

Crossing the Frontiers of Conflict in

The North East and Jammu and Kashmir

From Real Politik to Ideal Politik

Lt. Gen. V.K. Nayar, PVSM, SM(Retd.)



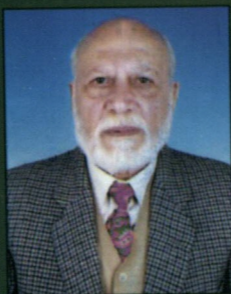
Centre for Policy Research
New Delhi

Since independence internal dissent has increasingly manifested in violence, conflict and terrorism. Conflicts in the North East and the proxy war in Jammu & Kashmir on our frontiers pose a serious challenge to India's security. The core of the problems rests on domestic roots with external influence and spread of arms and drugs aggravating the situation. Deteriorating political ethos, fermenting religious and ethnic divide and lack of responsive and effective governance has further worsened the situation.

The North East and Jammu and Kashmir with their distinctive features need to be addressed separately. The study examines the historical perspective, geopolitical dynamics and contemporary experience of the people in the socio-political, cultural and economic spheres in these areas. The search for a solution goes beyond the physical boundaries of the conflict for it to be lasting and holistic. The author suggests a way forward. The book may be of interest to all, interested in the subject as well as the regions.

Rs 650

US\$ 35



Lt. Gen. V. K. Nayar was commissioned in the Army in 1951; he is a M.Sc. in Defence Studies from the Madras University.

Lt. Gen. Nayar participated in the Sino-Indian War, the Indo-Pak Wars and Counter Insurgency Operations in Mizoram, Manipur and Nagaland. He served as Additional Director General of Military Operation before taking over a corps in Punjab. He was the GOC-in-C Western Command (1987-1989).

He was the Governor of Manipur and Nagaland and was also a member of Government of India's Task Force on Internal Security. Apart from problems of law and order, he has handled politico-social problems of the States of North East, Jammu & Kashmir and Punjab.

He is the author of books, *Threat from Within* (1992) and *Low Intensity Conflicts in India* (2000). Presently, he is with the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi and a trustee of the Centre for North-East Studies and Policy Research.

ISBN 81 7541 218 6

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Under the auspicious of
Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi



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5083
18/01/00

ISBN: 81-7541-218-6

First Published in India in 2005

Crossing the Frontiers of Conflict in The North East and Jammu and Kashmir

© Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi

Published by:

SHIPRA PUBLICATIONS

115-A, Vikas Marg, Shakarpur

Delhi-110092, INDIA

Phone: 91-11-55272210, 91-11-22500954

Fax: 91-11-22458662

E-mail: info@shiprapublications.com

www.shiprapublications.com



005083

Laser Typesetting by:

Sunshine Graphics

Delhi-110032

Printed at:

Choudhary Offset Process

Delhi-110051

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1

Geography and Historical Perspective

Geography

The North Eastern region has some common characteristics of its own, quite distinct from other parts of the country, whether from the point of view of geography, socio-economic conditions, political history and composition of people suffused with migration from outside. It occupies a strategic position, hills and forests cover 70 per cent of the region and cultivatable land is only 15.6 per cent as against the all India figure of 46 per cent. In Assam it is 34 per cent, Tripura 23.5 per cent, Meghalaya 7.99 per cent, Nagaland 11 per cent, Manipur 6.3 per cent and Mizoram 3.7 per cent. Eighty per cent of the people depend on agriculture. 64.80 per cent of the scheduled tribes live in the hilly region, 12.83 per cent in plains and 22.38 per cent in the foot hills. The region is rich in forest produce, gas and hydro power potential. Communications in the region are underdeveloped and hazardous and are a handicap to economic development. Migration of outsiders and foreigners has put pressure on land and its resources.

The region is located in the North Eastern corner of India, between 22° and 29° North latitude and 89° – 4 and 97° – 51. East longitude covering an area of 255083 Sq.Km and is linked to rest of the country by the narrow Siliguri Corridor of 20 Kms width. The total population is 3,84,95,089 (2001 census). The North-East (NE) accounts for 7.7 per cent of country's land mass and 3.75 per cent of its population. It consists of three distinct regions of the Assam Valley, Purbanchal and Meghalaya Mikir Region. The Assam valley is demarcated by the Eastern Himalayas, Patkai Naga Hills and Garo, Khasi and Mikir Hills. The valley is 720 Kms long and 80 Kms wide and covers an area of 58274 Sq.Kms. Purbanchal covers an area of 94800 Sq.Kms. and includes Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura and Mizo and Chachar Hills. It borders China in the

North-East, Myanmar in the South East and Bangladesh in the South West. The Meghalaya Mikir Region includes the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia Hills and the extended Mikir Hills. The region extending from Dhansiri in the East to Singmari in the west is 400 Kms long and 40 Kms wide and covers an area of 35291 Sq. Kms. It comprises the state of Meghalaya and a portion of Karbi Anglong and North Chachar Hills (NC Hills) districts of Assam¹.

It is strategically located and has borders with China, Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangladesh in the North, East and South and militants have found sanctuaries in these countries. Bases in these countries provide easy access to areas in the North-East. The NE has approximately 4200 Kms of India's international boundary. The region has immense geopolitical significance. It is the eastern part of the region, which is dominated by the head waters of major rivers of Hwang HO, Yanktizekiang, Sikang, Irrawadi and the Brahmaputra. The topography is rough and fractured, with dense forests and poor accessibility.

The other area of great significance is the Patkai Range. This forms the water shed between India and Myanmar. This one hill range has influenced the history of the North-East and Assam the most. The Patkai Pass has proved as historic as the Khyberpass in North-West of India (Now in Pakistan). It is through this pass that Ahoms came to Kamrup and established their kingdom, which lasted for 600 years, the longest in Indian history. Again, Burmese entered through this pass in the early 19th century at the instance of Ahom King Chandra Kanta whose reign was plagued by internecine civil conflicts and bloodshed. The presence and overlordship of Burmans brought no relief to the Ahom Kingdom. In fact there was further deterioration which resulted in intervention by the East India company. The Anglo-Burman War ended in favour of the company and by virtue of the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, the Ahom Kingdom virtually went into oblivion. During the second world war, it was again through the Patkai pass that the British built a metalled road connecting Assam valley to Hukawang Valley in Burma for movement of troops and equipment. Even today Naga insurgents and other North Eastern secessionist groups find shelter in Patkai Ranges.

Although Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) is a part of Bangladesh, the area influences to a great deal the security environment in the North-East. It forms an enclave between Mizoram in the East and Tripura in the west. CHT is home to twelve tribes, the largest being Chakmas and Marmas who are predominantly Budhists and Tripuris who are both Hindus and Christians as their counterparts across the border². The partition of the subcontinent has shaped the events in this troubled area. As CHT has a population which was 97 per cent non muslim, it was

logically assumed that it would become a part of India. But the Radcliffe Award did the Chakmas a great injustice by awarding it to Pakistan.

Chakmas had even raised the Indian Tricolour at Rangamati on 15 August, 1947 in anticipation of joining India. This has remained as an act of betrayal in the East Pakistani and now Bangladeshi psyche and the loyalty of these hill people will remain always suspect in their eyes, even after the birth of Bangladesh. The area of CHT has been a heaven for insurgents of the North-East and a distant home land of tribals of this area.

Communications

The surface communications to the North-East are tenuous, with only one road cum rail bridge over Brahmaputra River, which was opened to traffic in 1963. The Kalia-Bhomara road bridge near Tezpur came up in 1987. The third road cum rail bridge at Jogighopa was commissioned in 1996. The fourth road cum rail bridge is planned to come up near Dibrugarh but its completion may take another decade. The railway line on the South bank of Brahmaputra River was converted into broad gauge up to Guwahati in 1984 and up to Dibrugarh in 1997. The new South Bank extension across the Narnarayan Setu at Jogighopa will also be a broad gauge. Thus, with the commissioning of the Jogighopa bridge flood proof routing of the traffic into and out of Assam and along the South bank has become a reality. NH31 which connects the North-East is in bad state of maintenance.

The air services to the North-East are prone to disruption due to bad weather and climatic conditions. All the states are connected by air except Meghalaya and Mizoram as they have small size air strips which cannot take Boeing aircraft. The airfield at Umroi near Shillong and a new airport at Langpui in Mizoram are being developed to take bigger aircrafts. The Borjor airport in Assam is being upgraded to international standards. The region's location, isolation and inaccessibility continue to exert considerable influence on geopolitical perceptions and are a cause for socio-political instability and economic backwardness.

Mineral and Natural Resources

Assam produces 5.25 million tonnes of oil annually, which is 60 per cent of India's production. Of the three refineries in Assam, Digboi produces 0.58 million tonnes, Guwahati 0.77 million tonnes and Bongaigaon 0.46 million³ tonnes per annum. The oil shale reserves are capable of sustaining crude oil production of 140 million tonnes annually for 100 years. The annual value of crude oil produced in Assam is approximately Rs.2000 crores. A new refinery is being set up at Numgligarh with a capacity of 3 million tonnes of crude oil.

Tea and jute are other major agricultural products which are exported from Assam. Assam was estimated to produce 402.9 million Kg of tea in 1993, almost 50 per cent of India's total production. The current estimated annual turnover is over rupees 3000 crores. This is a major foreign exchange earner⁴. In 1993/94 North-East produced 729000 tons of jute⁵ but most of it goes to jute mills in Calcutta as Assam has only a few jute mills. The North-East has vast forest resources and a number of plywood factories and a variety of cottage industries based on forest produce have come up. Unplanned exploitation of forests has created ecological imbalances in many places. Assam also has large quantities of other mineral resources like coal, gas, lime stone and Mica. The region has 40 per cent of the water wealth of the country.

Anthropologically, the North-East is inhabited by races of Mongoloid stock besides the Indo-Aryan groups. Barring the Khasis and Jantias who belong to Austric linguistic groups (or Mon Khmer cultural groups of Burma), almost all the other hill tribes belong to the Tibeto-Chinese and Tibeto Burman sub-family. There are over 200 ethnic groups and over 400 languages and dialects are spoken in the area. There is also vast cultural and religious diversity. There is high percentage of Scheduled Tribes (93 per cent in Mizoram, 84 per cent in Nagaland, 80 per cent in Meghalaya, 70 per cent in Arunachal Pradesh, 28 per cent in Tripura, 27 per cent in Manipur and 10 per cent in Assam)⁶. Political geography has imposed a high degree of isolation on the North-East. Absence of industrialisation worth the name has discouraged population movement not only between North-East and rest of India but amongst the political units of the North-East. Along with this vested interests in the North-East have been responsible for the cultivated ignorance. How else can one explain the opposition to entry of railways in certain areas of the North-East.⁷

On the Himalayan border, the British policy ensured that no foreign influence operated in Tibet. The weakness of the Imperial Chinese Govt. also resulted in Tibetan Govt. pursuing an independent policy. To ensure that Tibet did not follow too independent a policy, Lord Curzon sent a military mission under Colonel Sir Francis Younghusband to Tibet, resulting in the Treaty of Lhasa in 1904. Great Britain was given complete control of the foreign policy of Tibet. It envisaged that no part of the territory was to be given to any country and no concessions were to be extended to any other foreign power in the forms of roads, railways and telegraph. According to the treaty Chumbi valley was occupied by British troops till war indemnity was paid. British commercial agent was stationed at Gyantse and empowered to go to Lhasa when required. Trade marts were opened by the British at Yatung, Gyantse and Gartok. The treaty

was somewhat modified by the home department as the British wished to maintain friendly relations with Russia, against whose activities it primarily aimed. The British followed a sort of Monroe doctrine to make this region of Asia as its exclusive sphere of influence. Tibet was so much influenced by the British that it played the British National Anthem as it had no national anthem of its own. While Burma and Malaya in East Asia were part of the British Empire, the Himalayan Kingdoms of Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan were either directly under the control of British or within their sphere of influence. The foreign policy was totally controlled by the British.

On independence, India inherited a truncated country with fractured borders. In the East, we had international borders with two countries in three segments apart from the Northern border with China. There was border between West Bengal and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), between Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram and East Pakistan and the third with Myanmar running along the hilly jungles of Mizoram, Manipur and Nagaland. The new borders did not have well defined features and in the west these passed through populated areas. It fractured centuries of relationship amongst people who were socially, culturally and economically interdependent. The net result was complex security problems due to immigration triggered by communal and ethnic tensions and economic pressure. This artificial division is prone to illegal activities, smuggling, infiltration and subversion.

The Northern borders with China are a source of tension due to continued Chinese claim of 32,300 Sq.Miles of territory in Arunachal Pradesh inspite of improvement of relations since 1962. Both Chinese potential and intentions need constant watch. China has extended its sphere of influence in our immediate periphery in the East, particularly in Myanmar and its influence in Bangladesh in collusion with activities of Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) is a source of worry, particularly in the internal security field. Our Northern and North-Eastern borders are inhabited by tribals, who have been living in isolation with traditional social, cultural and spiritual interaction with people across these borders due to physical proximity. The emergence of the border problems has put stress on the emotional integration of these people with the rest of India. Opening up of communications and the initiation of the process of modernisation has also created tensions as any change in traditional societies is bound to. However, it has broken their isolation and if we pursue policies of understanding and accommodation then the process of integration is bound to succeed even though it may take time.

Geostrategic Significance

Strategically, the NE is equally important as the North-West as was clearly brought out by the Chinese aggression in 1962. To day we are better prepared but our preoccupation with Pakistan tends to put it on the back burner. Assam's strategic location and its geo-military implications are obvious. It is the life-line to the entire North-East and all roads and rail communications to the area pass through Assam and Brahmaputra River itself still continues to be a bottleneck to movement within Assam and to other States of the North-East. Peace and development of Assam is vital for development and progress of the entire North-East. Any turmoil in Assam is bound to affect all the North-Eastern States and its social and economic lives.

Assam is bounded by Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh in the North, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Manipur in the East, Tripura, Bangladesh and Meghalaya in the South and West Bengal in the West. It provides access to Bhutan and Bangladesh and the states of North-East which were part of Assam earlier. All these areas are highly prone to infiltration by Bangladeshis and to some extent people of Nepali origin from Nepal through West Bengal and Bhutan. In addition, there has been infiltration of cheap Bihari labour into Assam like anywhere else in India.

Large scale military operations by China against India apart from the Northern Himalayas (Tibet) are a distinct possibility from Yunan via Northern Myanmar. This is the shortest and terrain wise easiest route from mainland China to India. The Northern routes across Himalayas through Tibet are longer and run over a more difficult terrain.

The above makes Assam prone to external threat from China and thereby a threat to the life of the entire North-East. The threat from Bangladesh directly is limited but threat to internal security is magnified due to the presence of the large number of immigrants from that area and their influx is continuing. This has not only resulted in pressure on the ethnic Assamese but also on the tribals, whose land is occupied by the migrants and Assamese both. At a time of crisis or conflict along the international border, whether in the East or West, India's frontiers and lines of communications will be exposed to grave danger by presence of so many foreigners.

We have had experience of it during the Chinese invasion in 1962, when illegal immigrants raised Pakistani flags welcoming Chinese in far-off distant places in the North. Utterances both by late Bhutto and Mujibur Rehman who had talked of special relationship with the non-Hindu population of Assam, need for land for expansion for the teeming millions of East Pakistan and need to incorporate natural resources of Assam to

make Bangladesh, erstwhile East Pakistan, viable economically and financially strong are geopolitical and economic realities, which we cannot afford to ignore. Migration of Bangladeshis into Assam is an asset for their country as it lightens their economic burden and creates an area of influence at minimum cost. In spite of Indo-Bangladesh pact, neither have we tried to deport Bangladeshis nor has the Bangladesh Government acknowledged the presence of millions of her citizens in Assam. The above economic burden does not include the very sizeable Bengalee Hindu refugees in Assam. Today, the problem is only in Assam and Tripura where the original inhabitants have become a minority, soon it will invade the other North-Eastern States if permitted to continue. Today Assamese militants are talking of secession out of frustration, in not too distant future the immigrants will claim these areas, aided and abetted by our neighbour Bangladesh. The security implications are obvious.

Lastly, the economic implications of the security burden of the area will continue to increase as dissatisfaction, poverty and internal conflicts in the area grow. The threat to India's strategic and economic interests in Assam and the whole of the North-East is of a much higher magnitude than in Jammu and Kashmir.

Historical Perspective

The region as a whole always remained outside the central power structure. Tribals were the earlier inhabitants of the area before the Ahoms came to the region. Even the great Vashnavite Surge, Bhakti cult of Sankradev during the 15th and 16th century AD remained confined to the Brahmaputra Valley, which the Manipur Kings integrated into the plains of the Imphal Valley. The Mughals could not annex the region beyond a portion of the lower Assam. East India Company on assumption of Dewani in 1765 could not extend its authority over the whole area. It is only after the Yandaboo Pact in 1826 that gradual annexation of the area without disturbing the customary social system of the tribals began. After 1858 British rule began to be firmly established in the Tribal areas but they did not want to bring them under regular administration. The Regulation X of 1822 set the pattern under which the commissioner of Assam combined in him the joint authority as collector, magistrate and judge⁸. It was only when there were occasional raids by the hill tribes on the neighbouring plains areas that punitive expeditions were led against them, otherwise tribals were left undisturbed to follow their traditional and customary life.

After the take over of the territories of the East India Company by the British Sovereign, a definite policy was adopted to extend and consolidate their power over the tribal areas. Separate legislation was

enacted under the Govt. of India (GOI) Act 1870 for the back-ward tracts and areas and they were designated as excluded and partially excluded areas. When Assam was brought under a Chief Commissioner in 1874, the Scheduled District Act was passed. In a nutshell British annexation in the 19th century did not mean administrating the area, it was essentially to protect their interests in the plains. Inner Line Regulation of 1873, GOI Act 1919 and Excluded Area Act 1935 resulted in perpetuation of physical, social, political and economic isolation. The tribal or frontier policy followed by the British was designed to keep tribal people satisfied and immune from influences of the neighbouring countries and national movement from within the country. Failure of the national leadership to establish political and social contact with the hill people of the area and activities of the Christian missionaries through education and health services with the help of the British Govt. made them sympathetic towards the British and left no scope for Indianness. While there was occasional stiff resistance to the British imposition of administrative controls, their spirit of independence and traditional way of life continued unaltered.

The growth of Indian nationalism has to be viewed in the background of the British colonial interests, to protect which a highly centralised system of administration with an efficient and loyal bureaucracy on top, extension of surface communications, establishment of industry, introduction of money economy and a wide network of telecommunications brought India closer together. The aim was exploitation of resources for crown's requirements and administrative convenience. The Indian nationalism grew out of anti imperialist struggle against British rule, which was viewed as oppressive, exploitative and undemocratic. The interaction of the people of the North-East was confined to the bureaucratic officers, traders, money lenders and forest contractors, whose highhandedness and corrupt practices in the absence of other social and cultural contacts could hardly bring them closer to the broader Indian life.

The spirit of Indian nationalism left the underdeveloped areas of the North-East except Assam untouched. The capitalist money market gradually penetrated the hilly areas of the North-East, displacing the self sufficient rural economy and traditional economic system. Thus, although the North-East was exposed to the economic system of the rest of the country as well as the political and administrative system but its consciousness retained its regional experience.

The British territorial claims extended well beyond its system of Governance. It created a large stretch of no man's land frontier between India and China. In the North-East it let princely states of Manipur and Tripura coexisting within its orbit and compromised with traditional tribal

structures in the hilly tribal areas. The policy was guided by cost benefits analysis rather than any respect for the traditional institutions with the result that neither territory nor tribal socio-economic structures of these areas were incorporated in the system of Governance. On independence, the task of territorial integration of the North-East and the people inhabiting these areas was a logical conclusion of the territorial integrity of the country.

Within two years, excluded and partially excluded areas were incorporated. The centralised system of Governance was already in place in Assam and princely states of Manipur and Tripura, both due to administrative convenience and perceived geopolitical considerations, integration through Assam, considered closer to the national mainstream, was effected by adding these areas to Assam. Arunachal Hills were brought under direct administration by creating North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA). Thus territorial incorporation and political and administrative integration preceded cultural and emotional integration. This process has been one of the major reasons for estrangement and resistance. The dilemma of Nagas is representative of the turmoil within the tribal societies, with variations based on their historical and traditional social and cultural experience. The choices varied from autonomy along with integration and complete independence. The first view was essentially of the moderates, the second of the extremists. The extremist views varied from a crown colony under British incorporating tribal areas of Naga Hills, North-East Frontier Agency, Tribal areas of Manipur and Burma, an independent State and to stay in India for a short period to establish relationship before independence. The dilemma of Nagas for their future and the country's geopolitical interests in the area led to Hydari Agreement of 1947, which has been a bone of contention.

Contemporary Experience

Most people argue that the conflicts in the NE are to a large extent due to clash between the traditional culture and forces of change. The politicians point to the geographical isolation, long years of neglect and indifference of the nation to the suffering of the people of the North-East due to which they have developed a feeling of separation from rest of the country. Another area of agitations is the massive influx of foreigners. The fact is that historical, geographical, cultural as well as economic and political factors attracted people from different regions to the North-East for better opportunities. Marwaris for trade and commerce, Biharis and Oriyas for jobs in plantations, Bengalees for white collar jobs and Punjabis and many other from UP, Bihar for contracts and skilled and semi-skilled jobs. Even in the agricultural field Bengalee Muslim migrants

outdid the natives. The presence of these migrants shook the foundation of the Assamese social structure and created solidarity amongst the Assamese, while generating cleavage between Assamese and Tribals. This assimilationist native sentiment and backlash separatist agitations resulted in massive conflict over language, education, employment policy and other political cleavages. The magnitude of the problem was very high, population wise Assam has been the fastest growing area between 1910 and 1980, that it has made North-East states particularly Assam linguistically and ethnically even more diversified⁹.

In the post-independent period education spread rapidly. 1991 census per centage of literacy in North-East states except Meghalaya is much higher than all India figure of 52.11, (Assam 53.42 Manipur 60.96, Mizoram 81.23, Nagaland 61.30 Tripura 60.39 and Meghalaya 48.26)¹⁰, educated youth out of colleges and universities found avenues for employment blocked. Young intelligentsia instead of being guardian of their own interests fell prey to parochial interest groups. While the older generation of politicians will work out equations in a leisurely fashion, the younger generation would go for action. With vote bank politics coming in the forefront since the beginning 1980, each political party or even groups within each party have their own liberation groups or established links with some insurgent groups, thus resulting in patronage and resources being traded for political power. The ruling elite (including some in Delhi) instead of integrating tribals with non-tribals, hill people with plain people exploited and widened the diversities, thereby deepening the conflicts.

The process of political integration and economic development generated its own forces for raising ethnic sensibilities and added to insurgencies in the region. The process of incorporation of the North-Eastern region, particularly the Naga hills into the Indian Union started the process of current insurgencies in the region. As it has resulted in escalation of extra constitutional ethno-political movements, which seem to be achieving constitutional goals aided and abetted by the ruling elite in the North-East areas. But achievement of constitutional goals of statehood and autonomy has not solved the basic problem of sense of relative deprivation of the smaller and peripheral ethnic groups and alienation of the people continue¹¹.

Modernity

Modernity, generally in the case of India has been a case of change without continuity, fission without fusion and differentiation without integration. Goals of modernity, universality and generality can be achieved in two ways—assimilation of parts in their fullest and then constructing it with all its vitalities, specificities and multifacedness. The

other way is the abstract way by emphasising only those qualities of the various parts which are common with all parts, thus accentuating some and ignoring other qualities. The modern state is birth of the first process as concepts like nation state and nationality were unknown and therefore bear relationship to modernity¹². The traditional identity in the case of individuals was distributed in different socio-cultural, politico-historical and territorial spheres. Modern national identity in the case of India not only consolidated earlier pluralistic identities but also tried to diffuse it. In the absence of a universal Indian identity the imposition of an abstract national identity generated violent resistance from the pluralist identities.

The other agenda of modernity is specialisation and standardisation of economic life based on freedom of individual in a society based on labour unrelated to birth and linkages. This remained elusive as the traditional social order still dictates social and economic mobility. The Mandal Commission has further legitimised it in the economic, political and social spheres of Indian life and polity¹³.

Instability Parameters¹⁴

The inhabitants of the North-Eastern region have a long history of antagonism to established central authority. The nineteenth century political relation (under the British and Burmese) brought them under administrative control of major powers as a result of which they were politically divided and one or other set of inhabitants had frequently raised their banner of revolt. Provision of sanctuaries to adjoining groups in return for gains (gun running, drugs and so on) is the fall out in recent years. However the level of their activities has been curtailed due to the Counter Insurgency Operations in the region. Thus location, itself leads to socio-political instability and economic backwardness and isolation and economic backwardness influence their perceptions. The elements are in constant competition for opportunities, resources and participation, inspite of the known natural resources and have had experience of political, economic and social participation.

Separate social groups in separate areas, encouraged development of distinct perspectives and compatible political organisation led to demands for separate existence. This coupled with suspicion of extension of systematisation and extension of administration after independence which interfered with traditional political and consequently with economic and social structure. The response was revival of alternate (traditional) centres of power, which became the focal point of mobilisation. Efforts by the administration for modernisation and improvement of communication linkages and development highlighted the constraints in infrastructure development. Failure to achieve these

confronted the state with new demands, aspirations and requirements. The response was purely political in granting autonomy or statehood but it did not overcome the inadequacies of the past 50 years, either in terms of minimising the differences within or develop alternative sources to overcome resource constraints and neither the locals nor the Govt. looked for an effective alternative.

Within this overall historical perspective, we should examine the historic back ground and contemporary perspective of each of the constituent areas/ethnic groups as these are not only different in their content but also bring out the varying perspectives of the people of each constituent area and community. Understating these is vital to finding a solution.

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