

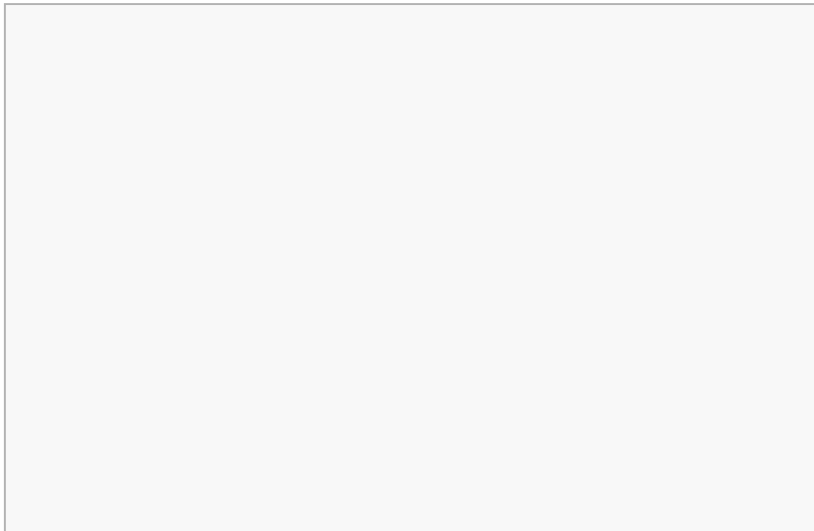
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**Internal Displacement,
Migration, and Policy in
Northeastern India**

Uddipana Goswami



East-West Center
Washington



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Internal Displacement, Migration, and Policy in Northeastern India

Executive Summary

The paper is divided into four sections: Migration; Illegal Migration and Policy Lacunae; Ethnic Politics and Internal Displacement; and State Responses to Internal Displacement. In the first section I discuss the colonial policy environment, altered administrative boundaries and concepts and how all this aided/abetted large-scale migrations into the Northeast. Demographic patterns were fast changing under the colonial administration's policy of importing more migrants to people a frontier region, and this approach did not lapse when a post-colonial government was ushered in.

I subsequently look at how colonial legacies lived on in the postcolonial period. Postcolonial policies reflected this while influx of population continued unabated. The case of Arunachal and settlement of refugees and

other non-native populations there has been taken as an example for elucidation.

There is also a close look at migrations from the various neighboring countries and a discussion of illegal migration, and the state's response all such migrations. The case of continued influx from Bangladesh—mainly into Assam—has been taken as a case in point. The inefficacy of the various instruments suggested by various quarters for tackling the problem have been discussed and the sincerity of all quarters towards solving the problem questioned.

“Illegal Migration and Policy Lacunae” deals entirely with the phenomenon of continued illegal migration. It outlines the tragedy of confounding legal settlers with illegal migrants. It suggests that the problem should be addressed by its real nature, and propensities to color it—in a fundamentalist hue, for instance—should be questioned.

Economics being at the root of the problem, finding an economic solution is advocated. The concept of work permits to daily workers from across the border is examined as one such possibility, while examining a similar extra-legal system already in place in Tripura.

It also pronounces the inefficacy/redundancy of acts like the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act, 1983 and shows how such an act can and has intensified the chasm between communities.

“Ethnic Politics and Internal Displacement” deals with internal displacement. It starts with clarifying that the paper is only about displacement induced by ethnic conflicts, and goes on to discuss the kind of ethnic politics prevalent in the Northeast which breeds violence and consequently internal displacement.

It discusses the kinds of ethnic-formation/reformation/construction that are rampant in the Northeast today and analyzes the “fast-food style politics” that is at the root of it. It also analyzes how this brand of politics—which doles out autonomies and other sops at the drop of a hat in order to control the influential ethnic elite—has led to hostility and violence between ethnicities and communities. Newer and newer ethnic formulations and construction have cropped up in order to reap the benefits granted by an over-generous state. The flux and fluidity in ethnic and inter-ethnic dynamics that has resulted from such politics has been illustrated by taking the cases of the Naga and Bru identity formation on the one hand, and the Bodo-Koch, Hmar-Mizo inter-relation on the other.

The politics of ethnic homelands is also held responsible for much of the conflicts. The absurdity of demanding exclusive homelands is illustrated through a description of the overlapping cartographies of various homelands being demanded by innumerable ethnic groups. The problem, it is discussed, arises because these imagined cartographies draw mostly upon legendary, mythical or pre-colonial memories, with little or no reference

to the present, and to add to that there is no guarantee that the emotional geographies of two rival contenders for the same piece of land would derive from the same period in history. Besides, ethnic boundaries and definitions being dynamic, there is every possibility of splinter ethnicities demanding exclusive rights over the same homeland.

An inquiry into how and where the idea of exclusivity originated follows. It is traced back to the colonial policies of “protective discrimination” which were mythologized as the ideal tools of governing the “others”. In retaining these colonial instruments of governance and introducing changes to them—for instance, in the shape of the Sixth Schedule—to allow these “other” communities to “develop along the lines of their own genius”, the postcolonial state let loose a rhetoric that was to be used by future insurgents against it in the process of demanding protective discriminations and exclusive homelands. The token nature of these instruments however is quite obvious and they are seen as having been taken down to the level of burlesque, almost.

The section looks at the reorganization of the Northeastern states which intensified since the 1960s—a process that ended in 1987—as another cause of intensification of the idea of exclusive homelands. Its failure is shown by the fact that even Mizoram—which has been touted as the postcolonial Indian state’s successful management of ethnic aspirations—has seen turbulence lately and rumblings of dissatisfaction have been often heard emanating from it.

It shows how the reorganization of states started border disputes between the various states and these disputes have been kept alive and allowed to fester. As a result, there has been violence and large-scale internal displacement. Displacement has also been caused by the state’s counterinsurgency measures such as grouping of villages in Mizoram and Manipur. Even the apparently well-meaning policies of the state towards this region have been half-baked, causing more

trauma than relief to the target populations. The Sulungs of Arunachal Pradesh are a case in point.

There is a look at how the state's inaptitude in handling ethnic aspirations leads to violence, bloodshed and internal displacement. For example, when the Bodo launched a movement in 1987 to demand an ethnic homeland, the state first used them for its own ends and fueled an already volatile inter-ethnic relationship. It then set a near impossible condition in return for autonomy, a condition to fulfill which violence was indispensable. The result was more large-scale violence, ethnic cleansing exercises and internal displacement.

This section then goes on to outline some other indigenous-settler conflicts which have created internally displaced people (IDPs) in the Northeast. It analyzes the "indigenous" category first which is a disputed category in the Northeast, and is often used very loosely in everyday political and social discourse. A few cases of internal displacement through indigenous-settler conflicts are outlined. Settler-settler, and indigenous-indigenous conflicts are also touched upon to show that conflicts in the Northeast are not uni-dimensional.

"State Responses to Internal Displacement" deals with the state's responses to internal displacement in the Northeast. It illustrates how, despite the recurring incidences of internal displacement in the Northeast and in spite of the severity of the phenomenon, the state has been seen doing precious little to either prevent its recurrence or tackle its occurrence. In fact, apathy has been the hallmark of the state's response to internal displacement in the Northeast. It outlines some of the coercive measures that have been used upon IDPs by various administrations and concludes that there is no coherent IDP policy of the state; ad hoc measures are taken after every incidence of displacement, and they are more often than not inimical to the safety and security of the

IDPs. Rehabilitation is also made a casualty of the game of political one-upmanship.

It ends with a note of caution that a continued apathetic stand on the part of the government towards IDPs might breed further insurgent activities. Better ethnic management instruments are called for, in the absence of which the state might not be able to retain its dubious control over the Northeast.

Migration

The history of the northeastern part of India has been a history of migration. Before written history, the flow was mainly from the eastern direction, so that most of the ethnicities that today claim to be the autochthons can trace their ancestries and affinities to the east of India, mostly to Southeast Asia. Subsequently, people from the western direction also began coming in and communities like the caste Hindu Axamiyā¹-speaking population of Assam often trace their origins back to parts of mainland India². In fact, the Axamiyā language also, unlike most other languages of the northeast, developed from the same roots as many mainland Indian languages. All these early migrants could, however, gain a claim to nativity in this region over a period of time.

Colonial Policy Environment And Population Shifts

Exactly when this "melting pot" of migrant ethnicities turned into a "witch's cauldron" of ethnic trouble and turmoil cannot be pinpointed but its genesis can certainly be traced back and identified as the effects of British colonial policies. The problem really began when colonialism came to this part of the world—in 1826, almost a century after most other parts of mainland India. The new regime brought along, on the one hand, its mechanism of large-scale, avaricious economic exploitation of the colonies and on the other, it imported its policy of isolating the territories they controlled from rival colonial powers by demarcating new frontiers.

One only needs to read the 1907 Romanes Lecture, "Frontiers", by Lord Curzon of Kedleston, Viceroy of India (1898–1905) and British Foreign Secretary (1919–24), to see how colonial intervention was introducing new perceptions of territory and belonging in the non-Western world.

In Asia, the oldest inhabited continent, there has always been a strong instinctive aversion to the acceptance of fixed boundaries, arising partly from the nomadic habits of the people, partly from the dislike of precise arrangements that is typical of the oriental mind, but more still from the idea that in the vicissitudes of fortune more is to be expected from an unsettled than from a settled Frontier...

...Occasionally in Asia, and almost invariably in Africa, the curious phenomenon is witnessed, sometimes under Treaty stipulations, as a rule independently them, of the demarcation of boundaries by Commissioners drawn not from the country directly affected but from the great Powers between or within whose spheres of influence it may lie. Thus Great Britain and Russia determined on their own account the north-west Frontier of Afghanistan in 1886.

In contrast to such "fixed boundaries" were pre-colonial forms of sovereignty, administration and control. For instance, if we read the history of the Ahom kingdom on its northern frontier, we come across the system of periodical revenue collection by rotation between the Ahom and Bhutanese kings from the flat foothill tract called the *Duars* (*duar* literally means *door*). The indigenous population of these *Duars* meanwhile continued to be administered by petty kings and chieftains of their own (Bhuyan 1974; Goswami 2005).

The *Duars* were taken over by the British in 1864 following the Anglo-Bhutan war. Of these, the Eastern *Duars* were annexed to the administrative unit of Assam in 1866. At the time, they were sparsely populated with barely any migration into the area. However,

with their inclusion in the district of Goalpara, which had been a commercial hub of British Bengal even before it became a part of Assam in 1826, slight trickles of migration were observed. By 1879, Hunter (1998: 120) noted:

From the neighbouring parganas³ of Goalpara proper and Kamrup there is a slight but increasing influx of people into the Eastern Dwars, as the new soil here is more productive than the old land which they leave.

Meanwhile Goalpara had already acquired quite a cosmopolitan character and when its multi-ethnic population—as well as the population from the Brahmaputra plains—began moving into the *Duars*, their population pattern naturally changed. Pressure on land and forest resources also increased as the colonial rulers imported more and more people to facilitate its commercial exploitation of the new colony. First, the tea-tribes and other Adivasi settlers⁴ from mainland India were brought in primarily to work in the newly established tea gardens in the *Duars*. Secondly, Muslim peasants from neighboring East Bengal were facilitated to settle in all fallow land—cultivable or uncultivable—under their wasteland development and colonization schemes. As newer and newer economic avenues opened up, other communities, like East Bengali Hindus, Rajasthanis and the Barpetia Mahajans (traders from the Barpetia area in Assam), followed suit to fill up the niches.

Colonial Legacies, Postcolonial Policies and Population Shifts

The Eastern *Duars* are just an example of how reshuffling of administrative boundaries and creation of new ones by the colonial rulers began to change the demographic patterns of northeast India. Artificial and unbalanced changes to the same were also effected for commercial ends, as we shall see subsequently in this section. And then, there was the frontierization⁵ policy under which the

Northeast of India was being shaped under the colonial dispensation as the last land frontier of the empire, with Burma (the Protectorates of the Shan States) forming the buffer between the British and the French colonial territories. The policy continued even into the postcolonial era creating large scale destabilization of population equations and ethnic equilibrium. The case of Arunachal Pradesh amply manifests all of this.

Colonial Legacy: The Case of Arunachal Pradesh

The outermost fringe of the northeast frontier of the British Empire in India was Arunachal Pradesh. Under colonial administration it was called the North East Frontier Tracts. Though the British professedly followed a policy of non-interference towards this frontier tract, in reality colonial commercial visions, especially of rubber and tea plantations, often led them to intervene and interfere. The Bengal Frontier Regulation Act was passed in 1873 whereby "inner lines" were drawn, ostensibly to prevent indiscriminate land purchase, trade, and settlement in these tracts. What remained unsaid—and what turned out to be the real reason for the enactment of such a law—was consolidation of colonial control over resources and commercial activities in the area. The Schedule District Act of 1874 formed this frontier region into "backward tracts" and "agency areas" which were subsequently classified as 'excluded areas' under the Government of India Act 1935. Indigenous forms of government were allowed to continue in these excluded areas over which the Governor was allowed to legislate (for details see Bose 1997).

Throughout this period, controlled but constant movements of people continued into the North East Frontier Tract, some with active facilitation by the colonizers, mainly for commercial purposes. Stuart Blackburn (2003/04) has succinctly captured the subtle link between colonial commercial control and population movement in his discussion of the annual trade fairs held in the *Duar* town of Udalguri which were patronized by the Ahom

monarchs and revived by the British after an interval.

The fairs ceased temporarily during the turmoil in the Ahom dynasty in late eighteenth century and the Burmese invasion of early nineteenth; they flourished again under British control after the 1820s, and by the turn of the century a large volume of goods flowed up and down the hills and back and forth across the Himalayas. Beyond this regulated trade, overseen by the colonial government, individual traders, mostly Marwaris and later British entrepreneurs, also bought and sold goods by setting up shops in the major towns in Assam. By the early twentieth century, these increasingly professionalized capitalists... had succeeded in displacing the state-regulated fairs... Arunachal tribes began to trade more and more in the market towns of Assam and less and less across the mountains; even adventuresome Tibetan traders, from Nepal, expanded into Assam and from there into Arunachal (van Spengen 2000: 182). Although this southern drift toward Assam was certainly encouraged by British colonial policy and propelled by the disruption caused by the Chinese expansion into Tibet after 1950, this "southern orientation" was a long-term development in response to the advantages of trade in Assam, such as rail lines, roads, modern commercial practices and a stable political situation (*Ibid*: 143).

Postcolonial Policies: The Case of Arunachal Pradesh

The story of Arunachal Pradesh did not change much under the postcolonial regime. After the colonial powers withdrew, instruments like the inner line and direct administration by the central government through the Governor as its representative were continued. Till 1965, Arunachal Pradesh continued under direct central rule, despite being a part of the state of Assam. Its administrative units continued to be called "frontier divisions" and its charge continued to rest with the External Affairs Ministry. Even in postcolonial India then, Arunachal continued to be treated as a frontier at an

empire's end, mainly because of her proximity to China.

The 1962 war with China led to a more inclusionary vision for Arunachal till 1972, called NEFA (North East Frontier Agency), after which the Home Ministry took charge, and districts were formed with Deputy Commissioners in charge like elsewhere in India. In 1987, it became a full-fledged state (for a detailed discussion see Bose 1997). It now has a representative form of government with a 60 member legislative assembly, of which 59 seats are reserved for the Scheduled Tribes⁶ who constitute more than 60 percent of the population (64.22 percent according to the 2001 census). Through all these changes in its administration and despite all the instruments of protective discrimination which continue till this day—indeed at times, because of these very instruments—Arunachal Pradesh has seen much the same population influx and demographic imbalances as the rest of the Northeastern state.

Population Shifts: The Case of Arunachal Pradesh
Population influx from neighboring countries into Arunachal continued even after the colonizers went back, and quite often as part of deliberate state policy. Nepalis, for instance, were especially brought into Assam by the postcolonial Indian state in the wake of the 1962 Indo-China war to build border roads and railways in Arunachal Pradesh (then NEFA) (Hussain 1993) to bring the frontier areas closer to administrative centers.

It is true that some population movements have been happening without state patronage as well. Small scale population movements like that of the transnational Singpho—Kachin in Burma—community living on either side of the border between India and Burma have been traditionally taking place since before the colonial construction of international borders and continue to happen till this day. Movement of Burmese peoples into Arunachal Pradesh is not a new phenomenon considering the proximity and ethnic affinity. And it is taking

advantage of this that a small population of illegal Burmese workers has been coming into Arunachal Pradesh—besides Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram—mainly owing to deplorable working conditions and human rights in Burma, a process that was set in motion by the Ne Win takeover of Burmese government in 1962 (Lwin 2003).

However, none of these movements into Arunachal Pradesh was of as great a magnitude and had as long-term an adverse effect as the settlement in the 1960s of Tibetan refugees from Chinese Occupied Tibet and of Chakma and Hajong refugees from the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh (then East Pakistan). And this was the outcome of a “postcolonial” administration's policy towards the frontier state, at that time a part of Assam.

The Tibetan refugees came to India during 1960–65 along with the Dalai Lama who had fled Tibet to escape persecution. Of these about 15,000 were settled in Arunachal Pradesh (Bhaumik 2003). In 1964 again, withdrawal of the Special Area Status and construction of the Kaptai dam in the CHT led to a mass exodus of Chakma people from the region. The dam, it is estimated, affected nearly 100,000 people (Singh 2003). Of these, various estimates place the number of people settled in Arunachal Pradesh between 15,000 and 20,000 (see Dutta 2002, Singh 2003). These people had entered the border states of northeast India looking for shelter with ethnicities more akin to them than the Muslim Bengalis and were given migration certificates, in consultation with the Chief Minister of Assam, by the Governor of Assam who was the center's representative ruler of Arunachal. Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury (2003) has observed:

Perhaps the incident of the Sino-Indian border clash in 1962 and the growing intensity of the Naga and Mizo insurgencies in the Northeast India encouraged the Indian decision-makers to settle the 'India-friendly'

oustees from the CHT in this area for strategic reasons.

The *White Paper on Chakma and Hajong Refugee Issue* (Government of Arunachal Pradesh 1996) quotes a letter from the Governor, Vishnu Sahai, to the Chief Minister, BP Chaliha:

These Chakmas would be quite suitable people to go into the Tirap division of NEFA where there is easily found vacant land, in the area about which you and I have often spoken.

A special census conducted by the Government of Arunachal Pradesh in 1991 put the population of the Chakma refugees at 65,000 (Dutta 2002). Today, they are the largest refugee group and second largest population group in the state. In Changlang, the only unreserved constituency of Arunachal, the Chakma are a majority and if granted citizenship and concurrent political rights, the Arunachalese fear that the political equation can easily change in favor of the refugees. Allegations of illegal influx of more Chakma from CHT and import of cross-border violence in conjunction with Chakma insurgent groups of CHT have also surfaced.

There has been an ongoing agitation, mainly led by the All Arunachal Students Union (AAPSU), against the Indian government's willingness to grant citizenship to the Chakma refugees. The animosity towards the refugees is unanimous and the contention is that when the decision to settle the refugees in Arunachal was taken, no representative of the indigenous peoples was consulted, since indeed, there was no system of representation. The elected representatives, with the Chief Minister at their head, have now demanded that the Chakma should leave the state.

The tussle continues with the centre adamant that as per the Indira-Mujib treaty of 1972, India has agreed to take responsibility for all migrants who entered India before 1971—the year Bangladesh was born. In 2004,

1,497 Chakma spread over three constituencies voted in Arunachal for the first time (Das 2004). In 1996, the Supreme Court of India had amended its earlier stand on the refugee issue and directed the Arunachal government to forward all applications for citizenship by the refugees to the Government of India and to refrain from evicting them till the applications are under consideration (Singh 2003, Dutta 2002). Earlier though, in 1993, it had upheld a Guwahati High Court verdict of 1992 which had declared the Chakma residing in Arunachal Pradesh as "foreigner/aliens" (Government of Arunachal Pradesh 1996).

M.M. Jacob, Governor of Arunachal Pradesh for a while in 1996 and former Union Minister of State for Home Affairs, has been quoted (Government of Arunachal Pradesh 1996) as saying,

...there is no question of deporting these refugees from the state of Arunachal Pradesh. The general public in the state will have to be convinced that the burden of the rehabilitation of refugees will have to be shared by the country as a whole including Arunachal Pradesh.

Postcolonial Population Influx Into Northeast

Despite protests by local populations then, population flow into the Northeast has largely been abetted, facilitated or condoned by the state. Like the refugee flow into Arunachal Pradesh, other states of the Northeast have also had to house foreign populations.

Influx from Burma

Burmese refugees, for instance, have been fleeing to India since colonial times and one such major flow was of Burmese people of Indian origin, mainly into Manipur, during the Second World War⁷. About 25,000 Burmese fled to Northeast India again after the Ne Win government put the Aliens Act in place in 1967 (Bhaumik 2003). Students and political activists from Burma, whose numbers

are difficult to estimate, began to seek asylum after the repressive measures taken by the Burmese government since 1987. Repression in the Arakan Hill Tracts caused about 2,000 Rakhaines to come to Manipur and Mizoram and other parts of the Northeast. According to one source, the total number of post-1987 Burmese refugees in the northeast is about 12,000 (Bhaumik 2003). However, estimates vary and the Mizoram Home Minister Tawnluia was reported on March 14, 2006 as expressing concern over the inflow of “at least 25,000 Burmese into the state”, that is, Mizoram alone (South Asia Terrorism Portal 2006).

Influx from Bhutan

Following the 1988 declaration by an increasingly insular Bhutanese government that almost 1/6th of the population of South Bhutan were foreigners, violence broke out in the hill kingdom which led to nearly 100,000 Lhotsampa (Nepali settled in Southern Bhutan) fleeing to Nepal and India in 1991. Most of them went to eastern Nepal; a few came to Assam and West Bengal where they joined their ethnic kin (Bhaumik 2003). The actual number of refugees could not be ascertained as they found shelter among and mingled easily with the local population.

Influx from Nepal

Nepali peoples came to the region during the colonial period as soldiers and manual laborers who settled here subsequently. Some who had come as cultivators and graziers, were financially assisted in their passage to India by the colonial government that had already drawn up favorable terms of land settlement (Barpujari 2004: 48). The Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaty of 1950 and two other similar treaties in 1951 and 1956 also facilitated their settlement in various parts of the northeast. Besides, the settlement of Nepali workforce in Arunachal has already been mentioned.

Influx from Bangladesh

But by far the largest number of migrants into the Northeast has been from what is now Bangladesh and was formerly East Pakistan and prior to that, East Bengal. The magnitude and incessancy of inflowing populations and the severity of resistance to this influx, certainly calls for a closer and more historicized look at the phenomenon.

When the British first came to Assam in 1826, they saw immense fallow lands with very few people to cultivate them and pay revenue. Since 1838, they began drawing up new wasteland settlement rules (Guha 1977) but even in 1902, Henry Cotton, Chief Commissioner of Assam, was forced to remark

The millions of acres of uncultivable lands now lying waste represent millions of rupees which might be dug out of the soil, but are now allowed to lie useless like the talent wrapped in a napkin. (Barpujari 2004: 50).

Thus began the process of importing peasants from neighboring East Bengal, who were facilitated by easy settlement rules and infrastructural development liked the extension of railways from West Bengal to Assam via East. Entering Assam through the western and southern borders, the East Bengali peasants, mostly Muslims, spread to all parts of Assam and beyond to the other states of the northeast. Being hardy and in desperate need of livelihood, they settled in all available land, even in stretches considered uncultivable, and produced food grains—by 1947, Assam had a rice surplus thanks to these peasants (Bhaumik 2003)—as well as a number of vegetables and crops earlier unknown in the northeast. Even after East Bengal became East Pakistan these peasants continued to come into the northeast. Political repression of Bengali nationalism by Pakistani authorities is cited as one reason of the continued influx, though economic compulsions cannot be ruled out either.

Ideally, after the creation of Bangladesh and reinforcement of international boundaries, the flow should have stopped. It was also agreed by the signatories to the Assam Accord—which ended the Assam Movement (1979–85) against illegal migration—that 1971, and no later⁸, should be taken as the cut-off year for granting citizenship rights to these immigrants and the border should be fenced in order to stop illegal influx. But the fencing of the border has been delayed endlessly and diplomatic face-offs between India and Bangladesh over the issue continue to postpone the search for a solution. In the meantime, illegal immigration continues to happen—though perhaps not of the quantum that Ajay Singh, Governor of Assam, would have the government believe. In a “confidential” report to the President of India, Singh claimed,

The border is literally one of the world’s most fluid border (sic) crossed daily, border officials say, by some 6,000 Bangladeshis who come in search of work, often staying on to join the estimated 20 million illegal immigrants in the country (cited in Khosla 2006).

That the 272 km long land and water border—of a total of 4,095 km Indo-Bangla border—which Assam shares with Bangladesh is quite impossible to fence is almost a certainty. A recent visit by the author to the Indo-Bangla border in Dhubri district (April 2006) has reinforced the absurdity of trying to fence off the border. The porous nature of the border is owed not merely to administrative procrastination/inefficiency, but also to the natural/physical qualities of the border. Over and above that, the excessive reliance on fencing as the only solution to containing illegal influx can also itself be questioned. Besides, another strong argument against border fencing is that it leads to internal displacement. In Tripura alone, it has been reported that fencing has displaced close to 70,000 people in the border

areas (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2006).

States like Manipur and Nagaland which do not share a border with Bangladesh, have also felt the impact of Bangladeshi migration. And though in these states, “data is conspicuous by its absence ...anecdotal evidence is abundant” (Routray & Dash 2006).

Postcolonial Responses to Population Shifts

In another report to the President of India in 1998, SK Sinha has said:

Illegal migration from Assam has been taking place primarily for economic reasons. Bangladesh is the world’s most densely populated country with a population density of 969 per square kilometre. The growth rate of population in that country is 2.2 per cent and its population is growing at the rate of 2.8 million per year. Each year nearly one third of Bangladesh gets inundated by floods, displacing 19 million people. 70 million people constituting 60 per cent of the population live below the poverty line. The per capita income in Bangladesh is 170 dollars per year, which is much lower than the per capita income in India (Sinha 1998).

It is common knowledge then that most of the illegal immigrants are poor people in search of livelihood, mainly peasants in search of land. And yet, conspiracy theories abound and different dimensions have been sought to be given to the problem of illegal migration from Bangladesh without addressing the root of the problem, which is undoubtedly economic. Sinha’s report (1998) stresses on the “lebensraum” theory that some other opinion-makers also subscribe to. According to this theory, the outflow of people from Bangladesh is part of a conspiracy to make Assam part of a greater Bangladesh. To that, mainstream national parties of India like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have often given a communal angle to raise fears of Islamization if influx is allowed to continue. A report in the *Organiser*, mouthpiece of the BJP, on an anti-immigration rally held in Guwahati on

November 11, 2005, by the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), a youth organization which like the BJP is also a member of the Sangh Parivar⁹, reads like this:

Speaking as chief guest at the rally, Shri Muzaffar Hussain, a noted journalist, said the Pakistani intelligence agency, ISI, was working for total Islamisation of Assam and the government and fundamentalist organisations of Bangladesh were following its directions. He said the ISI was working towards achieving the 1934 proposal made in Bhopal when the name of the proposed Islamic nation Pakistan was mooted and the second letter "A" was for Assam. He further said India saved Bangladeshis from the atrocities of Pakistani dictators, sent the Indian army for their protection and also helped them develop as a nation. But the same Bangladesh was today helping our enemies. Talking about ABVP, he said the movements by ABVP, brought so many changes in the country and the new agitation against infiltrators would definitely prove fruitful. He said the government must take the issue of missing Pakistani nationals in India very seriously. "People of Assam should also ask why Moinul Haq from Dhubri district of Assam masterminded the bomb blasts in Delhi. They must understand there was a conspiracy to create a "Mughlistan" by bringing together Assam and several districts of West Bengal and Bihar. They must rise against it otherwise their own identity will be in danger. Shri Hussain also called upon nationalist Muslims to raise a voice against anti-national activities (Organiser 2005a).

They would rather have Bangladeshi Hindus settle in the northeast, granting them refugee status and subsequently citizenship. As a statement issued by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS),¹⁰ defined by AG Noorani (2005) as "fascist in its set-up and outlook and committed to the cult of hate," announced:

...the Sangh demands that the Hindu refugees from Bangladesh should be granted

citizenship of Bharat under the Citizenship Act (Amended) 2004 as was done in Gujarat and Rajasthan for Hindus from Pakistan (Organiser 2005).¹¹

The game thus continues where at some point or the other, the magnitude of illegal influx is noted with alarm by one party or the other. On the other hand, however, they procrastinate over any concrete solution to the problem. In the world's biggest democracy, the 'one man, one vote' formula ensures that tacitly condoning ongoing influx provides for a larger vote-bank. The tragedy is that the frenzy that is simultaneously whipped up against the immigrants blurs the line between legal citizens of the state and illegal immigrants. Legally, since the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985, all migrants who had come to India before the formation of Bangladesh in 1971 are Indian citizens; in the popular imagination fed on images of religious and cultural invasion, however, all Bengali Muslims from East Pakistan or East Bengal (now Bangladesh) are also illegal infiltrators. Monirul Hussain (1993) shows how, since the Assam Movement, the gulf has increased between the Axamiyā-speaking people and the Muslims of East Bengali origin in Assam—na- or neo-Asamiya as he calls them—most of whom have been in Assam for generations:

Though the movement continued for six long years from 1979-85, yet none from the leadership could very precisely ascertain the number of foreign nationals living in Assam illegally. Fantastic and inconsistent figures were cited in the press and various other platforms of the movement. The estimated number of foreign nationals in Assam ranged from 2 lakhs to 77 lakhs...the fantastic numbers provided by the leadership of the movement and their supporters and collaborators in the press served two distinct purposes simultaneously: (1) it deepened sharply the fear of the Asamiyas of losing their numerical dominance in Assam and their identity; and (2) it also made the Bengalis and the neo-Asamiya groups

suspicious of the real motives of the leadership of the movement because such inflated figures which they provided must have included many Indians in the category of foreigners. This confusion created by wild estimates sharpened the division between Asamiyas and the Bengalis on the one hand, and between the Asamiyas and the neo-Asamiyas on the other. The fear of the Bengali and the Na-Asamiya Muslims was compounded when the Asamiya bourgeois press repeatedly identified the Bengali and the Na-Asamiya Muslim inhabited areas as the area of Bangladeshi nationals...

Indeed the volatile reaction against the migrant community was sparked off by observation of anomalies in the voter's list of the Mangaldoi parliamentary constituency— which has a considerable immigrant population—where the death of a sitting Member of Parliament (MP) in 1979 had raised the need for bye-elections. In the meantime, the then Chief Election Commissioner, S.L. Sakhdar had declared a few months back:

I would like to refer to the alarming situation in some states, especially in the North Eastern region, wherefrom reports are coming regarding large-scale inclusions of foreign nationals in the electoral rolls. In one case, the population in 1971 census recorded increases as high as 34.98% over 1961 census figures and this figure was attributed to the influx of a large number of persons from foreign countries. The influx has become a regular feature. I think it may not be a wrong assessment to make that on the basis of increase of 34.98% between two census, the increase would likely to be recorded in the 1991 census would be more than 100% over the 1961 census. In other words, a stage would be reached when the state may have to reckon with the foreign nationals who may in all probability constitute a sizeable percentage if not the majority of population in the state (cited in Hussain 1993).¹²

Illegal Migration and Policy Lacunae

Today, though the prognostication of state-wide majority has not quite materialized,

Muslim immigrants do constitute a majority in at least five districts of Assam and there is no instrument in place to determine how many of them are legal and how many illegal. Also, it does not appear as though any government or any political party is overly enthusiastic about determining the same, though they do all make the right noises at the opportune times.

For instance, in a pre-election speech in 2001 in Assam, former Prime Minister of India and BJP leader, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, had announced that his party, then in power, was seriously considering granting work permits to infiltrators from Bangladesh (Upadhyay 2001). The fact that no steps were taken to implement it subsequently indicates it might have been just an electoral gimmick. A possible solution though might lie in this system if implemented.

Economic compulsions being the main cause for illegal influx, if work permits are issued to border-crossers from Bangladesh, it would guarantee them a regular income and might just influence them not to settle in India. As it happens, in the border state of Tripura, there is already a regular influx of wage earners, rickshaw pullers, scavengers and beggars from the bordering areas of Bangladesh on a day-to-day basis. Functioning through middlemen called "linemen", a parallel system of border control has been in place in the state through which a payment of up to INR 200 (1USD=45INR approx) to the border security forces of both countries supply tokens or passes to cross the border into India from where they go back to Bangladesh after the day is done¹³. Though no official data is available, the prevalence of this quasi-legal system is common knowledge among people in the border areas. If legalized by the state, and if the smoothness and efficiency with which the system operates now can be duplicated under a legal framework and extended to all parts of the Northeast, perhaps lesser migrants would be encouraged to settle—after all under the current extra-legal arrangement, a daily crossing into India costs them almost half or more than half of their

daily earnings on Indian soil: there is no saying how many might have decided it is cheaper to settle in India than to undertake the recurring danger and expenditure.

Many civil society bodies like the All Assam Student's Union (AASU), which had also been in the forefront of the Assam Movement, often chant the mantra of "detection and deportation" of illegal migrants as if that was the panacea to the problem. But with the Bangladeshi government unwilling to even admit that any migration into India takes place, the question arises: where do we deport the illegal migrants? The only memorable instance of any migrant population being repatriated from the Northeast was in the case of the Chakma refugees numbering over 50,000 who had fled to Tripura and Mizoram since 1975 when insurgent activities and clashes between militants and security forces had intensified in the CHT. By 1998, they were repatriated after the insurgents began negotiations with the government and signed a peace agreement (Bhaumik 2003). But the Bangladesh government has not always been so forthcoming with admissions of its nationals being on Indian soil; insurgent pressure and internal political dynamics for once aided the return of migrant population.

Furthermore, detection itself has not proved an easy task, or one that any agency—government, political, civil—has seriously set out to attempt. Even the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP)—the members of which party were drawn from the leadership of the Assam Movement and which came to power in 1985 riding on promises of detecting and deporting illegal migrants—soon disappointed its main support base, the Axamiyā middle class, with a lack of political will in this direction. Rather, after a humiliated electoral defeat in the subsequent elections, the party was seen trying to appease the immigrants and this in a way brought them back to power in 1996. The only way it tried to redeem itself was by raising feeble cries against the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act [IM (DT)], 1983 (to be discussed in detail subsequently).

The BJP and the AASU joined the chorus and often came out sounding louder. Finally, on the basis of a public interest litigation filed by AASU leader (subsequently an AGP MP), Sarbananda Sonowal, the act was struck down as "unconstitutional" by the Supreme Court of India on July 12, 2005. But the debate continues whether this is enough to stop illegal immigration, or indeed, if the act was ever such a potent tool of protecting illegal immigrants at all.

Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act

The *raison d'être* of the IM (DT) Act was ostensibly detection and deportation of illegal migrants but certain provisions in it were definitely inimical to its stated intent.¹⁴ It was passed in 1983 by a government that quite evidently, in the eyes of the Assamese people lacked legitimacy¹⁵. The most obviously problematic areas in this act were:

- a) It provided for two individuals living within the same police station limit as the suspected illegal migrant to approach an IMDT Tribunal, deposit a sum between INR 10-100 as stipulated and then file a complaint.
- b) It also restricted complainants by saying that "no person shall make more than ten such applications or more than ten such declarations"
- c) It left the onus of proving the citizenship credentials of the suspect on the complainant and the police, not on the accused.
- d) It also provided that "if the application is found frivolous or vexatious" the Central Government may not accept it.

Most importantly however, this act was in operation only to the state of Assam. And as the Supreme Court verdict that struck down the act stated,

...though enquiries were initiated in 3,10,759 cases under the IMDT Act, only 10,015 persons were declared illegal migrants and only 1,481 illegal migrants were physically expelled up to April 30, 2000 (*The Hindu* 2005).

There have also been reports of genuine citizens being expelled with or without cover of the IM (DT), and of expelled people as well as illegal immigrants coming into Assam with the help of middle men in the borders known as “Night Birds” (Bhaumik 2006). So why the projection of a near fetishistic importance given to the IM (DT) Act by a) the minority immigrant Muslim community as its only savior from arbitrary harassment, and by b) the dominant Axamiyā middle class as the only deterrent towards detection and deportation of illegal migrants? The search for an answer would take us back to the period of the enactment of the act, and to the unraveling of a shameful period in the history of Assam when minority communities were harassed, killed, displaced and alienated by some sections of the agitators who participated in the Assam Movement.

It was a Movement that began with a non-violent agenda and had an overwhelmingly nationalistic fervor, evident from its huge support base¹⁶. But gradually as political opportunism and hypocrisy crept in among the middle class leadership, the minorities began to feel insecure—besides the Muslim immigrants, the “tribal” communities also began to feel vulnerable. It was not entirely “vote bank politics”, as Prabhakara (2005) explains, that was behind the enactment of this act.

...the enactment of the IMDT Act was not dictated entirely by opportunistic considerations, now popularly referred to as “vote bank politics”. In one way or the other such “vote bank politics” prevails throughout the country. But in matters of politics and public affairs, even the most opportunist choices are also dictated by political necessities.

The political necessity in this instance was dictated by the grim denouement of the enforced February 1983 elections that traumatised the people of the State cutting across all other divides, and most of all the Muslim minority. Since, despite all the normative claims that the Assam agitation was against all illegal aliens and made no distinction between an “infiltrant” (Muslim) and a “refugee” (Hindu) on the ground, the Muslim minority had felt the brunt of the animosities let loose. So legislation providing for greater protective measures against harassment than was available under the Foreigners Act, 1946, was considered. The Preamble to the IMDT Act resonates with all these elements: the hypocrisy, the opportunism and the political necessity.

For the Muslims of East Bengali origin who had been in Assam for generations but had nonetheless to face the Nellie pogrom of 1983—the number casualties of the pogrom have been placed anywhere between 1,200 (Hussain 2001) to 3,300 (Rehman 2006)—this act naturally provided some sense of security. By the same token, for a generation of Axamiyā ingrained with the paranoia that caused the Nellie massacre, the act was anathema. But as Prabhakara (2005) questions:

The situation on the ground has changed dramatically over the past two decades; to some extent this is also the case with the inveterate opponents of not merely the IMDT Act but all the other political shenanigans that are associated with it...

As for those who continue with their fixation with the act, he says they “seem to be living irrevocably in the past”. As the author has also noted elsewhere:

The headstones of all the people massacred in Nellie in the worst show of Axamiya chauvinism have been inscribed in the Assamese language!... A process of reinvention of the self is at work among the community which the author had the opportunity to observe in the course of a folk

meet at Aditpur in Kalgachia in January 2005. Not because of, but independent of the dominant society's construction of its otherness, the Muslims of East Bengali origin are charting out their own identity, marking out their own differences. Though not rampant, such confidence is also evident from their deviation from their traditional political affiliations. In the parliamentary elections held in 2004, an AGP candidate won from the Muslim majority Mangaldoi constituency which has been the stronghold of the Congress ever since it took on the role of the saviour of the immigrants in post-independence Assam. A teacher at the Ballabh Bhai Patel High School in Kopati was confident enough in his claim to Axamiyanness to declare that the scrapping of the IMDT Act held no threat for him. And this was in a conversation that took place in July 2004 much before the Supreme Court had scrapped the act (Goswami 2005).

It is a great injustice done to settler communities like the Muslims of East Bengali origin who have contributed a lot to the economy and society of their adopted country to confound them with illegal migrants from their part of the world (which has seen much geo-political changes since) and persecute them as such. But despite the ignominy attached to Nellie, the incident is a brave reminder of how a settler community held its own against odds and successfully resisted being internally displaced; the survivors returned to their villages eventually.

But violent confrontations between communities were not a one-off phenomenon that took place during the Assam Movement. The next section deals with inter-ethnic conflicts in Assam and the Northeast and how these have caused internal displacement among populations. Indeed, during the Assam movement itself, other communities in conflict with each other were forced to migrate internally. For instance, following the violent confrontations between the Axamiyā-speaking and Bodo people in 1983 at Gohpur in

Darrang district, members of both communities were displaced (Hussain 2001).

Ethnic Politics and Internal Displacement

Before embarking on a discussion of internal displacement in Northeast India, it would be appropriate to mention here that the paper deals exclusively with displacements induced by ethnic conflicts. It is of course true that certain instances of disaster or "development" induced displacements are also closely linked with or lead to such conflicts. For instance, the proposed Tipaimukh dam has already caused a lot of hostility between communities. To be built in a Hmar dominated area, some sections of the Hmar have welcomed the project in the hope of being benefited by it, although others have posed questions about rehabilitation and loss of agricultural lands. But stronger protests are coming from non-Hmar communities. Leaders of the Zeliangrong Naga villages which are expected to be submerged have registered their protest against the government's policy of developing one community at the cost of another:

"It is not right to bring advantage to one group at the cost of another," says D Dikambui, the president of the Zeliangrong Union, the apex social body of the people of Tamenglong. It is immensely influential. The Zeliangrong tribe is part of the Naga groups that predominate in Tamenglong. "If some people shall get a little benefit at the cost of our people how can the government trade off one community's future against the others?" This tirade is repeated by every Zeliangrong elder or leader that one meets. Very often it boils into anger. "If this is what the government wants to do then we shall have no option but to pick up arms. We shall defend our way of life and our lands," says Guiliang Panmei, adviser Zeliangrong Women's Union. This is not an empty threat in a district where Naga groups are immensely powerful. They are concerned with what the Zeliangrong Naga in Tamenglong

will lose, if the Tipaimukh dam comes up (Sethi 2006).

Again, allegations have arisen that in order to reinforce their strength against the dominant Dimasa community, there are plans to bring in the displaced Hmar population from the Tipaimukh area into Assam's North Cachar (NC) Hills district where the community has some presence (Hmar 2003). Thus, the dam has already led to friction between the communities and if it is constructed there is no saying what other conflicts will visit the area and how many more people will be displaced than just the project-affected ones. But the very fact that the Tipaimukh saga begins with a "development" project, means that in order to understand its dynamics in its totality, one would have to enter into a discussion and analysis of the state's development policies, indigenous approaches to development and a plethora of other issues besides. For the sake of maintaining a clear focus and owing to economy of space, therefore, the discussion will henceforth remain confined to displacement directly induced by conflicts between ethnicities. And that would mean taking a look at the ethnic politics of the Northeast first.

'Fast-Food' Politics and Ethnic Re-organization

WHO are the Thengal Kachari and where do they fit into in this categorization (of tribes of Assam)? The simple answer is: Nowhere. The community has never been separately enumerated in any of the five Census operations (1951, 1961, 1971, 1991 and 2001) conducted in Assam since Independence...

On the face of it, the Thengal Kachari, as the very denomination of Kachari indicates, should have been recognised as a tribal community, part of the great Kachari family, and enumerated in successive Censuses as a Scheduled Tribe. This has not been the case. According to the government and community leaders that this correspondent has spoken to, the Thengal Kachari were, in all these

Censuses, counted as a tribal community but not enumerated so separately. They were instead included with the Sonowal Kachari, a people closely related, and their numbers were subsumed in the total of the Sonowal Kachari....

...According to Dr. B. K. Gohain, the State's Home Commissioner who is closely engaged in the issue, the estimated population of Thengal Kachari is 'about 3.5 lakh', a figure that is also cited as the estimated 'total population of the council area' which of course will also include many people who are not Thengal Kachari... According to Dr. Mohammed Taher, the highly regarded geographer and demographer of the State, the total population of the Thengal Kachari is unlikely to be very much over 10,000...

...a community never enumerated separately and never finding even a mention in all the literature on the tribal people of the State, including literature published by the Government of Assam, about whose numbers or habitat little is known, has within a few weeks of the formation of a 'Demand Committee' for the formation of an autonomous council found this demand conceded. The alacrity, not to speak of democratic response to popular demand, is astounding, given the history of violent agitations that have marked the grudging concession in respect of even the most legitimate of demands.

...The strange story of the TKAC (Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council) provides a most salutary and striking instance of this new fast-food style politics, picking out chat-pat solutions out of a hat to any and every problem, without even considering whether such a process of mechanical autonomisation and the consequent inescapable atomisation of Assam is the only way out of the more fundamental predicament that is facing Assam. This is the real purport and moral of this tale (Prabhakara 2005a).

Inherent in this piece by MS Prabhakara is a critique of ethnic re-formulations in response to current "fast-food style politics". In fact, his

piece is very creatively called “Manufacturing Identities?” and though he admits that changes in ethnic affiliations are part of social flux and dynamism, he also point out how political systems of rewards and punishments have shaped these in Assam in recent years. Thus there is in the state:

...the ongoing agitation with deadlines announced and extended for recognition as a Scheduled Tribe by six OBC communities of the State: the *Koch Rajbongshi* to which stream most of the Saraniya Kacharis belong, the *Tai Ahom*, who ruled Assam during medieval times, the *Moran*, the *Mottock*, the *Chutiya* and the *Adivasi*, the appellation now preferred by tea garden labour and ex-tea garden labour. As against these demands one has to set the certain opposition from the existing Scheduled Tribes against making any concession on such demands. The Bodo Kachari, despite securing recognition as a ‘Sixth Schedule tribe’ and so qualifying to be a Scheduled Tribe in the hill districts, has till now not secured such recognition in Karbi Anglong (Prabhakara 2005a).

If “detrribalization”¹⁷ was a means of acquiring social acceptance in pre-colonial Assam, with the introduction of the instruments of protective discrimination, the trend of “retribalization” began. Ad hoc solutions to deep rooted problems will after all, generate ad hoc responses among the communities affected, to the extent that they have resorted to creation of ad hoc ethnicities now in the northeast. If being a Scheduled Tribe qualifies a community for an autonomous council, and if councils begin to be disbursed with as much alacrity as the TKAC, every community would want to re-invent itself towards getting scheduled status. And when the already scheduled communities feel their privileged positions slipping away, and their rewards being distributed among many contenders, naturally oppositions would arise. Thus, the Koch Rajbongshi’s demand for inclusion in the scheduled category has been constantly opposed by the Bodo.

Interestingly, the Bodo and the Koch Rajbongshi of Assam are being increasingly constructed as distinct ethnicities, though if some historical accounts are to be believed, the Koch are “detrribalized” Bodo who took to Hinduism earlier. And yet, when the Bodo movement began, the Koch Rajbongshi were among the first targets of a spate of violence unleashed against non-Bodo communities in an effort to create an “exclusive” Bodo homeland.

Changing Inter-ethnic Equations

In the Northeast, such cases of changing inter-ethnic dynamics in response to state policies and political flip-flops are many. We may further examine the case of the Hmar and Mizo inter-relation. Of all the Northeastern states where the Hmar have been traditionally living, it is only in Mizoram that they have some amount of autonomy. Though the grant and nature of this autonomy has been brought into question, and much resentment continues regarding its functioning¹⁸, it has often been cited by the majority Mizo population as a token of their recognition of the Hmar as their kin. Therefore, when in early 2006, the Manipur Hmar fled to Mizoram following heightened violent activities by Meitei insurgents in their areas, they were given shelter by the government just as other Hmar internally displaced people (IDPs) had been sheltered earlier—notably when in April 2003, Dimasa and Hmar insurgent activity had displaced them from Assam. And the relief camp was set up in Sakawrdai, the headquarters of the Sinlung Hills Development Council, the seat of Hmars in Mizoram—a step that worked in the interest of the majority of the IDPs, considering that reports of clashes of those who stayed outside the camp with local villagers were soon to surface.

Meanwhile, the issue of integration of what has been constructed as the Zo tribal brotherhood resurfaced. The daily *Newslink* (2006) commented:

Because of their perceived need to preserve their unique cultural identities, Hmars, Paites and other ethnic tribes of the Zo family living outside Mizoram had resisted coming inside the encompassing umbrella of the Mizo identity. However, the need to be a part of a bigger community is slowly being realized by these other tribes with the advent of an identity crisis among the various peoples of the region during the last few decades.

The Hmar Inpui (Hmar Main House) and the Hmar Youth Association responded in kind to the Mizo's hospitality. It issued a statement (*Newslink* 2006b) saying:

We have rediscovered our deep brotherhood as we have learnt that our plight had evoked deep sympathies among the Mizo kindred scattered all over the world.

But in a splendid demonstration of diplomatic dexterity, the Central YMA president, J.H. Zoremthanga, said he was in favor of the IDPs returning to Manipur "since occupation of any land outside Mizoram by Zo kindred tribes would mean a greater Mizoram." (*Newslink* 2006d)

A member of the Mizoram opposition, the Zoram Nationalist Party (ZNP), had earlier in the year suggested the need for redrawing the political boundaries along ethnic lines, in naïve forgetfulness—Mizoram after all, like most other states of the Northeast, was reorganized by the central government on the basis of ethnicity (to be discussed in details later). Obviously, since then, the definition and boundaries of the Mizo identity had changed as had the equation with certain other ethnicities, so that the ZNP could announce based on the re-definition of the Zo-Hmar relation that was taking shape:

A nation is built by God. Therefore, these man made boundaries should not forever divide the nation. The ZNP National Council Meeting has rededicated itself towards bringing together under a single state under a single government the Zo ethnic tribes who

are forced to live separately. Any move towards the disintegrity of the Zo tribes will be strongly opposed by the ZNP (*Newslink* 2006a).

Ironically, the Hmar of Mizoram had earlier demanded a separate state—and has been conceded the Sinlung Hills Development Council—alleging homogenizing tendencies by the dominant Lushai community.

New Ethnic Formulations

Not merely are relations between ethnic communities redefined and reformulated in this way in the Northeast, but new ethnic identities are also constructed, thus illustrating that identities that are included popularly under the "ethnic" label also can and have had civic formulations. The efforts being made towards the construction of the scattered Naga "tribes" as a single nation and identity—sometimes also through alleged "ethnic conversion"—is the most obvious example. Another recent effort at ethnic reorganization is that of the Bru.

The Bru have been living traditionally in Assam, Mizoram and Tripura. Their biggest concentration was in Tripura where they were the second largest indigenous community till royal persecution following an uprising displaced a lot of them in the 1942–43 (for details see Chakravarti 2002, Chakraborty 2004). The ones that moved to Mizoram were always looked upon as "outsiders" even to the extent that their names have been struck off the voters' list from time to time. But it was in Mizoram that their process of reinvention of the self began.

The word "Bru" derives from "Bruha" the common mythical ancestor of a number of allied clans, of which the Reang are the most dominant. In fact, all the sub-clans—Uchoi (Husoi), Chamrong, Wariem, Raichak, Reang—which fall in to two major clans—Mulsoi and Meska—were clubbed together under the name "Reang" till a conscious effort was made in the 1990s to popularize the umbrella identity of Bru for all of them. They then

began increasingly to demand political and representative rights in Mizoram; administrative policies for the protection of their unique identity were also sought. The culmination of the process of resistance to an alleged “Mizoisation” policy was in the form of a demand, often backed by violent insurgent activities, for a “Bru land”, comprising of the area traditionally inhabited by the community (for details see Chakravarti 2002, Chakraborty 2004).

The anti-foreigners agitation in Mizoram in 1995 prompted the Bru political leadership to urge the people of the community spread out over other places to migrate to areas within the territory where they began to demand an autonomous council. The confrontation between the Mizo government and the Bru came to a head when the Dampa forest area, largely inhabited by the Bru, was declared a Tiger Reserve. Large scale displacement of the Bru was feared and a section of the youth apparently took up arms. They allegedly killed a Mizo forest officer and in the conflict that followed, 30–35,000 Bru were displaced and most of them entered Tripura—some went to Assam—looking for sanctuary (for details see Chakravarti 2002, Chakraborty 2004).

A peace treaty was signed in 2005 between the Mizoram government and Bru insurgents of the Bru National Liberation Front (BNLF) to put an end to violence and a repatriation settlement of Bru IDPs was also reached. But resentments continued to simmer under the surface on both sides. Sporadic violence by another Bru militant group—the Bru Liberation Front of Mizoram (BLFM)—continues. On their part, the Mizo continue to air their antipathy, as the statement of a newly-formed organization called the Zoram Vengtu (guardians of Mizoram) demonstrates (*Newslink* 2006c):

The Brus, also called as Reangs, Halams and Deburman, were recognised by the British as Tiperas. Since the British understood that they did not belong to Mizoram (then Lushai

Hills) they (Tiperas) were included among outsiders who were denied settlement in Mizoram under the inner line regulation of 1930...

Brus originally were not homeless people, but who failed to protect their home. We should help these people get back their homeland instead of giving them a home here.

The Politics of Ethnic Homelands

The Location of the Ethnic Homeland

But the question that arises here is: where is that homeland? The Bru’s imagination of their homeland overlies the place the Mizo call home. There is not much possibility that in Assam and Tripura as well, where they have a presence, a demand for a Bru homeland can be accommodated. Already there have been internecine wars over contested homelands in Assam—the most recent case being in Karbi Anglong in 2005 where Karbi-Dimasa clashes left nearly 50,000 people displaced (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2006). The clash had begun over the demand of the United Peoples’ Democratic Solidarity (UPDS), a Karbi militant organization for the removal of a designated camp belonging to the Dima Halam Daogo (DHD), a Dimasa insurgent outfit from Karbi Anglong; it escalated into large scale ethnic cleansing of Dimasa people in the hill district, mainly in areas which are sought to be included by the Dimasa insurgent group in their proposed homeland. Interestingly, parts of the proposed Karbi homeland also spills over into the NC Hills.

Instances of overlapping cartographies of imagined homelands are many. The problem arises because they draw mostly from legendary, mythical or pre-colonial memories, with little or no reference to the present, and to add to that there is no guarantee that the emotional geographies of two rival contenders for the same piece of land would derive from the same period in history. For example, the idea of an exclusive homeland for the Bodo which spread over the entire north bank of the

Brahmaputra river in Assam, was based on mythical and legendary reconstruction. Overlapping with this territory, is the Koch Rajbongshi homeland, which spreads over some parts of what now constitutes the Bodo Territorial Autonomous District (BTAD) area, and extends up to North Bengal. The overlap in the imaginaries occurred because the Koch homeland is based substantially on a more recent memory—that of the pre-colonial Kamatapur kingdom.

Besides, as has been seen in cases already discussed above, ethnic boundaries and definitions are dynamic. And as such, there is every possibility of splinter ethnicities demanding exclusive rights over the same homeland. When one goes into the many conflicting spatial and temporal histories based on which the many ethnicities demand so many homelands, most of them overlapping, the idea of exclusivity begins to seem more and more absurd. Add to that the violence that erupts from the demand of exclusive homelands and kills and displaces so many, and the idea begins to seem not just absurd but also inhuman.

The Idea of Exclusivity

So where does this notion of exclusivity originate? Who thought that in a multi-ethnic place like the northeast, any ethnicity could be given an exclusive homeland? The trouble began with the coming of the colonial administration which was removed from the ground realities of the region. It introduced a range of policies based on cursory knowledge of the people for whom the policies were made and followed them through from their own perspective of commercial gain. Consider the case of Arunachal Pradesh as already discussed where it has been seen that the colonial policy of non-interference towards the frontier tribes often translated in reality into indirect control. To elucidate further, an attempt at reconciliation with the raiding tribes of Arunachal had led the Ahom kings of the plains to pay them *posa*, or services in cash or kind. The British began with observing this

custom but gradually turned the system around wherein the tribal chiefs had to collect it from the government as rewards for their “good behavior”, and allowance of European plantations and other commercial pursuits in the hills. This is how the frontier tribes slowly lost control over their lands to the colonial entrepreneurs and to a government that often led punitive expeditions into their territory, such was their “reconciliatory” policy.

However, the myth behind these instruments of governance was so strongly built up that the postcolonial state retained many of these colonial provisions as instruments of protective discrimination. The difference was that the assumption that some communities were not worth the attempt to be brought within the ambit of modern administration had led the British to label certain areas of the northeast as “excluded” or “backward”; but the postcolonial state’s declared intent was that it saw protective discrimination as a means of letting the formerly ‘excluded’ communities develop according to their own genius¹⁹ while gradually integrating into the mainstream. This was the “Philosophy for NEFA” (1959) that Verrier Elwin, whose scholarship and experience of the northeast shaped much of postcolonial India’s policies towards the region, propagated. Thus the frontier tracts remained under central governance—we have seen how Arunachal Pradesh became a state only in 1987. Provisions like the “inner line” which prohibits settlement of outsiders remain in place till this day. Most of the hill areas—like the Lushai hills which went on to constitute Mizoram, and the United Khasi and Jaintia Hills which became incorporated in Meghalaya—were also tagged like the frontier tracts as “excluded” and “partially excluded”, and they came under the provisions of the Sixth Schedule as per the recommendation of the Gopinath Bordoloi Sub-committee on North East Frontier (Assam Tribal and Excluded Areas) of the Constituent Assembly.

The Sixth Schedule has often been seen as the panacea for all disgruntled demands for

autonomy and self-rule by the resurging ethnicities, both by the ethnicities themselves as well as by the state. Hence the proliferation of autonomous councils in recent years and of insurgent groups to demand the same. Where the demand has been for more—in extreme cases, for secession and sovereignty—amendments of the Sixth Schedule to extend the powers of the councils formed under it have been effected and offered as an alternative arrangement. As recently as 2004, the Arunachal Pradesh assembly adopted the Sixth Schedule:

so as to enable it to create Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) in militant-dominated Tirap and Chanlang districts, besides Tawang and West Kameng districts affected by 1962 Chinese aggression (Press Trust of India 2004).

The near-talismanic importance attached to autonomy under the sixth schedule can be gauged by the opposition generated to the formation of an autonomous council for the indigenous people of Tripura by the immigrant population in 1980. The riots that followed put about 18,9919 people, both indigenous and non-indigenous, in relief camps (Chakravarti 2002). And yet, the nature of autonomy that the formation of the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) conferred can best be described as token.

The powers conferred on the council are very limited, especially if one compares them with the powers vested in the BTAD by an amendment of the Sixth Schedule in 2003, which has control over all 40 state subjects. Besides, financial autonomy is almost absent. Of course, one could also turn the matter around and question the need for tokenisms within tokenisms, since even in the most powerful autonomous councils, the ultimate power does not vest with the people. In the centrist model of the Indian polity, the centre has remained the sole keeper of all power. And even in the lower tiers of administration,

it is the same centralizing propensity that is replicated at every level.

Tokenism is also the spirit in which the various ethnicities of Assam are being conferred Sixth Schedule status with alarming regularity. After the initial reservation of the government towards granting autonomy to the Bodo who in a way, began the trend for demanding autonomous councils in Assam—the hill districts had been put under the schedule at the time of constitution making—the government has since been more than generous with disbursing autonomous councils and concomitant grants. After the grant of autonomy to the Bodo, it was soon seen that ethnic aspirations can be appeased, at least provisionally, by declaration of Sixth Schedule status, and the passing on of some amount of power to a section of the ethnic elites. Besides, the huge monetary grants that accompany the setting up of each new autonomous council is enough to keep the leadership quiet at least till the finances last. Possibly after the Bodo experience, and the positive results of co-optation of the ethnic elites, other communities like the Rabha, Mising and Tiwa have also been granted autonomous councils. With each new memorandum of understanding that is signed with each next community, the process is simple—the terms remain the same, only the dates and names of the signatories are the same. A comparative scrutiny of any two of the memoranda of settlement signed post-BTAD will prove the veracity of this. The burlesque that autonomy has been reduced to was exposed in the case of the TKAC discussed above.

Frontier Reorganization and Ethnic States

Over and above the Sixth Schedule, the policy of reorganizing the Northeast states along ethnic lines which started since the 1960s has equally led to internal disintegration, proliferation of ethnic identity movements and demands for exclusive homelands. In 1960, Assam was a much bigger geo-political entity than it is at present. Four states (including what remained of Assam) were

shaped out of this entity. Meghalaya was made an Autonomous State in 1970 and a full-fledged state in 1972. Arunachal Pradesh was made a Union Territory in 1972 and upgraded to a state in 1982. Mizoram became a Union Territory in 1972 and a separate state in 1987. And except for Arunachal, all the other states were formed by the central government in order to appease insurgent and secessionist activities.

In the aftermath of the 1962 war, the reorganization of Arunachal, leading eventually to state-formation, was seen as an exercise in integrating a frontier region that was situated dangerously close to powerful China. Nagaland had already been separated from Assam in 1957 when it was made into a Central Government Administrative Area. Its formation as a state in 1963 has also been considered to be a reaction to the 1962 debacle and an effort to appease Naga sentiments, given the continued refusal of hardliners to consider themselves a part of India. By 1987 then, the formation of the Northeast as we know it now was more or less complete—the erstwhile princely states of Manipur and Tripura had been made into states of the Indian union in 1972.

The fact that ethnic dissensions increased rather than decrease after this reorganization of the northeast points towards some fault in such a policy of appeasement, or at least in the handling of it. Only in one much-touted case—the case of Mizoram—ethnic aspirations seemed to have been assuaged to the extent that insurgent activities came officially to a halt with the insurgents turning administrators.²⁰ However, in the process of reorganization, the state boundaries of Mizoram as well as that of the other northeast states, were not defined clearly enough to preempt the possibility of inter-state border disputes. Thus, Mizoram continues to have a border dispute with Assam even 20 years after its formation, a legacy left behind by colonial incursion which acquired land for its plantations on either side of the border between what are now the states of Assam

and Mizoram. On January 6, 2006, the general secretary of the Former Undergrounds Welfare Association, V Laichhinga reiterated a long standing demand:

We had submitted a memorandum to the President of India in September last year to constitute a three-member border commission. We had also urged the Mizoram Chief Minister to initiate a CM-level talk with Assam on the border dispute, but no action has been taken till today (South Asia Terrorism Portal 2006).

Meanwhile, student bodies like the Mizo Zirlai Pawl (MZIP) and the Mizo Students Union (MSU) have pledged to safeguard the 'true' territory of Mizoram which extends into the Cachar plains of Assam over some parts of which Mizo chiefs had at one point in history held sway (United News of India 2006). Indeed there is a sizeable Mizo population in the Cachar plains even today, and powerful Mizo organisations like the Young Mizo Association (YMA) have their local chapters in the Cachar area of Assam.

Barring isolated incidents though (see for instance, *The Telegraph* 2005) there have not been many major incidents of violence on the Assam-Mizoram border. The same of course, cannot be said of the more sporadically volatile borders like the Assam-Meghalaya, Assam-Nagaland and Nagaland-Manipur borders.

State Policies and Internal Displacement

Keeping Disputes Alive

In November 2003, for example, more than 4,000 Khasi-Pnar people living in Assam's Karbi Anglong district were displaced following violence perpetrated by Karbi insurgent outfits (*The Assam Tribune* 2005). They fled to Meghalaya to find shelter with their ethnic kin. The displaced Khasi-Pnar people belonged to Blocks I & II of Karbi Anglong which has been an area of dispute between Assam and Meghalaya for more than 30 years now. The dispute arises from the

contention that these blocks were yoked to Karbi Anglong in 1951 by dissociating them from what used to be the Khasi and Jaintia Hills district. Indeed, most border disputes in the northeast, as the case of the Mizoram-Assam and Meghalaya-Assam borders illustrate, spring from references to a history the linearity of which was disrupted either by colonial or postcolonial (neo-colonial?) intervention. In the course of current conflicts, the inability of the postcolonial state to address and/or redress these disruptions has prolonged these disputes.

Uprooting Populations

The result has been escalated violence and insurgent activities, to counter which, the state undertakes counterinsurgency measures. And though till date, these measures have not been able to contain insurgency in the Northeast, many of them have definitely succeeded in displacing civilian populations. As part of the state's counterinsurgency operations, grouping of villages involving 80 percent of the total population was undertaken in Mizoram in 1966–69, purportedly to isolate militants and deprive them of shelter (Lianzela 2002)—just as the British had done in their Malaya colony. At least 150,000 people were affected. The same exercise is repeated occasionally in Manipur, but not quite peaceably. In a replay of British soldiers burning down Kuki villages in 1917–19, Indian security forces have also been known to destroy both Naga and Kuki villages under the pretext of counterinsurgency operations. In 2001, an entire Kuki village was burnt down and about 50 families displaced (Haokip 2002). Thus resentment in this region against the state and the security forces it often fails to rein in is quite natural.

Half-Baked Policies

Meanwhile, even the apparently well-meaning policies of the state towards this region have been half-baked, causing more trauma than relief to the target populations. For instance, if we take the case of the Puroik (Sulung) of Arunachal Pradesh, we find what damage

uninformed and inconclusive policy decisions can and have perpetrated on entire communities.

Among the indigenous Arunachalese, the Puroik have been victims of a myopic government policy of liberation from slavery that has led to their displacement. The government took a decision in 1964 to free the community that was traditionally used as serfs by the more powerful tribes of Arunachal, like the Nishi. There were many lacunae in the action plan—a sum of INR 500 (approx. 11 USD) was paid to the owners towards liberating the slaves, but there was no mechanism to follow up on the success/failure of the plan. In some cases the money was taken, but the slaves were not released. In most cases, the Puroik themselves were unaware of what the payment was towards so that they could not demand release. The money advanced towards rehabilitation of the serfs was in many cases handed over to the erstwhile masters due to lack of information. 3,540 bonded labors were identified, all of whom had no homesteads. Those of them who were liberated, thus joined the ranks of the internally displaced (for details see Dutta 2002).

(Mis)handling Ethnic Aspirations

For the most part however, the state's inaptitude in handling ethnic aspirations leads to violence, bloodshed and internal displacement. When the Bodo launched a movement in 1987 to demand an ethnic homeland, the state first used them for its own ends, and then set a near impossible condition in return for autonomy, a condition to fulfill which violence was indispensable.

It is true of the Bodo movement that policies of forced assimilation on the one hand and of deliberate alienation on the other that were formulated by the AGP government formed after the Assam Movement were responsible to a great extent for the rise of militancy in Bodo society. At the same time there are clear indications that the central

government, which was run at the time by the Congress (I), a national party as opposed to the regional AGP in power in Assam, was providing arms and training to Bodo militants (Bhaumik 2004). The then chief minister, Prafulla Mahanta claimed:

The whole exercise appears to be part of a larger conspiracy to destabilise the AGP Government (*The Hindu* 1989).

And the Bodo case is not an isolated one. A white paper on insurgency in NC Hills district in 2000 alleged that faced with a “popular democratic movement for an Autonomous State”, the Congress (I) “has been sponsoring insurgent activities in the hill district” (*Oriental Times* 2000). Similarly, in Nagaland, the Isak-Muivah faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM) have also raised allegations from time to time that the centre was trying to covertly derail the peace process they were overtly participating in with the insurgent group, by arming rival faction NSCK (Khaplang) and the Naga National Council (NNC) (*The New Indian Express* 2004).

All in all, there are clear indications of efforts to destabilize inter-ethnic harmony by both the central and state governments. Indeed, destabilization is often attempted because there are these two tiers of governance that are often at loggerheads over power-sharing, especially if there are two different ruling parties at the two levels. Add to that the tier of autonomous councils and the idea of a state apparatus that can—or would—consensually work towards meeting ethnic aspirations entirely breaks down.

Indeed, rather than work towards meeting the aspirations of peoples, the state is often seen instigating them to violence. When the Bodo demand for a separate state intensified, the state levied Bodo majority as a pre-requisite for granting the community an autonomous council area—a much watered down version of the separate state the Bodo had begun the movement by demanding—

and the boundaries of the promised “homeland” were left un-demarcated till then in the Bodoland Autonomous Council Memorandum of Settlement of 1993.²¹ Inevitably, violence broke out in Western Assam and continued intermittently during 1993–1998 with the aim of driving out the settler communities. Sansuma Khungur Bwismutiary, MP and formerly President of the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) that led the movement, went on record saying

... This is all our land and non-Bodos have come and settled here from time to time. So changed demography cannot be used against our aspiration for autonomy. If therefore we do not have majority, we might consider creating one (BBC World Service Radio, South Asia Report, March 12, 1995).

About 150 people were killed in the Bodo-Adivasi clashes of 1996 and 1998. An estimated 202,684 individuals, mainly Adivasi, were displaced in Kokrajhar district alone in 1996. When violence renewed in 1998, it continued sporadically till the following year and displaced about 314,342 individuals (Deputy Commissioner Kokrajhar 2000). Of these a small proportion belonged to the indigenous Bodo and Rabha communities; the rest were all Adivasi people. In December 2005, there were still nearly 110,000 people living in relief camps in the Kokrajhar and Gossaigaon sub-divisions (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2006).

Inter-Ethnic Clashes and Internal Displacement

Ethnic cleansing by the Bodo unfortunately is not an isolated incidence in the Northeast. Settler communities have often borne the brunt of insurgent activities by indigenous communities who look at them as usurpers in their land. What is interesting in the context of the Northeast ethnic politics however is that even indigenosity is a contested category, and for every claim a community makes to

indigenesness, there are labels proclaiming it as a settler community.

The Indigenous Category in the Northeast

The term “indigenous” is used very loosely in the everyday political and social discourse of the Northeast. Although it is true that “indigenous” is an essentially contested term even in international law, the usually accepted definition is the one used by the United Nations, according to which indigenous communities are:

...those which, having a *historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies* that developed on their territories, *consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies* now prevailing in those territories or parts of them. They form at present *non-dominant sectors of society* and are *determined to preserve, develop, and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories and their ethnic identity*, the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems (Cobo 1986) (author emphasis).

Almost all pre-colonial non-settler communities of the northeast would ideally come under this definition, including the Meitei of Manipur and the Axamiyā-speaking Hindu population of Assam. Almost every community has “pre-invasion” roots in this region and is conscious of its self-identity. And almost all feel deprived of power in their own territories.

The Meitei of Manipur refer to themselves as indigenous and also use indigenous as a prefix to their religion, Sanamahi, and language, Meteilon. And yet, allegations of dominating and repressive policies are often raised against them by the hill tribes of Manipur. Interestingly, the Manipur valley which the Meitei share with other communities like the Pangal constitutes only 11.14 percent of the total area of the state.

In Assam, the Axamiyā-speaking people feel that they are the sons-of-the-soil who have been deprived of their political and economic

rights in their own land. The dominant society, the “other” sector, in their case is the Indian mainland. The Assam Movement in fact had its genesis in such a belief, and even today, the propensity among representatives of this community is to refer to themselves as “indigenous”. Thus, when the AASU which had also given leadership to the Assam Movement formed the “Asom Sena” (Assam Army), it declared its aim to be to “safeguard the socio-political rights of the *indigenous* people of Assam” (Thakuria 2006) (author emphasis).

Indeed, such a feeling of being a deprived community runs deep and was evident even in the Constituent Assembly debates when power sharing between the federating units of the Indian Union was being discussed. What J. M. Nichols Roy said on August 8, 1949, is often echoed even today:

Now, surely we feel that there has not been a just treatment of the province of Assam by the Centre up to the present time. (Constituent Assembly Debate 1949).

Despite this self-representation, however, they are not included within the indigenous category, mainly because in the postcolonial period, they have been politically, economically and socially dominant among all the communities in the northeast, with allegations of neo-colonizing designs being raised against them by almost all the other communities. Such allegations do not seem far-fetched when policy decisions like the 1960 Official Language Act of Assam which sought to impose the Axamiyā language on all peoples of the state, are considered. This act and the events it unfolded acted as a catalyst to speed up the process of ethnic identity formation among the non-Axamiyā-speaking communities of the region. They are now the indigenous populations academic and policy making circles concern themselves with. Following the Act, there were riots in many places of Assam leading to displacement,

especially in the Barak valley, which has a predominantly Bengali population.

Indigenous-Settler Clashes and Internal Displacement

In Tripura, where the indigenous “tribals” are now a minority, the majority Bengalis have had to face frequent violence. According to an estimate, nearly 120,000 Bengalis have been displaced since the 1980 massacres in the course of violent confrontations with Tripura “tribals” (Bhaumik 2004).

In Assam in 1993, 3,658 families or about 18,000 individuals from the East Bengali Muslim community had been displaced (Deputy Commissioner Kokrajhar 2000). Of course, this was not the first time this community, which has been the *bete noir* of almost all indigenous and native communities of the northeast, had been targeted. Communal violence in post-Partition Assam had caused some of them to be displaced in Lower Assam. As recently as April 2005, a group of youth under the banner of the Chiring Chapori Yuva Mancha led a campaign of economic blockade against “illegal Bangladeshi nationals” in Upper Assam and according to some estimates about 10,000 (*Assam Tribune* 2005) people left the Upper Assam districts; official figures however placed their numbers at about 600–700 (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2006). In the frenzy that was created in the name of freeing Assam from illegal migrants, the question that very few quarters raised was: how many of them were actually illegal immigrants?

Like the Bengali Muslims, the Bihari settlers have also faced persecution and violence resulting in displacement. In Manipur, for instance, five Bihari people were killed by Meitei insurgents in Manipur in 2001. In Assam, Bihari people have had a presence for a long time now. In the 1940s, during an official Congress Committee tour, Rajendra Prasad, former President of India, noted:

I was surprised to find that in Assam villages, Bihari porters were working; the carters were also Biharis. I had my bath in the Brahmaputra river. Incidentally I saw a few boats there. From their talks which were in Chapra dialect, I learnt they were men from Bihar. On inquiry I knew they hailed from the district of Chapra and were professional boatmen. The sweetmeat vendors in a steamer nearby were also persons from Bihar (Kakati 1954).

His autobiography also notes:

They (the local people) liked the Biharis. The people from Mymensingh were not welcome... Some preferred Hindu labourers to those from Mymensingh. The local people felt it was good for them if the Muslim population was not on the increase (Kakati 1954).

Tolerance for all settlers was eroded by the frenzy generated by the Assam Movement and it reached its pinnacle in the wide-scale mob violence that broke out in November 2003 following allegations of preferential recruitment of Bihari applicants to jobs in the Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR). MS Prabhakara (2003) balances the two sides:

Although a major portion of the NFR falls within Assam with mostly a symbolic presence in or extensions into five of the other six States of the region (Tripura has nearly 45 route kilometres and the railway link is eventually expected to reach Agartala, while Meghalaya has no railway on its territory), a substantial portion of the NFR stretches westwards outside Assam... The aspiration for people from Bihar and West Bengal for jobs in the NFR, even without the constitutional provisions (Article 16) and the Supreme Court's ruling thereof, is entirely understandable and legitimate. The rub, however, is the widespread conviction that successive Railway Ministers have manipulated and misused their powers to provide jobs for ‘their boys’, depriving legitimate and qualified local aspirants. This perception and grievance is held not merely by agitating youth organisations; even

government leaders in the States that have not had one of its Members of Parliament as Railway Minister share it.

Hence the growing consensus in Assam, the State through which the major part of the NFR runs, that local youth/ "indigenous" youth should get preference for jobs in the NFR, as indeed in other Central government undertakings situated, or having their offices in the State.

Revenge attacks on Assamese and other northeastern train travelers on Bihar territory made retaliation fiercer. At least 56 people were killed and thousands displaced. With one of the strongest insurgent groups in Assam, the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) serving quit notice to these settlers, more than 17,000 (BBC World 2003) of them fled Assam. An unknown number stayed back in Assam, internally displaced.

The case of the Nepali settlers is also similar, though perhaps not as severe. Or perhaps, as Lopita Nath (2005) says:

The issue of the Nepali IDPs has failed to draw much attention first, due to their small numbers and second, due to the apparently mobile nature of the community that makes it easy to ignore the many complexities that affect this community in recent times in Northeast India.

Soon after their advent, the Nepali came into conflict with some of the hill communities of the northeast. In Meghalaya, for instance, since the 1930s, the Nepali have had a strained relationship with the Khasi community. Finally in 1987, large scale violence broke out between the two communities and around 7,000–10,000 Nepali were expelled from Meghalaya (Nath 2005, Gurung 2002).

In Assam, violence against them began with the Assam Movement when Nepali as much as other settler communities like the Muslims and Hindus of East Bengali origin were termed foreigners and asked to leave. Subsequently, in the Bodo Movement for self-

determination (1987–2003), many Nepali families were displaced from mainly the Kokrajhar and Chirang districts; in the Patgaon relief camp in Kokrajhar alone, there were about 581 Nepali IDPs (Nath 2005).

Internecine Wars and Internal Displacement

Conflicts in the Northeast are not uni-dimensional and it has witnessed all categories of clashes: conflicts between settler and indigenous communities, between settler and settler communities and between indigenous communities. In July 2005, the Adivasi and the Bihari communities in Karbi Anglong district of Assam came into confrontation, which rendered about 13 Bihari and 25 Adivasi families homeless (Asian Center for Human Rights 2005). This was a case of conflict between settler communities, which is a rare phenomenon but not one that is unheard of. But by far the most complicated, because highly nuanced, of all conflicts in the northeast are the ones between the various indigenous communities. Some of these have already been touched upon in earlier sections.

Major internecine wars have been fought in the Northeast either encouraged by the Indian state's handling of the complicated Naga issue, or as a reaction against it. For instance, when the state of Nagaland was created in 1963 in an effort to curb militancy, the central government was setting in motion a process of disintegration of the northeast and spawning ethnic aspirations for further disintegration and power distribution. Inspired by the break up of the erstwhile geo-political territory of Assam, insurgency began and continued for 20 years in the Lushai Hills till the state of Mizoram was formed. And in an endless chain reaction let loose through the initial reorganization of states, even a comparatively small ethnicity like the Bodo of Assam citing the example of the formation of smaller states like Mizoram while demanding a state formation of their own (All Bodo Students Union 1987, 1987a).

Naga sentiments have not been totally allayed and insurgency continues even today in Nagaland, led primarily by the NSCN. Then when the Indian government signed a ceasefire agreement with the NSCN (IM) and extended it to cover the Naga inhabited areas of Manipur, as a signatory to the agreement, in a way it was tacitly gave its nod to the Greater Nagalim blueprint of the insurgents which include parts of Manipur besides Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Burma. It was thus effectively deepening the mistrust between the neighboring communities.

To some measure, the Kuki-Naga conflict in Manipur has deepened as a result of this. A long standing but unfulfilled demand of the Kuki has been for the formation of a district in the Sadar Hills area. This area also has a sizeable Naga population and there has been continued resistance by them to the creation of this district. Thus clashes take place. However, the Naga-Kuki hostility goes back to the colonial period when the latter were reportedly used by the British in their efforts to subjugate the fierce Naga tribes. Of late though, control over the lucrative border trade of Moreh has also been a bone of contention between Kuki and Naga groups. One estimate suggests that since 1992, about 1,000 people have died and 130,000 displaced in Manipur as a result of Naga-Kuki clashes alone (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2006).

State Responses to Internal Displacement

Despite the recurring incidences of internal displacement in the Northeast and in spite of the severity of the phenomenon, the state has been seen doing precious little to either prevent its recurrence or tackle its occurrence. In fact, apathy has been the hallmark of the state's response to internal displacement in the Northeast. While discussing apathetic administrative approach towards IDPs in Western Assam, the author has written elsewhere:

The cycle of state response to conflict-induced displacement in Assam usually runs along the following pattern: immediately after the violence, temporary relief camps are set up in local educational institutions and government office buildings. Subsequently makeshift cramped shelters are built on government land. While there is a security outpost near the camp to provide protection to the camp inhabitants, field interviews have revealed that security personnel also sometimes cause insecurity inside the camps. The government provides Gratuitous Relief (GR) in the form of rice, lentils and oil regularly for a few years till the makeshift camps take on the nature of permanent settlements. When the GR stops and the people are forced to vacate the camps and to look for rehabilitation, they are provided only with a small rehabilitation grant (RG) (Goswami 2006).

Often, when "rehabilitation" is in process, the host administration is seen adopting various coercive measures to get rid of the IDPs from state-sponsored relief camps. While the Khasi-Pnar people who had fled to Meghalaya from Karbi Anglong in November 2003 were in the process of being rehabilitated, fresh violence broke out in Karbi Anglong between the Karbi and Kuki communities, halting the process. The IDPs refused to return in the absence of adequate security deployment. Meanwhile allegations arose that the Meghalaya administration had cut off water supply and electricity lines to the makeshift camps where the IDPs were housed, so as to force the people to return to their villages (*The Assam Tribune* 2005). Denials were issued, but the allegations strengthened once again the belief that such tactics of coercion are indeed practiced in the northeast region by host administration or by government agencies responsible for providing relief and rehabilitation to get rid of IDP populations.

Once abandoned, the IDPs are left to fend for themselves. With all assets and property lost, no livelihood options to look forward to, in constant fear of further attacks and nowhere to go, most of these displaced

populations float around, sometimes settling in government land or forest area where the fear of displacement is always alive. Or they live at the mercy of touts and middlemen who give them a semblance of settlement but at an exorbitant price. In short, they are doomed to a life of impermanence. The worst sufferers are those who, before displacement, had not had proper “deeds” or *pattas* for their land, as is the case with many settler communities.

In the case of the immigrant Muslim IDPs... a considerable number of them had no such deeds; having settled in the areas from which they were now displaced as recently as 25-30 years ago. Prior to being uprooted from their villages in 1993, they had officially been encroachers on forest land, their settlements having been set up since the 1960s when they reportedly migrated from neighboring districts of Assam and West Bengal. As a result of their status as encroachers, their rehabilitation has been conveniently delayed and responsibility of rehabilitation shifted to the district administrations in their places of origin. (Goswami 2006)

This is not to say of course, that *patta*-holders fare much better:

Among the Adivasi IDPs in Kokrajhar district, 14,208 out of 38,925 families were identified as *patta* holders and the rest as forest villagers and encroachers (DC Kokrajhar 2000). The action plan drawn up in 2000 envisaged a three-step rehabilitation process, involving rehabilitation in a phased manner of people displaced from revenue villages, followed by those coming from authorized forest villages and encroachers. Officially, the first two phases have already been completed.

In the Adivasi IDP camps, however, there are as yet people who have *pattas* and have not been rehabilitated – even though they were officially to be covered under the first phase of rehabilitation. (Goswami 2006)

In a study conducted by the author on Muslim IDPs in Western Assam (Goswami

forthcoming), the complete chaos that surrounds the life of an IDP from the time of his displacement has been detailed. The lack of a coherent policy for IDP relief and rehabilitation and ad hoc measure taken in the aftermath of violence and displacement have often led in the two extremes to a) effective aid not reaching most of the IDPs b) overlapping benefits being given to some IDPs. In both cases, there are no long-term solutions devised to allay the experience of complete uprooting that the people are subjected to. There are instances of twice displaced people too in the northeast. In many cases, it is the inability of the administration to provide adequate security cover to the vulnerable IDPs that causes a prolongation of their displaced condition. The insensitivity of the state’s approach to IDPs in the Northeast finds its extreme manifestation in cases where the IDP populations are housed in areas where the host population belongs to the same ethnic group as the perpetrators of violence. Thus, the Adivasi population of Assam found themselves twice displaced in 1996 and 1998, and inmates of some of the relief camps were gunned down by an insurgent group within the premises of the government sponsored camps, such is the level of security provided. The surrounding population belonged to the majority Bodo community (for details see Goswami 2006, *forthcoming*).

A different kind of pressure tactic has been noticed in Manipur’s approach towards its Hmar population, displaced in early 2006 and sheltering now in Mizoram. The Hmar have been displaced from Manipur where insurgent activity and counter insurgency operations create IDPs with alarming frequency.

The Hmar are a small ethnicity belonging to the Kuki-Chin-Mizo group and spread over the northeastern states of Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura. Numbering a little over 60,000 in population,²² they have been frequent targets of ethnic violence and hence victims of internal displacement in almost all states of the

northeast where they live. In January 2006, Hmar villagers of Parbung and Tipaimukh on the Manipur-Mizoram border were forced to flee to Mizoram following increased violence by Meitei insurgent groups. Though the actual numbers would be more, a little over 500 of them were living in relief camps set up by the Mizoram government.

In an IDP situation like this where the displaced people seek shelter with ethnic kin, it is always difficult to assess the exact numbers. Thus official figures only reflect the number of IDPs in state-sponsored relief camps. Even within those numbers, Mizoram sources, including the administration, was seen as quoting a much higher number than the Manipur government was willing to accede. The cost of sheltering the IDPs, even within Mizoram, was after all to be borne by the Manipur government.

As reports began to surface that Mizo village authorities were determining to evict the IDPs following illegal construction of houses by the latter, in May, the Manipur government promised to provide them with security and transport facilities as well as construct houses for about 300 of them and feed them (*The Sangai Express* 2006). A deadline was set for return by April 15, 2006 (Newmai News Network 2006) though not many IDPs were aware of it. Another announcement was made in June, this time more publicized and setting June 30th as the deadline for entitlement, wherein free ration for a resettlement period of four months and a cash offer of Rs 5,000 to each family was promised (*The Telegraph* 2006). The offer, however, was rejected. John Pulamte, president of the Manipur-based All Tribal Students Union, Manipur (ATSUM) was quoted as saying:

Apart from the students, civil societies feel the relief package offered by the Manipur government towards the rehabilitation of Hmar refugees now currently lodged in Mizoram is inadequate. What needs to be taken into account is that these people who

fled their homes and villages did not have the chance to initiate anything towards jhum cultivation, which is their mainstay for a living. With planting season now much over, the relief package would hardly see these families through the year (Newmai News Network 2006).

In one way, therefore, the displaced Hmar were being coerced to remain displaced and not return to Manipur. Because of their ethnic kinship with the Mizo, the Hmar are often tagged as outsiders in Manipur where they are perceived as too "Mizoised" to be Manipuri (Dena 2002).

Meanwhile, with the Mizoram government also declaring willingness to house them till July 18, 2006 only, the IDPs found themselves stranded in the middle of nowhere. Though about 42 families returned, a majority refused to face the perils back home. A Mizo daily quoted L. Thuamluaia, chairman of the Manipur Hmar Refugees Advisory Board, as saying:

We were informed that everything had been done for our safe return and our future safety but the reports that we receive from back home is otherwise. We know for certainty that armed forces have left the area and except for occasional patrolling, no armed forces are present permanently. Our areas are also infested with buried landmines and we prefer that more be done before we are forced to go home (*Newslink* 2006h).

A Note of Caution

Such apathy does not bode well for the state as it can only invite further discontent among people, especially the IDPs. Such discontent needs to be taken seriously by the state in its own interest since it is widely known that these camps at times become the breeding ground for retaliatory insurgent activities. Thus, the surrendered president of the BNLF, Surjyamani Reang, in his request to the Mizoram chief minister, Zoramthanga, to implement the Mizo-Bru peace accord, could claim that only the repatriation of the IDPs in

Tripura can help eliminate the Bru Liberation Front of Mizoram (BLFM) since it has its base in relief camps (*Newslink* 2006b).

The BLFM has reportedly been holding the peace process between the surrendered BNLF and the Mizo government at ransom. It has been involved of late in various cases of extortion, kidnapping and other forms of violence that has delayed the Mizo government's repatriation efforts. Ironically, the BLFM had also participated in the peace talks and is a splinter group of the BNLF. Between the BNLF-BLFM face-off and the Mizo government's delay in implementing the promised rehabilitation package, the IDPs have been made the victims.

Such then, is the quality of peace in Mizoram, the state that has been touted as the successful creation of the Indian state's ethnic reconciliation policy. On its border with Manipur, another group of IDPs are getting impatient, and they also have armed insurgent outfits to back them. A commentator in a daily newspaper reflects the general mood:

It is imperative that the government reassessed its approach on how to properly repatriate the Tipaimukh Hmar IDPs. The people of the region have suffered enough. The debts to the Tipaimukh people are long over-due. The faster the government does its homework, the better it is for the displaced people as well as the Government of Manipur to save its dirty face. If not, the people should be allowed to decide for their political future than merely voting for an irresponsible and unrepresentable (sic) government (Hmar 2006).

And in this way, the cycle of insurgency continues. Mishandling of ethnic aspirations by the state makes a people aggrieved. The aggrieved people decide to shape their own "political destiny". The decision more often than not takes a violent form. Insurgent activities begin, ethnic clashes proliferate, internal displacement takes place. The government yet again takes an obviously apathetic

stand, doling out ad hoc solutions. Violence once again escalates...

Unless the state wants the cycle of bloodshed and mayhem to continue *ad infinitum*, it needs to do a serious rethink of its ethnic management policy. With its polices/warped policies/non-policies, the state has been increasingly eroding the importance of the essential bases of ethnic formations and instrumentalizing ethnic aspirations in the Northeast. By setting one ethnicity against the other—or at least by creating the necessary conditions for the same—it has earned for itself a dubious control over the region. But how durable this control is would depend on how soon it can learn to bring a semblance of empathy into its dealings with the Northeastern states. After all, when "the blood-dimmed tide is loosed", "things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" (Yeats 1921).

Endnotes

¹ There is a distinction made in the paper between Assamese and Axamiyā. Assamese has been used in the sense of anything relating to and belonging in the state of Assam. Axamiyā, on the other hand, has been used to denote the language of “mainstream” Assam alone.

² By “mainland” India, I mean the parts of India that fall on the other side of the “chicken neck” or Siliguri corridor—a slight piece of land, only about 21 km wide in parts, that connects the northeastern land mass with the rest of India. The use of the term “mainland” also connotes a perception of the northeast as a peripheral and frontier zone. It is a distinction commonly used by both the “mainlanders” and the people of the “periphery”. State policies towards the northeast have also often borne out this distinction.

³ The *pargana* area of the Goalpara district was the area under the Permanent Land Settlement system.

⁴ The tea-tribes of Assam were recruited from various provinces of central and eastern India. With them—and sometimes independent of them—came those who took primarily to cultivation. They now identify themselves as Adivasi, literally, “original inhabitant” as distinct from the tea- and ex-tea-tribes. Ex-tea tribes are the ones who have retired from their bondage in the tea estates and having chosen to stay back in Assam, have taken to other pursuits, mainly agriculture.

⁵ The term “frontierization” usually refers to the extension of administration to and exploitation of a new territory, a propensity mainly attributed to colonial expansionism.

⁶ Article 342 of the Indian Constitution defines tribe as “an endogamous group with an ethnic identity, who have retained their traditional cultural identity; they have a distinct language or dialect of their own; they are economically backward and live in seclusion governed by their own social norms and largely having a self-contained economy.” Under the Indian state system, a tribe is an administrative concept including communities scheduled as tribes by a majority vote in the parliament.

⁷ It is the peculiarity of most communities of Indian origin in Manipur—the Tamils for instance—that they have not migrated directly to the state, but via Burma.

⁸ The exact clauses of the Assam accord in relation to the foreigners’ issue are:

5.1. For purposes of detection and deletion of foreigners, 1.1.1966 shall be the base data and year.

5.2. All persons who come to Assam prior to 1.1.1966, including those amongst them whose names appeared on the electoral rolls used in 1967 elections shall be regularised.

5.3. Foreigners who came to Assam after 1.1.1966 (inclusive) and upto 24th March, 1971 shall be detected in accordance with the provisions of the Foreigners Act, 1946 and the Foreigners (Tribunals) Order 1964.

5.4. Names of foreigners so detected will be deleted from the electoral rolls in force. Such persons will be required to register themselves before the Registration Officers of the respective districts in accordance with the provisions of the Registration of Foreigners Act, 1939 and the Registration of Foreigners Rules, 1939.

5.5. For this purpose, Government of India will undertake suitable strengthening of the government machinery.

5.6. On the expiry of a period of ten years following the date of detection, the names of all such persons which have been deleted from the electoral rolls shall be restored.

5.7. All persons who were expelled earlier, but have since reentered illegally into Assam shall be expelled.

5.8. Foreigners who came to Assam on or after March 25, 1971 shall continue to be detected, deleted and practical steps shall be taken to expel such foreigners.

5.9. The Government will give due consideration to certain difficulties expressed by the AASU/AAGSP regarding the implementation of the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act, 1983.

Full text available at www.northeastvigil.in/facts/index.php?p=87. Last accessed July 8, 2006.

⁹ The Sangh Parivar is an association—"parivar" stands for "family"—of more than 10 organizations which are built around the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a right wing "Hindu nationalist" organization.

¹⁰ The BJP-RSS equation is succinctly summed up in Noorani's observations (2005) about BJP as a ruling party:

Well-established norms govern the relationship between a ruling party's parliamentary and organisational wings. The BJP's record of obeisance to a body outside and superior to both the wings, the RSS, violates these norms. An extra-constitutional body, fascist in its set-up and outlook and committed to the cult of hate, with a proven record of violence, calls the shots.

He also quotes Anderson and Damle (1987) in order to explicate the relationship between the two organizations within the Sangh Parivar:

The BJP for its part will try to develop into a national political force, but it is questionable whether it can do so with a cadre drawn largely from the RSS. Within the party's organisational structure, the cadre has been reluctant to share power with politically prominent figures from non-RSS backgrounds who could mobilise mass support for the party. The RSS training, emphasising the sacrifice of self for the larger good, and apolitical orientation of the RSS ideology, make it unlikely that politically charismatic figures will emerge from within its own ranks. On the other hand, it is questionable if the BJP could survive politically without the RSS cadre, and the cadre will not stay unless the leadership of the party stays firmly in the hands of the 'brotherhood'.

¹¹ A similar though less pronounced communal tint was evident in the observations made way back in his 1946 autobiography by Rajendra Prasad, former President of India, who belonged to the state of Bihar:

I saw extensive waste lands in the Nowgong district as I was touring in the villages there. Assam's soil being very fertile, good fodder grow (sic) on the lands. I also saw hutments here and there with sparse population. No crops were grown nor any trace of cultivation could be seen. These fallow lands were available. Under the prevailing laws, it was easy for any person to settle there and acquire land with rights of occupancy. Some people from the neighbouring district (Mymensingh) in Bengal came there due to pressure of land and thick population and used to live in small huts. They used to reclaim those lands. Thus, they acquired rights over the lands. They were mostly Muslims. In this way the immigrant Muslims inflated the Muslim population of the province. On enquiry I knew that whosoever had migrated to Assam could obtain land, no matter which province they belonged to. I recalled to my mind then that the population in Bihar, especially in the district of Chapra, was increasing to such an extent and put such a pressure on land that lakhs of people had to go every year to work as labourers. A few thousands of those people should have come to Assam...I felt it was better for them to settle permanently, instead of coming periodically; because the railway fare that was necessary for a visit to Assam was sufficient for them to buy a plot of land (Kakati 1954).

¹² Shakhddhar was quoted in *Asom Jagriti* 1980: 2–3. Cited in Hussain 1993.

¹³ Based on field interviews (January 2006) and information and evidence provided by Syed Sajjad Ali, a local journalist.

¹⁴ Full text available at www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/documents/actsandordinances/the_illegal_migrants_act.htm. Last accessed December 10, 2006.

¹⁵ For instance, Tarun Gogoi, now Chief Minister of Assam, won the Jorhat parliamentary constituency election in 1983 on the strength of 5.44 percent of the total votes.

¹⁶ Udayon Misra (2000) has written:

Though reservations have been expressed by social analysts and scholars about the democratic content of the Assam movement, yet given the scale of people's participation in it, it must be said that there was a great degree of national content in it. Had it not been for its wide popular base, the movement would not have been able to sustain itself against such severe state repression for five long years. The Assamese middle class no doubt played the leading role in the agitation; but its success was ensured because of the strong degree of support it received from the rural masses, both Assamese and tribal. The "civil disobedience" programmes, the "Janata curfews", the oil blockade and finally, the boycott of the 1983 polls would not have been possible if the rural population of Assam had not overwhelmingly responded.

¹⁷ "Detribalisation involved, among other things, a renunciation of tribal forms of worship and the acceptance of traditional Hindu gods and goddesses." (Lahiri 1990: 166).

¹⁸ 'The Sinlung Hills Development Council was created after Hmars living in NE Mizoram took up arms and rebelled against the state government in demand of at least an autonomous council if not a union territory in 1988. Six years later, in 1994, the then Lalthanhawla government signed an understanding with the Hmar rebels according to which the Sinlung Hills Development Council was created in Hmar dominated area of NE Mizoram. However, factional fighting and state government policies had not allowed the smooth functioning of the council which resulted in frequent change of the council chairman by the state government. Duly elected council members are yet to serve out their full term in the council and the present council is also an interim council' (*Newslink* 2006e).

¹⁹ When the then Prime Minister, Jawarharlal Nehru, outlined his Panch Shila (five principles) for 'tribal development', and said "People should develop along the lines of their own genius and we should avoid imposing anything on them" (Elwin 1960), he had introduced a rhetoric which was to be used by many an insurgent group in the Northeast to demand protective discrimination for themselves. (See for instance ABSU 1987, 1987a.)

²⁰ Recently however, rumblings have been heard in the hill state to the effect that some ex-insurgents have already returned to their underground life. A local daily reported in June 2006:

Sources in the Peace Accord MNF Returnees Association (PAMRA) today confirmed reports that some six former MNF underground members have gone underground again and are currently said to ensconced in a former tactical headquarters of the then MNF underground in Bangladesh. (*Newslink* 2006f)

²¹ Full text available at www.neportal.org/northeastfiles/Assam/ActsOrdinances/index.asp. Last accessed July 6, 2006.

²² According to 1991 data on non-scheduled languages, Hmar speaking people number only as much as 65,204. Scheduled languages are those that are recognized by the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, thus officializing them. An amendment of the constitution can provide for the inclusion of a language in the Eighth schedule, which initially listed 14. The politics behind scheduling of languages in India becomes apparent when

one considers the recent objection against the inclusion of Mizo in the Eighth Schedule. As the Mizo Zirlai Pawl (MZP), the largest students' body in Mizoram holds, "If our language is included in the 8th schedule, we would be regarded as one of the major tribes of India. In that case, there is a danger of the Centre removing the inner line protection and other reservations" (*Newslink* 2006g).

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

Project Information

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

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Rationale

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

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

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

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

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

Purpose

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

Design

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

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

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

Publications

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

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

Public Forums

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

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

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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.

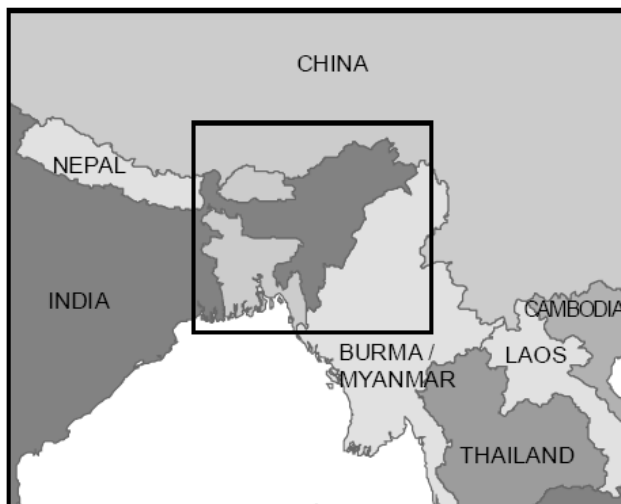
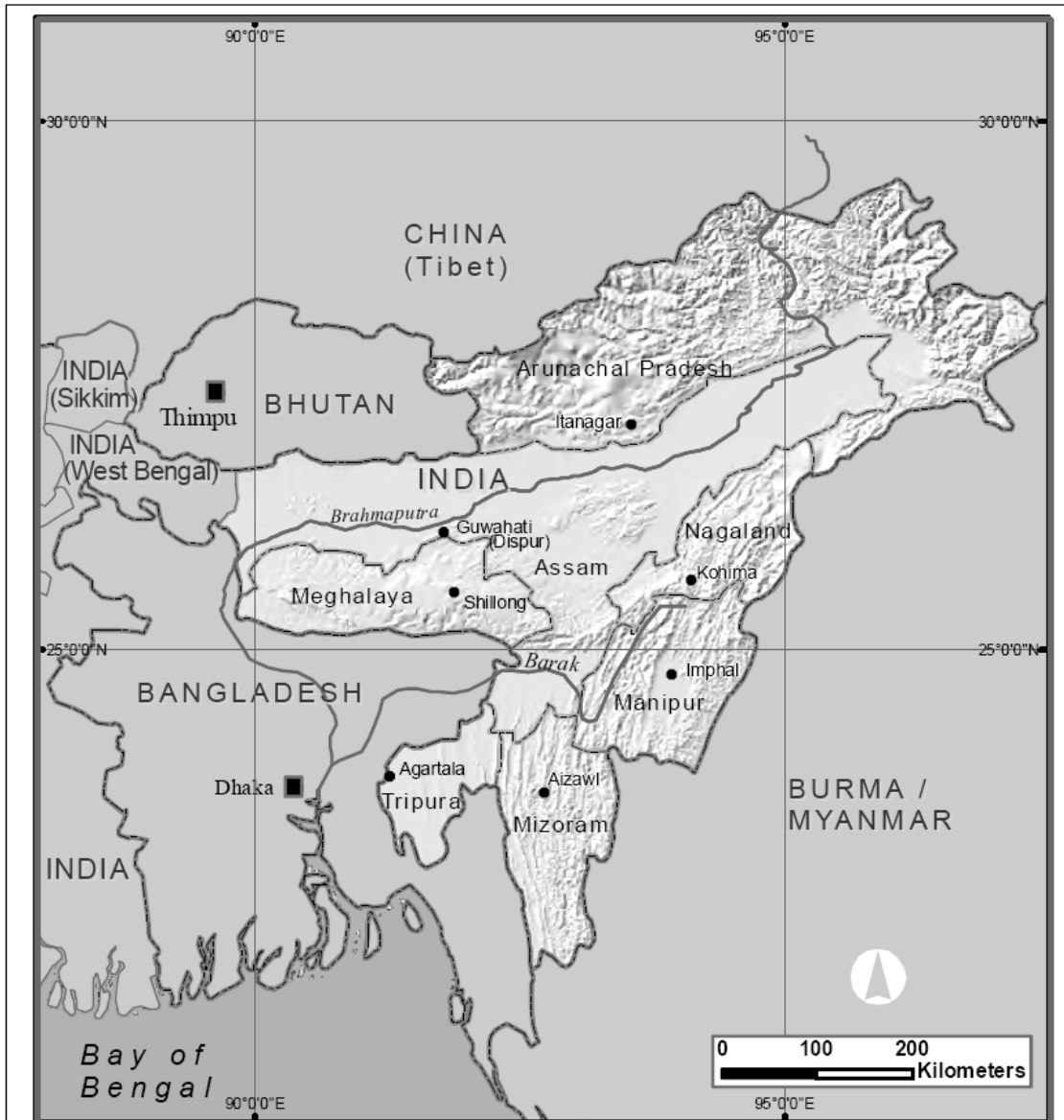
Northeast India has been the theater of the earliest and longest-lasting insurgency in the country—in the Naga Hills—where violence centering on independentist demands commenced in 1952, followed by the Mizo rebellion in 1966 and a multiplicity of more recent conflicts that have proliferated especially 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 ceasefire 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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