiple channels, and the rivers change course and take up alternate channels, creating new *chars* with sediment deposits, while eroding and submerging old ones (Government of Assam 2004: 97). Although some *chars* become permanent, many do not. But since sediment makes for very fertile soil, people settle on *chars* despite the hazards of floods, erosion, and submergence—temporarily as well as permanently. In precolonial times some of the *chars* were used to grow winter crops like mustard and pulses and a variety of paddy called *ahu*. The colonial policy to settle East Bengalis on this frontier was a source of conflict, because local cultivators lost their seasonal access to that land (Baruah 2005: 83–97). However, the decision of colonial officials to permanently settle people on the *chars* did not suddenly make them hospitable to year-round living. The difficulties of surface communication during the rainy season mean formidable challenges for the government in providing health and educational facilities, and even for the presence of the basic State apparatus—including the institutions for controlling the Indo-Bangladeshi border that cuts across some *chars*. Furthermore, the question of access to land in newly emerging *chars* generates many conflicts, especially since *char* settlers have to move between *chars* as some get submerged while new ones emerge.

Yet nearly 2.5 million people—nearly 9.4 percent of Assam’s population—now are counted as inhabitants of *chars* and, not surprisingly, 68 percent of them live below the poverty line (Government of Assam 2005: 4). *Char* settlers comprise a very large part of Assam’s Muslim population of East Bengali descent. Indeed the Assamese term, *sorua Musalman* (Muslims of the *chars*, or *sors* in Assamese), is almost synonymous with the term Muslims of East Bengali descent, as opposed to ethnic Assamese Muslims.

The sedentary bias in development thinking cannot fully grasp the condition of *char* settlers. There is inadequate appreciation of the special conditions of *chars* for the delivery of government services that, for instance, may require regular access by water transport during the rainy season. Often politicians and officials talk about giving *patta*, or permanent settlement rights, to *char* dwellers. There is talk about cadastral survey and land records as a way of avoiding land disputes (Government of Assam 2004: 97). Although it may be possible to do that in some cases, the basic fact is that a flood plain is not meant for permanent settlement. In

wealthier countries, one could have considered the option of gradually weaning people out of some of the most vulnerable and flood-prone *chars*—and having only seasonal cultivation as in precolonial times, thus avoiding the annual political theatre of flood control and flood relief.

Mobility is an essential part of the livelihood for people settled in the *chars*. As family members, including children, seek work in other places or move altogether, descendants of those settled in the *chars* of Assam have dispersed to all parts of Northeast India and beyond. One sees evidence of this dispersal during election time in Assam. Muslims of East Bengali descent go through enormous trouble to vote. Trains to Assam during elections carry large numbers of poor people of “Bangladeshi” descent—some living in slums in other parts of the country. They travel to Assam to vote in villages—mostly in *char* areas—where they are registered. In Guwahati, Northeast India’s commercial hub, there is a noticeable shortage of rickshaws and vegetable peddlers on election day, because many people in these occupations leave the city and return to places where they are registered to vote. Voting is clearly more important to this segment of the subcontinent’s multitude than to many upper and middle class citizens. Many among them spend their hard-earned money not only on travel expenses, but also forfeit their meager earnings for a few days just to be able to vote. Their claim to being in the country could rest on something as fragile as a “voter’s slip” (pieces of paper issued to voters by candidates on election day), given the conflation in public discourse between the dispersal of earlier generations of settlers and the question of illegal immigration from Bangladesh.

The Indian discourse on “Bangladeshis” takes attention away from the powerful economic forces that attract outsiders to the once prohibited parts of this region, notably places like Arunachal, Nagaland, and Mizoram.¹¹ Descendants of *char* settlers mostly respond to the growth of informal land markets and other new economic opportunities. The congruence between the mobility-intensive livelihood strategies of generations of *char* settlers and the new economic niches in many parts of the Northeast deserve attention. Whatever the argument for the Inner Line and India’s protective discrimination practices, a policy that categorizes *char* settlers and their descendants in ethnic terms as perpetual outsiders, and in the process risks aborting a nascent agricultural revolution in places like Arunachal, is hard to justify in a democracy. The government needs to protect the rights of indigenous peoples while giving descendants of *char* settlers, who play a significant role in the region’s economic development, a chance to become full citizens.

The Bangladeshi Question: Still a Frontier?

Although the dispersal of the descendants of earlier generations of *char* settlers is an important element in India's "Bangladeshi" discourse, there is little doubt that significant cross-border migration from eastern Bengal also continues. The partition of 1947 could not suddenly change the logic of a

*migration of partition
refugees turned the indigenous
Tripuris into a minority*

frontier simply because an international border had been inserted. The flow of people from one of the sub-continent's most densely populated areas to a relatively sparsely populated region once regarded as a frontier open to new settlements could not easily be turned off. Indeed from the point of view of Northeast India, the effect of the partition was mostly to

intensify the migration pressure from East Bengal, with Hindu refugees now being added to the flow. The consequence is most apparent in Tripura, where the migration of partition refugees turned the indigenous Tripuris into a minority and a politically nondominant group, given the one-person-one-vote paradigm.

Muslim Bangladeshis cannot easily be distinguished from mobile *char*-settlers—mostly Muslims of East Bengali descent. An article in *Organiser*, a publication of the right-wing Hindu organization Rashtriya Swayam Sewak Sangh, illustrates the danger of this conflation. The article deserves to be quoted at length because of both its intolerant language and the information it contains about the integration of "Bangladeshis" into local societies. The author, Jagadamba Mall, talks about a "sinister plan" to turn Northeast India into a Muslim majority region that he traces back to the politics of the partition of India in 1947 when a claim was made to include (undivided) Assam in Pakistan. Because of continued migration from Bangladesh, he says, Muslims now constitute 60 percent of the population in 6 of Assam's 24 districts, and 40 percent in another 6 districts. In 54 of the 126 constituencies in the Assam legislative Assembly, according to him, "the Muslim vote bank" determines election results. As a result, 28 of 126 members of the Assam Assembly and four ministers are Muslim. After discussing "Bangladeshis" in Assam, he turns his attention to "Bangladeshis" in other Northeastern states:

Bangladeshis have illegally sneaked into Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh and Tripura too. They are marrying the local girls of influential people and thus getting protection from their in-

laws' families. After marriage with a Janjati [tribal] girl, they convert her to Islam. They purchase land in the Janjati belts in the name of their Janjati wives by producing Janjati certificates in her name. Now, the new generation of Muslims, i.e. the Janjati Muslims, is growing. They give Muslim names to their children but the clan remains that of local wives, like Saidullah Ningrum, Azad Lingdoh (Khasi Muslims), Nizamuddin Semia, Akram Semia (Naga Muslims), Shahabuddin Chowdhury, Akbar Laskar (Assamese Muslims) and others. In Assam, Muslims are using Assamese surnames like Hazarika, Barbhuiyan, Bargohain, Bhuiyan, Bora, Gohain and others. There are Meitei Muslims too in Manipur.

In Nagaland, the Muslim menace is more serious. Dimapur has become the den of these Bangladeshi Muslims. They constitute the leading labour force in the agriculture sector owned by the Naga community. The majority of rickshaw-pullers, auto-drivers and other manual labourers is now of Bangladeshi Muslims....

The Nagaland state capital, Kohima, has become the second biggest haven for the illegal migrant Muslims who occupy most of the shops in the main market, P. R. Hills [Police Reserve Hills] and other localities. They marry Angami girls and become sons-in-law of the Naga people.

Similarly, all the district areas such as Mokokchung, Wokha, Zunheboto, Phek, Mon and Tuensang are infested with them. They are sneaking into the interiors of Nagaland. In places like Jalukie in Zeliang area, Naginimora, Tizit and other central places of Nagaland, the pain of the presence of migrant Muslims is felt by the local Naga populace (Mall 2004).

It is easy to see how in this framing Arunachal's Jamir Ali—a fourth generation immigrant from East Bengal—could easily appear as a Bangladeshi. At the same time, a widespread perception that migration leading to the inevitable minoritization of indigenous communities is unstoppable also presents formidable political dangers. There appears to be an affinity between the situation in Assam and in Malaysia and Fiji: in all three places large-scale colonial-era migration produced a stubborn pattern of conflicts between immigrant communities and those with indigenous roots. Indigenous communities seek primacy in terms of official cultural symbols, economic opportunities, and political power. Cultural policy and immigration policy are especially sensitive issues, and

they seriously threaten democratic stability. Assam's long slide into political instability, including the present era of insurgency and counterinsurgency, began in 1979 as a social movement protesting immigration. The situation is structurally similar to political crises in Malaysia and Fiji. However, while Malaysia and Fiji have managed to develop institutions and practices responsive to "indigenous" demands, in Assam there is little acknowledgement that the immigration question requires a robust policy response. Continued immigration in the postcolonial era has made an already precarious demographic and political balance worse. The fact that Malaysia and Fiji are independent sovereign countries with jurisdiction over immigration policy, while Assam is not, explains the very different outcomes (Baruah 1999: 67–68).

Anindita Dasgupta has pursued the comparison between Assam and Malaysia in greater detail. While Malaysia officially froze immigration and "clamped the lid firmly on the citizenship issue," she writes, Assam did not, due to the partition of 1947 and the emergence of "a new migrant-exporting state, East Pakistan/Bangladesh." The settlement of refugees in Assam went on despite Assamese opposition, and it repeatedly "re-opened the matter of citizenship." From the perspective of the indigenous population of Assam, the absence of an effective immigration policy produced "a sense of a demographic disaster" (Dasgupta 2005). Both immigrants and locals, however, have adapted to the demographic transformation more creatively than is usually recognized.

A passage by C. S. Mullan, a British colonial official responsible for the census report of 1931, often appears in the literature on immigration to Assam. He had predicted that "immigration was likely to alter permanently the whole future of Assam and to destroy more surely than the Burmese

invasion of 1820, the whole structure of Assamese culture and civilization." In another thirty years, Mullan predicted, it was not improbable that "Sibsagar district will be the only part of Assam in which the Assamese will find itself at home" (cited in Sinha 1998).

*demographic transformation...
continues to have major
consequences for Assamese politics*

In retrospect, Mullan was both right and wrong. The demographic transformation of Assam did indeed take place exactly as Mullan had predicted. It has led to a significant shift in the demographic balance that continues to have major consequences for Assamese politics. But contrary to Mullan's prediction, as

Monirul Hussain points out, “the entire East Bengali Muslim peasant community” adopted Axomiya or Assamese as their mother tongue (Hussain 1993: 207). This has produced a cultural politics very different from what Mullan had in mind.

M. S. Prabhakara argues that the real fears of the ethnic Assamese today are quite different from the “standard” view. It is not so much that they fear being outnumbered by Bengali speakers, or that the existence of the Assamese and their culture are in danger. Their real fear is that the new generation of Assamese speakers—mostly Muslims of East Bengali descent—would claim Assamese as their own language, “stealing away, as it were, a crucial cultural patrimony which defines the Assamese people.” Prabhakara, who after covering the Northeast for India’s *Hindu* group of publications had a stint as its correspondent in South Africa, even compares the Assamese fears with those of the Afrikaners in post-Apartheid South Africa. Like so many “symbols of Afrikanerdom cherished as the unique patrimony of the white Afrikaner,” Assamese too feared their language was being “taken over, used or abused in vibrant and independently creative ways by other people” (Prabhakara 1999: 70).

However, although Assam may have adapted creatively to its massive demographic transformation, its present political troubles to a significant extent result from the perception that the flow of immigrants is interminable. The question of immigration from Bangladesh has become further complicated by trends toward Islamicist cultural radicalization in that country (Hossain 2006). No one doubts that large numbers of “illegal immigrants” from Bangladesh have migrated to Northeast India, since the border is highly porous. But it is impossible to say with certainty whether someone is a Bangladeshi national, since India has no mandatory personal identification system. Attempts to identify illegal immigrants therefore invariably carry the risk of profiling individuals with certain ethnic features. Yet despite this difficulty, the fact remains that Assam has a long history of opposition to immigration and of resistance to the frontier model of development, and it is unlikely that this tradition of resistance would suddenly disappear.

In recent years, there have been efforts to frame Assam’s illegal immigration question in national security terms. In particular, officials associated with the counterinsurgency establishment have tried to take advantage of traditional Assamese anti-immigration sentiments and win hearts and minds in their battle against insurgents (see, e.g., Sinha 1998). In these post-9/11 times, when any talk of Islamicist militancy and cross-border terrorism has a ready national and global audience, this framing could put the future of Northeast India, and of Indo-Bangladesh relations, on a dan-

gerous slippery slope. This does not mean that Islamicist cultural radicalization does not pose a real threat to Bangladesh, and to its transnational neighborhood. However, rather than policies that seek to unilaterally enforce border control, the future political stability of this postfrontier will depend on developing institutions and practices that are in line with the reality of what is fast becoming a transnational space.

Although Indians talk about millions of Bangladeshis living illegally in India, official Bangladesh flatly rejects the notion. India and Bangladesh have no mutually agreed-upon procedures for identifying—not to speak of deporting—illegal immigrants. Thus when Indian law-enforcement officials deport a Bangladeshi national, they drop the person in the no-man's land between the two countries. A person is literally thrown out of the country and s/he is at the mercy of two armed groups—the Indian Border Security Force on one side and the Bangladesh Rifles on the other.

This mode of forced repatriation has become an irritant in the relations between the two unequal countries. No sovereign country likes to accept a person unilaterally deported by another country. There is little recognition in India that a deportation decision involves two countries and not one. Were official Bangladesh and official India to find a way to talk about cross-border population movement rationally and as equals, at least some aspects of it could be better managed. A postfrontier policy paradigm would necessarily mean recognizing the transnational dimension of many of Northeast India's challenges, including the question of the cross-border movement of people. In addition, turning the region's international borders from spaces of confrontation into spaces of cooperation would facilitate policymaking in areas such as developing water resources and transportation.

Managing continued immigration—which today takes complex new forms including seasonal circular migration—and the perception of a

“demographic disaster” is an important policy challenge. At the same time, one has to keep in mind the dangers of the conflation between “Bangladeshis” and the descendants of earlier settlers. After all, in its extreme version, the Bangladeshi discourse becomes an alternative framing of the *Human Development Report's* story of migrant sharecroppers as agricultural modernizers. It is time therefore to consider

***It is time...to consider
legalizing and formalizing
the land rental markets***

legalizing and formalizing the land rental markets that bring the Jamir Alis to the hills of Northeast India, and give them a permanent stake in the

region's economic future. Such a policy might even permit considering the possibility of gradually returning parts of the floodplain—the *chars* that Assam's *sorua Musalman* community has made its home—to the mighty Brahmaputra River.

The “Bangladeshi” question, however, is only a part of the larger question animating many conflicts that are the result of the demographic transformation of the region through immigration and the perception of minoritization by indigenous groups. Migration from the rest of India and from Nepal and Burma (in the case of Mizoram) is also a source of tension. In January 2007 in the area around Tinsukia in Upper Assam, faced with the pressures of a counterinsurgency operation, ULFA tried to open a third front by targeting Hindi-speaking migrants for attack. Tinsukia as a railway junction and urban center developed in the twentieth century primarily to take coal, oil, tea, and timber out to the rest of India. Before its twentieth-century transformation, Tinsukia, then called Bengmora, was the capital of the independent Muttock (or Motok) Kingdom that came under British colonial rule in 1842, fourteen years after the rest of Assam. Tinsukia for all practical purposes today is a Hindi-speaking city where the Assamese and other indigenous communities are a minority.

On the other hand, the Motok-Moran people, proud of their history of political resistance, dominate the villages around Tinsukia. These villages are a solid source of support for ULFA. It is not surprising that the hinterland of an urban area marked so clearly in terms of its contemporary political economic niche and Hindi-speaking cultural profile would be a natural magnet for ULFA. There are few other places in Assam where ULFA's thesis that natural resources are being sucked out to the rest of India in a classic colonial relationship seems more plausible.

Two-Tiered Citizenship: Is It Sustainable?

I have suggested that both ethnic militants and conflict managers find the idea of ethnic homelands appealing. In parts of Northeast India this has led to a *de facto* two-tiered citizenship regime that privileges those with claims to being ethnically indigenous. This is most visible in Arunachal, Mizoram, and Nagaland, and to a lesser extent in Meghalaya. Given the generous development assistance that comes from New Delhi, what happens in effect is that economic and political benefits are showered on an ethnically defined segment of the citizenry—hoping that they would become stakeholders in the pan-Indian dispensation—and putting limits on the capacity to aspire of others.

However, in Nagaland, even though such privileges are in place, the Naga elite has not fully accepted the political deal, thanks to the appeal of

an alternative geography of the Naga homeland and an alternative political vision represented by the Naga rebellion. At the same time, the paradigm does appear to shape the Indian government's vision of how to end the Naga conflict. In those parts of Northeast India where inherited policy tools do not permit privileging the indigenous at the state level—notably in Assam, Tripura, and Manipur—development policy has not been framed by this paradigm. However, the absence of institutions to counter the sense of “demographic disaster” among the indigenous communities is a persistent destabilizing factor in the politics of Tripura and Assam.

Although the ethnic homeland model motivates many indigenous ethnic activists, it is equally clear that the privileging of certain ethnic communities becomes a nightmare for other groups living in the same territory.¹² Any homeland demand in Northeast India therefore is usually a precursor to new conflicts. Ethnic militias seeking homelands come in conflict with groups that are seen as obstacles to the demand, and after such homelands are conceded, “outsiders” are resented. This has already produced a crisis of citizenship that can only get worse over time.

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The condition of Santhals and other so-called *adivasis* (indigenous people) in Assam dramatically brings home this point. Seen through the prism of the global political economy, the migration of Santhals as indentured labor to the

tea plantations of Assam was part of the same nineteenth century migration that took Indian labor to plantations in various parts of the British Empire, such as Fiji, Guyana, Mauritius, or South Africa. Whether a person landed in a plantation of Assam or in Guyana, Fiji, or Mauritius was quite accidental. As Brij Lal's history of Fiji-Indians puts it, “For peasants already uprooted from their homes and out and about in search of jobs, going to the *tapus*, the islands, was like going to Assam or some other similarly distant place. Many probably had not heard of Demerara or Trinidad or Fiji before, but they all knew—or hoped—that they would return. Most did not” (Lal 2004: 8).

India today celebrates its diaspora. Since January 2003 India has begun honoring descendants of migrants to far-away shores, some who had even risen to become heads of governments of their countries. But the Santhals in Assam—descendants of those who remained within the borders of post-colonial India—have gone through a vastly different experience. They are now seeking designation as STs. The term “tea tribes,” as in the name of an organization such as the Assam Tea Tribes Students Association, under-

scores this aspiration. A section calls themselves *adivasi*, emphasizing their roots in Jharkhand and other parts of India from where their forefathers had migrated more than a century ago. *Adivasi* activists argue that since their ethnic kin in their original habitats are designated as STs, they should have the same designation in Assam.

India's protective discrimination practices create conditions for this political demand. Designation as ST is seen as a passport to educational and public employment opportunities to which the descendants of tea workers have had limited access, and political mobilization is seen as the road to securing such status. However, in the case of the Santhals, protecting full citizenship rights—even in a very basic sense of ensuring the security of life and property—in the face of political mobilization by Bodos demanding an ethnic homeland is an added rationale for this demand. Many Santhals in the Kokrajhar District of Assam became victims of violence committed by Bodo militants and were displaced from their homes. In order to save the Indian government from international embarrassment, many remain in makeshift relief camps outside the view and care of international refugee organizations.

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

From the perspective of the principles of democratic citizenship, the most significant aspect of this regime of two-tiered citizenship is that the vast majority of seats in the state legislatures of a number of Northeast Indian states—indeed all but one seat in the case of three legislatures—are reserved for candidates belonging to the STs. Table 3 gives the number of reserved seats in the state legislatures of Northeastern states and the percentage of the ST population.

In the legislative assemblies of Arunachal, Mizoram, and Nagaland, all but one seat are reserved for STs. In

Meghalaya, fifty-five of the sixty seats are reserved. Apart from the issue of those not designated as STs being unable to contest elections, the princi-

*a two-tiered citizenship
regime is not sustainable*

| State | ST as % of Population | Leg. Assembly Total Members | Leg. Assembly Seats for STs | Leg. Assembly Unreserved seats |
|-----------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Arunachal | 64.2 | 60 | 59 | 1 |
| Assam | 12.4 | 126 | 16 | 102 ^a |
| Manipur | 34.2 | 60 | 20 | 40 |
| Meghalaya | 85.9 | 60 | 55 | 5 |
| Mizoram | 94.5 | 40 | 39 | 1 |
| Nagaland | 89.2 | 60 | 59 | 1 |
| Tripura | 31.1 | 60 | 20 | 33 ^b |

Notes: a. 8 reserved for scheduled castes; b. 7 reserved for scheduled castes

ple of one-person, one-vote, one-value has had to be undermined in other ways in order to achieve such a weighted system of representation. Generally, the norm about ensuring the equality of the relative weight of each vote requires that in electoral systems with single-member constituencies the electorates in all districts be roughly of the same size. This is not possible if the legislative assemblies have such a weighted system of representation. As a result, Nagaland's largest urban center, Dimapur, for instance, which has a very high concentration of non-tribal "outsiders," is divided into two constituencies, and one of them is the sole unreserved (non-tribal) seat in the Nagaland Assembly. This unreserved constituency has many times the number of voters of each of the other constituencies in the state. Through a constitutional amendment, the balance between reserved and unreserved seats in the assemblies of Arunachal, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland has been frozen in order to ensure that future delimitation of constituencies in light of demographic changes does not change the current political balance. Such a two-tiered citizenship regime is not sustainable in the long run: a postfrontier policy paradigm must find an alternative.

Toward an Alternative Policy Framework

The Point of Return by Siddharth Deb is a poignant novel about the lives of the refugees of the 1947 partition and their descendants in a nameless Northeast Indian hill state. Given the hold of the political imaginary of ethnic homelands, partition refugees are seen as interlopers. Thus the refugees, after leaving “their homes forever to try and find themselves within the nation,” discover that their journey is not over. “The hills that appeared beyond the horizon were only another mirage, their destination just another place that would reject them.” On a visit to his “hometown,” the narrator remembers the “life time of fear” that the protagonist felt, and from which his son, the narrator, ran away to escape. A hill-town that “drummed in the message of death” to his father, the son imagines, must have seemed “like a lost spot on the map of the nation, its remote beauty and even more remote violence surfacing in the national newspapers only as little single-column reports of ‘disturbances’” (Deb 2004: 292, 295).

Finding ways to compensate the indigenous peoples of Northeast India—symbolically or substantively—for the historic injustice done by the colonial imagining of the region as a land (almost) without people should undoubtedly have been a priority in India’s approach to the Northeast. That did not happen, at least not as an explicit goal of Indian policy. This is undoubtedly a major reason for Northeast India’s troubled postcolonial politics. At the same time, it is in the very nature of what was once a frontier that not all changes in its landscape can be wished away and undone. Thus Northeast Indians intuitively accept that tea plantation and *char* lands cannot be returned to their original claimants. Ironically, sometimes it might appear that they do not accept that reality when it comes to, for example, land occupied by impoverished descendants of tea workers. However, the issue has not been explicitly presented this way to the public, thanks to the mystification by a policy discourse that makes ethnic homelands appear to be the epitome of social justice—a discourse that is in fact completely out of sync with the region’s actually existing political economy. Compensating for historical injuries in a frontier can sometimes take the form only of symbolic justice. In a postfrontier condition, trying to undo history by enforcing hard boundaries between the indigenous and the outsider—as the Indian State seeks to do in many parts of the Northeast—means that only certain ethnically defined groups can have the capacity to aspire, and risks perpetuating a politics of violent displacement and ethnic cleansing.

Arunachal's potentially abortive agricultural modernization reflected in Jamir Ali's story, the deplorable condition of the descendants of tea workers, and the "life time of fear" with which some people seen as outsiders may have to live should wake us up to the need for a new paradigm for Northeast India's future.

An alternative policy paradigm to the ethnic homeland model is the concept of multilevel citizenship, that is, citizenship both of India and of a

state. Multilevel citizenship is not unknown in federal systems. Instead of an exclusively ethnic principle of defining effective local citizenship (that prevails in four of the seven Northeastern states), multilevel citizenship could introduce a civic principle and give the right to define the rules of inclusion and exclusion

***An alternative policy paradigm...
[could involve] citizenship both
of India and of a state***

to territorially defined political communities. Such a provision could be extended to all Northeastern states.

Citizenship discourse is based on a different grammar than the discourse of ethnicity.¹³ In principle, most countries recognize three ways of becoming a citizen: birth within the territory of a country (*jus soli*), descent from a citizen (*jus sanguinis*), and naturalization. If *jus sanguinis* incorporates the principle of citizenship gained through blood ties, the other two principles can incorporate the ethnically or culturally different outsider. In contrast, protective discrimination practices define political communities in Northeast India in static and exclusively ethnic terms. Citizenship laws, of course, vary on how much of the *jus soli* principle is applied to citizenship claims of children of immigrants and on the degree of difficulty involved in obtaining citizenship through naturalization. Yet inherent in the grammar of citizenship discourse is that new members can enter the political community as full members, unlike the rules of inclusion and exclusion inherent in the idea of ethnic homelands. Unlike ethnically defined rules, it is hard within the discourse of citizenship not to recognize the right to citizenship of second- or third-generation immigrants. Ethnically defined outsiders and their descendants cannot remain foreigners in perpetuity.

The obvious advantages of multilevel citizenship are that it can define political communities in civic terms; and introduce a dynamic element of incorporating new members, thereby making a decisive break from the notion of ethnic homelands that is part of the legacy of colonial subject-

hood. Multilevel citizenship could allow elected state governments and legislatures to make rules by which an internal immigrant or his descendants could become citizens of the state and full members of the local political community.

Under a strong multilevel citizenship regime, even national citizenship could become a concurrent subject requiring, for instance, that international treaties affecting the flow of people from outside the country into India would need the agreement of state legislatures. This could include treaties affecting the rights of ethnic Nepalis or East Bengalis. Subjecting such treaties to state-level political debates could give them the popular legitimacy that they lack in Northeast India. Giving state legislatures a formal say in controlling the flow of people into the region would give legitimacy to the movement of people into the region—migration that is likely to further increase in coming years. This is more consistent with the ethos of a democracy than the restrictions that exist through nontransparent, colonial-era bureaucratic practices, or as an indirect result of protective discrimination practices.

Indian public opinion is unlikely to be hospitable to the idea of multilevel citizenship. However, it is possible that such constitutional innovations may be less politically controversial than they are, for example, in Jammu and Kashmir. Northeast India being peripheral to the national imaginary can be an advantage. In any case, in Northeast India it would not be a matter of introducing restrictions for the first time on rights to movement, residency, and property ownership. In a number of states a set of rules exists that makes ethnic distinctions between insiders and outsiders—rules that fuel an increasingly exclusionary politics of homelands and precipitate ethnic violence. Multilevel citizenship would introduce a civic element to this conflict management tool that seeks to ameliorate the injustices of the frontier model of development, with undesirable side effects. At the same time, it would not abolish distinctions between outsiders and locals. This is not advocacy for dismantling the protective discrimination regime. Multilevel citizenship would continue the protective discrimination practices, but would incorporate an inclusive civic element over time consistent with the trends of demographic change.

Multilevel citizenship would be entirely consistent with the traditional liberal incorporative ethos of Northeast India, even though the intellectual and political habits nurtured by the political imaginary of ethnic homelands would undoubtedly produce some resistance. The Khasis of Meghalaya, for instance, have a very liberal and inclusive conception of group membership. Although descent is traced along the female line, children of non-Khasi women married to Khasi men are still absorbed into

Khasi society. Children of such marriages typically adopt the non-Khasi mother's given name or occupation as a clan name, and over time such names are recognized as Khasi clan names. As Khasi sociologist Tiplut Nongbri points out, although Khasi rules of descent may render "the ethnic boundary of the Khasi highly porous, it makes the addition of new members into the society relatively easy and adds to the vibrancy of the system" (Nongbri 2000: 379). Multilevel citizenship would only return Northeast India to the spirit of such liberal traditions of incorporating new members—so dramatically different from the caste sensibilities of mainstream India—and make a clean break from the colonial constructions of ethnic subject-hood.

Conclusion

After visiting Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the Burmese democracy movement, in Rangoon, essayist and novelist Amitav Ghosh went to the Thai-Burmese border hoping to find that democracy would be an answer to Burma's unresolved civil war. By the time he left, he was no longer sure (Ghosh 1996: 49). Ghosh would not have found grounds for more certitude and optimism about democracy's ability to resolve civil conflicts across Burma's border in India. Despite being a democracy, the postcolonial Indian State has routinely asserted sovereignty in the Northeast with significant display and use of military power.

Indian policy towards the Northeast is at a crossroads. The debate on AFSPA underscores a policy impasse. The Reddy Committee, to its credit, recognizes that the law has become "a symbol of oppression, an object of hate and an instrument of discrimination and highhandedness," and it recommends the repeal of the law. Yet it wants key elements of AFSPA to remain. So it recommends that some of its provisions be incorporated into a pan-Indian counterterrorism law, in effect proposing a significant reform with one hand and taking it away with the other. The stated goal of this self-contradictory recommendation, quite incredibly, is to help "erase the feeling of discrimination and alienation" among the people of the region (Government of India 2005: 75, 77). Even this clever compromise, which would have had almost no practical effect on the ground, is opposed by India's security establishment.

AFSPA in Northeast India is about to enter its sixth decade: it is almost as old as Indian democracy. Thanks in part to this law, illiberal democracy is the only kind that the region has known. Yet if the current debate on AFSPA is any guide, no one expects a sudden outbreak of tranquility.¹⁴ Spending large amounts of money to close a so-called "development gap" cannot be a substitute for a roadmap to get Northeast India out

of its low-level equilibrium of poverty, nondevelopment, civil conflict, and lack of faith in political leadership (World Bank 2006: 30). It is time to recognize errors in old habits of thinking, ask some tough questions about how India has come to this juncture, critically examine prevailing policy frames, and envision a strategic change of course.

In commenting on the dysfunctional institutional arrangements that govern the management of water resources in Northeast India, the World Bank warns of the dangers of path dependency—of being locked into bad choices even when better alternatives are available. In order to build a more accountable institutional framework, what is needed, says the Bank's Strategy Report, is "strong political will to counteract the tendency of a society to follow the path it has already taken due to the political or financial costs of changing it" (Ibid.: 14). This applies not only to the management of water resources, but to India's entire approach to its Northeast.

During his travels through Burma, Ghosh pondered the inherent arbitrariness of national boundaries in this especially heterogeneous part of the world with many "putative nationalities." But on balance, he concluded, Burma's best hopes for peace "lie in maintaining intact the larger and the more inclusionary entity that history, albeit absentmindedly, bequeathed to its population almost half a century ago" (Ghosh 1996: 49). The same can be said of Northeast India. However, to be able to break away from its troubled past and present—its postfrontier blues—a new policy vision for Northeast India must also be post-national. It cannot be entrapped by the national security manager's narrow imaginary of the nation-state, where nation-building as metaphor becomes "a handsome neoclassical building in which political prisoners scream in the basement" (P. T. Bauer, cited in McCloskey 1990: 154).

***It is time to...critically
examine prevailing policy
frames, and envision a
strategic change of course***

Endnotes

Earlier versions of this monograph were presented at the project workshops organized by the East-West Center Washington in Washington, D.C. and also at seminars at the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi; the Department of English, Gauhati University; and the Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati. I have incorporated suggestions, and have tried to respond to critiques by Muthiah Alagappa, Ashok Malik, Pratap Bhanu Mehta, Bhagat Oinam, B. George Verghese, and two anonymous readers who reviewed the manuscript for this series. In substance and in form, the final version benefited from Rakhee Kalita's critical reading.

1. The Indian Home Ministry's website, for instance, claims, "Consequent to various peace initiatives and other steps to contain insurgency, the number of violent incidents in 2005 had increased by 8% [an "increase"—possibly an error—is indeed part of this official account that portrays the overall trends as positive], killings of civilians came down by 6% and security forces by 37% as compared to the incidents/killing in 2004. During the current year till 30.06.06 as compared to the corresponding period in 2005, the number of violent incidents has reduced by 8% (from 688 to 636), the number of SFs [security forces]/civilians killed reduced by 15% (from 185 to 159)." Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, Website. Section under "Internal Security, The Northeast" <http://mha.nic.in/nemain.htm#STATE> (Accessed February 26, 2007).
2. Independentist is a more neutral term than "separatist" or "secessionist." The term is commonly used in Puerto Rico to refer to political groups that stand for Puerto Rican independence.
3. Colony in this context refers to residential neighborhoods. General Sinha's figure on Nagaland's population is not quite accurate. It perhaps refers to the time when Nagaland was created. According to the 2001 census, the population of Nagaland was nearly 2 million.

4. On the role of retired military generals and other retired senior security officials as governors in the Northeast Indian political system, see my “Generals as Governors,” chapter 3 of Baruah 2005: 59–80.
5. The word “tribe”—scheduled tribe to be precise—is commonly used in India and it has no pejorative connotation. The term “indigenous people” however, arouses more controversy. In recent years international practice has given this term significant normative power. But the Indian government, like many of its Asian neighbors, rejects the term. Asian governments argue that the term “indigenous people” can be applied only to places where European settlers and their descendants can be clearly distinguished from “indigenous peoples.” It is often assumed that the Indian term “scheduled tribe” is synonymous with the term indigenous people of international practice. The word “schedule” in the Indian term refers to an official list or schedule of “tribes,” as stipulated in Article 342 of the Indian Constitution.
6. Not everyone agrees that the Indian government has become generous about financing Northeast India’s development. See for instance the Government of Assam’s memorandum to the 12th Finance Commission. According to this memorandum, the notion that Assam benefits from large sums of central funds through the prime minister’s package, Non-lapsable Central Pool of Resources and the North Eastern Council, is “a popular misconception” (Government of Assam 2004: 5).
7. This figure needs some explanation. In a recent Indian official publication the language data for the country as a whole is organized into 114 languages. How then can there be 220 languages just in Northeast India? The Indian census questionnaire seeks information on a person’s mother tongue. Enumerators are instructed to record mother tongues “whatever may be the name of the tongue returned by respondents.” But since there is no “definite inventory of languages,” the initial exercise produces a very large number: 10,400 languages, according to the 1991 census. The names of the languages are then “rationalized” and classified into language families. From that “Master List,” the 1991 census publication focuses on 114 languages—only those that were spoken by more than 10,000 people (Census of India 2004: VII–VIII). The 1971 figure of 220 languages in Northeast India clearly included languages spoken by fewer than 10,000 people, of which there are many in the region.
8. The argument is premised on the work of James C. Scott (2000 and 2006). I am grateful to Scott for permitting me to cite his unpublished work.
9. For the notion of the capacity to aspire see Appadurai 2004.
10. This paragraph uses previously published material from Baruah 2005: 33–34.
11. In Mizoram, Chin immigrants from Burma occupy similar niches.
12. The rest of this section includes previously published material from Baruah 2005, chapter 9.
13. An earlier version of this argument was presented in Baruah 2005, chapter 9.
14. The phrase is borrowed from the *Economist* 2004: 10.

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Internal Conflicts and State-Building Challenges in Asia

Project Information

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 northeast 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.

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Background of the Conflicts in Northeast India

Northeast India owes its geographical distinctiveness in relation to the Indian “mainland” to the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. But as an official Indian category it dates from 1971 following a radical reorganization of internal boundaries and creation of new states. The region is connected with the rest of India through a narrow corridor, which is approximate thirty-three kilometers wide on the eastern side and twenty-one kilometers wide on the western side. This constitutes barely one percent of the boundaries of the region, while the remaining 99 percent of its boundaries are international—with China’s Tibet region to the north, Bangladesh to the southwest, Bhutan to the northwest, and Burma/Myanmar to the east.

The region comprises the seven Indian states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura—also known as “Seven Sisters.” Since 2003, Sikkim has been included as the eighth member of the regional North Eastern Council. With the exception of Nagaland, which became a state in 1963, most of the states in the region were reorganized between 1971 and 1987. These cover a total area of over 254,645 square kilometers (about 8.7 percent of India’s territory) and, according to the 2001 Census of India, have a combined population of 38,495,089 people—roughly 3.73 per cent of the country’s population. The region accounts for one of the largest concentrations of “tribal” people in the country—constituting about 30 percent of the total population—though with a skewed distribution of over 60 percent in Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland together. Three states—Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya—contain an overwhelming majority of Christians (90, 87, and 70 percent respectively). The region is characterized by extraordinary ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity, with more than 160 Scheduled Tribes and over 400 distinct tribal and subtribal groupings, and a large and diverse nontribal population concentrated mainly in Assam, Manipur, and Tripura. An estimated 220 languages belonging to the Indo-Aryan, Sino-Tibetan, and Austric language families are spoken in the region—the largest concentration of languages in the subcontinent.

Although the Ahoms were successful in gradually consolidating the greater part of the region under a single political unit in the course of their rule (1228–1826), court chronicles of the Kacharis (1515–1818), the Jaintias (1500–1835), the Manipur Kings (1714–1949), and other local groups point out how they had historically retained varying degrees of independence into the nineteenth century, when the British took over the region. Colonial rulers took nearly a century to finally annex the entire

region and exercised their control over the hills primarily as a loosely administered “frontier” area, thereby separating it from the “subjects” of the thickly populated plains.

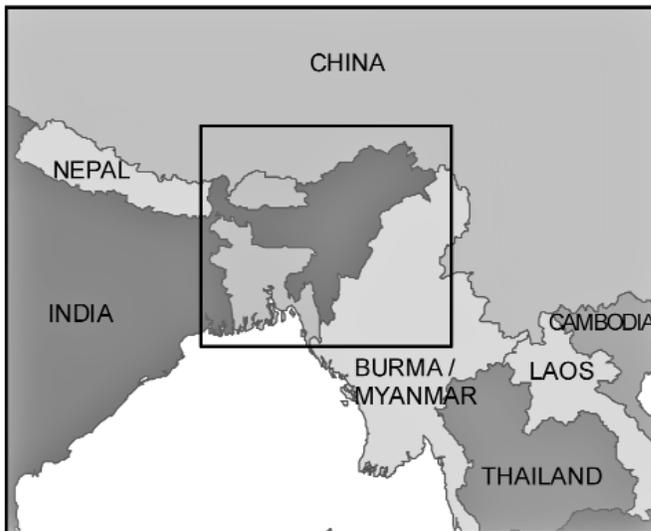
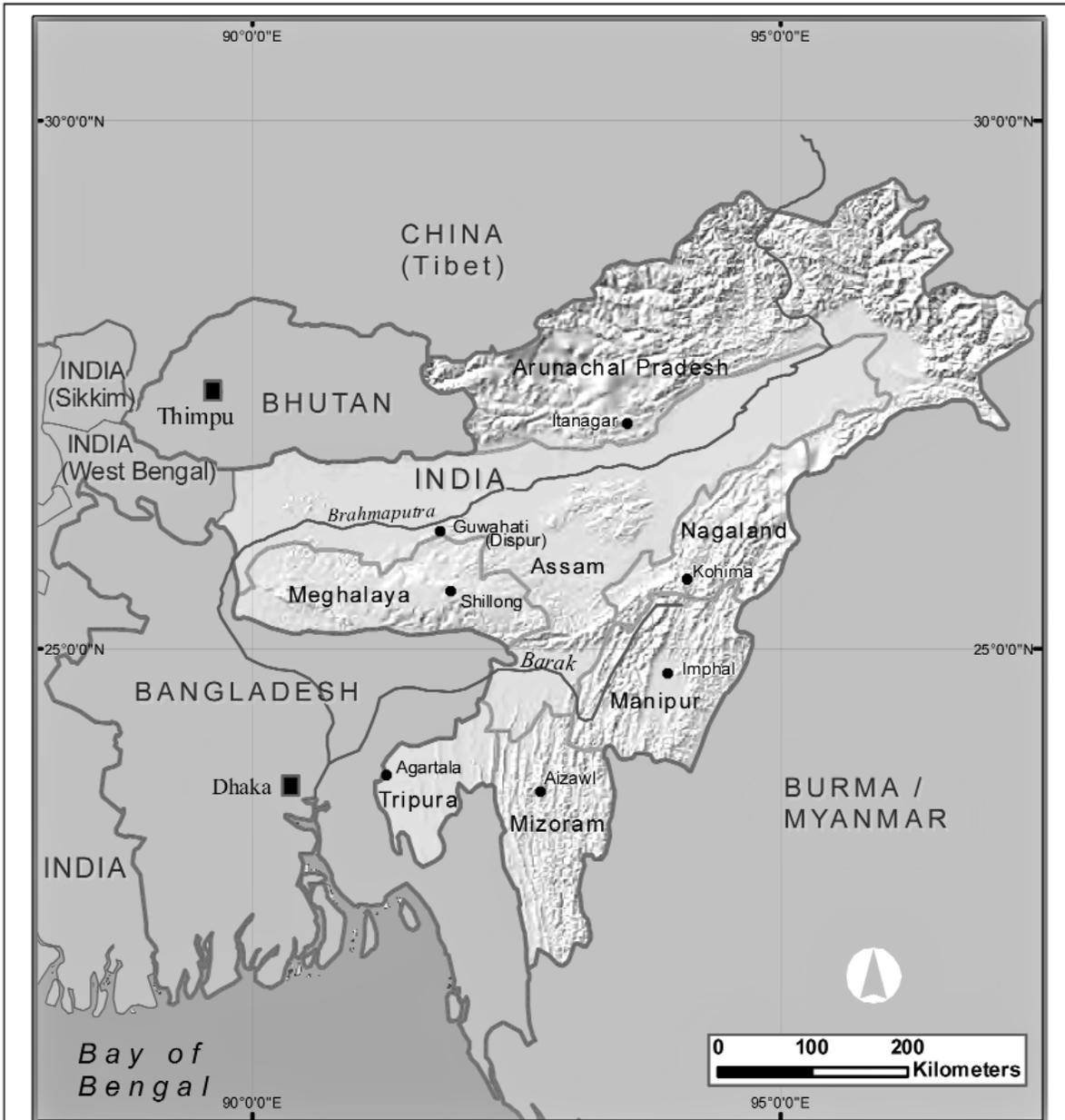
Northeast India has been the theater of the earliest and longest-lasting insurgency in the country—in the Naga Hills—where violence centering on independentist demands commenced in 1952, followed by the Mizo rebellion in 1966 and a multiplicity of more recent conflicts that have proliferated especially since the late 1970s. Every state in the region excepting Sikkim is currently affected by some form of insurgent violence, and four of these (Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, and Tripura) have witnessed scales of conflict that could—at least between 1990 and 2000, be characterized as low intensity conflicts. The Government of India has entered into cease-fire agreements—renewed from time to time until today—with two of the leading factions of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland in 1997 and 2001. The Government of India and one of these factions, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muivah), are now reportedly involved in discussing “substantive issues” while trying to reach a “permanent and honorable” solution to the long-standing problem. The Mizo National Front and the Government of India signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 1986 and their rebel leader, Laldenga, subsequently formed his own political party and became chief minister of Mizoram State. The United National Liberation Front (UNLF)—the armed opposition group active in the valley of Manipur, contests the “Merger Agreement” that the king of Manipur signed with the Government of India in 1949 on the grounds that the king signed it under duress. The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) too questions Assam’s inclusion in the Indian Union. Attempts have been made to bring UNLF and ULFA to the negotiating table. The Government’s response to independentist demands so far has included enacting extraordinary legislation like the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act of 1958, utilizing security forces to suppress rebellion, promoting economic development, and negotiating peace agreements with the insurgent organizations.

Although landlocked on all sides, migration, whether from across the international borders or from other parts of India, continues unabated. A significant part of the immigration into the region is thought to be cross-border and illegal—especially of foreigners from Bangladesh. The region has frequently been rocked by violent tremors of anti-immigrant sentiments. Although a major problem, the Government often finds it difficult to detect and disenfranchise—let alone deport the foreigners.

Conflicts in Northeast India have not only focused on the Indian state, but also manifest intergroup and intragroup dimensions. Intergroup

conflicts based on mutually rivaling “homeland” demands (say, between the Bodos and the non-Bodos, the Karbis and the Dimasas in Assam, the Nagas and the Kukis/Paites in the hills of Manipur, the Mizos and the Brus/Reangs in Mizoram, etc.) and struggle for power among competing groups have sparked conflicts and internal displacements. The multiple forms of resistance in the exceptionally diverse ethnic landscape have produced politics and struggles with multiple competing agendas.

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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About this Issue

A number of armed conflicts smolder in India's Northeastern border region. For instance, the Naga rebellion, which began in the 1950s, is one of the world's oldest unresolved armed conflicts. With its controversial human rights record and sluggish economic growth, Northeast India is a counterpoint to India's new image as a mature democracy, dynamic economy, and emerging major power. The World Bank describes conditions in the region as a low-level equilibrium of poverty, nondevelopment, civil conflict, and lack of faith in political leadership.

Northeast India's history as a frontier, and the inattention of policymakers to contradictions rooted in this context, explain the deficits of democracy, development, and peace. Counterinsurgency operations, massive infusion of development funds, and a variety of conflict management tactics have only nurtured the multiple low-intensity conflicts. This study proposes a democratic institution-building agenda that is sensitive to the particular dynamics of change in this "postfrontier." In a historically sparsely populated region with long-term trends of demographic transformation, managing indigenous-settler tensions must be a priority. This and other challenges cannot be addressed through domestic policy alone. An effective alternative policy must have a transnational dimension: to turn the region's extensive international borders—with China's Tibet region, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Burma—from militarized zones of mistrust and confrontation to spaces of cooperation.

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