



# The Northeast Imbroglia: A Sociological Perspective

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## Abstract

The “Northeast” region which comprises the eight sister states of the North eastern part of India has received some attention in the recent years from some scholars, the media and statesmen. The Government of India has begun to show its concern on the region although not much has been seen on the ground. The problem in the region is multi-faceted ranging from under-development to political movements, inter-state and ethnic conflicts. Most of these issues have both historical and contemporary contexts. This paper attempts to examine these problems and the mechanism to conflict resolution in the region. The paper argues that the problems in the Northeast would require the proper understanding of the regional context and employ multi-pronged approach in the resolution of conflicts, peace-building and addressing under-development. This paper is mainly based on secondary sources. Some primary sources are also employed based on fieldwork.

**Keywords:** Northeast India, Political Movements, Ethnic Conflicts, Under-development, Multi-pronged Approach.

## Introduction

The Northeast is a geographical and regional concept. The region denotes the Northeast part of India comprising eight sister-states, namely, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim. This region is inhabited by various ethnic groups and cultures which are heterogeneous. Racially, they belong to Mongoloid and Caucasoid. The region is least known to the outside world until recent past due to its under-development. The main attention of the Government of India and also the mainland Indians were drawn through the various political movements, unrest in the region, and the importance of the geo-political situation. The various movements have bearing on the socio-political and historical contexts coupled with under-development issues. There are also inter-ethnic conflicts for various reasons. Although, the Central Government and the respective Northeast States have been giving efforts to improve the situation in the region, it is far from eradication of peoples’ unrest and under-development among other problems. Therefore, a new thinking would be necessary to address the conflict situations in the region.

## Historical and Geo-Political Setting

In order to get a better insight of the political history of the Northeast region, it will be pertinent to situate the historical development of the Northeast into political and administrative unit/s in South Asia.<sup>1</sup> Prior to the advent of colonial rules in South Asia- “the Portuguese, Dutch, Danish, French and ultimately the British from the 16th to the 20th centuries, there never existed any kingdoms called India, Burma or Pakistan in the South Asian Sub-Continent’s history” (Kaka, 2014). The three nation-states “created by the British were formerly simply known as the Ava kingdom, Hindustan or the Mughal Empire and Bengal Province. However, with the departure of the British in 1947, these three huge modern nation-states were created in South Asia” (ibid.) and Southeast Asia, and incorporated in them the “smaller South Asian and Southeast Asian nations” and/or ethnic groups “who formerly had their own independent national histories and independent geographical territories before the transfer of power. But after the transfer of power, these smaller nations were declared as Burmese, Indians and Pakistanis. Some of these smaller nations voluntarily joined the new unions but others were against their expressed wills, forcefully integrated with the new Unions” (ibid.). In the context of Northeast India, erstwhile independent royal kingdoms like the Manipuris, the Ahoms, the Tripuris and various indigenous peoples like the Nagas, Khasis, Garos, Mizos, Boros (Bodos) among others became part of India. It is also to be noted that the nationalities and ethnic groups of the Northeast region did not either participate or were not quite aware of the Indian independence movement except for some parts of Assam. In the case of the princely state of Manipur, they had their own constitution made in 1947. It was an independent state till their merger with the Union of India in September 21, 1949 through the instrument of “Manipur Merger Agreement, 1949”.

The high exposure to international borders with China, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Bhutan and Nepal has been another geo-political concern. This matter which is “under the administrative control of Ministry of Home Affairs”<sup>2</sup>, (Government of India) has been a great responsibility for decades in terms of management of the borders. Of the total 15,106.7 km of India’s international land border with neighbouring countries, the Northeast region commands 5182 km which is more than 99 percent of its total geographical boundary (cf. Krishnan et al, 2020). These porous borders have been a broad corridor for the insurgency operations, foreign influx into the region, and even a hub for drug trafficking activities. As much as insurgency activities are concerned, it has been reported in the media about the movements of the cadres in the international borders with the neighbouring countries. Foreign influx into the Northeast region, particularly from Bangladesh<sup>3</sup> and Myanmar has been a threat to the stability of the region. Assam and Tripura have been facing the brunt of such immigration, particularly from Bangladesh. Many other states of the region such as Mizoram, Nagaland and Meghalaya also have their own shares of problem due to foreign influx.

<sup>1</sup> The Northeast Indian region is in many respects a part of South Asia. It is in the context of Political location that the region became part of South Asia.

<sup>2</sup> See Krishnan et al (2020), cf. Borah (2021).

<sup>3</sup> For the nature influx from Bangladesh at different period, see Upadhyay (2005).

## Inter-State Border Issues

The inter-State border conflicts have been major issues in the region in the post-independence period. There are many cases of this conflict associated with various states. The problem has been inherited from the vague administrative unit demarcations of British colonial regime coupled with further administrative divisions in the post-independence period. It was the British regime which clubbed several ethnic groups into the erstwhile Assam Province. In the post-independence period, the further division of the Province became a major problem when different ethnic groups emerged as separate political units as either union territory or state. It is not surprising to find that Assam has maximum inter-state border conflicts with all the neighbouring states, namely, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh. These conflicts have been continuing for decades without being able to settle. Recently, the border dispute between Assam and Mizoram has depicted the kind of the intensity of inter-state clash of the region. The border dispute of Assam with Nagaland is also very grave, so also the Assam-Meghalaya and Assam-Arunachal Pradesh inter-state border conflicts. These are long drawn conflicts which are being dragged on till today. Some cases are pending in the supreme court while some are in the level of conflicting states with the central government in the helm for necessary intervention and arbitration.

As a case in point, it will be pertinent to mention the Assam-Mizoram inter-state border conflict of 26 July 2021 which has attracted the central government and the people of Northeast at large once again. The clash took place in such an intensity that “resulted in the death of six and injured at least 50 Assam police personnel, including the Cachar district” which is part of the long standing dispute covering “164.6 kilometres (km) of Assam-Mizoram border” (Sarmah et al 2022; cf. Singh, 2021). This is not an isolated incident between the two states. Among others, the major violent clashes had also taken place in 2006, 2018 and 2020 in the recent past (cf. Das, 2021). The root cause of the dispute has been the flaws in the administrative arrangements during the British regime and the post-independence India territorial demarcations (cff. Singh, 2021; Sarmah et al 2022) coupled with the divergent points of the respective states. Even today, there seems to be no sign of progress towards the settlement.

## Socio-Economic Issues

The issue of underdevelopment is a huge problem in the Northeast India. It has links with many collateral issues such as alienation, people’s protests and social movements. With the exception of some parts of Assam, one can prominently see the scar of undevelopment in the region. There are also its related issues of infrastructure deficit. Besides, the disparity of development within the region and states have also caused discontentment among the deprived sections of the population. The hilly peoples/ tribals are by and large the victims of the type of disparity and exploitation by the so-called dominant and more advanced plains peoples, particularly in the states of Assam, Manipur and Tripura. This exploitative scheme has also been possible due to dominance of the plains peoples, especially in the realm of development projects, setting up of institutions, government manned jobs and under-representation in the political institutions (State Assemblies *inter alia*).

The institutions and developmental projects pertain to both the state and central governments. In fact, one would easily observe that all the key offices/institutions are confined to the plains. One is reminded of the pathetic road condition of Nagaland State when the Prime Minister of India, Atal Behari Vajpayee visited Kohima in October 2003. It was reported that “Vajpayee told a gathering that he was pleased to sanction the amount because he had to travel the 70-km bumpy road [from Dimapur to Kohima, the capital of Nagaland state] as his helicopter could take off for Kohima due to bad weather. He even remarked, “I wonder, if this road is the best in Nagaland one can simply imagine what could be the conditions of the others” (Statesman, 2016). On the other hand, the Prime Minister Vajpayee’s sanction of Rs. 400 crore for the four-laning road project of the Dimapur-Kohima National Highway 39 (later changed to National Highway 29) could not be implemented even after twelve years. It was only on 3 November 2015 that Nitin Gadkari, the then Union Minister for Road Transport and Highways laid the foundation of the project (cf. *ibid.*). Such was/is the condition of the road, the non-implementation of promises, and the unaccountability coupled with corruption in the implementation of the sanctioned projects on the part of the implementing authorities. The difficult law and order situation has also added to the already perennial vexed problem. The lopsided allocation or for that matter distribution of developmental funds between the plains and the Hills has also been a perennial problem. Besides, there has also been an alleged siphoning of Hill (tribal) funds to the plains.<sup>4</sup> Corruption and nepotism in various job related appointments and schemes/projects further complicated the state of affairs.<sup>5</sup>

The factor of education system is also a major issue. There appears to be a plain-hill or the advantaged and the disadvantaged divide in this matter. Manipur is one grim example wherein the hill peoples have been deprived of in many ways. The absence of even a University in the Hill area is just one example to begin with. Of the several important educational institutes manned by either the state government or the central government, there is no institution located in the hills. This certainly reminds of the acute neglect of the Hill area which occupies 90 percent of the State’s territory with over 40 percent population. The issue also applies to colleges and schools. The problem of enrollment of tribal (Hill) students in colleges and universities/ institutes (both in technical and non-technical) quite unproportionate to the tribal population is certainly a problematique. The same is true in the under-representation of teacher appointees in the educational institutions. This is compounded by the acute shortage of teacher appointees in schools in the Hills. The poor infrastructure, management and maintenance of these schools in the Hills have been a talking point of the educated people in the Hills. This is certainly a pathetic concern. The case of Manipur is in some way true with other Northeast states like Assam and Tripura where the tribals are minorities. Quite related to the education system

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<sup>4</sup> Some of my informants (tribal leaders) of Manipur narrated me how tribal sub-plan funds have been transferred to the development in the valley from time to time.

<sup>5</sup> I was told by the native people that corruption in the State of Manipur is very high for various appointments and sanctioning of projects/schemes by charging a huge amount of money which rates vary according to cadres and grades, and also projects/schemes. This also includes the unaccounted rate for moving files and even issue of certificates in educational institutes.

and its related issues is the under-representation of the minorities (mainly tribals in this case) in government jobs which have become a huge problem.

The Imposition of Language language is quite another problem. The imposition of the dominant language and cultural chauvinism had a huge impact in some states of the region. Assam is one of the states that have a bitter memory of what happened a few decades ago. The division of the state of Assam was the direct or indirect impact of linguistic and cultural politics of Assamese language and cultural chauvinism. The separation of Meghalaya (as state) and Mizoram (as union territory) out of erstwhile Assam are examples. Such exploitation and discrimination through imposition of language and cultural chauvinism is surely a grave concern in other states of the region. Manipur is also one of the most affected states of this syndrome. The imposition of Manipuri (Meiteilon, language of the dominant Manipuri/Meitei ethnic group) is still a grave threat to the minority peoples of the Hills. The continuation of Manipuri language imposition on the tribals can spark of any time that will be quite detrimental.

### **Insurgency, Militarisation and Peace Deficit**

Insurgency and self-determination<sup>6</sup> movements have been very common phenomena in the region. While some movements are oriented towards autonomy movements within the Indian Union, there are other groups who strive for independent status, be it, resistance movement or external self determination. As a matter of example, the Naga movement was for a sovereign Naga nation-state. The Mizo movement and the movement of United Liberation of Asom (ULFA)<sup>7</sup> among others also belong to this category. There are other movements as well (insurgency movements)<sup>8</sup> which are oriented towards demanding for territorial autonomy such as Union Territory or Autonomous District. However, one common character among these movements is that they are armed struggles fighting either against the federal state/s to which they are located or the Union of India. With all these armed struggles prevalent in the Northeast region, the Government of India felt the need to suppress the movements. The first national movement of the region- Naga movement which mainly started in the 1940s before Indian independence for a Naga nation state<sup>9</sup> was perceived by the Indian State as a threat to the territorial integrity of the Union of India. Therefore, since the early 1950s, the Government of India decided to suppress the Naga movement through militarization.<sup>10</sup>

Due to the intensive militarisation, the Naga nationalists under the aegis of the Naga National Council (NNC) was compelled to organize into an armed struggle and setting up its own government called Federal Government of Nagaland (FGN) in 1956. When the Government of India found it difficult to suppress the Naga

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<sup>6</sup> Self-determination (external) may be differentiated with Insurgency movement in the sense that self-determination (external) points to a struggle outside the purview of the existing nation-state, where as insurgency may mean both external and internal self-determination.

<sup>7</sup> For more details of United Liberation of Asom (ULFA) activities, see Misra (2000), Hazarika (1994).

<sup>8</sup> For more discussion on insurgency in the Northeast see Hazarika (1994), Misra (2000).

<sup>9</sup> The Naga nationalists under the Naga National Council (NNC) declared independence on 14 August 1947.

<sup>10</sup> For detail account on the Naga movement, see Vashum (2005), Mullick (1972), Gundevia (1975).

movement, it resorted to an enactment of a powerful armed Act called the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act in 1958 also known as AFSPA, 1958.<sup>11</sup> This Act was a more powerful version of the Quit India Act, 1942 which the British-India Government used against the Indian national movement led by Mahatma Gandhi. Ever since the promulgation of the AFSPA, 1958, much human right violations have been reported<sup>12</sup> perpetrated by the empowered armed forces personnel. The nature of the excessive power vested with the armed forces by the AFSPA, 1958 is such that even an armed personnel (“Any commissioned officer, warrant officer, non-commissioned officer or any other person of equivalent rank in the Armed Forces”) may, in a disturbed area shoot any person with a mere suspicion that the person is an insurgent. The same armed personnel is immuned for being tried in the Indian court of law without the permission of the Central Government of India.<sup>13</sup>

The second phase of militarization in the Northeast came about when many more insurgency movements emerged, such as the Mizo movement<sup>14</sup> under the aegis of Mizo National Front (MNF), movements in Manipur [like the United National Liberation Front (UNLF); People’s Liberation Army (PLA) inter alia], Assam [United Liberation of Asom (ULFA)] among others. The deal with the several movements that emerged from the 1960s, the Government of India considered it necessary to extend the AFSPA, 1958 through amendment of the said Act called the “Armed Forces (Assam and Manipur) Special Powers (Amendment) Act, 1972. Some more amendments were introduced later to extend the AFSPA, 1958 to all the states of the region and also in some other parts of India outside the Northeast region.

The impact of militarization has its own flaws. The excessive power and use of this law has created more problems than it has solved the problems of insurgency for which it was intended. According to Zoramthanga, the Chief Minister of Mizoram and the president of the Mizo National Front (MNF), “the historic Mizo peace accord, which was signed in 1986 was one of the successful accords ever signed not only in the country but in the world” (PTI, 2020). The factor of the only successful Accord so far signed in the Northeast is mainly attributed to the recognition of the leadership its supremo Laldenga by its cadres with the unflinching support of the prominent leader- Zoramtanga who acted as a catalyst in times of conflicting views. He however admitted that that the accord "not up to the satisfaction of either the MNF or the Indian government." It was possible mainly because of the “results of prayers by the people as well as NGO and churches” (PTI, 2000). Apart from Mizoram which has maintained relative peace since the past few decades (free from insurgency), Sikkim which is the latest entrant to the Northeast region is relatively peaceful free from insurgency ridden situation. Nevertheless, the state also has ethnic conflict between the indigenous population and the later

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<sup>11</sup> The AFSPA, 1958 is to be promulgated for six months. However, it was extended through the decades in the case of Nagaland state. In some states like Manipur and Assam, the promulgation of the AFSPA (as amended in 1972) has been done from time to time.

<sup>12</sup> Much of the atrocities Indian armed forces personnel against the Naga populace were unreported as per the documents available in the later years (cf. Nandita et al, 1984).

<sup>13</sup> See particularly Article 4 (a) to (d) and Article 6 of AFSPA, 1958.

<sup>14</sup> Mizoram was a part of the erstwhile undivided Assam state during the period.

immigrated population (the Nepalis) which has become the major player in the state politics and every walks of life (cf. Yogi, 2014).

There had been several protests registered against the promulgation and abuse of the AFSPA for decades. Many more protests were also launched for repeal of the Act. To the Northeast peoples, the Union of India is largely represented in the region by paramilitary and army personnel. Rather than protecting the people, the paramilitary and army personnel have been observed as the violators of human rights. It is no wonder how such acts authorized by the government of India have further alienated the people of the region. Thus, militarisation of the region by the Government of India had literally accentuated the resurgence of the insurgency movements. The absence of peace or peace deficit in the region has also greatly impacted the psyche of the people, progress, and the overall well-being of the people.

### **Identity Consciousness and Ethnic Conflicts**

Identity consciousness also led to formation of ethnic movements. Therefore, it resulted into ethnic conflicts involving both the existing ethnic oriented insurgent groups, civil societies involving the general populace at large. Such phenomenon has been a great setback for the peaceful co-existence and well being of various nationalities and peoples in the Northeast region. Most of the causal factors for these conflicts are deep seated and historically planted in one way or another. For instance, the ethnic conflict in Assam between the Boros and the Santhals /immigrant adivasis had been planted by the British for their own selfish motives. An identical case has been experienced in Manipur where the British had planted the Kukis to Manipur and other parts of the Northeast in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and has now caused conflicts mainly with the Nagas who are said to be indigenous to the land. The case in Tripura where in a few decades the tribals/ indigenous peoples have been reduced to less than 30 per cent (in reverse order of the earlier situation) has been largely due to the partition of Bengal and the chauvinism of the Bengalee settlers in Tripura. It is one of the most pathetic situations of the indigenous plights in the region. There are also conflicts due to ethnic chauvinism. For instance, the exploitation and discrimination of the tribals by the plains peoples Assam, Manipur, and Tripura are good examples. These conflicts have been an on-going problem.

### **Inequitable Policies of the State**

The inequitable policies of the various states in the region are glaringly clear. Even without going through the details, it existing reality in very sectors, be it policies related to development, language, identity, electoral policies, educational among others. To make the inequitable policies little clearer, some instances may be cited. For example, the tribals in the State of Manipur do not have any safeguard that one can speak about. Even the status of VIth Schedule (that some of the Northeast hill peoples have been entitled for decades and is still continuing in some areas) has been denied to the hill peoples of Manipur at the behest of the dominant population. Again, the politics of representation is problematic and denial of the rights of the minorities. For instance, the disparity in the representation of the hill peoples in plains peoples' dominated State Assemblies of Manipur state has been rather unconstitutional. The tribal population is provided only 19 seats out of the total seats of 60; whereas, the

population of the tribals is over 40 percent of the total population of the state as per the census of 2011. Such deprivations of rights have attracted protests and movements of the tribals of the state. The indifference of the state to the concerns of the marginalized sections of the society also affects the lives of the people. Such insensitivity of the state has been observed as an on-going problem.

## Conclusion

There is plethora of problems that confront the Northeast region. The problems are of varied nature. These problems are attributable to both external and internal causal factors. The differing historical and geo-political development of the region has provided a socio-political differentiation and world views between the Northeast region at large and the other populations of the mainland of India. Most of the populations of the region were quite isolated with unique socio-cultural and political setting. Most of the ethnic groups of the region were not associated with the Indian national movement. The incorporations of these Hills and valleys of the region after India's independence was the sole reason for them to be part of the Union of India. For instance, Manipur state was an independent state until 1949 when it merged with the Union of India. The Nagas claimed that they were never part of India until today, and therefore maintains that their struggle against India and Myanmar is a resistance movement. The same is true for many other nationalist groups who are struggling for self-determination. There are also movements for autonomy within the Indian Union. The issue of militarization, human rights violation, and peace deficit can be added to the complex. The experience of the region would suggest that the solution to such political problems ought to be settled politically and not by militarization. The military approach only worsened the situation of insurgency. The demand for repeal of AFSPA by the people of the region including some of the Chief Ministers could be a major step to douse the anger of the people against militarization and the seed of power in Delhi.

The region is further complicated with various problems such as inter-ethnic conflicts, development related issues and its inequitable distribution, the inter-state border conflicts, the divide between the plains and hill peoples, anti-minority/tribal policies in some of the states, be it on language imposition, coercive acquisition of tribal lands, neglect of tribal areas, under-representation of the minorities/tribals in various government institutes/jobs and state assembly *inter alia*. With so much of problems, it is certainly necessary to address the issues in a multi-pronged and integrated approach. Peace is a pre-requisite for the progress of society and over-all development. Therefore, the thorny issues, such insurgency problem needs to be addressed keeping the historical and contemporary situation. For instance, Framework Agreement signed between the Government of India and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland on 3 August 2015 was mired with controversies. Should the stalemate continue the more than two-decade long drawn negotiation for settlement could result into suspension of hard-earned ceasefire and peace process, without yielding any positive result. The same applies to the other inter-ethnic conflicts and inter-state border disputes. They need to be solved on time with the intervention of the central government.



As a matter of policy, the central government should also intervene in the affairs of the minorities in various states of the region to address the issues of genuine demands, be it of autonomy, equitable representation in the government services and other important educational and institutes, the under-development issues among others. The establishment of important institutions of the central government, be it educational institutes, developmental projects, and infra-structure in the hill and relatively un-developed areas needs to be part of the policies of central government and respective states. As for the over-all development issue, the remark of Atal Behari Vajpayee, the Prime Minister of India at Kohima in 2003 is relevant. He states that the “Peace is also a precondition for the development of the North-East. Without peace, there can be no private sector investment and no development. Without development, there can be no employment.” He also states that “The under-development of the North-Eastern region is not necessarily on account of shortage of funds” but “funds must be used judiciously. Corruption is an enemy of development”, and there “should be proper accountability both at the political and bureaucratic levels.” The underlining principle and ethics along with the improvement of infrastructure covering the dilapidated hill areas can play a major role in boosting the development process and progress of the region.

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