

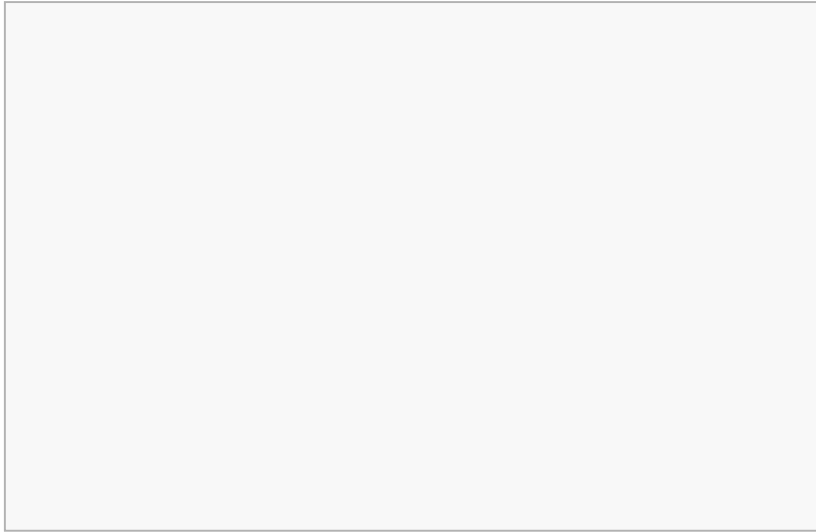
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**Insurgencies in India's
Northeast: Conflict,
Co-option & Change**

Subir Bhaumik



East-West Center
Washington



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Insurgencies in India's Northeast: Conflict, Co-option & Change

Executive Summary

Ever since the British withdrawal from South Asia in 1947, India's Northeast has been scarred by sustained separatist insurgencies, mass agitations, ethnic riots and heavy-handed state response resulting in continuous bloodletting. The land-locked region, which is linked to the Indian mainland by the 22 km wide Siliguri corridor in northern Bengal, borders on Bhutan, Bangladesh Myanmar and China's Tibet Autonomous Region and Nepal is not too far away. Located in a volatile neighborhood as it were, India's Northeast has witnessed, since the 1950s, large-scale insurgent violence directed against Indian security forces and communities from "mainland" Indian states, but it has also witnessed frequent fighting between different ethnic militias. As a result, the Indian federal government and those governing the states in the Northeast have deployed large formations of regular army, federal para-military forces

and state armed police for counter-insurgency operations. Often, Indian intelligence agencies have played rival insurgent factions against each other to weaken and control the relatively stronger rebel groups. Unlike the British who were quite content to leave the Northeast on its own, independent India has tried to integrate the largely Mongoloid region into its post-colonial nation-building project. But when such assimilationist efforts provoked discontent and armed revolt, Delhi responded with a combination of force, monetary inducements, split and political reconciliation—all key elements of the ancient Hindu statecraft associated with the great realpolitik exponent, Kautilya or Chanakya. In recent years, India has tried to rope in neighboring countries in its counter-insurgency efforts against the insurgent groups who operate across the border.

The inevitable militarization of the region and the murky "covert operations" has been

accompanied by rampant human rights violations due to the unrestrained use of terror by both state forces and rebel factions. Extra-judicial killing, ethnic cleansing and large-scale massacres followed by substantial internal displacement—India's northeast has witnessed it all. The growth of the civil society in the strife-torn region has been impeded by the lack of democratic space, because special laws, all very draconian and very unpopular with local communities, have remained in effect in the Northeast to fight the insurgencies. The high level of legislative instability in some of the northeastern states have been compounded by the growing linkages between legitimate political parties and the underground rebel factions or those who have gained state patronage after surrender.

The Northeast is surely the one area of post-colonial India where the outbreak of insurgency has been more frequent than anywhere else in South Asia and where recourse to armed rebellion has often been the first, rather than the last, option of a recalcitrant tribe or a larger ethnic group. The Naga National Council (NNC), by unilaterally declaring independence a day before Indian gained independence from the British, challenged the claims of the post-colonial Indian state to rule over the Naga Hills, that became part of the large province of Assam. The NNC entered into negotiations with the Indian government on the future status of the Naga Hills and when it appeared that Delhi will not entertain the Naga aspiration for self-rule, it formed the "Naga Army" and started waging sustained guerrilla warfare against Indian forces. Several attempts at peace-making with the NNC failed even as India carved out the separate state of Nagaland and gave it special status just after signing the 16-point agreement with the "Naga moderate groups" in 1960.

The NNC was first split in the late 1960s when the Sema Naga tribal faction was co-opted by the Indian administration and used against the "Naga Army." Much weakened by

splits and surrenders, the bulk of the NNC leadership gave up the path of armed insurgency and signed an agreement with the Indian government in the city of Shillong in 1975. But the China-trained Naga rebel leaders, Issac Chisi Swu and Thuingaleng Muivah, decried the Shillong Accord as a "sellout," formed the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) to carry on the armed insurrection until it signed a ceasefire agreement with the Indian government in June, 1997. The ceasefire has been followed by negotiations inside and outside India—but it is yet to lead to a settlement of what is easily South Asia's first major and longest running ethnic insurrection.

A famine caused by bamboo flowering and the accompanied explosion of rat population in Assam's Mizo Hills in the early 1960s set the stage for an armed insurrection in what is now the Indian state of Mizoram. Angry Mizos joined the Mizo National Famine Front (MNFF) to help out the victims of "Mautam" (Rat Famine) after rats destroyed crops and caused large scale starvation. The Assam administration, which had failed to heed the warnings by tribal elders, responded ineffectively. Laldenga, a former Indian army soldier from the Mizo tribe, took control of the MNFF and was instrumental in turning it into a platform organization to lead the rebellion against India. The word "Famine" was dropped and the Mizo National Front (MNF) seized nine towns in the Mizo Hills on February 28, 1966 in a bold operation christened "Operation Jericho." It took the Indian army several months to take full control of the Mizo Hills. Later the Mizo hills were carved out of Assam to form a federally-administered province of Mizoram, which later became a full state in 1987—a year after the MNF finally bid farewell to arms and signed an agreement with India in 1986. Except for some ethnic tensions between Mizos and the smaller tribe of Brus (called Reangs in Tripura), Mizoram has remained largely peaceful ever since.

Insurgency erupted in the erstwhile princely states of Tripura and Manipur in the late 1960s, almost around the same time as the uprising in the Mizo hills. The indigenous tribespeople of Tripura resented the continuous influx of Bengalis from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) which was reducing them to a minority in their own homeland after the state was merged into the Indian Union in 1949. In 1967, some Reang tribespeople, upset by the large scale land grabbing by Bengali settlers in northern Tripura, got together to form the "Sengkarak" (Clenched Fist). The Sengkarak developed fraternal ties with the Mizo National Front and started a short-lived insurgency that died with the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. But as the Bengali population continued to increase and the tribal resentment continued to grow over loss of land, political power and economic opportunities, a new separatist group, Tribal National Volunteers (TNV) was formed in 1978. It unleashed a wave of attacks against Bengali settlers and security forces before it surrendered and signed an agreement with the federal and the state government in 1988.

But two new separatist groups, the All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF) and the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) were formed in the early 1990s, to continue the armed activity against the Bengali settlers. Both of these groups have been split, often engineered by the state intelligence agencies, and they are weaker than before. But so long as the angst of the indigenous tribespeople remain over perceived marginalization in their own homeland, the cycle of armed rebellion in Tripura may be far from over.

In Manipur, some Meitei youths formed the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) in 1964. It remains Manipur's strongest separatist group and its fighters fought back a determined Indian military offensive in 2005–06 to overrun their "base areas" in parts of the state bordering Myanmar and the neighboring state of Mizoram. Another separatist group of the Meiteis, the Revolutionary People's Front

(RPF) and its armed wing, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) have also been fighting since its inception in 1976. Another Meitei rebel group, the Kanglei Kana Yan Lup (KYKL) plays the moral cop to "cleanse the ills of Manipuri society" by periodically shooting corrupt officials, schoolteachers who help students cheat or drug traffickers who peddle heroin into the state from Myanmar's infamous "Golden Triangle." Two other once-powerful Meitei rebel groups, the Peoples Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK) and Kangleipak* Communist Party (KCP) have been considerably weakened by loss of fighters and leaders in encounters with security forces.

But Manipur has a number of other rebel groups representing smaller tribes like the Kukis, the Paites and Zomis—and more than half a dozen of these Kuki and Zomi groups are now actively collaborating with Indian troops against the Meitei rebel groups like the UNLF and the RPF after they signed Suspension of Operations (SOO) agreements with the Indian army and not with the country's Home Ministry which normally negotiates with such groups. While the younger generation of Meiteis resent the state's progressive economic decline and endemic corruption that leaves them with little opportunity, the smaller tribes want their separate autonomous homelands that promise them more funds and political clout.

While Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh have witnessed some insurgent activity in recent years, as much by homegrown groups as those operating in neighbouring states, the truncated state of Assam has been in a throes of violent insurgencies unleashed by the Asomiya-dominated United Liberation Front of Asom** (ULFA) and by factions representing the smaller tribes like the Bodos. Assam first witnessed a mass agitation directed against "illegal migrants" from Bangladesh and Nepal that degenerated into ethnic riots directed against Muslims of Bengali origin. The worst riots were reported from Nellie where at least 1800 Muslims were

killed in February 1983. The agitation was led by the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and other Assamese radical groups. In 1985, after six years of unprecedented turmoil and bloodletting, the AASU signed an agreement with the Indian government in 1985 to bring the agitation to an end. But the ULFA, which grew out of the Assam agitation against migrants, grew stronger after 1985 and began to run parallel administration in many parts of Assam.

Federal rule was imposed on Assam and a regional party government believed to be sympathetic to the ULFA was dismissed in 1990. The Indian army was called out for the first time in the valleys of Assam and they launched two successive operations “Bajrang” and “Rhino” in the 1990s. An unified command was formed to coordinate the counter-insurgency operations between the army, the federal para-military forces and the state police. The ULFA is now a much weaker force and it started “indirect” negotiations with the Indian government through a mediating body called the People’s Consultative Group (PCG) in 2006. But the negotiations collapsed because the ULFA was unwilling to sign a ceasefire (like the NSCN and other rebel groups negotiating with Delhi had done) and the Indian government was unwilling to allow the issue of Asom’s sovereignty to be raised. But one of the two Bodo rebel groups, the Bodoland Liberation Tigers Force (BLTF), signed an agreement with Delhi that led to the formation of an autonomous territorial council for the Bodo-dominated areas of western Assam. The other Bodo separatist group, National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), has signed a ceasefire agreement with India and is involved in negotiations. The situation in Assam—and elsewhere in India’s Northeast—is still very fluid. A settlement in these two states, that’s the key to peace in the rest of the troubled region, does not seem to be achievable in near future. Also a settlement in Nagaland, if achieved by meeting the NSCN’s demand for a “greater Naga state” may provoke huge

reactions in Manipur and Assam and fuel more unrest there. India has managed to contain the major insurgent movements in the Northeast and none of them can achieve the stated objective of separation—but India has also failed to resolve the issues that fuel such movements with the result that the number of such movements has multiplied over the decades.

*Kangleipak is the ancient name of Manipur. Groups who believe in Meitei revivalism tend to use this.

**Asom is how the locals describe their own state in Assam. The British and successive Indian governments used Assam but the state government has recently renamed Assam as Asom, much like Calcutta has been renamed Kolkata and el

Northeast Indian Insurgencies— An Introduction

The British administered India's northeast as an imperial frontier and treated it as a buffer zone between the Bengal plains and the highlands of China and Burma. They avoided imposing direct administration over much of the multi-ethnic, polyglot area and only Assam with much British investments in tea, oil and timber was administered as an imperial province. After the British left, post-colonial India sought to integrate the whole region into the “national mainstream,” provoking violent opposition to federal control and cultural assimilation. Guerrilla warfare emerged as the favorite form of resistance and sixty years after India became independent, more than seventy insurgent groups still remain active in the country’s troubled northeast.¹ They continue to battle Indian security forces for independence but some of them have settled for extensive autonomy. And the ethnic rebel armies often fight each other—mainly over conflicting homeland demands and scarce resources—and thus end up providing Indian intelligence agencies enough opportunities to play divide-and-rule in the region.

The 225,000 km² hill-forest region, sandwiched between four neighboring countries, provide ideal terrain for guerilla

warfare. Its demography has changed sharply, pitting the growing rush of settlers from the Indian mainland and neighboring countries like Bangladesh against the region's indigenous Mongoloid ethnicities in a competition for scarce resources like arable land. Distance from mainland India has led to a sense of isolation and the meagre regional representation in the national parliament (only 24 seats in a 542 member lower house) has often prompted rebellious ethnicities to choose armed guerrilla warfare over other forms of political protest, because violence attracts immediate attention and provides bargaining clout in absence of adequate numbers. India's recalcitrant neighbors—with whom the country's northeast shares 98 percent of its borders—have often supported these rebel armies with weapons, training and sanctuaries, helping them survive the onslaughts of India's formidable military machine.

Contemporary studies in asymmetric conflicts have “military and technological superiority may be a highly unreliable guide to the outcome of wars.”² The numerous wars of national liberation (like those in Algeria and Indonesia) or those of national resistance (Vietnam and Afghanistan) and revolution (Cuba) in the late-colonial and post-colonial era have demonstrated that overwhelming conventional military superiority enjoyed by industrial/imperial powers is no guarantee against defeat. Even post-colonial national armies have often failed to suppress separatist campaigns by use of superior force. The Pakistan army lost the country's rebellious Bengali-dominant eastern wing in 1971 and Indonesia could not hold on to East Timor after integrating it as the country's 27th province following the Portuguese withdrawal in 1976.

The Indian counter-insurgency experience in Northeast has been a mixed bag. The Indian security forces have not suffered defeat, that could force a withdrawal. Far from it, the Northeast has evolved into a constituent region of post-colonial India and at least three

of the seven states in the region are largely peaceful. But India has not been able to crush many of the insurgent movements or even managed to offer political solutions to end them. In fact, the number of active insurgent groups has multiplied in the northeast over the years, posing a continuous challenge to federal control but their divisiveness has also offered opportunities for containment by Delhi.

The post-colonial Indian strategy in fighting these asymmetric conflicts—in Kashmir, Punjab or in the Northeast has—relied as much on co-option as on military operations. Military operation has been the immediate response but once the insurgency lost its sting, political dialogues were promptly initiated. This is in stark contrast to neighboring Burma (Myanmar), where the military junta signed ceasefire agreements with a large number of ethnic rebel armies in the 1990s without initiating political negotiations with any of them. Delhi has offered settlement packages that involve devolution of greater political and administrative autonomy, a much greater flow of federal funds for economic development (part of it also siphoned off to rebel coffers to keep them happy) and an expressed commitment to promote local culture and interests. But if the insurgent group insisted on sovereignty (like the ULFA has done in Assam) or adopted other positions unacceptable to Delhi, military operations were resumed with renewed vigor and intelligence agencies worked overtime to split the recalcitrant insurgent group. Naga, Mizo, Assamese and other tribal insurgent groups have all ended up split, mostly during or after having dialogues with the federal or the state governments.

The frequent doling out of federal largesse as “special development packages,” the emphasis on talks and negotiations with the rebel groups, the heavy handed military operations like “Bajrang” and “Rhino” and the frequent splits engineered in the rebel ranks by intelligence agencies all point to the

combined use of the four principles of India's ancient Kautilyan statecraft. In fact, post-colonial India's strategy for the pacification of its Northeast has been largely influenced by the realpolitik propounded by the great Kautilya (also called Chanakya), who helped King Chandragupta Maurya build India's first trans-regional empire just after Alexander's invasion of northern India. Kautilya advocated Sham (Conciliation), Dam (Bribes), Danda (Force) and Bhed (Split) as the four options of statecraft to be used in effective combinations rather than as single, stand-alone options.³ For neighboring princes and forest chiefs unwilling to accept the king's authority, Kautilya advocated the use of force and sowing of dissension but also suggested conciliation and lavish gifts. That has striking resemblance to India's current counter-insurgency strategy in the Northeast.

Insurgencies in India's northeast do not represent a stereotype and their similarities often end with their opposition to federal control and use of violence to challenge it. It will also be simplistic to see the insurgent movements as manifestations of core-periphery conflict as some writers have done.⁴ Most insurgencies in India's northeast, even those with pronounced separatist overtones, have been directed as much against federal control from far-off Delhi as against the perceived regional overlord, a dominant ethnic group seen in control of a political-administrative unit, from which the rebels were keen to break away.

Though the insurgencies by the Naga and the Mizo guerilla organizations emerged into strong secessionist movements, their initial angst was as much directed against perceived Assamese domination as against the Indian state. The Tripuri insurgency was wholly directed against the Bengali settler community who had become a majority in Tripura in the three decades after Partition. The insurgency by smaller tribes like the Bodos, the Karbis, and the Dimasas have been directed against perceived injustice meted out by the dominant Assamese. In many cases, even these smaller

groups have viciously fought each other over conflicting homeland demands or for control of key resources.

In fact, federal intelligence agencies have often used these movements for fulfilling the vested interests of those controlling the power structure in Delhi. The support given by the Congress-led federal government to the violent Bodo movement in the 1980s to unsettle the Asom Gana Parishad led Assam government or to the tribal insurgents in Tripura to bring down the Bengali-dominated Left government is well known. Currently, the Indian army is using the Kuki armed groups to curb and control the Manipuri insurgent groups like the UNLF. The insurgent in Northeast India have always had an immediate enemy—and a distant one. While the distant one has been a constant—the Indian state—the immediate enemy has varied from state to state and from situations to situations. India's northeastern periphery has never really struck back as one against the federal overlord in Delhi and insurgent efforts to develop tactical unity (like through the Indo-Burma Revolutionary Front in the 1990s) have largely failed.

In Assam, the rebels of the Karbi and the Dimasa tribe have fought against perceived Assamese control for decades. Though they attacked Indian federal forces deployed in their areas, some of their factions have actively collaborated with the Indian intelligence after starting dialogues. And now, more often than not, the Karbi and the Dimasa rebels fight each other for control of key areas in Assam's Karbi Anglong district. If the Assamese rebel groups like the ULFA resent "exploitation by India," the Bodo, the Karbi and the Dimasa groups allege diversion of federal resources meant for them to benefit Assamese-dominant areas. And on a few occasions, a federal decision have often split the rebels down the middle. Delhi's decision to extend the Naga ceasefire to other parts of Northeast India was seen as a prelude to conceding the "Greater Nagaland" demand of the NSCN in the early part of this decade—and that pitted the

Assamese and the Manipuri rebel groups against the NSCN in a hostile confrontation.

Broadly, the insurgent movements of Northeast India would fall into five categories:

- (a) Insurgencies based on a deep-rooted historical ethos of independence that developed into a struggle for secession from India—the Naga insurgency is the best and perhaps the only example in this category. In recent years though, the NSCN has climbed down from its demand of secession to one of a “special federal relationship” within India.⁵
- (b) Insurgencies, separatist in rhetoric but autonomist in aspiration, thus easy to co-opt into the so-called Indian “mainstream”—most insurgencies in the Northeast, like the tribal insurgency in Tripura or the Bodo insurgency or the Dimas and the Karbi insurgencies in Assam would fall into this category.
- (c) Insurgencies with sharp initial separatist overtones but ones that were ultimately co-opted by the Indian system through sustained negotiations and concessions—the Mizo insurgency is the best example of this category.
- (d) Insurgencies seeking to “change the Indian system” and having linkages with fraternal allies in mainland India—the Manipur PLA before 1990 or communist insurgents of Tripura in 1948–50 would fall into this category.
- (e) Insurgencies propped up by more powerful groups, that continue to function essentially as satellites. The Dragon Force or the United Peoples Volunteers of Arunachal (UPVA) would fall into this category since they are small organizations sustained and used as springboards by larger Assamese or Naga rebel groups to function outside their own state.

Post-colonial India has not been able to root out insurgent movements in Kashmir and

the northeast and now has to reckon with a rapidly-expanding Maoist guerrilla movement in several states in the country's mainland. Unfulfilled aspirations caused by asymmetrical economic growth and failure to ensure distributive justice have led to regional disparities and social unrest that fuel armed protest movements in India. In the Northeast, the insurgencies have multiplied because (a) most ethnic groups in the region resent federal control or domination by bigger ethnic groups; (b) the preservation and assertion of ethnic identity through aggressive means is seen as the key to winning share of power and resources (c) most ethnic groups in the region do not have sufficient numbers to make an impact through the legitimate political system—hence the tendency to use armed guerrilla warfare as a force multiplier (d) the northeast shares long borders with countries for long hostile to India and eager to lend support to insurgencies. India's response pattern to the insurgencies has also encouraged their proliferation. Since Delhi has often come forward to meet ethnic aspirations only after a bout of armed guerrilla warfare, the lessons have not been lost on all aspirant ethnicities.

But by adopting the principles of Kautilyan statecraft in state policy, India has successfully contained a host of insurgent movements in the Northeast and elsewhere in the country. The Kautilyan precepts provide for an effective combination of political co-option and compromise with use of military force, material inducement and ability to split the opposition. The over-emphasis on military force was responsible for Pakistan's failure to hold on to its eastern wing in 1971. Military operations have usually been the first response to an insurgency in post-colonial India—but it has been quickly followed up by packages for economic development and political reconciliation.

Since the mid-1990s, India has added aggressive regional diplomacy to its counter-insurgency repertoire. The initial tendency was to back an insurgency against a

neighboring country if they backed one on Indian soil. Pakistan's support for insurgents in Kashmir and Punjab have been reciprocated by Indian support for the rebellion in East Pakistan, Sindh and Balochistan. Indian support for Tibetan rebels led to Chinese support for the rebels from India's northeast. Bangladesh's support for northeast Indian rebels and Indian support for the rebels of Chittagong Hill Tracts went hand in hand for two decades.⁶

But since 1995, India has focused on influencing neighbors to attack anti-Indian rebels based in their territory. The first coordinated operation against Northeastern rebels took place in March-April 1995 when the Burmese army helped the Indian army during "Operation Golden Bird." Later, the Indian strategy worked in Bhutan when the Royal Army demolished nearly thirty camps of three separatist groups from Assam and northern Bengal in December 2003. Burma (Myanmar) has reportedly attacked some Naga rebel bases in its western province of Sagaing and even the Bangladesh security forces have initiated some action against Tripuri rebel groups based in its territory. India has offered military hardware and other concessions to influence neighbours like Burma to turn against the rebels. A Kautilyan strategy in the northeast may be effectively combined with India's aggressive diplomacy in the neighborhood to inconvenience the insurgents and deny them sanctuary and support across the borders. This might not end insurgencies and resolve those still existing, but may offer better prospects for containment.

The Naga Path

The Naga insurrection posed the first major challenge to India's post-colonial nation-building project. It has also been South Asia's longest-running guerilla campaign. For forty years (1956-96), armed Naga insurgent groups fought India's powerful military machine to a stalemate, until both sides announced a ceasefire in 1997 and started negotiations for a

final settlement. The progress of the negotiations has been slow, both the Indian government and the NSCN has periodically accused each other of "lack of sincerity." The ceasefire has, however, held and the negotiations continue—sometimes in India, sometimes in Bangkok and Amsterdam.

After half a century of bloody conflict, the yearning of peace has grown in Nagaland and it will not be easy for the NSCN to go back to the jungles, though they have made it clear they will settle for "a peace with honor, not for peace at any cost."⁷ The main hurdle towards a settlement of the Naga problem is the NSCN's demand for a larger Naga state integrating of all Naga-inhabited territories in northeast India with the present state of Nagaland. The NSCN general secretary Thuingaleng Muivah has ruled out any compromise on this issue⁸—but Delhi says an attempted integration of the Naga territories may spark off massive unrest in Manipur and some trouble in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. Manipur erupted in violence after the NSCN-Delhi ceasefire was extended to the rest of Northeast India in July 2001—and Delhi wants no repeat of it. But the NSCN has indicated it is prepared to settle for a "special federal relationship" with India—in which Nagaland will have its own flag and constitution, but key subjects like defense and foreign affairs will be left to India.

The Nagas were never a homogenous ethnic entity. The British stopped clan warfare and head-hunting amongst the Naga tribes, considerably monetized their economy, introduced Christianity and western-style education, paving the way for the emergence of an incipient middle class, which began play a pivotal role in Naga politics since the 1920s. Christianity and Western education undermined the traditional power structure of the villages and weakened exclusive clan allegiances—and that paved the way for the growth of a pan-Naga consciousness, non-existent before the advent of the British.

The first expression of the Naga desire for self-determination was during the visit of the

Simon Commission in 1929. In a memorandum to the Commission, the Naga Club, the first political group among the Nagas, pleaded with the British to "leave us alone once you leave."⁹ That evoked suspicion among the Indian nationalist leadership and the freedom-loving Nagas came to be seen as a problem, a challenge, and never as a possible partner. Only visionaries like Mahatma Gandhi or Subhas Chandra Bose could have reconciled the Indian's desire for independence with similar aspirations amongst the Nagas. But Gandhi died within a year of India's independence and Subhas Bose mysteriously disappeared during the last days of the War never to surface again.

In February 1946, the Naga National Council (NNC) was formed with 29 members and two central councils, one based in Kohima and the other in Mokukchung. Although the domination of two leading tribes, the Angamis (with seven members) and the Aos (with five members) was unmistakable, all major Naga tribes with the exception of the Konyaks were represented in the NNC. The existence of a common adversary, India, strengthened the "national consciousness" amongst the Nagas and for the first time in history, they came together on a common platform. But the NNC organization was modeled on traditional power structure, that promoted tribalism and clan loyalties which Delhi was too keen to exploit during conflict.

In June 1946, when the Cabinet Mission plan was announced, the Naga National Council adopted a resolution supporting the demand for autonomy within Assam. It opposed the proposal for a Crown Colony under the British as well as the Grouping Scheme. In hindsight, that was India's best chance to settle with the Nagas—but it remained a missed chance. The NNC was divided on many issues related to the future of the Naga Hills, but on one point there was no division of opinion—that the Nagas were never part of India and so be allowed to decide on their own future. In May 1947, when the Indian Advisory Committee on the

Aboriginal Tribes visited Kohima, the NNC put forward a proposal that provided for (a) a ten-year interim government for the Naga people, having full powers in respect to legislation, executive and judiciary; (b) full power for collection of revenue and expenditure; (c) an annual subvention by the guardian power to cover the revenue gap; (d) a force maintained by the guardian power for defense and to aid the civil power.¹⁰

By recognizing it as the sole representative of the Nagas, the Assam governor Akbar Hydari managed to sign an agreement with the NNC. But soon after the Hydari agreement, hardliners led by Angami Zapu Phizo took over the NNC, declared independence a day before India became free and set the Nagas on the road of conflict with India. Nehru, during his meeting with NNC general secretary Aliba Imti, made one last attempt to save the situation by promising autonomy for the Naga Hills under the Sixth Schedule, but it was too little, too late. The 1952 parliamentary elections produced a negligible turnout in the Naga Hills and the NNC claimed a total support for independence in a plebiscite it organized under controversial circumstances.

Thereafter, Nehru authorized security operations to crush the NNC movement. Whole villages were burnt down and its population relocated, heavy fines imposed and large-scale arrests and killings were reported from the Naga Hills. Nehru however did not authorize use of air power, except for carrying troops and dropping supplies in remote locations. In 1956, Phizo escaped to East Pakistan, secured a promise of help from Pakistan and then left for London to internationalize the Naga issue. The NNC created an armed wing, the Naga Army, and a parallel government, the Federal Government of Nagaland (FGN). As Pakistan agreed to help, several batches of Naga guerrillas, numbering 200–300 each, started reaching East Pakistan for training and weapons. In the Naga Hills, the guerrilla campaign and the counter-insurgency operations intensified,

causing much misery to the Nagas. By 1962, the Naga Army had grown into a force of 5,000 trained guerrillas, backed by a less equipped support force of about 15,000 militiamen.

The Naga insurgency has been through four distinct phases: (1) the 1957–64 phase, when the Pakistan-trained rebels intensified the guerrilla war in the Naga Hills (2) the 1964–75 phase, when the movement peaked and then weakened after two splits along tribal lines, ending with the signing of the Shillong Accord in 1975 (3) the 1975–87 phase, during which the NNC split and the breakaway NSCN emerged to give the Naga rebel movement a fresh lease on life; and (4) the post-1987 phase, when the NSCN also split along tribal lines and after some years of fighting, both NSCN factions started negotiations with India. Throughout the 1960s, as the separatist movement intensified, Delhi backed up its military effort with a political move that led to the Sixteen-Point Agreement with the moderate Naga leadership in 1960.

The 1960 agreement led to the creation of Nagaland as a separate state in India with a much higher degree of autonomy than enjoyed by other states. This political move divided the Naga political class and led to the creation of an alternative political platform, from which the secessionist campaign could be politically challenged by Nagas loyal to India. And huge quantum of federal development funds was pumped into Nagaland, not merely to promote growth but to secure the loyalty of the pro-Indian Nagas. During the four decades of guerrilla campaign in 1956–96, Nagaland received nearly Rs 300 billion (about \$9.1 billion) in federal funds for a population of less than one million.¹¹ Very few Indian states have received such a high quantum of federal funds so far.

After the humiliating defeat suffered at the hands of the Chinese by the Indian army in 1962, Delhi started negotiations with the NNC through the Naga Peace Mission. The talks broke up within two years after the

Chinese started helping the Naga rebels. But though boosted by support from China and Pakistan, the Naga insurgent movement was beginning to weaken considerably from within due to tribal factionalism. And Indian intelligence agencies were quick to capitalise on that. In 1968, the Sema leaders defected from the NNC to form the Revolutionary Government of Nagaland (RGN) which started cooperating with Indian security forces.¹² The RGN helped the Indian army intercept and nab a whole column of China-trained guerrillas led by Mowu Angami in 1969.

India's counter-insurgency strategy in Nagaland at this stage revolved round (a) blocking the exit-entry routes for the Pakistan and China-bound guerrilla columns; (b) denial of base areas for those guerrilla squads active within the Naga Hills; (c) negotiation with tribal leaders and chiefs to secure the surrender of the guerrillas by exploiting tribal divisions; (d) strengthening of the electoral system and pumping in huge quantum of funds into Nagaland aimed at securing the loyalty of the emerging Naga political class; (e) split the NNC by utilizing the contacts established during the negotiations in the mid-1960s. The defeat of the Pakistani forces and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 dealt a severe blow to the Naga rebel movement. An immediate base area for training, regrouping and arming was gone in one stroke. Though groups of Naga rebels kept going to China until 1976, the sheer length and duration of the trek, the increased vigil on the route by the Indian and Burmese armies and the RGN's support for the Indian forces made it more and more difficult for the Naga Army to use foreign bases to train and secure equipment.

However, the China-returned Naga guerrillas gave the Indian army a tough time. Fierce encounters were fought all across Nagaland, the one at the Jotsoma knoll where the Indian army lost around 30 soldiers, being the most bloody. The rebels nearly killed chief minister Hokishe Sema in a fierce ambush.¹³ As the Indian military operations intensified,

the Naga rebels started targetting soft targets like the railways along the Assam-Nagaland border for the first time. And as the China-returned guerrillas intensified their activity, the Indian army started using the RGN (made up off the former Sema guerillas of Naga Army) against them. The civil administration started using the tribal chiefs to negotiate the surrender of guerrillas by exploiting clan loyalties. In his memoirs, one of India's top administrator in Nagaland, S.C. Dev, has provided a detailed account of this strategy of pacification.¹⁴

If India made a mistake by not offering a honourable settlement to the Nagas when they just wanted autonomy, the NNC leadership made an equally serious mistake by failing to reach an agreement with India in the 1960s when it enjoyed huge bargaining clout. A climbdown from the demand of sovereignty (which the NSCN has finally done now) and a commitment to remain within the Indian Union might have got Nagaland a Bhutan-style protectorate status.¹⁵ But when Indira Gandhi sensed the growing schism within the Naga movement, she called off the talks and pursued a vicious divide-and-rule campaign followed up with a huge counter-insurgency operation sustained until the 1971 war with Pakistan. All the elements of Kautilyan statecraft—sustained military operations with one and even up to two full army divisions, constant intelligence activity to divide the rebels, periodic political negotiations to win over moderates and isolate hardliners and huge pumping of federal funds to win over the Naga influentials—were simultaneously tried out by the Indian government.

The loss of East Pakistan further weakened the Naga rebel movement and set the stage for the Shillong Accord of 1975. It was an apology of a settlement because it merely reiterated the will of the two sides to achieve a final solution of the Naga problem. The NNC, by now discredited, split again and was eventually overshadowed by the breakaway National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) formed by the China-

trained Thuingaleng Muivah and Issac Chisi Swu. The Konyaks of the Mon-Tuensang area, the Tangkhuls of Manipur and the Hemi Nagas of Burma made up the bulk of the NSCN's initial fighting force. Muivah's success in propping up the NSCN owes much to his strategy of creating "satellites"—training, arming and guiding smaller insurgent groups in neighbouring states in return for safe bases, routes to reach key foreign locations and support in operations. By developing such "satellites" in other northeastern states, the NSCN has extended its operations much beyond Naga-populated areas.

For most rebel groups, the NSCN is now a role model. For Delhi, it is "the mother" of all insurgencies in northeast India. But the 1988 split in the NSCN pitted Muivah and Swu against their one-time comrade, the Burmese Naga leader S.S. Khaplang. More than two hundred NSCN fighters were killed in the first bout of fratricidal strife in 1988. Four times as many have died ever since. The NSCN (Issac-Muivah) was denied the base area in Burma's Sagaing Division by Khaplang. Direct Chinese and Pakistani support was not forthcoming anymore and Muivah's options had become limited. After suffering a series of setbacks in 1994–95, the NSCN decided to open negotiations with India in 1997.

Now, both the NSCN factions observe a ceasefire with Indian forces but fight freely amongst themselves. The latest round of fighting has erupted in March–April 2007 and more than a dozen guerrillas of both factions have died. The Indian security forces have made no attempt to stop the fighting even when the rebels used heavy weapons like mortars. In many parts of Nagaland, like Phek, citizens upset with the vicious factional feuds have taken the initiative to chase away both rebel factions from their areas. Both NSCN factions have accused each other of being "Indian agents" but both have maintained contacts with Indian security forces and intelligence agencies.

The generation that fought so fiercely for Naga independence is fading away. The next generation is more inclined to accept the reality of India and profit from it. The Nagas value their freedom but they are also keen on peace. Since negotiations with the NSCN started in 1997, the civil society movement has grown and human rights, gender and youth groups are playing a much bigger role in shaping the Naga's future. The NSCN has also started intervening in the Indian political process to ensure victories for over ground parties seen as friendly to their cause. In the 2003 Nagaland assembly polls, they ensured the victory of the Democratic Alliance of Nagaland (DAN)—a coalition of Naga regional parties with the Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—as their guerillas swept through villages, asking Nagas to vote for DAN candidates or face the consequences. The NSCN later faced accusations of engineering the defections that brought down the Congress government in Arunachal Pradesh, to the delight of the BJP.

But in the last two years, the NSCN seems to have mended fences with the Congress-led coalition in Delhi. The long negotiations between the NSCN and the Indian government has not been a waste of time. The two sides have reached some understanding on the contours of the "special federal relationship" between India and Nagaland. The NSCN has given up sovereignty as a goal and the Indian government has promised to incorporate a special chapter in the Indian constitution detailing Nagaland's special status instead of conceding the NSCN's demand for a separate constitution for Nagaland. The NSCN has agreed to the presence of Indian troops in Nagaland and to Indian control over Nagaland's foreign relations—it only expects India to consult Nagaland on issues that involves its interests. But the roadblock for a settlement remains Muivah's insistence on the integration of all Naga-inhabited territories in Northeast India.

Which brings us to an important element of the Indian counter-insurgency strategy—the use of drift, the art of tiring down the insurgent leadership through unending negotiations running into more than a decade now. India has used its army and paramilitary forces to soften up the rebels and forced them to the table. It has used clan-and-tribe rivalries to split the Naga separatist movement. It has used huge fund inflow to neutralize the hostility of the Naga political class towards Delhi. It has also bought out Naga rebel leaders with favors and concessions, positions of power and financial benefits, and it has used a long political dialogue to soften up the Naga rebels by exposing them to normal life. Just after the NSCN signed the ceasefire in 1997, a senior Indian Home Ministry official had said the NSCN will "never again be able to go back to the jungles."¹⁶ It has not—so far. But Delhi's failure to arrive at a settlement with the NSCN has stood in the way of peace in other parts of Northeast. Unless India achieves a breakthrough on the Naga issue, other insurgent movements in Northeast India may continue to shy away from starting dialogues with India for political reconciliation.

The Prairie Fires Spread

After the Naga insurrection, the Northeast witnessed three distinct phases of insurgency (a) the late 1960s, when insurgency erupted in the Mizo Hills, Manipur and Tripura; (b) the late 1970s, when it intensified in Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur and Tripura; (c) the late 1980s, when Assam was gripped by a powerful separatist movement led by the ULFA and a number of insurgent groups surfaced among the smaller ethnic groups like the Bodos, the Hmars, the Dimasas, the Karbis, the Khasis and the Garos to add to the turmoil. The split in the NNC and the signing of the Shillong Accord in 1975 led to partial pacification of the Naga separatist movement and a decade later, peace returned to Mizoram when the Mizo National Front bid farewell to arms and was co-opted into the national

political system. At the moment, every state in the region is affected by some level of insurgent activity. Since the NSCN is negotiating, peace in Nagaland is only punctured by the occasional fighting between the NSCN factions. But negotiations between the ULFA and Indian government broke down in September 2006, leading to a fresh spurt of violence in Assam. The insurgency in Manipur is stronger than ever before, though the one in Tripura has been largely controlled. But though homegrown insurgency is weak in Meghalaya, the state is being increasingly used as a corridor and a regrouping zone by rebels from all over Northeast. The existence of a large number of insurgent groups, however, means greater complexity because a settlement with one group could well provoke another to more violence.

The Mizo uprising and after

Unlike the Naga insurgent movement, which slowly grew in intensity after the few initial armed actions in the early 1956, the uprising in the Mizo Hills began with a bang. A devastating famine (Mautam) caused by an explosion in rat population ignited passions in the Mizo Hills in the early 1960s. The people's anger was directed at both the Assam government and Delhi for failure to provide relief. The Mizo National Famine Front (MNFF), formed by some former Mizo soldiers, began mobilizing Mizos, but once the need for relief was addressed, the MNFF became the Mizo National Front (MNF). The MNF candidates contested elections for the Assam assembly, but its leadership quietly prepared for rebellion. At midnight on February 28, 1966, the MNF unleashed 'Operation Jericho'—a blitzkrieg operation that led to the capture of eleven towns in the Mizo Hills in one stroke. Indian para-military troops barely managed to hold on to the capital town, Aizawl. The Indian army took more than a month of bitter fighting to regain the towns of Mizo Hills, after which the MNF guerrillas moved into the hills and the

countryside, keeping up a barrage of attacks against the army columns.

To deny the guerrillas popular support and a secure line of supply, the army initiated a village regrouping program—as tried out in Nagaland before—that hit at the heart of the Mizo rural economy. The MNF pulled back most of its guerrilla units into the hills and its leaders escaped into camps in East Pakistan. Only small strike squads were left behind in the towns to eliminate select targets, such as moderate Mizo politicians, senior police, military officials or those serving the federal government. In one such strike in 1975, the MNF killed three senior police officials inside the police headquarters in Aizawl: an inspector general a deputy inspector general, and a superintendent of the special branch.¹⁷ Between 1967 and 1969, the army undertook a huge regrouping of the villages in the Mizo hills. The relocation of the population outside their traditional villages in new sites (euphemistically called "Progressive and Protected Villages") along the national highway that the army could control, was seen as essential to isolate the MNF from the Mizo people.

A leading bureaucrat-scholar claims that at least 80 per cent of the population of the Mizo Hills was affected by the regrouping programme: "The general humiliation, loss of freedom and property and, very often, the injury and death involved in the so-called grouping of villages...was tantamount to annihilation of reason and sensibility and certainly not the best policy to follow against our own ethnic minorities."¹⁸ As in the Naga Hills, more military repression only led to the swelling of the guerilla ranks in the Mizo Hills. Burnt-out villages full of bitter Mizo families maintained a steady flow of recruits to the MNF in their bases in East Pakistan. The creation of Bangladesh in 1971 affected the MNF more than the NNC. Its immediate trans-border bases that facilitated regular exit and entry for the guerrilla units were put out of action by the Indian army during its push into East Pakistan. By the time these bases

could be revived in the late 1970s, the MNF had a rival in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The tribal insurgents of the Shanti Bahini, backed by India, began to hound out the MNF to avenge the ill-treatment meted out to the Chakmas by the Mizos in northeast India.¹⁹

The Mizo insurgency has been through three distinct phases: (a) outbreak and peak intensity during 1966–71 (b) decline in intensity followed by the 1976 Calcutta accord and the first splits in the MNF soon after followed by surrenders (c) sporadic hostile action and periodic negotiations after 1977 leading to the final settlement in 1986.

By the late seventies, the MNF's resolve to fight India had weakened and a spate of surrenders from its ranks had been engineered by Mizoram's chief minister, Thengpunga Sailo. A former Indian army Brigadier who first started a human rights movement in the state and then formed the Peoples Conference that went on to win the elections. The MNF started attacking soft targets like "outsiders" from the plains but after a while started negotiations. When he became prime minister following the assassination of his mother Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi carried the Mizo peace process to its logical culmination by working out a settlement acceptable to the MNF.

It ensured the grant of full statehood to Mizoram and accommodated the MNF in an interim power-sharing arrangement with the Congress, that was ruling Mizoram at that time. Of the many accords that Rajiv Gandhi signed, the Mizo accord in June 1986 has been the most enduring. Peace in Mizoram has held, the MNF has won elections and ruled Mizoram for two full five-year terms and no breakaway group has surfaced, like in Nagaland, to resume insurgent activity. The present disturbances in Mizoram are caused by insurgent groups of smaller tribes like Hmars and the Brus but the MNF-led state government has neutralized those groups through local-level settlements without having to concede much in political terms. The Mizo accord has worked because Delhi came

to a settlement with the entire Mizo insurgent leadership, not with a splinter group. The MNF did split later, but those who left the party were mostly former student and youth leaders who had joined the MNF only after it came overground.

Even after Laldenga's death, his followers have held together under the leadership of Laldenga's favourite protege, Zoramthanga. There is a lesson in the Mizoram's story for Delhi to consider: splits engineered within an insurgent organization may help in immediate control of an armed movement, but the multiplicity of factions created by splits make a final settlement through dialogue difficult. Parallel power centers in the underground not only complicate the process of negotiation, but also interferes with the very modalities of the dialogue. To demonstrate their own clout, insurgent leaders may get involved in competitive radicalism, trying to outdo each other in challenging the government. Delhi was spared such a scenario in Mizoram because the entire movement stood behind Laldenga during the 1986 Accord. A united rebel group like the MNF may push for a hard bargain during the process of negotiations but is usually more confident of implementing an accord once that is reached.

Tribal Unrest in Tripura

Unlike in the Naga and the Mizo Hills, the insurgencies in Manipur, Tripura and Assam involved communities believed to be influenced by Sanskritisation (mainland Indian cultural influences), so their angst was not born out of cultural distance from mainland India. Rather, it grew out of acute frustration born out of lack of livelihood opportunities and the abysmal failure of governance. These three states have been exposed to various strands of leftist ideology and the rebels there often saw the problem with India as one of exploitation by Delhi.

In Tripura, the Communist Party of India (CPI), that had provided leadership to the tribespeople involved in their armed rebellion in 1948–50, joined India's electoral democracy.

But the change in Tripura's demographic character caused by a ceaseless flow of refugees from East Pakistan provoked young tribespeople to form a succession of insurgent groups that promised expulsion of the Bengali settlers and liberation of Tripura. The Sengkrak (literally meaning "clenched fist") grew in the late 1960s to protest against the rampant and systematic grabbing of tribal lands encouraged by functionaries of Tripura's Bengali-dominated Congress government. It was annihilated by the mid 1970s only to be followed by the Tribal National Volunteers (TNV). After a decade of violence, the TNV guerrillas returned to normal life in 1988, following an accord with the federal government.

Within four years, however, the state saw the birth of two guerrilla organizations: the All-Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF) and the National Liberation Force of Tripura (NLFT). Both are sustained by an agenda to drive out Bengali settlers, who are blamed for the physical, cultural, political and economic marginalization of the indigenous tribespeople. With the exception of the ATTF, which has drawn many of its guerrillas from the communist mass fronts and which uses leftist polemics in its articulation, the other insurgent groups in Tripura were—and are—fiercely anti-left. They blame Tripura's ruling Communists for failing to stop the influx of Bengalis and for failing to improve the position of the tribespeople. TNV Chief B. K. Hrangkhawl used to call Tripura's first Communist chief minister Nripen Chakrabarty a "refugee chief minister" in all his letters.²⁰

The TNV had a large number of first-generation converts in its ranks and now the NLFT, also draws its recruits mostly from the "new Christians" amongst the tribespeople.²¹ They regard the acceptance of Christianity by the tribespeople as the one and the only way to break away from the dominant Hindu-Bengali culture, which they blame for cultural marginalisation of the tribespeople. Their leaders urge them to look to other tribal-

majority states like Nagaland and Mizoram where politics and culture, economy and society are dominated by the tribespeople converted to Christianity. While the ATTF has wisely stayed away from the religious debate and identified itself with the "colonial thesis" of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and the Manipuri rebel groups, the NLFT has faced a major split by over-emphasizing its religious agenda.

A faction led by Nayanbashi Jamatia broke away from the NLFT after the rebel leadership ordered the execution of the Jamatia spiritual guru, Hada Okrah Bikram Bahadur Jamatia. Bikram Bahadur escaped two assassination attempts but another tribal guru, Shanti Kali, was killed. This provoked tribes like the Jamatias, who continue to value traditional religious practices, against the NLFT and the ensuing religious schism has weakened tribal insurgency in Tripura. While the Sengkrak and later the TNV attacked Bengali settlers and security forces in a bid to protect tribal settlements from encroachments by the Bengali settlers, the ATTF and the NLFT have adopted a tactic of large-scale abductions targeting Bengali settlers.

Between 1995 and 2003, nearly 2,000 abductions were reported to the police. Many went unreported because the families paid up silently. For a small state like Tripura (pop: 3 million), the number of abductions were unusually high. Many of those kidnapped failed to return even after their families paid a ransom. So widespread was the problem that the state government had to change the succession laws because many family business could not be run after the head of the family had been kidnapped. Since the head could not be declared dead until the body was found, banks and financial institutions would not accept the legal authority of the successors. With the change in the laws, a person missing for a particular period of time is treated as dead in the eyes of law to allow for succession.²²

The kidnappings had a double effect: it terrorized the Bengali settlers, forcing

hundreds to head for safer places, and it earned huge amounts of liquid cash for the rebel groups, enabling them to buy weapons and communication equipment and even pay their fighters a monthly allowance. Abduction as an insurgent strategy is not unique to Tripura, but is not as rampant anywhere else in the region. Insurgents in Assam, Manipur and Nagaland, now even in Meghalaya, have adopted this tactic to extort funds from the business community and the endowed class, but they have kidnapped people, only when repeated "tax notices" failed to force the targets to pay up. On the other hand, the insurgents in Tripura abduct and then bargain. In some cases, the insurgents have gone to the extent of demanding payment for the dead bodies of victims who died while in rebel captivity.²³

The ATTF is militarily weaker than the NLFT but it is the more cohesive of the two. It also enjoys close links with the ULFA and the Manipuri rebel groups, while the NLFT had close links to the NSCN and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), which has been fighting for an independent homeland. This is the contour of the new ethno-ideological divide in the separatist politics of northeast India. Groups with leftist tendencies or origins like the ULFA, MPLF or ATTF tend to stick together, while organizations more narrowly focused on ethnic concerns and united by their faith in Christianity, find themselves in the same camp. While this means there cannot be effective tactical unity amongst the region's separatist groups, it also provides Indian intelligence agencies opportunity for "special political operations" to play one group against another.

The Manipur Imbrolio

In Tripura, the communist movement, despite its initial focus on tribal concerns, never became separatist in form or content. But in Manipur, the legendary communist leader, Hijam Irabot Singh, betrayed distinct separatist overtones in his ideological

orientation. He opposed Manipur's merger with India and he abandoned the Indian communist movement for its failure to address the "national question" in peripheral areas like Manipur, advocating instead that "Manipur should be a republic with a responsible form of government."²⁴ Irabot's left separatist ideology continued to inspire a whole generation of young Meiteis (Manipur's dominant Hindu community).

In 1964, the state's first separatist group, the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) was formed, but it soon split on the question of the need for a revolution. The UNLF advocated a programme of social reform, but a faction within it advocated outright revolution. This faction called itself the Revolutionary Government of Manipur (RGM) and its members went to East Pakistan for training. Though Pakistan had welcomed Naga and Mizo rebels and provided them with sanctuary, training and weapons, it refused to help the Manipuri rebels. They were all arrested and released near the Indian border, only to be picked up by Indian police. The RGM was again split and its leader, Sudhir Kumar, a proponent of Meitei revivalism, was challenged by a leftist group, led by Nameirakpam Bisheswar Singh, which believed in Marxist-Leninism.

Sudhir was shot dead by his rivals and endemic factionalism reigned until Bisheswar, who had spend time with the Naxalite leaders in jail, established the Revolutionary Peoples Front and its military wing, the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) on July 25, 1978. Bisheswar led the group of about twenty Meitei rebels (described as "Ojhas" meaning pioneers in Manipuri) who were trained by the Chinese in "revolutionary warfare" and "Marxism-Leninism and Mao Thought." The RPF reposed unreserved faith in "class war," "abolition of private property after the revolution," and "cooperation with the Indian proletariat." It opposed sectarian politics based on ethnic or religious appeal and stated that its foremost objective was to "bring down the bandit government of Delhi." The PLA

leadership identified China as the 'fountainhead of international proletarian revolution' and even credited Beijing with preserving Nepal's sovereignty from Indian expansionist designs. It further accused Nehru for "attempting to take over Tibet to create an all-India empire."²⁵

Another similar insurgent group that surfaced around the same time was the Peoples Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (the ancient name of Manipur) which was better known by its acronym, PREPAK. It also displayed leftist tendencies but was more pronounced in its separatist designs when it declared it would fight for Manipur's independence and declared it would suppress "all counter-revolutionaries, Mayangs [outsiders], neo-colonialist stooges and class enemies" and establish a classless society in Manipur.²⁶ Once the PLA "Ojhas" returned from their long training in Lhasa, they set up Communist-type secret cells, built up an arsenal of stolen weapons (unlike in the case of the separatist Nagas and Mizos, the PLA did not even get a starter's supply of weapons from the Chinese) and started selective recruitment of cadres for underground militant action. By then, the PREPAK had also taken the plunge and the UNLF had reorganized itself under Raj Kumar Meghen (party name: Sanaiyama).

In 1979, the three groups unleashed a fierce spell of urban guerrilla warfare in the Imphal valley. Special laws were soon extended to Manipur and the army was deployed in strength. Smaller groups, like the Kangleipak Communist Party, added to the turmoil in the Imphal valley. Indian intelligence managed to infiltrate the Meitei separatist groups by mid-1981. Almost the entire China-trained leadership of the PLA was captured or killed in just two encounters—the first one at Thekcham in August 1981, which led to the arrest of PLA chairman, Nameirakpam Bisheswar Singh, and the second one at Kadamkopki in April 1982, in which Bisheswar's successor, Kunjabehari Singh was killed. Despite these

setbacks, the PLA regrouped and hit back at the security forces regularly. The UNLF also stepped up its operations, despite a split in the group.

Unlike most other insurgent groups in the northeast, the Meitei rebels have a social programme. Both the PLA and the UNLF have played the social watchdog with unflinching zeal, shooting drug traffickers, imposing bans on liquor, "culturally obscene" Hindi films and even tobacco. A new rebel group, the Kanglei Kan Yana Lup or KYKL has even attacked students who cheat in exams and teachers who help them. They want to "clean up the society in which the revolution has to take place"—a leftist moral hangover rare amongst other ethnic rebel groups in the Northeast. Meitei insurgency has experienced four distinct phases: (a) the early beginnings, with the formation of the UNLF, the Meitei State Committee and the RGM, all of which petered out by the end of 1970; (b) the birth of the PLA in 1978, the beginning of Chinese help, heavy violence throughout the Imphal valley and the severe setbacks suffered by the major Meitei insurgent groups; (c) the regrouping of these groups, redefinition of their political objectives and revival of insurgency in the valley between 1988 and 1998; (d) the fresh impetus to insurgency after the creation of the Manipur Peoples Liberation Front (MPLF) that brought together several Meitei rebel groups in one platform in 2003.

After major setbacks in the 1980s, both the PLA and the UNLF have emerged stronger since the late 1990s. Between themselves, they have more than 6,000 well trained and armed fighters and a more focused political programme devoid of the ideological baggage of the "Indian revolution." Fraternal ties with Indian Maoists still exist, but are limited to expressions of support. After the two groups joined to form the MPLF, their strike power and the range of their operations have increased. Since 2003, the MPLF armed wing, Manipur People's Army (MPA) have effectively thwarted repeated efforts by Indian troops and borderguard to overrun their main

base areas at Sajit Tampak in Chandel district and in Churachandpur district, both bordering Burma. The orchestrated nature of mob violence during the agitation against the extension of the Naga ceasefire to Manipur in 2001 gave rise to suspicions that Meitei underground groups were behind it. Not one Naga was killed during the violence, but the office of every major political party in Manipur, the assembly building and the residences of several top politicians were burnt down. It was a short but violent agitation that could be controlled only after Delhi backed out to quell Meitei fears of a possible slicing away of its Naga-inhabited territories.

Three years later, Manipur witnessed another upsurge after the alleged rape and execution of a Manipuri woman, Manorama, by the para-military Assam Rifles troops. Scores of elderly Manipuri women demonstrated nude in front of Imphal's Kangla Fort housing the para-military Assam Rifles. Another Meitei woman Irom Sharmila has continued an indefinite fast (broken only by force-feeding) for six years demanding scrapping of the controversial Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958, that gives sweeping powers to the security forces during counter-insurgency operations and often leads to excesses. After the 2004 protests, the Indian government set up a committee under a former Supreme Court judge that recommended abolition of the controversial act. But the government has not yet accepted that under pressure of the defense ministry.

The angst against excesses by Indian security forces is further compounded by fears amongst the Meiteis that the state's Naga-inhabited areas might be given over to Nagaland to placate the NSCN into a final settlement. Delhi's unqualified assurance of not compromising Manipur's territorial boundaries is yet to pacify the Meiteis and that helps the rebels recruit freely. The possible breakup of Manipur is a widely shared concern and those resisting it stand to gain a lot of popular support in Manipur.

Delhi dilemma is serious: for a final Naga settlement, it needs to accept integration of Naga areas of Manipur and other northeastern states with Nagaland, but if that happens, Manipur will go up in flames, strengthening Meitei insurgency as never before.

Faced with the growing strength of the Meitei insurgent groups, who refuse to start any kind of political negotiations and even demand plebiscite, the Indian government even authorized the army (for the first time) to sign Suspension of Operations (SOO) agreement with eight Kuki and Zomi tribal insurgent groups active in southern Manipur in 2005. These groups were then used by the Indian army in its effort to drive out the Meitei insurgents from Kuki-Zomi dominant districts like Churachandpur. The Meitei rebel groups like the UNLF responded harshly and their guerrillas were even accused of raping Kuki women in 2006. The high moral ground of the Meitei insurgents was somewhat undermined. Subsequently, the Kuki organizations openly demanded deployment of additional Indian military units in their areas for protection against the UNLF. Exploitation of ethnic divisions by the Indian army and intelligence was not unique to Manipur but the use of the Kuki groups against the UNLF was the most blatant of such cases. The UNLF has alleged that the Indian army is using guerrillas of the Kuki National Army as "scouts" to track down their bases.²⁷

Assam in Turmoil

Assam's experience in India has been the opposite of that of the Nagas. When India became free, the entire northeastern region, except the erstwhile princely states of Manipur and Tripura, were all part of Assam or tied to the state in some form or other. The Assamese elite and middle class, through their involvement in the Indian nationalist movement, were Delhi's obvious choice as its "political sub-contractor" in the Northeast. And during the first quarter century of the Republic, Delhi ruled the Northeast through Assam. But as India faced one hill insurgency

after another and demands for separate tribal states multiplied, Delhi was forced to politically reorganize the Northeast in 1972 that led to the creation of several new states. That curbed Assam's influence in the region and alienated a large section of the Assamese from India.

This alienation, however, was not sudden and was not merely linked to Delhi's decision to break up Assam. It can be traced back to the Partition, when Assam was forced to accept tens of thousands of refugees from East Pakistan. Despite strident opposition by Assam's Congress chief minister Gopinath Bordoloi, the federal government forced him to resettle more than 600,000 Bengali Hindu refugees in Assam by 1961. Bordoloi pointed out that there were 186,000 landless Assamese peasants awaiting resettlement on reclaimable lands. But India's Home Minister Sardar Patel insisted that the reclaimable lands be evenly distributed between landless Assamese peasants and Bengali Hindu refugees. Nehru threatened Bordoloi with denial of federal development funds unless Assam agreed to share "India's refugee burden."²⁸

Bordoloi's plea to check the continuous Muslim migration from East Pakistan also fell on deaf ears in Delhi. Though the Assamese elite had some stake in India's nation-building project, its middle class and rural masses were immensely resentful of the state's changing demography, land loss to Bengali migrants and perceived "colonial exploitation" by the Indian state. When India decided to build a refinery at Barauni in Bihar to process crude oil from Assam transported through a long pipeline, the state erupted in agitation. The movement failed to stop the construction of the pipeline but secured for Assam a small refinery later built at Guwahati (derisively described in Assam as a "toy refinery"). An all-party committee, the Sangram Parishad, coordinated the agitation and the state Congress leadership also came out openly in opposition against the Barauni refinery. Chief Minister Bishnuram Medhi, when told that a large refinery in Assam would be a security

risk because of the proximity of state's borders with China and Pakistan, argued that, by the same yardstick, Assam's oilfields and long railway network would be at risk as well.

In any typology of the protest movements in northeast India, Assam would stand out at the end of a continuum, with Nagaland occupying the other extreme. The Nagas resorted to insurgency as the first option of protest after negotiations with the Indian leadership had failed in the early 1950s. The Assamese middle class and the peasantry exhausted their options of non-violent protest and mass agitations (not always peaceful) before some Assamese decided to start a violent separatist insurgency. The Mizo insurgency and ones in Tripura and Manipur would fall in between Assam and Nagaland.

The oil refinery agitation raised the issue of Assam's "exploitation" by the Indian state. From 0.1 million tonnes, Assam's annual crude output touched a peak of five million tonnes in the 1970s before beginning to fall again. Before the anti-foreigner agitation started in 1979, Assam received only Rs 42 (less than one US dollar) as royalty for every metric tonne of crude oil. The Centre collected six times as much in cess. For a long time, Assam was getting only Rs 54 as sales tax on a tonne of crude oil, while the federal government collected Rs 991 on the same quantity. For plywood extracted from Assam, the state received only 3.5 to four million rupees a year—the federal government was collecting 800 million rupees on it. Assam's sales tax collections from tea hovered around Rs 200–300 million while West Bengal collected 70 percent more because the head offices of the tea companies were located there.²⁹

To this feeling of economic exploitation, was added powerful linguistic sentiments and a lurking fear that the Assamese would one day become foreigners in their own land. In the late 1960s, as insurgencies spread from Nagaland to other areas of northeast, Assam's Brahmaputra valley was engulfed by agitations. The statewide food agitation in

1966 was followed by the agitation against the proposed breakup of Assam in 1967–68. The call for boycott of Republic Day Celebrations and observance of “Unity Day” in 1968, the attack on non-Assamese business communities that year because they were regarded as the immediate exploiters of Assam, gave the first indications that separatist sentiments were building up in the state. In 1969, the left and regional parties organized an agitation in favour of a second oil refinery in Assam to process the state’s growing crude oil output. The new refinery was set up in Bongaigaon, but the feeling gained ground that the state would get nothing unless its people took to the streets. The break-up of Assam in 1972 was pushed through despite large-scale protests.

In some ways, these mass agitations were a dress rehearsal for the “mother of all agitations” that was to follow. The by-elections to the Mangaldoi assembly constituency in mid 1979 provided the fuse for India’s most powerful and sustained mass agitation after Independence. During a routine update of the electoral rolls, 45,000 illegal migrants were found in the voter’s list by a tribunal set up by the state government. On June 8 1979, the All Assam Students Union (AASU) observed the first statewide strike, demanding deletion of the names of “foreigners” from the electoral rolls. It was quickly followed in August that year by the formation of the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad, which composed of several regional parties, youth organizations, the AASU and the Asom Sahitya Sabha, the revered literary congregation of the Assamese.

The leaders of the agitation had one specific demand: the use of the 1951 National Register for Citizens to determine the citizenship of all those living in Assam. All those identified as non-citizens would have to be pushed back to Bangladesh, argued the agitators. The student and youth groups coerced linguistic and religious minorities, particularly the Muslims of East Bengali origin, who had in large measure integrated

into Assamese society and were being called Na-Asamiya (Neo-Assamese). For six years, the mass agitation was sustained by a high level of cross-ethnic participation, as thousands of Assamese and tribals, cutting across political affiliations and age groups, took to the streets to demand the ouster of the illegal migrants. “People’s curfews,” civil disobedience programmes and oil blockades paralyzed the administration across the state as attacks on non-Assamese kept pouring from various parts of Assam. There is no denying that the agitation received unprecedented popular support that led one analyst, Mahesh Joshi, to comment: “Assam is fighting India’s battle.”³⁰ More than 130 people died in police firings during the February 1983 assembly elections in Assam, even as the polls were reduced to a farce in the Brahmaputra valley, where one Congress candidate won his seat after polling a few hundred votes out of a total electorate of 69,000. It turned out to be India’s most violent elections since independence, as supporters of the agitators went after the minorities, particularly Muslims of East Bengali origin. The worst massacre occurred in a cluster of villages in Nellie, where more than 1600 were killed.

The assumption of power by the Congress in a farcical election marked by state repression convinced many Assamese that their concerns would be rudely overlooked. The United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), formed in 1979, started drawing substantial number of recruits from the groups leading the anti-migrant agitation. But many of ULFA’s recruits and leaders came from leftist sub-national groups like the Asam Jatiyabadi Yuba Chatra Parishad (AJYCP), that propagates a curious mix of Assamese nationalism and radical Marxism (build communism on a nationalist basis), shuns parliamentary politics and advocates the Assamese’s right to dual citizenship and self-determination. Their influence on the ULFA’s rhetoric became evident when the rebel group

emphasized on “scientific socialism” and “two-phase revolution” as its goals.

The ULFA also advocated “denationalization of ethnic communities” to ensure they accepted the broad goals of Assamese nationalism. It promised to implement “scientific socialism” to build Assamese society after the liberation from Indian colonial rule. After being very parochial in focus during the 1980s, the ULFA sought to widen its popular base among non-Assamese ethnic groups after the first Indian military operations. In 1992, it articulated its concerns for the non-Assamese by saying: “Ours is not a movement for the Asomiyas (Assamese), ours is a movement for the Asombashis (dwellers of Assam).” It acknowledged “the contributions” of the people of East Bengali stock in development of agriculture, education, professions and other spheres of activity and described the AASU-AAGSP led anti-migrant movement as “juvenile.”³¹

During the Congress regime (1983–85), the ULFA undertook bank robberies and made select assassination attempts. It came into its own after the 1985 Assam Accord, when the newly formed Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), riding the crest of a popularity wave, came to power. Unlike the Naga or Mizo rebels, the ULFA avoided large-scale confrontations with the security forces. Given the flatland terrain from which it was operating and the lack of experience of its newly trained guerilla force, a major encounter with the security forces would be suicidal for the ULFA. So, it chose a combination of selective terror and parallel taxation to build up a support base with help from elements within the AGP leadership. In the five years of AGP rule, the ULFA killed nearly 100 people who had been branded “enemies of the people of Assam.” The victims were mostly Assamese, though the killings of some high-profile non-Assamese businessmen like Surendra Paul and Haralalka, politicians like United Minorities Front leader Kalipada Sen and police officials like Dibrugarh police

superintendent Daulat Sing Negi, received huge publicity.

The ULFA also built up a huge war chest by systematic extortion, raising tens of millions of rupees from tea companies and other businesses in Assam. It entrenched itself in rural Assam through the Jatiya Unnayan Parishad, a front that undertook public works in order to endear itself to the masses. Several batches of its guerrillas were trained by the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and later by the NSCN, as a result of which, by the end of 1990, the ULFA had built up a standing force of some 2,500 fighters, all armed with weapons bought in Burma. Slowly but steadily, it built up a parallel administration in the Brahmaputra Valley and then sought to spread its influence in areas dominated by ethnic tribespeople and other linguistic or religious minorities.

Successive military operations in 1990–91 (Operation Bajrang and Operation Rhino) broke the back of the ULFA and led to the first surrenders from the group in 1992. The Indian army smashed its major base areas within Assam and in neighboring states. Many senior ULFA leaders—district commanders, those heading special units or cells like group’s highly effective publicity wing chief Sunil Nath—were either killed or captured. Indian intelligence managed to establish contact with the ULFA leadership in 1992 and three of its top leaders (Chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa, Vice-chairman Pradip Gogoi and general secretary Anup Chetia) were flown to Delhi where they promised to begin talks for a peaceful settlement by giving up their demand for Assam’s sovereignty. The ULFA’s organization, like the KIA which trained it, was however always dominated by the military wing and its chief Paresh Barua refused to give up armed struggle. When Rajkhowa, Gogoi and Chetia returned to Bangladesh to bring him round for talks with Delhi, they were admonished for “dealing with the enemy” by Barua.

Once the ULFA made it clear that it would not give up the path of armed struggle,

it faced one of the most ruthless counter-insurgency operations ever unleashed in contemporary South Asia. Indian intelligence used mercenaries and surrendered militants to attack ULFA leaders like Paresh Barua in foreign countries. Many of its leaders, like Swadhinata Phukan, were liquidated in prisons or in fake encounters and their close relatives were not spared. The ULFA also responded in equal measure with similar terror tactics. But it began to lose out on popular support, once it started bombing locations in which civilians, many of them Assamese, were killed. When several school children were killed in the northern town of Dhemaji on Indian Independence Day in 2004, public opinion in Assam decisively turned against the ULFA. Influential sections of Assamese society came out openly against the ULFA and even civil society leaders close to the rebels faced severe criticism in the local Assamese media that was once so supportive of the all of ULFA's actions.

The imposition of president's rule in 1990 and the subsequent military operations were followed by the return to power of Congress in 1991. The ULFA struck immediately, kidnapping fourteen senior officials on the same day. Soviet coal engineer Sergei Gritchenko was killed while trying to flee, while a petroleum engineer, T. Raju, was killed in crossfire during a police raid on an ULFA hideout. Assam chief minister Hiteswar Saikia finally managed to persuade the ULFA to release the kidnapped officials without conceding to all its demands. Then, the wily Saikia went about splitting the rebel organization with a vengeance. The Assam police was using the surrendered militants (popularly known as SULFA) to hunt down their colleagues in the underground. Like the RGN in Nagaland, the SULFA (though not a political platform) was ruthlessly used against the ULFA. The SULFA provided Indian security forces with intelligence on the ULFA, they even went into Bhutan to attack the ULFA, and its members were used in the brutal killings of ULFA relatives and

sympathisers like local editor Parag Kumar Das, who had emerged as an ideologue of the rebel movement. And the SULFA was provided huge money from "secret source funds" of the army and the intelligence agencies and their leaders were provided lucrative business deals like the control of the coal trade on the Assam-Meghalaya border. Many SULFA leaders would figure amongst Assam's new billionaires.

When the regional party Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) came back to power in 1996, it promised to take up "the issue of Assam's self-determination." But once in control, Chief Minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta not only accepted the formation of the United Command to provide security forces the necessary structure and leadership to fight the rebels, but also asked his police to go after the ULFA. Mahanta was determined not to have his government pulled down by the Centre (as in 1990) by allowing the ULFA a free run. The rebels struck back and nearly assassinated Mahanta, after which they started his cabinet colleagues. Zoinath Sarma (a hero of the anti-foreigner agitation like Mahanta and a minister in his government) was attacked by rebels while in a boat. While Zoinath Sarma survived, his colleague, Nagen Sarma, was killed in a bomb explosion at Nalbari. Scores of AGP leaders at the zonal and district level were killed to ensure the AGP's defeat in every election in the run-up to the 2001 state assembly polls.

One can say that the wedge driven between the AGP and the ULFA, who share similar origins in the 1979-85 Assam's anti-foreigner agitation, was a success of the Indian state. The Assamese press was agog with reports that Assam governor former lieutenant-general S. K. Sinha had promised to prevent prosecution of Chief Minister Mahanta in a major corruption case (the LOC scam) and got him to approve the Unified Command concept and go after the ULFA. In fact, a special commission has now been set up to investigate the "secret killings" during the AGP regime, in which many ULFA leaders

(after arrest), relatives and sympathisers were liquidated.

The Congress victory in 2001 did not lead to an immediate respite in ULFA-sponsored violence but by the end of his term, chief minister Tarun Gogoi had managed to get the ULFA to start negotiations. The ULFA formed the Peoples Consultative Group (PCG) with eleven Assamese notables and the PCG started negotiations with Delhi. But after several rounds of PCG-Delhi talks, the negotiations broke down in September 2006 and Indian military operations were resumed in Assam. The ULFA hit back with serial explosions, both in populated areas and on oil and natural gas pipelines. The ULFA still insists that the issue of Assam's sovereignty during its discussions with India is the "core issue." It has however given up its two earlier pre-conditions for talks: negotiations through UN mediation and holding the talks in a foreign country.³² The ULFA still depends on Paresh Barua to decide on crucial issues and unless he agrees to talk directly, no one else can. But Paresh Barua's insistence on "Assam's sovereignty" as the core issue has upset Delhi. No government in Delhi, however liberal, can compromise on India's sovereignty, so the talks broke down in September 2006. The ULFA, apprehensive of Indian divisive tactics that had split it in 1992, did not expose its own leaders during the 2005–06 negotiations and it has refused to come down to something like the NSCN's "special federal relationship."

Going by available indications, the Indian intelligence agencies will continue to make efforts to lure Paresh Barua out of his lair in Dhaka for "direct talks." The lessons of the Mizo peace process is not lost on Delhi—it is always desirable to deal with the entire organization during the peace process rather than split and divide. But if Barua refuses to stop his bombers and continues the violence in Assam, Delhi may try to split the ULFA by isolating its hardline elements—and if that's not possible, it will try to weaken the ULFA by organising surrenders from its ranks. It has already intensified the military operations in

Assam and that's leading to some surrender already. In April 2007 alone, more than 20 ULFA activists including three top leaders were killed and many more captured. Indian intelligence may even try a covert operation to eliminate Barua (he has twice escaped such attempts in Dhaka) even as the Home Ministry and the Prime Minister's Office continue to woo perceived ULFA moderates.

Bodo, Karbi and Dimasa Insurgencies

Unlike the ULFA, the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), has joined the negotiations directly. The NDFB has already accepted a ceasefire and lodged its fighters in designated camps. Much younger to the ULFA, the NDFB (originally Bodo Security Force) grew out of the Bodo movement for a separate state. In 1987, the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) and the Bodo Peoples Action Committee (BPAC) began their agitation for a separate Bodo state they wanted to carve out of Assam with the slogan "Divide Assam Fifty-Fifty."³³ The Bodo movement was marked by extensive violence, including blowing up of buses and trains. The AGP government, pushed on the back foot by the Bodo agitation, resorted to heavy-handed police operations to quell its pitch. But state repression provoked the Bodos to more violence. They controlled the gateway to the Northeast and bombing of the region's road and rail networks gave the Bodos a clout far greater than their numbers and resources merited.

After Assam came under president's rule, intense behind-the-scenes negotiations with the ABSU-BPAC leaders started. With the Congress back in power, Indian minister Rajesh Pilot piloted an agreement in 1993 with the ABSU-BPAC combine that promised a territorial council for the Bodos in western and central Assam. Chief Minister Hiteswar Saikia felt slighted because the deal was struck behind his back and made sure it did not work. The Assam government refused to hand over thousands of villages that would fall into the agreed boundary of the Bodoland

Territorial Council on grounds that Bodos were a minority in those villages and their majority non-Bodo population felt insecure in a Bodo-dominated administrative dispensation.³⁴

The impasse over the council's boundary torpedoed its future. Saikia got his protegee in the Bodo movement to head the Territorial Council on an interim basis, but the body never went through elections and failed to find an institutional footing. As the ABSU-BPAC combine stood discredited "with a kingdom which had no boundaries," the NDFB emerged from the shadows to intensify its armed insurgent movement. Besides taking a leaf out of the ULFA's book—by using systematic extortion of the tea industry and other businesses in the Bodo area, shifting major bases to Bhutan, and resorting to select assassination of rivals within the community—the NDFB also went about its programme of ethnic cleansing. The Assam government was refusing to give the proposed Bodoland Territorial Council possession of 2,570 villages on grounds that Bodos were less than fifty percent of their population. In order to create a Bodo majority in areas lacking one, the NDFB unleashed a violent campaign, targeting all non-Bodo communities in the area.

The worst of these campaigns targeted the Adivasis (descendants of the Santhal, Munda and Oraon tribesmen brought to Assam from central India by the British) during the 1996 elections. The Adivasis set up their own militant group, Cobra Force and Birsa Commando Force to resist the attacks. Nearly a quarter of a million people—both Bodos and non-Bodos—were displaced and nearly 100,000 people were killed.³⁵ With peace now returning to the area after the creation of the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Council after the 2003 Bodoland Accord, almost two-thirds of these displaced people have returned home. Lack of funds and conflict of authority is delaying the process of rehabilitation, but if peace holds in

western Assam, most of these displaced peoples will go back home.

The conflict in the Bodo areas took a different turn once the NDFB found a challenger in Bodo insurgent politics. The remnants of the old Bodo Volunteer Force organized themselves into the Bodoland Liberation Tigers Force (BLTF) and demanded a separate Bodo state, but within India. The BLTF, which was backed by the ABSU-BPAC combine, endorsed an autonomist agenda because it found the NDFB's secessionist agenda "far too unrealistic and unattainable." The BLTF also teamed up with groups like the Bengal Tigers (formed to defend the Bengalis) to fight the NDFB, who alleged that the Indian military intelligence was backing both the BLTF and the Bengal Tigers. In private, military officials have owned up to attacking the NDFB bases in collaboration with the BLTF and the Bengal Tigers.³⁶

So while the ULFA, though much weakened, has never had a rival that could challenge its primacy in Asomiya separatist politics, the NDFB got involved in a fierce fratricidal feud with the BLTF and its allies. While the Indian military have used the BLTF and the Bengal Tigers to check the NDFB militarily, Delhi complemented it by politically appeasing the Bodos through a power-sharing arrangement under a regional autonomy scheme with the BLTF. The subsequent isolation of the NDFB forced it to start talks and helped India sanitize one of the most violent theatres of insurgency, ethnic violence and internal displacement. In December 2003, the Indian government came to a settlement with the BLTF, on the basis of which an autonomous territorial council with local self-government powers was set up for the Bodos. The BLTF was disbanded and its leaders and activists joined up to form the Bodoland Peoples Progressive Front.

Though ridden by factionalism, the dominant faction of the BPPF is now represented in Assam's Congress-led coalition government with three ministers. For the first time, the Bodos are well represented in the

Assam government, in addition to enjoying the fruits of regional autonomy. Both Delhi and the Assam government have high stakes in making a success of the Bodo autonomy experiment. If this works, other recalcitrant tribes like the Karbis and the Dimasas may accept autonomy instead of pressing for separate homelands. Assam will thus be spared further divisions. Assam needs to survive as a polyglot state if the Northeast is to get over the dangerous spectre of fragmentation owing to separate homeland demands that forecloses the possibility of ethnic reconciliation.

The ULFA promises a federal Assam to all tribes and minorities if it gains freedom. One cannot gauge its commitment to the cause of a multi-ethnic Assam, but for the moment, its solidarity with the "Asombashi" (dweller of Assam) rather than the Asomiya (ethnic Assamese) alone, sets the stage for fraternal relationships between the Assamese insurgents and those from the Bodo, the Dimasa and the Karbi tribes. But with the Bodos getting their own autonomous, if not independent, homeland, and other ethnic rebel groups in Assam have started negotiations with Delhi. The dominant faction of the Dima Haram Dago (DHD), fighting for a separate homeland for the Dimasa tribe, is now negotiating with Delhi. Initially the DHD was supported by the NSCN but now the NSCN is uncomfortable with the DHD's vision of a separate Dimasa homeland that includes parts of Nagaland, including the town of Dimapur.

The United Peoples Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) is similarly fighting for a separate homeland for the Karbi tribe. But one of its factions has started negotiations with Delhi. Both the DHD and the UPDS have fed on the failure of the earlier generation of Karbi and Dimasa leadership, who used agitprop methods to secure autonomy but lost their credibility due to large scale corruption. But both the DHD and the UPDS have been weakened by splits. The Karbi Anglong and the North Cachar Hills have strategic

importance—the corridor has been traditionally used by the Naga and the Manipuri rebels to reach East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, while northeast India's north-to-south railroad networks pass through it. The Dimasa and the Karbi insurgency may be territorially limited because of their smaller population base, but with the right kind of alliances, they can still pose a problem. Grant of autonomy and appeasement of the Karbis and the Dimasas is seen by many as crucial to India's counter-insurgency strategy in Northeast—it is no longer a problem of Assam alone.

Every insurgency in Assam has been weakened through organizational splits caused by personality tussles, clan rivalries within the tribes or on crucial issues of whether to continue an armed movement or settle for greater autonomy. The Indian state has taken advantage of these splits, won over breakaway factions with funds and favors and used them to attack dominant rebel groups both within Assam and across its borders where the rebels are located. The Indian government has opened talks with rebel groups but resumed military operations whenever the rebels refused to accept a deal within Delhi's climb-down limits. It has even used foreign mercenaries to target ULFA leaders abroad. But Indian leaders accept that military offensives and the covert operations are only to "soften up" the rebels and political reconciliation through settlements holds the key to conflict resolution in Assam and elsewhere in Northeast.³⁷ But so long as the terms of a settlement does not suit Delhi, the federal security forces and intelligence will continue military operations against the rebels in Assam and initiate covert action to split them, while rewarding defectors who surrender and help the government.

The Foreign Hand

India's Northeast shares a total of 5,200 kilometers of border with China, Bhutan, Burma and Bangladesh. Nepal does not have a

border with the Northeast but it is barely a few hundred kilometers away from the western tip of Assam. During the last fifty years, most of these neighbors have either been hostile towards India or have failed to control the turmoil in their own frontier regions. Rebel groups thriving there, with or without the support of the neighboring countries, have helped the armed rebellions against Delhi. Without such long and often untenanted borders and without the support of India's hostile neighbors like Pakistan, China and Bangladesh, the insurgencies in Northeast India may not have found survival easy. Much as neighboring countries like China, Pakistan and Bangladesh have backed insurgencies in India's northeast, Indian intelligence agencies, sometimes with US backing, have used the Northeast to back armed rebellions in neighboring countries.³⁸

The Naga, the Mizo and later the Manipuri rebels received support from Pakistan and China while almost all northeastern rebel groups thrive on support from Bangladesh. The Burmese or the Bhutanese have not backed northeast Indian rebels but have often failed to prevent them from using its territory. On the other hand, India backed several separatist campaigns across the borders of its Northeast. The most powerful rebel army on Burma's western borders, the Kachin Independence Army, developed close links with northeast Indian separatist groups like the NNC, the NSCN and the ULFA. But by the end of the 1980s, India's external intelligence, Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), persuaded the KIA to discontinue support to the northeast Indian rebels in exchange for Indian support for their armed campaign against Rangoon. Some other Burmese rebel groups in the Chin Hills and the Arakans were also supported by Indian intelligence.³⁹

During the Bangladesh liberation war, India trained thousands of Bengali guerrillas in hundreds of camps located in the northeastern states of Tripura, Meghalaya and Assam as also in West Bengal. When India's

relations with Bangladesh soured after the assassination of the country's founding father, Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, India backed the Shanti Bahini guerrillas fighting for autonomy and self-rule in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Support for the Shanti Bahini was discontinued in the mid 1990s and India pressurised the rebels to sign an accord with Bangladesh.⁴⁰ Throughout the 1950s, Indian intelligence supported the Tibetan armed struggle against the Chinese.

Thus, India's Northeast, with its daunting topography and complex regional surroundings, has witnessed a continuous spell of "insurgent crossfire" between India and her recalcitrant neighbors. Over a period of time, China and India stopped backing guerrilla armies against each other. Indian backing for the Burmese rebel groups has also stopped as Delhi appears keen to appease the Burmese military junta, which in turn undertakes periodic military campaigns against northeast Indian militants based in its Sagaing Division. Indian support for the Shanti Bahini insurgency in the Chittagong Hill Tracts has also ended. But Pakistan and Bangladesh continue to support the ethnic rebel armies of northeast India. Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) has developed "safe locations" in and close links with the intelligence organizations of Bangladesh since the mid-1980s. Both Pakistan and Bangladesh provided weapons, training and sanctuary to northeast Indian rebels on a regular basis.

Unlike Bangladesh, Bhutan has never denied the presence of northeast Indian rebels in its territory. The kingdom's government tried to persuade the rebels to leave and then used military force to dislodge them. Burma has never directly backed the rebels of Northeast and have often attacked bases of Naga rebels in its territory. But its control over its long western frontier with India is not total and it has avoided attacking both the Assamese and the Manipuri rebels for reasons not yet clear. At the moment the crossfire of mutually sponsored insurgencies operating across national frontiers in South Asia on a

reciprocal basis is beginning to wane. For the last fifty years, however, the Northeast has witnessed this phenomenon of mutually supported trans-border insurgencies with all its doublespeak, deniability and deterrence.

The patronage of insurgency has not been limited to countries. Within the Northeast, state governments have backed insurgent groups against each other and Indian federal intelligence agencies have backed insurgents as part of Delhi's ploy to settle scores with state governments seen as hostile to the interests to the ruling party at the centre. All across South Asia, the sponsorship of insurgency has remained an easy option for unleashing a low-cost proxy offensive against a rival nation or a hostile government.

Between 1956 and 1971, Pakistan's ISI backed the NNC, the MNF and the Sengkrak of Tripura. China started aiding the NNC, the MNF and later the PLA of Manipur but discontinued all help after 1980. There are reports of the ULFA and the MPLF receiving substantial quantities of Chinese weapons through Bhutan and Burma, but perhaps these weapons come through Yunnan-based mafia groups like the Blackhouse. They get these weapons from China's government ordnance factories like Norincho, but it is not clear whether Beijing is supplying weapons to Northeast Indian rebels through mafia proxies or just making profits for its ordnance establishments.

Bangladesh backs almost all northeastern Indian militant groups—the guerillas from Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur and Tripura have around 125 camps, smaller hideouts and safe houses in its territory.⁴¹ India backed the Bengali guerrilla campaign in 1971 and trained thousands of guerillas in Tripura, Assam and Meghalaya. Later, many political opponents of the Bangladesh military junta escaped into northeast India and were sheltered. The Bangladesh liberation war-hero Kader (Tiger) Siddiqui escaped into Meghalaya and was allowed to stay in the town of Burdwan in West Bengal for around eighteen years. India also ran training and

operational camps for the Shanti Bahini in Tripura and Mizoram for more than twenty years (1975–96). It ran camps for the Tibetan guerrillas in 1956–62.⁴²

Indian intelligence ran hideouts and arms caches in Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram for the Kachin Independence Army, the Arakan Army and the Chin National Front of Burma. The NNC and NSCN, the MNF and the Manipuri rebel groups maintained camps in Burmese territory and it is primarily to dislodge them from there that India started helping Burmese rebel groups. Between 1958 and 1971, when Pakistan lost its eastern wing, eleven batches of Naga rebels (some numbering two hundred guerrillas or more) reached East Pakistan for training and weapons. One of the two largest groups of Naga guerrillas, more than five hundred fighters led by Dusoi Chakesang, took the long route to East Pakistan through the Chin Hills in October 1963 and returned in October 1964. Military officials estimates that at least 3,000 Naga guerrillas were trained in East Pakistan, where the Naga Army had seven camps.⁴³

The Naga guerrillas were trained by instructors from Pakistan's Special Services Group (SSG), an elite special forces unit, who had trained the mujahids sent into Indian Kashmir as part of Operation Gibraltar in 1965. One veteran SSG officer, Colonel S.S. Medhi, who had trained both the Nagas and the Kashmir mujahids, later told the author: "The Nagas were far better fighters than the mujahids. They were disciplined and dedicated and quickly picked up tactics. They clearly had a cause. The mujahids from Azad Kashmir were unruly."⁴⁴

After its short border war with India in 1962, China started training the Naga rebels. The first batch of Naga Army, about 300 strong, left for China in June 1966. Led by Thinoselie, the military commander, and Muivah, the commissar, they reached Yunnan after a march of 97 days. The second batch of Naga Army, about 250 strong, went to China in 1968 under the leadership of Mowu

Angami, the military commander, and Issac Chisi Swu, the commissar. The Chinese trained four subsequent batches of Naga guerrillas. The first two batches were large but the subsequent batches were much smaller. The Naga rebel leadership faced a dilemma in deciding the size of the batches they would send for training—if the batch was small, it could be annihilated by a major Indian or Burmese military operation, but they would be harder to detect. On the other hand, if the batch consisted of a few hundred guerrillas, it would be difficult to conceal, its supply problems would increase, but it would come back with a much larger body of trained guerrillas and more weapons. For tactical reasons, the Nagas chose to send large batches to Pakistan and China in the initial stages because they had the element of surprise. Subsequent batches were smaller so that they could slip through.

Indian military intelligence estimates that Pakistan and China trained nearly 5,000 Naga guerrillas in all. A batch of 300 guerrillas underwent special training in advanced guerrilla warfare and special operations in 1969 in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Chinese and Pakistani instructors jointly imparted training to this batch. By then, India's two hostile neighbors had set up a joint "China-Pakistan Coordination Bureau" to coordinate the guerrilla war in the Northeast. Two intelligence officers from the Foreign Liaison Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and four from the Chinese PLA's training division, including a full colonel, were based in Dhaka and Chittagong under diplomatic cover. They teamed up with a Pakistani SSG complement supported by the ISI's East Pakistan regional headquarters. The twelve-member Coordination Bureau consisted of six Chinese and six Pakistani officials, but there were no representatives from the northeast Indian rebel groups.⁴⁵

After the Mizo insurrection, Pakistan opened many more camps for the MNF in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Between 1967 and 1971, seventeen camps were housing 3,000–

4,000 Mizo guerrillas in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Most of them underwent training imparted by SSG instructors and received weapons. When the Bangladesh Liberation War broke out, the MNF units fought with the Pakistani troops against the Bengali "Mukti Fauj" (liberation army). Four batches of Mizo guerrillas went to China for training after 1971, when the MNF turned to China for training and weapons after losing its base area in East Pakistan. The first MNF batch led by Damkoshiak Gangte started for China in 1973 but it took them a march of thirteen months to reach Tinsum County in Yunnan. After training, the Chinese gave them some weapons and gold chains, some of which they had to hand over to the Kachins on their way back. An Intelligence Bureau official has revealed that Damkoshiak had been recruited as a junior operative by the IB's station chief in Manipur, B.R. Sanyal and then infiltrated into the MNF. This official claims that Damkoshiak just walked back into the IB's outpost in Moreh with most of his China-returned guerrillas and surrendered on June 30, 1975 after being in touch with the IB from his temporary locations in Burma.⁴⁶

Subsequent batches of MNF were small and their experience with the Chinese was far from happy. Like the Nagas, the Mizos had to hand over half of the weapons they got from the Chinese to the Kachin Independence Army. If we compare patterns of sponsorship to guerrilla campaigns in South Asia, two trends are clearly discernible. First, the Indians and the Americans trained much larger batches of Tibetan guerrillas in a short time between 1956 and 1961 than the number of Naga insurgents trained by China and Pakistan. In five years of peak sponsorship, more than 20,000 Tibetan fighters underwent training in India and the US, while the Chinese and the Pakistanis trained only one-fourth that number of Naga guerrillas over a much longer duration. If we look at the more than 60,000 Bengali guerrillas trained by India in eight months in 1971, the contrast is sharper—even if we include the training

imparted to nearly six thousand Mizo guerrillas by Pakistan and China.

Second, the training spans of the Tibetans were shorter than the Nagas. While a Tibetan fighter spent two to three months in an Indian training camp and perhaps as much in a specialist American facility, the Nagas underwent four to five months of training on an average. The training span of the Bengali guerrilla was shorter than the Tibetans—30–45 days and 60 in the case of those given specialist sabotage training or special tasks. The Nagas suffered the absence of a common border with the sponsor countries and had to take long circuitous routes that added to the training time. The Sino-Pakistani sponsorship to the Naga and Mizo insurgencies reached a critical stage with the formation of the Coordination Bureau when it was cut short by the Bengali revolt of 1971 and the Indian intervention. In fact, a senior RAW official stated that Indian support for the Bengali revolt was crucial to match the Sino-Pakistani sponsorship for the guerrilla armies of Northeast India and finally get the better of India's enemies in a "who-gets-whom first" situation.⁴⁷

The much smaller numbers of Naga and Mizo rebels trained by Pakistan and China in comparison to the numbers of Tibetans and Bengali guerrilla fighters trained by India with US support could be attributed to the following: (a) Pakistan was primarily interested in taking away Kashmir from India and support to the rebels in the Northeast was for a limited tactical purpose, namely, to keep the pot boiling in the remote region and ensure dispersal of Indian forces on two flanks; (b) Nagaland had no common border with either East Pakistan and China and only when the Mizo insurrection started could the two work on a strategy to unsettle the Northeast by using the border which the Mizo Hills shared with East Pakistan; (c) The Mizo Hills border with East Pakistan was narrow and could easily be blocked by Indian troops whereas India's border with Tibet was too long to be sealed completely by the Chinese.

China was also concerned with consolidating its position in Tibet and was backing the rebels in northeast India only to deter India from actively backing the Tibetan guerrillas; (d) India was burdened with a huge flow of refugees from Tibet and Bangladesh, while Pakistan or China faced no refugee exodus from the Northeast. India therefore pitched its sponsorship of guerrilla armies in Tibet and Bangladesh at a high level because it was keen to resolve the crisis quickly.

After the Shillong Accord, the Naga movement split up and weakened. The MNF also began moving towards a final settlement with India after the 1976 Calcutta agreement. China, under Deng Xiaoping, started to look for ways to normalize relations with India. The Manipuri PLA was supported because of its ideological affiliations, but only just. When it started to lose its way in the face of severe repression and strong counter-insurgency measures, China stopped aiding it. Repeated efforts by the ULFA and the NSCN in the late 1980s to secure Chinese help did not lead to any direct assistance from Beijing. Indian intelligence does have some evidence that Chinese intelligence put the NSCN, led by the China-trained Muivah, in touch with the Khmer Rouge (another China-backed group) in Cambodia. That connection helped the later generations of Naga, Assamese and Manipuri rebels secure large quantities of weapons from the Khmer Rouge or through black-market operators close to them.

Unlike the Pakistani support for the Naga and the Mizo rebels, the element of clandestinity in Indian support was absent from the very beginning. Journalists, foreign diplomats and dignitaries visited Bangladeshi refugee camps and also those where the Mukti Fauj guerrillas were being trained. The Bengali guerrillas would use these camps for launching operations inside East Pakistan and then return to base. Every time they came back, they briefed Indian intelligence and military officials in detail, procuring information that would ultimately be useful for the Indian military action. Unlike the Naga

and Mizo rebels, who were trained and told to return to fight in their hills against Indian forces with no regular control by “handlers,” the Bengali guerrillas remained in close contact with Indian officials. During the Bengali uprising in 1971, India waited for the first two months before Prime Minister Indira Gandhi decided to aid the guerrillas. Indian intelligence had opened some channels of communication with the Awami League in 1968. A senior Awami League leader, Chittaranjan Sutar, had set up base in Calcutta around the time when the situation in East Pakistan started to spin out of control.

The brutal Pakistani military crackdown in March 1971 against the Awami League, which had got a sweeping majority in the 1970 elections, forced India to support the provisional Bangladesh government on Indian soil, after which the training and arming of the Mukti Fauj went ahead at great speed. Between 200 and 250 camps for the Mukti Fauj were set up in West Bengal and in the three northeastern states of Tripura, Meghalaya and Assam.⁴⁸ The level of coordination between the Indian military machine and the Mukti Fauj began to grow firmly with the progress of the guerrilla campaign and was finally formalized with the setting up of the Joint Command just before the war. By mid 1971, Mrs Gandhi had decided on military intervention to break up Pakistan, which explains why the Indians were supporting the Mukti Fauj quite openly. The successful conclusion of the Bangladesh Liberation War owed as much too Indian support for the guerrilla movement and Mrs Gandhi’s decision to militarily intervene as to Pakistan’s failure for political accommodation that led to the civil war. The Pakistani military crackdown forced the Awami League into guerrilla warfare that it was just not prepared for. The huge refugee exodus forced India to act, or at least gave it a rationale to justify military action.

Within four years of the liberation of Bangladesh, India sponsored another guerrilla campaign in that country. The immediate

provocation for the Indian sponsorship of the Shanti Bahini guerrillas, made up of Chakma, Marma and Tripuri tribesmen, was the military coup that killed Sheikh Mujibur Rehman and many members of his family. To Indira Gandhi, the coup amounted a political act in defiance of India. Within a week of the coup, senior RAW officials arrived in Tripura’s capital, Agartala to take the Chakma dissident leaders of the Chittagong Hill Tracts to Delhi for negotiations. The Parbattya Chattogram Jana Sanghati Samity (PCJSS) was a political party that had contested elections and sent representatives to the Bangladesh parliament. It wanted extensive autonomy for the Chittagong Hill Tracts, a hill region dominated by tribes that were neither Muslim nor Bengali. Having failed to get that, the PCJSS was slowly veered towards a course of confrontation with Dhaka.

The opportunity came in 1975 when Sheikh Mujibur Rehman was killed in a military coup and an angry India took the initiative to arm and train the Shanti Bahini. By the end of 1979, India had trained seven to eight hundred guerrillas of the Shanti Bahini including its entire military leadership. Just before Mrs. Gandhi was defeated in the 1977 parliamentary elections, RAW officials told the Shanti Bahini that India was prepared to support upto 15,000 guerrillas with both light and heavy weapons like mortars. Shanti Bahini leaders remember how they were asked to get used to dry Indian-made rations for deep penetration strikes inside the CHT.⁴⁹ After a brief cessation of support, the Chittagong Hill Tracts operations were resumed by the RAW after Indira Gandhi came back to power in 1980. By then, however, the PCJSS-Shanti Bahini was torn apart by a fratricidal feud that weakened the once powerful guerrilla organization.

In the summer of 1986, the Larma faction unleashed a fresh offensive in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. But retaliation by the Bangladesh security forces and the Muslim settlers forced more than 65,000 Chakmas and Marmas to flee into Tripura. The Shanti Bahini, now

much weakened by factionalism, failed to stop the fragmentation of the CHT into three administrative districts. Neither was India willing to step up the heat in the CHT nor was the Bahini capable of delivering a massive blow. The PCJSS started negotiations in 1992 and reached a settlement with Dhaka in 1997, albeit under Indian pressure. Bangladesh started providing shelter to the rebels from Northeast India in mid 1978, two years after India started training and arming the Shanti Bahini. The MNF came back to the Chittagong Hill Tracts in 1978 and set up six camps: Central Headquarters at Chhimtlang, supply headquarters at Rumabazar, General Headquarters at Alikadam, tactical headquarters for the Dampa Area Command (west Mizoram) at New Langkor, tactical headquarters at Lama, and two smaller transit camps close to Parva and Tuipubari villages in Mizoram.⁵⁰

As the MNF increased its presence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, it inadvertently stepped into Chakma-dominated areas. In that period, to oblige the RAW, the Shanti Bahini attacked the MNF columns and camps at six different places. The MNF suffered up to thirty casualties and their operations were stifled. Its animosity towards the Chakmas increased. By 1984, the Tribal National Volunteers (TNV) of Tripura had also set up ten camps in the Chittagong Hill Tracts—its headquarters was located at Singlum, the military wing headquarters at Thangnan with a ring of transit camps around them. Subsequently, the NSCN also came to the Chittagong Hill Tracts and set up three bases, including the one at Silopi that was earlier used by the NNC. And after 1990, the DGFI developed close links with the ULFA, the NDFB, the PLA and UNLF of Manipur. Now even Meghalaya rebel groups like the Achik National Volunteers Council and Tripura rebel groups like the ATTF and the NLFT are based in Bangladesh.

The Indian government has recently claimed that 190 bases belonging to eleven rebel groups from northeast India exist in

Bangladesh. My own extensive investigations suggests that the Indian claims are far over the mark.⁵¹ After being pushed out of Bhutan, the ULFA has set up at least eight bases in the Mymensingh region bordering the Indian state of Meghalaya. The ULFA has traditionally maintained only a transit camp at Sherpur but now its presence in the area has grown. The largest ULFA camp is said to be based in Halughat, near the border with Meghalaya. The ULFA's leadership, however, has stayed in Dhaka, maintaining at least four safe houses on a regular basis. The Assam police has provided details of all the locations the ULFA military wing chief Paresh Barua has used since his stay in Bangladesh.⁵² The locations have been changed from time to time to avoid attacks by Bangladeshi criminal syndicates close to Indian intelligence. One such syndicate, Seven Star, was believed to be responsible for at least five attacks on him at separate locations.

After the pullout from Bhutan, Bangladesh is now the major foreign area for the ULFA and the other rebel groups of Assam and Meghalaya. The NDFB and the ANVC bases are also located in the Mymensingh region, not far from the ULFA bases. These two rebel groups have been "taxing" the coal exports to Bangladesh. The MPLF of Manipur has more bases in Burma's Sagaing Division than in Bangladesh, but it runs not less than six bases in the Sylhet area. The largest MPLF camp in Bangladesh is located at Chotodamai and Bhanugach. Both these camps house fifty to seventy guerrillas at any point in time. Since Burma's army had only limited control over its western frontier, Indian intelligence dealt directly with the powerful Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) which was aiding guerrillas from Northeast India. Denied Chinese support when Beijing turned to improve its relations with the Burmese military junta, the KIO was also compelled to look to India. A senior RAW official who set up India's links with the KIO says they were given at least two large consignments of weapons between 1990 and

1992 and promised more. For its part, the KIO agreed to deny support, bases, weapons or training to the northeast Indian rebel groups. Indeed, for two years, a team of three RAW agents, equipped with communication equipment, were based in the Kachin “second brigade” headquarters at Pasao, monitoring northeast Indian rebel movements in the area.

Burmese intelligence soon found out that the KIO had been receiving weapons from India and wasted no time to block the supply routes.⁵³ After 1988, Burma received huge consignments of Chinese military hardware. The KIO lost huge areas during the Tatmadaw’s winter offensive of 1992–93. In February 1994, they declared a ceasefire like many Burmese rebel armies had already done. But though the RAW-KIO relations failed to grow after the ceasefire, the KIO kept its promise of not allowing any northeast Indian rebel group to be based in areas it controls. Nor did they supply weapons to the northeast Indian rebels or train them. After 1997, India discontinued all forms of support to the Burmese rebel armies it had so far helped.

And if India denied her territory to the KIO, the CNF or the NUPA, the Burmese started attacking the NSCN bases though except for one occasion, it avoided attacking the ULFA and Manipuri rebel bases. The major hiccup in this emerging relationship was the capture of 192 Manipuri rebels and the seizure of 1,600 units of weaponry by the Tatmadaw during operations around Tamu in November 2001. India did not take kindly to the Burmese refusal to hand over the rebels, that included some of the top guns of the Meitei insurgency, including UNLF chairman Rajkumar Meghen alias Sanayaima.⁵⁴ But now India has started giving Burma tanks, artillery pieces and an assortment of other heavy weapons after she agreed to attack all northeastern rebel bases in its territory.

Given Bhutan’s economic and strategic dependence on India, one would have least expected her enemies to find shelter in the land of the Druk Yul. Indian intelligence and its military establishment were slow to react

when the ULFA and the NDFB started moving into the southern foothills of Bhutan in 1992–93. The first ULFA bases in Bhutan were on the border—Guabari, Ngalam and Kalikhola. But by the end of the decade, the ULFA had set up at least seventeen camps in the four southern districts of the kingdom. An Assamese security analyst, with impeccable sources in the state’s intelligence, has listed thirty bases run by the ULFA, the NDFB and the Kamtapur Liberation Organisation (KLO) in southern Bhutan at the peak of their presence in the kingdom.⁵⁵ These existed in the arc between Daifam in eastern Bhutan to Samste in western Bhutan on the eve of the “Operation All Clear” launched by the Royal Bhutanese army on December 15, 2003.

“Operation All Clear” was comprehensive and relentless, lasting for more than a month, during which all the 30 camps of the rebels were demolished. India’s army chief at that time, General N.C Vij said at least 650 militants had been neutralized—killed or captured. Media reports said between 90 to 120 rebels were killed by sixteen Bhutanese soldiers. The Bhutanese army had to raise 5000 troops for six years and establish twenty army camps on its southern borders before it could launch “Operation All Clear” against the rebels.⁵⁶ Indian military sources say that not only did Delhi provided substantial supplies of weapons and ammunition but the broad strategic vision for “Operation All Clear” was drawn up in close consultation with the Indian army. One Indian military official based in Assam claimed the Bhutanese “had been perfect in carrying out the plan of action we drew up for them.”⁵⁷

Future Portents

“Operation All Clear” may provide the future model for military cooperation between South Asian neighbors in an era of war against terrorism. So far they backed insurgent forces against each other but now many of them are joining ranks in trans-national joint/coordinated operations to control and

neutralize insurgent armies. These may enjoy the blessings of the U.S. The era of "Insurgent Crossfire" in South Asia is perhaps not yet over but the era of "Counter-Insurgency and Cooperation" may just be beginning. So far India reposed faith in tit-for-tat gestures to counter Pakistani, Chinese or Bangladeshi backing to Indian insurgents. But since withdrawing support to the Shanti Bahini in Bangladesh's CHT region and the Arakanese rebels of Burma, India has refrained from backing rebels in neighbouring countries. Instead it has resorted to building up diplomatic pressure and offered concessions to countries who act against anti-Indian rebels.

The Indian military machine, perhaps with the most extensive and longest commitment in counter-insurgency anywhere in the world, is seeking dividends from the expected cooperation with the neighboring militaries to lend a cutting edge to its overall counter-insurgency strategy—in which military action against the rebels is complemented by covert intelligence operations that divides the rebel ranks and is usually followed up by political deals to co-opt rebel leaders and recalcitrant ethnic groups through autonomist power sharing arrangements. These arrangements are formalized in accords that help bring in huge quantum of federal largesse for the insurgency-affected region and help the former insurgents turned politicians to have a share of the cake. In the last more than fifty years, the Indian state has stuck to the Kautilyan precepts in its counter-insurgency response in the Northeast and that has provided the model for similar efforts elsewhere in the country, albeit with some modifications to help adjust to local peculiarities.

A revolt like in the Mizo hills or even a serious breakdown of law and order like in Assam has been met with huge deployment of military units in "aid to civil authorities." The Unified Command structure that was set up in Assam in 1997–98 is now being offered as a model structure to conduct counter-

insurgency operations. And these operations have all the four elements of the Kautilyan statecraft—Sham (reconciliation through negotiations), Dam (monetary inducements through transfer of federal largesse), Danda (use of force through military operations) and Bhed (Split in rebel ranks). The military response is the immediate and the most visible aspect of the response but it is always mixed with federal largesses, engineered splits and attempts at reconciliation.

The structure for the military response has also evolved over the years in Northeast. The Unified Command structure, developed in Assam since 1997 is headed by the state's chief civilian administrator (usually the chief secretary of the state government) but it gives much power to the army in actual operational planning and coordinate use of all military and other para-military forces. It also provides a platform for necessary coordination and intelligence sharing between the army, the para-military forces and the police. Attempts to set up a trans-regional coordinating body for conducting counter-insurgency operations across all the northeastern states has, however not been successful so far because of turf battles and inter-state rivalries. Such rivalries can even go to the extent of the Tripura's police chief accusing the Mizoram government (run by former MNF underground rebels) of backing rebels in his state.⁵⁸

The usual military response to insurgency in Northeast has followed a three phase strategy: (a) "prevent, protect and preserve" phase when the army gets its bearings on the movement through a mix of "area domination," static guarding of targets (human and material) and "cordon and search" operations intended to segregate the rebels from the people and deny them supplies; (b) the "infiltration and isolation" phase that involves penetrating rebel groups to generate credible intelligence followed by select counter-action to keep the rebels on the run and the unleashing of a propaganda effort to deny the rebels local support; (c) the "attack

and finish” phase when rebel bases or mobile squads are attacked in large numbers and their organization is split through engineered defections. In recent years, the army has also started direct deals with rebel groups to play them off against other such groups.

In Manipur, the army concluded Suspension Of Operations (SOO) agreements with eight Kuki and Zomi militant groups in 2005. These groups were later drafted into operations against Meitei rebel groups like the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) by the army. The military intelligence, which had previously limited themselves to organising surrenders from rebel groups, have started getting into deals directly with rebel groups to balance off each other. Quite often, the state governments and their police as well as federal intelligence agencies are upset with the army when it has struck such deals with rebel groups. The Manipur government, for instance, demanded details on the SOOs signed with the eight Kuki-Zomi rebel groups by the army and made it clear that those agreements would be summarily rejected if they involved the state’s territorial issues.⁵⁹

The federal government has taken care of the much of the security related expenditure incurred by the Northeastern states. The annual quantum of central assistance released for security expenditure to Northeastern states has gone up from 104.86 crores (1,048 million) Indian rupees in 2000–01 to 150.41 crores in 2004–05 writes off the huge cost of security caused by insurgent action. Almost half these amounts have gone into Assam where the cost of guarding economic installations like oil and gas pipelines and refineries (that are bombed by rebels) calls for large deployment of paramilitary personnel. Over the last five years (2001 to 2005), the fatalities in insurgent action in the Northeast has dropped from 600 in 2001 to 393 in 2005.⁶⁰

The downward trend in insurgent activities in northeast India may be attributed to (a) political reconciliation in some erstwhile troubled areas like the Bodo-dominated areas of Assam; (b) the ongoing negotiations with

the separatists in Nagaland and the fact that the ceasefire, by and large, is holding there; (c) the splits and the weakening of the insurgent groups in Tripura; (d) the growing lack of popular support for groups such as the ULFA which has resorted to terror tactics like bomb explosions in crowded areas; (e) the control established by intelligence over the Kuki-Zomi rebel groups in Manipur and their use against Meitei rebel groups. The influence of the great Kautilya on post-colonial India’s counter-insurgency strategy remains as preponderant as ever. But reconciliation that he suggested is now attempted not merely with the insurgents but also with India’s neighbors who are willing to lend a hand in neutralizing the rebels fighting India.

For the Indian nation-state, there are some lessons to absorb from its more than five decades of counter-insurgency experience in Northeast.

- *Prevention rather than cure*—it is important to respond to grievances amongst the smaller ethnic groups if they are unhappy with the federal authorities or regional power-centres like the state governments. Solutions, more substantive than mere transfer of federal largesses, have to be offered centering round comprehensive devolution of power and support for development of infrastructure—and this has to happen before the ethnicities turn to armed guerrilla warfare.

Assam chief Hiteswar Saikia’s offer in 1993–94 to create autonomous councils for many ethnic groups rather than offer one to the Bodos and than face similar demands from other communities is a case in point.

- *Create stake-holders, not surrogates*—Delhi should offer solutions for the whole ethnic group and not just assume a problem has been solved by buying off the rebels. For instance, in Tripura, it is important to tackle the problem of tribal landlessness than

- just bringing about the surrender of rebel groups and providing them attractive rehabilitation packages. Such a policy only encourages poor tribals from landless families to take to insurgency. The Tripura government can get upto 65 km² of fertile lands that has been under water for thirty years by decommissioning the 10 MW Gumti Hydel project which has stopped producing electricity during summers because of lack of water in reservoir.
- *Attempt reconciliation, not just buy time*—Long drawn negotiations, like the one with the NSCN, may weaken or discredit existing rebel groups but they don't end up providing durable political solutions to issues that are political. The settlement has worked in Mizoram because it offered the rebels—and the Mizo people—a comprehensive political package including statehood. Long drawn negotiations may weaken groups like the NSCN but unless the issue is resolved, some other rebel outfit may emerge with the unfinished agenda. This explains why in most states, rebel groups have withered away only to be replaced by other groups equally violent.
 - *Split work, but comprehensive settlements work better*—Split, so frequently used by India in northeast, has been useful to weaken rebel groups when they are fighting but the benefits are primarily tactical—it creates multiple contenders for the same political space and fails to bring about a consensus needed for a durable and a comprehensive settlement—that is why the settlement has worked in Mizoram because Laldenga could carry the entire MNF behind it and that is precisely why the 1975 Shillong Accord failed in Nagaland. Splits also create unwelcomed and bitter divisions in the ethnic societies that make them susceptible to long term instability and violence.
 - *Humanise military operations, improve intelligence*—If India believes the Northeast is part of its country; it is incumbent to push the military to operate with a human face. Brutalised armies are no good as fighting machines, as former Indian army chief General Shankar Roychoudhuri once told me in a BBC interview—and one only has to look to the brutalities perpetrated by the Pakistanis in 1971 and the cause for the loss of its eastern wing is not hard to see. The Indian army and para-military forces must be professionally trained to avoid “overkill,” intelligence gathering has to be improved to provide precise locations of rebels so that harassment of the civilian population can be minimized and the forces must take part in genuine and not cosmetic civic action programmes that will benefit the local population.
 - *Allow better linkages with the neighborhood*—India should not merely improve ties with its neighbors to use them for counter-insurgency purposes—it should allow local populations to benefit from cross-border linkages through order trade and better people-to-people contact. If India can get neighboring countries to allow ethnicities like the Nagas and the Mizos to have regular and unhindered access to areas of their ethnic cousins in Burma and Bangladesh, it will go a long way to reduce the urge for attaining freedom through armed guerrilla warfare.
 - *Do away with the mainstream*—Last but not the least, India must give up this grand idea of a “national mainstream” because there is not one in this hugely diverse country. India is a flower garden where the multiplicity of the

identity is a fact of life, so no ethnic group, however small, should be compelled to undergo mainstreaming. India's burgeoning economy and her obvious success in so many different spheres should give its leaders the necessary confidence to handle diversity at the political level. In view of its own record in containing the insurgencies in the Northeast, Indian leaders should not be unduly haunted by the spectre of balkanization that existed in the 1960s.

- *Give up ethnicity as the policy basis in Northeast*—ever since the creation of Nagaland as a separate state and the subsequent break-up of Assam, ethnic groups in Northeast India have found that assertion of their ethnic identity, if necessary through violence, has paid. The Indian state, in its efforts to contain stronger movements, have also patronized and boosted smaller ethnicities like the use of the Kuki-Zomi groups against the Meiteis since 2005. That has to change. Further fragmentation of existing states in the Northeast has to be stopped and multi-ethnic solutions have to be worked out.

Endnotes

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⁴ Udayon Mishra (*The Periphery Strikes Back*, Shimla, 2000) and Sanjib Baruah (*India against Itself*, OUP, Delhi, 1999) see the Northeast problem primarily in the context of the region's confrontation with the Indian nation-state.

⁵ See Muivah's interview with the author in *Irrawaddy* magazine, Chiang Mai (Thailand), January 2007.

⁶ For details of state-sponsored guerrilla campaigns in South Asia, see Subir Bhaumik, *Insurgent Crossfire, Lancers*, Delhi, 1996.

⁷ Muivah, interview with Subir Bhaumik, "A Naga Ultimatum" *Irrawaddy* magazine, Chiang Mai, January 2006.

⁸ Muivah argued his entire case for "Greater Naga state" and "special federal relationship" in this rather detailed interview with the author, *Irrawaddy* magazine, Chiang Mai, January 2006.

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²¹ “In the name of Father?: Christian Insurgents and armed groups in Northern Uganda, Tripura and South Moluccas,” by Koen Vlassenroot, Bruno De Cordier and Jerome Adam, Conflict Research Group, Ghent University, Belgium.

²² See details of the Tripura government order in report entitled “New Succession Law for Tripura Missing Families” in *Tripura Times*, November 22, 2004, Agartala.

²³ The ATTF demanded one million rupees to hand over the remains of Yugobroto Chakrabarty, tea planter of Tripura who died of renal failure while a hostage in ATTF’s Satchherri camp. This revelation by his brother, Santimoy Chakrabarty was reported in a special report on Tripura in BBC Bengali Service “Bishes Protibedon” aired at 2200 hours Indian Time on July 16, 2004.

²⁴ V.Venkata Rao, “Meitei Nationalism,” paper presented at Northeast India History Congress’s annual conference at Imphal, 1983.

²⁵ The RPF-PLA’s standpoint was reflected in several issues of their mouthpiece DAWN between September 1978 and July 1979. (All Dawn issues available with author).

²⁶ Prepak’s political manifesto, available with author, called for “total nationalization of trade and commerce, revival of voluntary labor in Manipur and establishment of a government based on a mix of Communist and ancient Meitei ideals.”

²⁷ UNLF publicity secretary Tombi alleged KNA guerrillas were used as scouts against their base in Dingpi area by the Indian army. Four guerrillas of the UNLF’s 293 battalion were killed by the army, see *Imphal Free Press Journal*, May 5, 2007.

²⁸ For details of the conflict between the central leadership and the Assam leadership of the Congress, see Udayon Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation-state in Assam and Nagaland* (Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2000).

²⁹ See Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back*, *ibid*.

³⁰ Quoted in Hussain, Monirul (edited), 2005. *Coming out of Violence: Essays on Ethnicity, Conflict Resolution and Peace Process in Northeast India*, Delhi, Regency Publications.

³¹ “Asombasi Purbobangeeya Jonogoshtiloi ULFA-r Ahwan (in Assamese) [ULFA’s call to the East Bengali peoples living in Assam], carried by Budhbar (literally Wednesday), an Assamese weekly, Guwahati, June 1992, P. 5–6.

³² ULFA’s military wing chief Paresh Barua, interview with author, broadcast on BBC Bengali “Bishes Protibedon” (Special Report) at 2200 hours IST, October 13, 2006.

³³ The author was present at the 20th ABSU convention at Banshbari in 1987 when the decision to start the movement for a separate Bodo state was adopted with the slogan “Divide Assam Fifty-Fifty.”

³⁴ Assam Chief Minister Hiteswar Saikia in press conference on May 13, 1993.

³⁵ See Subir Bhaumik “Flower Garden or Fluid Corridor: A Conceptual Framework for Refugee Inflows and Internal Displacement in Northeast India” in O.P. Mishra and Anindyo. J. Majumdar (eds) “The Elsewhere People: Cross-border Migration, Refugee Protection and State Response” . 2003. Lancers. Delhi.

³⁶ Indian military intelligence Lieutenant Colonels G. Shankar and G. Srikumar, both involved in the anti-NDFB operations, disclosed in conversation with the author that the BLTF and the Bengal Tigers were both armed by them and the fighters of these groups regularly accompanied the Indian army on attacks on NDFB bases.

³⁷ Indian Home Minister Shivraj Patil told the Lok Sabha on October 18, 2006 that the government was still keen to open talks with the ULFA and the other insurgent groups in Northeast and that military operations could not solve what was essentially a political problem, see Times of India, October 19, 2006.

³⁸ For a detailed study of South Asia’s externally-supported insurgencies, see Subir Bhaumik, *Insurgent Crossfire* (Delhi: Lancers, 1996).

³⁹ B.B. Nandi, the former additional secretary of RAW, set up close links with the KIA during his tenure as RAW station chief in Bangkok. He developed a personal rapport with KIO chief Maran Brangsein and settled on a quid pro quo: the KIA promised not to help any northeast Indian rebel group any more, the RAW promised weapons and ammunition that the KIA needed to fight the Burmese junta. This relationship was short-lived, however, and did not last beyond 1993. The KIA announced a ceasefire with Burmese forces in 1994 and have not resumed fighting with the Tatmadaw (Burmese army). B.B. Nandi gave a detailed interview to this author on May 25, 2003, providing a graphic account of the RAW-KIO relationship.

⁴⁰ Subir Bhaumik, “Strategic Pawn: Indian Policy in the Chittagong Hill Tracts” in “Living on the Edge: Essays on the Chittagong Hill Tracts (eds: Subir Bhaumik, Meghna Guha Thakurta and Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury) [Kathmandu : South Asia Forum for Human Rights, 1997] Pages 127–139.

⁴¹ Subir Bhaumik, “Politics of Sanctuary: Indian Rebel Bases in Bangladesh” in “Bangladesh: Treading the Taliban Trail” (edited by Jaideep Saikia) [Delhi: Vision Books, 2006] p. 186–206.

⁴² M.S.Kohli & Kenneth Conboy, *Spies in the Himalayas: Secret Missions and Perilous Climbs*, (Delhi: Harper Collins-India Today joint venture publication, 2002). It not only reveals how Indian intelligence helped train the Tibetan rebels but also how India used some of its best mountaineers to place plutonium devices on Himalayan peaks to monitor Chinese nuclear activity in the 1960s.

⁴³ General K.V. Krishna Rao, former Indian army chief and later Governor of Nagaland, in interview with author, broadcast on “South Asia Report” program of BBC World Service, July 6, 1995. Rao had access to details of “interrogation reports” of surrendered and captured Naga rebels and also was privy to all confidential reports of Military Intelligence.

⁴⁴ Colonel S.S. Medhi had published in 1988 from Karachi his recollections of the failed “Operation Gibraltar,” a 1965 operation initiated by the Pakistani Special Forces to train and induct thousands of mujahids from Pakistani Kashmir into Indian Kashmir for intense guerrilla war after which the Pakistan army was to make the big push to liberate Kashmir. While discussing the 1965 war in an interview with the author on February 3, 1990 at Oxford, Medhi disclosed how the SSG had trained and armed the Naga (and later the Mizo rebels) from Northeast India. He was part of the SSG complement based in East Pakistan.

⁴⁵ Ibid. Details of the Sino-Pakistani Coordination Bureau were revealed by S.S. Medhi in the same interview at Oxford, February 3, 1990.

⁴⁶ IB official Subir Dutta, just retired from service and winner of President’s Police Medal, was in charge of its Moreh outpost when Damkoshiak walked in with his entire group of China-returned guerrillas, surprising the army and the local police.

- ⁴⁷ P.N. Banerji, RAW's joint secretary (east), quoted in Subir Bhaumik, *Insurgent Crossfire* (Delhi, Lancers, 1996). p. 33.
- ⁴⁸ Major Rafiqul Islam, *A Tale of Millions*, (Dhaka : Bangladesh Books International, 1981).
- ⁴⁹ PCJSS/ Shanti Bahini leader Priti Kumar Chakma, then in charge of its "foreign liaison unit" based in Agartala (Tripura), in an interview with author on March 26, 1995.
- ⁵⁰ Details of the escape of the MNF leaders is provided by Nirmal Nibedon, *Mizoram: The Dagger Brigade* (Delhi: Lancers, 1980).
- ⁵¹ Subir Bhaumik, "Politics of Sanctuary: Indian Rebel Bases in Bangladesh" in "Bangladesh: Treading the Taliban Trail" (edited by Jaideep Saikia) [Delhi: Vision Books, 2006] p.186–206.
- ⁵² Khagen Sarma, Inspector-General (Special Branch) of Assam Police, in a press conference at Guwahati on June 14, 2006, revealed the twelve locations used by ULFA military wing chief Paresh Barua as residences since he moved to Dhaka in 1991. He also provided details of ULFA cadres taken to Pakistan for training from the ULFA's bases in Bangladesh.
- ⁵³ RAW former secretary B.B. Nandi, interview with author on May 25, 2003 at his residence in Calcutta, where he lives after a chequered career spanning over three decades.
- ⁵⁴ Vivek Katju, Indian ambassador to Burma in 2001, interview to author on December 26, 2001, expressed anger and disgust, because the Burmese were unwilling to send back the 192 arrested guerrillas to India for standing trial.
- ⁵⁵ Jaideep Saikia, "Terrorism Sans Frontiers: ULFA Digs Deeper into Bhutan," in O.P. Mishra and Sucheta Ghosh (eds.), *Terrorism and Low-Intensity Conflict in South Asia Region* (Delhi: Manak, 2003). p. 438–60.
- ⁵⁶ Pravin Kumar, "External Linkages and Internal Security: Assessing Bhutan's Operation All Clear," *Strategic Analysis*, Delhi, Vol 28 No 3, July–September 2004.
- ⁵⁷ Retired Major General Gaganjit Singh, former GOC, 20 Division based on Assam-Bhutan border in interview to author, February 3, 2004.
- ⁵⁸ Tripura police director General G.M. Srivastava alleged that Mizoram is now the "regrouping zone for Tripura rebels," interview telecast on Northeast TV channel, December 1, 2006.
- ⁵⁹ Manipur chief minister Okram Ibobi Singh in a press conference at Imphal, reported in *Imphal Free Press Journal*, August 28, 2005.
- ⁶⁰ Annual Reports, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India 2000–01 to 2004–05.

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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.

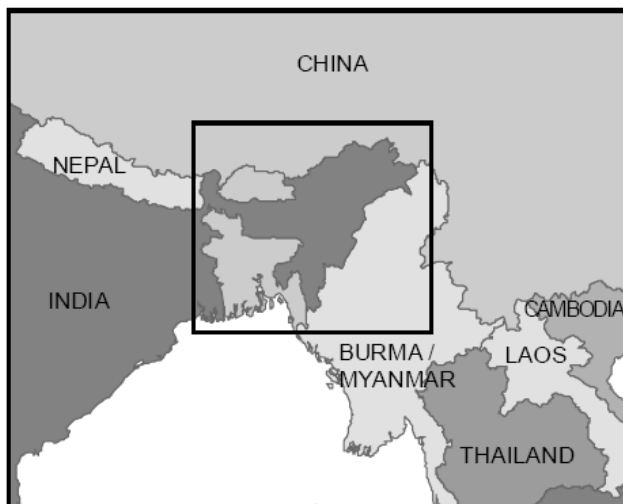
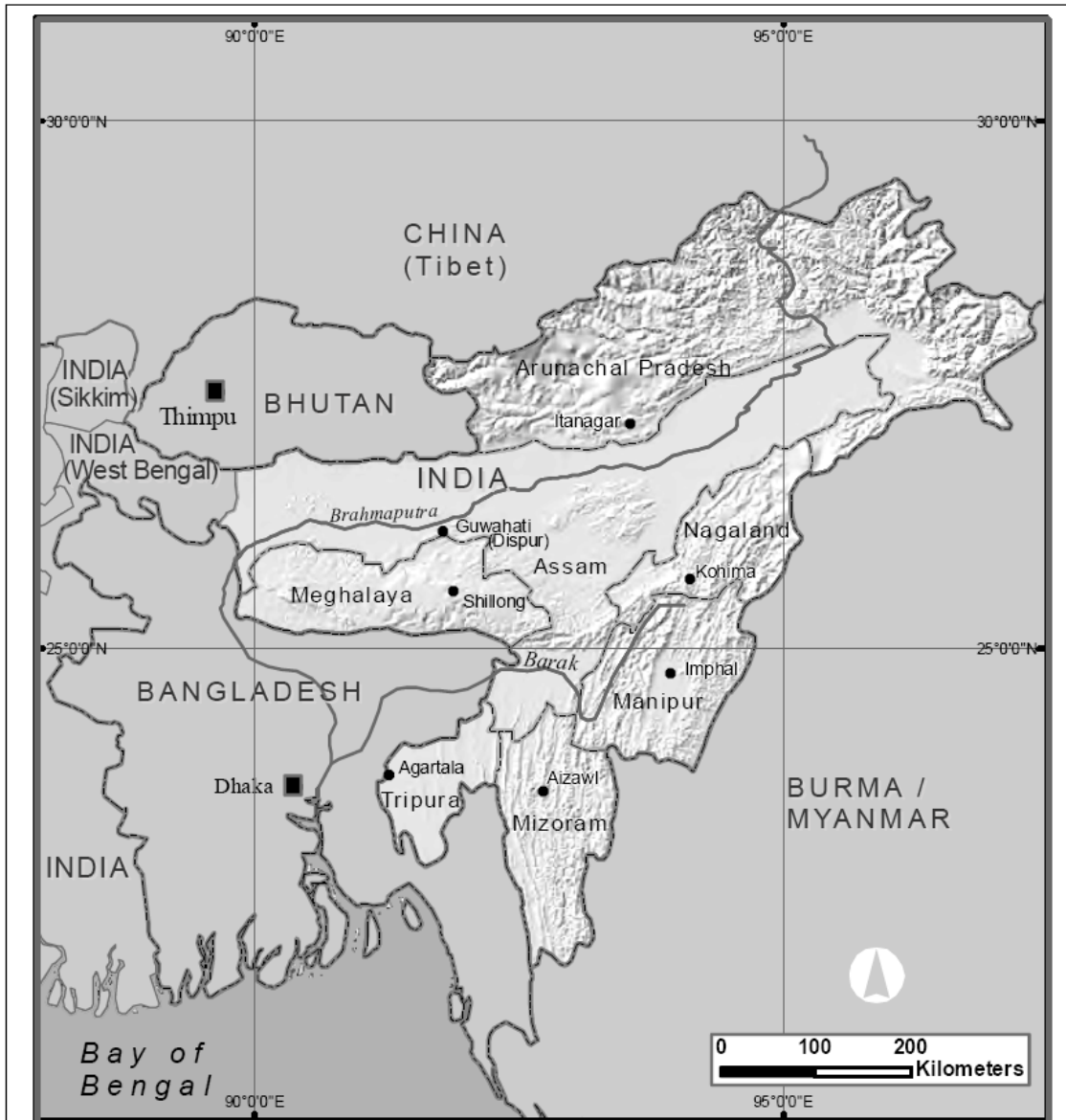
Northeast India has been the theater of the earliest and longest-lasting insurgency in the country—in the Naga Hills—where violence centering on independentist demands commenced in 1952, followed by the Mizo rebellion in 1966 and a multiplicity of more recent conflicts that have proliferated especially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