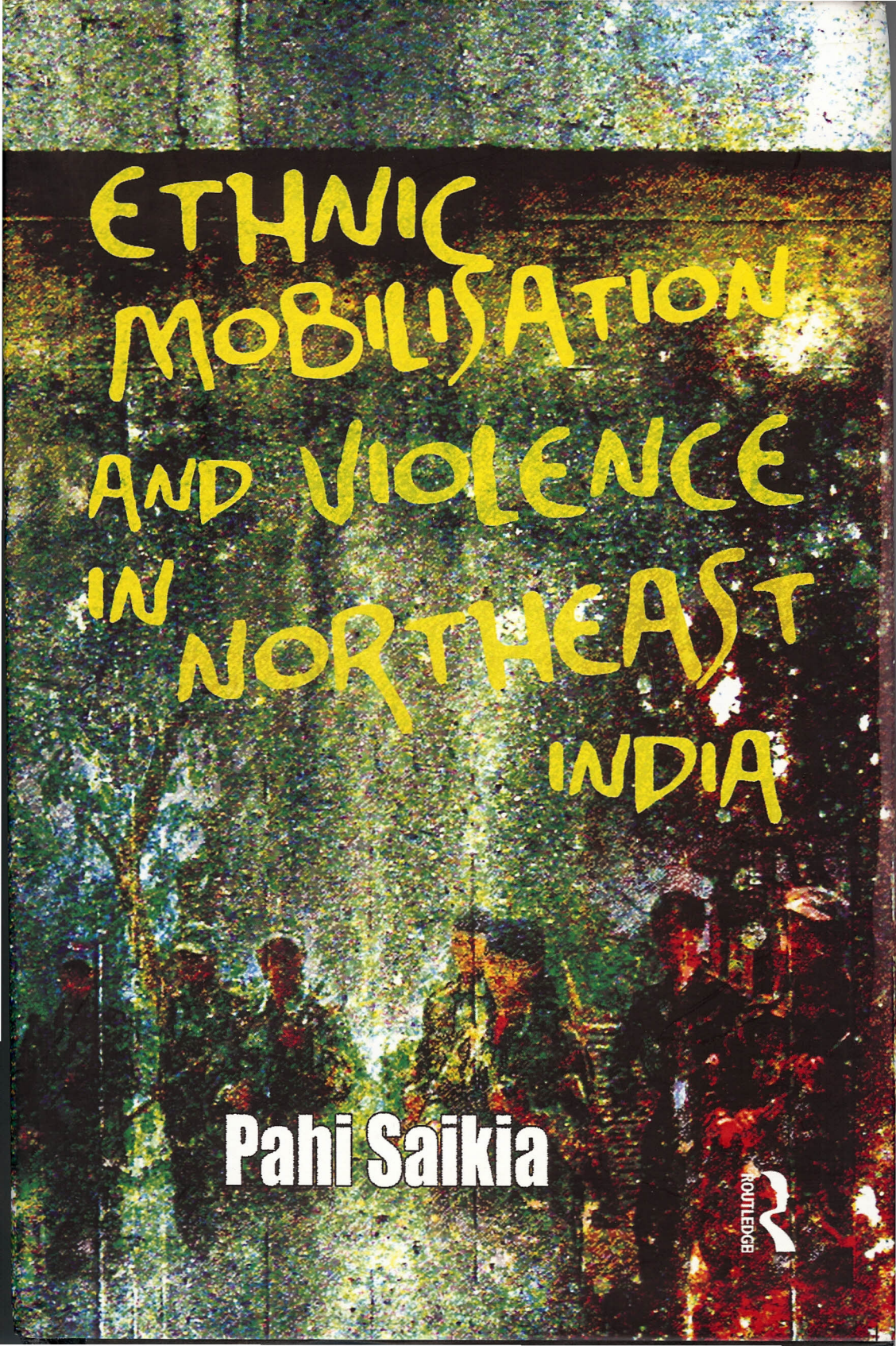
ETHNIC MOBILISATION AND VIOLENCE IN NORTHEAST INDIA
Pahi Saikia
ROUTLEDGE

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PAHI SAIKIA

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To Ma and in memory of my Deuta

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List of Abbreviations

AASU	All Assam Students' Union
AATL	All Assam Tribal League
ABWWF	All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation
ABEF	All Bodo Employees Federation
AGP	Assam Gana Parishad
ABSU	All Bodo Students' Union
ASS	Assam Sahitya Sabha
ASDC	Autonomous State Demand Committee
BLT	Bodo Liberation Tigers
BSS	Bodo Sahitya Sabha
DHD	Dima Halam Daogah
DRDC	Dimaraji Revival Demand Committee
DSU	Dimasa Students' Union
HPC	Hmar Peoples' Convention
MADC	Mising Autonomous Demand Committee
MAK	Mising Agom Kebang
MBK	Mising Bane Kebang
MMK	Mising Mime Kebang
MNF	Mizo National Front
NDFB	National Democratic Front of Bodoland
PTCA	Plains Tribal Commission of Assam
TMPK	Takam Mising Porin Kebang

Preface

Disputes between Georgia and two of its regions, Abkhazia and Ajaria, in the 1990s led to considerably different outcomes — while the Abkhazians became embroiled in a full-blown civil war with the state of Georgia, the Ajarians remained conspicuously calm. Similarly, in 1967-70, while the Igbo and Hausa-Fulani regions engaged in a violent confrontation with the Nigerian state, the adjoining Yoruba territory prevented such hostilities and stayed relatively peaceful. Variations such as these have been a recurring theme in the study of contentious politics along ethnic lines. Despite similarities in historical and structural experiences, some ethnic groups are able to avert violence, while others turn to highly disruptive forms of contention to secure their goals related to group rights, cultural recognition, and political and territorial autonomy. What accounts for these variations? Why do some ethnic groups seeking cultural and political autonomy engage in extraordinarily high-risk violent movements, while others respond with relative quiescence? It is precisely an interest in these significant questions that began my journey with this book. I was struck by the huge number of new volumes on contentious politics and violent ethnic mobilisation that crowd the shelves of libraries and bookstores. A thorough research through these, nevertheless, revealed that only a few books can be found on India's northeast that have actually dealt with these issues. The main purpose of writing this book is to fill up this particular gap in literature by providing an alternative set of explanations to understand some of the potentially destabilising tensions that have raged since the late 1970s and 80s in India's northeast.

Although a host of explanations exist on the cause of these variations in contentious politics, this study tends to adopt a process-oriented approach while incorporating theoretical perspectives borrowed from contentious politics besides rationalist and social psychological assumptions of ethnic violence. At the most general level, this book makes the fundamental claim that although the desire for material ends does play a crucial role, it is the emotional struggle

over the relative status of group identity and core ethnic symbols that affords a group the necessary mobilising potential for collective action. Beyond this, a well-crafted analytical framework that includes the mobilising structure, the organisational resources and state responses is developed to understand the correlation between the mobilising process and the outcome of ethnic movements. The utility of this framework is demonstrated through a comparison of three tribal minority ethnic groups in the northeastern part of India, where one group seeks to create a separate ethno-federal territory through high levels of sustained violent insurgent actions, another employs relatively low levels of violence for a shorter duration, while a third group advances moderate claims and resorts to relatively peaceful contentious actions. Further, the level of ethnic violence is determined by the consistency and extent of state accommodation of ethnic demands, and the nature of state repression. The study indicates that consistent and timely state accommodation is most conducive to the containment of violence, and widespread rather than targeted repression produces support for higher levels of anti-state violence.

The analysis finds that popular support and participation are crucial to shape the trajectories and strategies of ethnic movements. What leads to variations in the level of popular following across cases, is the availability of vertical networks, the degree of commitment, legitimacy and effective communicative strategies adopted by decentralised activist organisations. This, in turn, generates collective mobilisation and produces the mechanisms for the sustenance of violent rebellion.

I accumulated numerous debts from a large number of people who contributed in different ways to formulate my arguments. I benefitted enormously from a wide range of people whose support indeed brought this work to fruition. First and foremost, my supervisor Prof. Narendra Subramanian deserves my gratitude for his generosity with his time, immense patience and invaluable advice at every stage of writing and doing the research. I am grateful to him not only for enkindling an interest in the subject of ethnic mobilisation, but also for guiding me on how to think about different patterns of contention, for stressing the value of posing important questions and, most significantly, for teaching me how to find answers to those questions. Prof. Stephen Saideman deserves sincere thanks for providing different perspectives on the literature

while taking his course titled Ethnic strife and World politics, and for offering the opportunity to participate and gain insights from the seminars and talks held from time to time by the Montreal Research Group on Ethnic Conflict. I owe immense thanks to Prof. Khalid Medani for his encouraging words and valuable comments that sharpened my analysis. I must also thank Prof. Sunita Parikh, Washington University, and Prof. Matthew Lange, McGill University, for their invaluable comments and suggestions on my draft.

Apart from the guidance of these scholars, I was extremely fortunate to have been taught by Prof. Filippo Sabetti, Prof. Michael Brecher, Prof. Philip Oxhorn and Prof. Barbara Haskel, who imparted to me the basic knowledge to carry out social science research. I also express my appreciation to the staff of the Department of Political Science, especially Tara, Helen and Angie, and the Humanities and Social Science Library at McGill University; Indian Council of Historical Research library, Guwahati, Tribal Research Institute library, Guwahati, and Assam State Archive library, Guwahati. I am very much grateful to Canadian Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Program whose financial support allowed me to undertake this project.

There are many more people whom I cannot possibly list here but who listened to my arguments in formal discussions in the conferences where I presented my work, as well as through exchanges in several informal settings, and helped me with their suggestions and stimulating questions. My special thanks to Prof. Thorsten Janus and Prof. Douglas Woodwell for their extensive comments and fruitful advice on my work. I must also acknowledge Prof. Rakesh Gupta for his constant encouragement and motivation throughout the past years of my research.

Many of the ideas were developed during my fieldwork in India, where I spent almost seven months in the winter and summer of 2007. The kindness and willingness of many people I interviewed, particularly those in Guwahati, North Cachar Hills, Bodoland and the Mising areas of Assam, greatly aided me to build up my arguments. Many people chose to participate in the interviews as they wanted to share their views with a wider audience. I wish I could do a better job of conveying their message. Needless to mention, some of my participants wished to remain unnamed for various reasons. My fieldwork in some of the most remote and inaccessible areas in Assam would not have been possible without the generous help

and support of some local residents. I am especially indebted to Bijoya Pait, Sanmoni Kamprei, Uttam Bathari, J. A. Tapadar, Ganesh Kutumb, Ranoj Pegu, Tabu Taid, Pradip Kar, Langtheswar Nunisa, Sonadhar Patir, Bibhishan Pegu, the members of the Dimasa Students' Union, Dimasa Sahitya Sabha, selected office-bearers of the Mising Autonomous Council, the Bodo Territorial Council, North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council, the All Bodo Students' Union and Bodo Sahitya Sabha for their warmth and counsel, and M. Basumatary and B. Pawegam for facilitating my visits to some of the remote villages in the Bodo and Mising areas. I owe my deepest gratitude to P. Jibung and his colleagues for some unforgettable moments during my stay in N. C. Hills. It is important to acknowledge M. S. Prabhakara, an eminent writer and journalist, for being gracious enough to share some of his rarest collections on Assam politics.

I also thank the team at Routledge for their enthusiasm to publish my manuscript. I am particularly grateful to Professor Mohd Taher for allowing me to reproduce son of the maps of Assam that he had compiled and Mr Reo Rheo Narzihary for this permission to represent some of the significant photographs on the Bodo movement.

Among my friends in India and Canada, special thanks goes to Adama and Diane for making me feel at home when I first reached Canada; Nicole, Bahar, Anusha and Ece with whom I shared some cheerful moments in Montreal; Alessandra, Salim, Dilip Gogoi, Ranjan Chakravarty for their moral support and for being extremely helpful on countless occasions; Ali Munhanif for his kindness and help in various ways all these years at McGill.

My family, who have been a constant source of inspiration, deserve more than words can merely express, especially my parents, grandparents, my dear sisters Moushumi and Amrita and my close relatives for their confidence in me; Papuda, Bikram, Rajib, Pompy, my little niece Ayushi and nephew Ayushman, and my uncle (Dhan) for being so supportive and always reminding me of the lighter side of things. I am extremely grateful to my parents for their sensitivity, immense love, confidence and encouragement to work hard and stay focussed.

Finally, I express my deepest acknowledgements to my husband, Bipul, for his unique understanding, and for offering me his wonderful companionship, time and unflinching support that kept my morale up and helped complete my work. I am indebted to him for graciously spending his invaluable time not only by accompanying

me during my fieldwork, but also by reading different versions of the manuscript from various perspectives. It was his firm belief in the compelling need for a research of this nature that perpetually helped me overcome negative emotions and boost my motivations. I truly believe that without his constant care, patience and love, it would have been difficult for me to remain steadfast and complete this book.

Introduction

Ethno-nationalist violence involving minority ethnic groups has attracted increased attention amongst scholars due to the protracted nature of these conflicts along ethnic lines, claiming lives and threatening the stability of states in places as diverse as Asia, Africa, Balkans, and the Middle East. The subject has long concerned the academic community not only because of the destructive consequences of these violent conflicts, but also because of varying implications for power relations between majority and minority groups, intra and inter-state politics.[1] What are ethnic minority groups contesting about? What strategies do these contending groups pursue to steer their claims? While navigating their claims, ethnic protest and mobilisations of some ethnic minorities have often resulted in their engagement in considerable levels of violence both with the state apparatus and other ethnic groups. This book begins with a simple question — why are some minority ethnic groups susceptible to violent mobilisation while others mobilise using less disruptive methods of contention?

The book explores ethnic mobilisation and violence in Assam, northeast India. Assam and northeast India are culturally very diverse and have witnessed much ethnic conflict, sometimes violent, especially over the past three decades. India was until recently considered a fine example of the containment of ethnic conflict and the restriction of ethnic violence in a multi-ethnic society, and the

[1]Inter-state politics may be affected as a result of symbolic and material support mustered by a separatist group from a neighboring country. Mizos and Nagas in India are just a few examples that fit into this category. Indo-Burma (Myanmar) relations were strained because of perceived assistance that the Burmese military junta provided to the insurgents of northeast India. Virtually all insurgent groups in India's northeast enlisted a lot of external support Pakistan, China, Thailand and Bangladesh in the form of military training, supply of arms and financial aid. India's strained relations with these countries had been effected by this factor to a certain extent.

devolution of power was one of the means through which conflict was taken to have been restricted. However, the devolution of power through federalism, and the formation of new states and other autonomous regions in which particular ethnic groups were in the majority, failed significantly to contain ethnic violence in much of northeast India. This book addresses some of the reasons for the failure of ethnic conflict management in northeast India, and for the frequent emergence of violence in the region. It does so by exploring the different trajectories followed by three important movements among Assam's ethnic minorities — the Bodos who engaged in considerable violence against the state and other ethnic groups; the Dimasas whose organisations engaged in lower levels of violence against both state authorities and ethnic others; and the Misings whose ethnic organisations engaged in little violence in return for gaining some autonomy within the state of Assam.

Nation-building in the post-colonial phase in India took place amidst existing ethno-cultural and religious diversities. During this period, the nationalist leaders of India embarked on a balancing mission by designing a federal state apparatus, slightly tilted in favor of the central government. The balancing act thus entailed the division of the territories of India into 14 federal units, on the basis of dominance and geographical concentration of ethno-linguistic communities (SRC report 1955: 229–37). Although this practice proved to be temporarily productive, neat divisions along similar lines seemed to be practically difficult in areas like the northeastern region of India. The leaders of the Indian state at that point of time were confronted with the herculean task of integrating the diverse communities inhabiting the northeastern part of the country, which as some scholars would suggest, represent nothing less than a 'patchwork of tribal and mixed linguistic communities' (Dube 1984: 146). The region is a complex mosaic of different tribal ethnic groups with some shared ethnic characteristics as well as tremendous variety in terms of historical memories, distinct cultural features, beliefs, languages or dialects. The state of Assam, which is the focus area of this book, alone includes a variety of such groups which are numerically less in number than the dominant and majority Assamese-speaking group. The Indian state decided to lump together the heterogeneous groups of the northeastern region into one federal unit — the state of Assam. In addition, the central government created local administrative units allowing some of

the tribal communities to gain control of and administer the affairs related to their local economy, culture, customs and beliefs.

Creation of an ethno-linguistic state and devolution of local power through the decentralised institutions of limited autonomy, however, did not effectively contain the conflicts that were emerging in the region. These arrangements proved to be insufficient to make the region cohesive. Different tribal communities mobilised to achieve greater territorial autonomy and separate states, within as well as outside the Indian boundaries. This phenomenon had become significantly visible in the 70s and 80s. While the number of groups mobilising since then has been increasing, what is even more puzzling is the variation in terms of degrees and strategies of mobilisation used by these groups seeking greater autonomy. Some have mobilised peacefully, while others have taken to armed conflicts. Although political mobilisations have occurred among several of the tribal groups of Assam, only a few have developed into bitter and violent movements. How do we account for the variations in the trajectories of mobilisation adopted by protesting ethnic minorities? While addressing this question, this book adopts an integrated approach in which the mobilising structure and state responses assume equal and important roles that determine the correlation between the mobilising process and levels of contention. A fundamental claim is that ethnic organisations' mobilising success leads to popular support and participation that are crucial to shape the trajectories and strategies of ethnic movements. The study traces mobilising success to the long-term commitment, legitimacy and effective communicative strategies adopted by activist organisations. This is a necessary condition which, in turn, generates collective mobilisation and produces the mechanisms for violence. Absence thereof leads to less disruptive contention. Further, the level of ethnic contention is determined by consistency and extent of ethnic accommodation, and by the nature of state repression. Consistent accommodation can have a countervailing effect on the activists to launch violent rebellion. Accommodation may range from implementing particular ethno-linguistic policies to selective incentives or cooptation of core political activists by the government. Contrarily, inconsistent accommodation and widespread state repression rather than targeted repression produced support for higher levels of anti-state violence. While the pieces of the argument are based on the existing literature, they are effectively connected to materials drawn from northeast India.

This book identifies some background conditions which shaped contentious actions and accelerated the movements for autonomy and identity-formation in the late 60s and throughout the 70s. As a first step to my argument, I contend that the search for explaining the process of mobilisation should begin by considering two enabling conditions — effective communicative mechanism and the mobilisation of societal resources to carry out the rebellion. The process of mobilisation first involves the act of convincing potential supporters of the movement. Following the views of social movement scholars, I believe that movement participation can broadly consist of three different levels of supporters and participants. The first set of movement participants can be counted as the core activists, who are most committed and remain at the forefront of movement actions. The next level of participants may be loosely categorised as those involved in the activities of social movement organisations on an average basis, such as attending regular meetings, demonstrations or other movement actions. The third level of participation may be derived from the general populace with little or no experience and knowledge about activism, but whose support is essential for sustenance of protest activities. Their participation may be considered as occasional and sporadic.

With such a variegated level of involvement and support within a group, it becomes challenging for the movement leaders to organise a mass-based movement. Even if the group experiences underlying grievances, the issues have to be narrated in such a manner that the group members get collectively motivated. The process of mobilisation may involve material as well as non-material bases of contention that the members of the group can easily identify with. While the former relates to tangible sources, such as economic resources (land, jobs, etc.), the latter refers to symbolic aspects related to ethnic symbols, historical narratives, etc., where an individual shares the source of his/her identity (i.e. relevant group membership based on a social dimension, ethnicity, etc.) with other members of the group. Political and social salience of these identities or ethnic grievances motivates the protagonists to achieve the preferred benefits and rights in a collective way. However, there is a need to emphasise that all collective identities may not gain salience at the same time and across different ethnic groups. Within a given collective identity, people are likely to attach themselves only to specific sub-group identities (e.g. language, customs, etc.)

depending upon the immediate social context and their material or socio-psychological needs and interests (distinctiveness, belonging, respect) (Tajfel and Turner, 1979: 86). Adherence to particular group identities, therefore, becomes more pronounced due to a system of inter-group relations, characterised by asymmetries and differentials over distribution of power and control over resources.[2] Collective identities embedded in such inter-group relations are likely to spur the challenge amongst competing groups to secure an estimable portion of those resources.

It is within this context that collective identities gain salience and gets politicised. Politicisation unfolds as a sequence of continuous denial or irregularities to fulfill group expectations. Typically, this involves orchestrating claims for indemnities levelled against the out-group, perceived to be involved in the predicament.[3] Differing capabilities of the movement leaders to politicise ethnic grievances enable us to understand the variance in the degree of mobilisation across groups. To look at it differently, the ability of movement leaders to mobilise the group members on the basis of a particular ethnic identity or ethnic grievance will depend on the degree of salience that the group members attach to those symbolic elements. It will also depend on the ability of the movement leaders to effectively frame those grievances or to make those elements 'situationally available' to the group members through effective repertoires of contention.[4] This condition relates to the mobilising process, referring to the means through which actors (intellectuals, political leaders or nationalist leaders) define a problem and the situation the group experiences. These grievances in turn, are effectively communicated by the actors as unjust.The problem is best fashioned

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[2] Power can be based on the ability to allocate material rewards and resources or possession of immaterial resources such as status, reputation or worth for group members.

[3] The out-group may involve the state or another ethnic group.

[4] Drawing from the social movement literature, repertoires of contention are the tools of activism such as widespread pamphleteering, mass demonstrations, sit-ins, etc. that help people understand what they are protesting about. In other words, these are the means to broadcast movement appeals. On repertoires of contention, see McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001).

out of existing cultural symbols, common grievances, identities, norms, etc., which are likely to have resonance with the preferences or interests of potential constituents. This involves the process of coordinating, recruiting and disseminating the ideas of the movement and building movement-supporter networks. Mobilisation of networks operates at two different levels — within the group members at the community level, and a channel of interaction established between the movement leaders and participants. The process of mobilisation is finally dependent on the exogenous forces or the type of responses of the political system that can enhance or constrain further prospects and tactics used by activists to advance their claims.

General Definitions

Ethno-political mobilisation may be defined as a process by which members of a group collectively organise around an ascriptive identity (for example, language, religion, customs, origin) or interests to achieve collective goals. Collective goals may encompass increased participation in the bureaucracy, enhanced political representation, socio-economic power and privileges, cultural rights or control over a piece of territory.

Separatist movement can be broadly defined as a process whereby an ethnic group seeks to secede or create an independent state or to achieve autonomy or federal status within an existing state by redrawing its territorial boundaries. A broader definition seems to be useful because goals may often overlap or shift between separatism and secession (or vice versa) or lesser autonomy (e.g. cultural) to separatism. For example, the Moros in southern Philippines shifted their demands from independence to autonomy. Similarly, the Dimasas in India shifted their demands from autonomy to the formation of a separate state within India.

Disruptive collective action can be described as the tools of political mobilisation used by a protesting group. Protesters may practice either non-violent or violent disruptive tactics or both, depending on the responses of the political system. Some of the most conventional non-violent disruptive tactics used during protests are sit-ins, demonstrations, strikes and boycotts. Violent disruptive tactics involve direct confrontational strategies like bombings and physical attacks.

Contentious politics involves different forms of political struggle, including violent as well as non-violent tactics used by contenders to make their claims. McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly provide a broad based definition of contentious politics that refers to 'episodic, public and collective interactions among makers of claims and the objects' (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001). Contentious politics can, therefore, encompass issues concerning civil war, riots, strikes, demonstrations, ethnic conflict, revolutions, civil disobedience or everyday resistance. The scope can be domestic or transnational.

Armed and unarmed ethnic organisations are characterised in this study as organisations established on the basis of common ethnicity and background of individuals joining such organisations. These are non-state actors as they act, at least in principle, autonomously of the authorities and the machinery of the state. The distinction between armed and unarmed ethnic organisations is based on the strategies and methods of bargaining and collective actions used to show a group's resistance against ethnic others and state authorities. Armed ethnic organisations can encompass small or large cohesive group of ethnic bands possessing small and light weaponry or large-scale sophisticated armaments having a capacity for organised militant activities. These bands are often the armed extensions of a non-combatant political community like a tribe or ethnic group, and, in rare cases, those of unarmed ethnic organisations. Although this definition precludes unarmed ethnic organisations (for instance, the student organisations of the Bodos, Dimasas and Misings) that consistently assert and display quiescent political behaviour, strict distinction between these two types of ethnic organisations is sometimes difficult to maintain. The reason, because unarmed ethnic organisations while bargaining with the state authorities may try to achieve their moderate or radical aims by employing militant tactics. Case-specific studies in this research reveal that pre-planned bomb explosions orchestrated by unarmed student bodies often act as effective bargaining tactics. This study uses concepts like militants, rebels and extremists to refer to the armed and unarmed ethnic organisations or the members of ethnic organisations that engage in violent activities to secure their political gains.

Why Assam? — Selection Criteria

In addition to my profound personal interest in the people and politics of the area, I believe that Assam, identified with a veritable mix of different ethnicities and cultures, reveals a significant amount of observable attributes for research on ethnic studies and ethnic conflict. Ethnographic accounts reveal that minority tribal ethnic groups make up a distinct portion of Assam's population. According to recent censuses, there are nearly 23 tribal groups in Assam constituting nearly 13 per cent of the total population of the state (Census 2001). These groups vary not only in terms of their size and spatial distribution but also dialects, culture and ways of life. Bodos constitute the largest tribal group of Assam and account for nearly 44.1 per cent of the total tribal population of the state. Next to them are the Misings, at nearly 16.3 per cent. Dimasas are approximately 2.3 per cent of the total tribal population.

Ethnic identification of the Bodos, Dimasas and Misings as tribals, have become strikingly conspicuous since the post-colonial period. The British divided the territories of India's northeast into 'excluded' and 'partially excluded' areas, and categorised the people inhabiting these areas as 'backward' or 'forest tribes'. This engendered the creation of different categories of people living in the northeast based on their ethnic origins, socio-cultural divisions and habitation as Indo-Mongoloids and Indo-Aryans, as tribes and non-tribes, and further within the tribal groups, as plains tribes and hills tribes. The typical pattern of delineating and redrawing of territorial boundaries during the colonial period was associated with the interests of the colonial rulers to administer these areas in an indirect manner. Later, this shaped the construction of a distinguishing and bounded ethnic identity known as Kacharis, as separate and distinct from the majority ethnic group — the Assamese-speakers. Adversely, this resulted in isolationalism and backwardness of the tribal groups. In the post-colonial period, when state-building process was at its pace, the broader Assamese society was divided in terms of differences in social hierarchy and power structure. The prevailing discourse was that while the Assamese-speaking majority people were relatively modernised and developed, the tribal groups were considered to be significantly alienated and backward.

Articulated expressions of these groups as tribes and, more specifically, as the original inhabitants of the region became increasingly pronounced when they mobilised for redefinition of their group

status and rights as 'distinct nations', and as worthy of special group-based rights and privileges which they feel have been denied by the colonial as well as the post-colonial state.[5] Owing to these differences and contestations based on discrete identities of these groups, the Indian state made attempts to redefine, restore and promote some of their dispossessed rights and practices. Following a presidential notification passed in the year 1956, the state labelled these groups as Scheduled Tribes and conferred on them special concessions and privileges, including reservation of seats in educational institutions, government jobs and state legislatures. The state also instituted certain ways to protect the areas inhabited by these communities as protected tribal lands. The institution of such a protective discrimination regime was nevertheless marked by lack of uniformity. Some were granted with partial devolution of local powers of autonomy (for instance, the Dimasas) while others with limited powers to protect their lands without any devolutionary power (for example, the Bodos and the Misings). Later, these arrangements seemed to have wider political implications. One of the most visible consequences of the irregularities in continuous mapping and reshaping of tribal territories was displayed in the form of ethno-political reclaiming for greater territorial autonomy by these ethnic minorities.

My own choice of the nomenclatures throughout this study is to use the terms 'tribal ethnic group', 'tribal communities' or 'tribal ethnic minorities' interchangeably, to refer to the tribes of India's northeast. The rationale for this is the degree of consciousness as distinct collectivities and as tribes, and the extent of political organisation to maintain them as such. I use the term to refer to a group of people forming a community by claiming descent from a common lineage. Like an ethnic group, the members are tied by perceived rather than real affinities. A tribal community is unified by a collectively held social organisation for purposes related to administration and day-to-day lives.

The categorisation of the tribes of India's northeast is, however, based on a rather anachronistic notion developed by classical

[5] Various anthropological findings confirmed that these groups were the original inhabitants of the region but were pushed out of their original lands as a result of later political conquests by the Ahoms who ruled Assam from 1228 to 1826 (Betielle 1998).

colonial anthropologists, which depicts tribes as isolated, small, self-contained, self-sufficient and autonomous communities practising subsistence economy with little or no dependence on external economy (Goswami 1984: 55–60). Unlike the hinterland dwellers of indigenous communities in Latin America, the Dayaks of Indonesia or the autochthon tribes of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, groups called tribes in northeast India maintain a certain degree of interdependence with the non-tribal communities. Therefore, to relegate the living conditions of these groups as 'primitive' would be inappropriate. More notably, barring certain traditional forms of behaviour, such as distinct social practices, physical characteristics, dress codes, food habits and other cultural features, most of them have intermingled with other non-tribal communities. Some dwelling in the urban areas have even adopted modern ways of living. They have also been continuously exposed to the processes of state-building and commercialisation. Nonetheless, the incorporation of these groups into the socio-economic and political structures of the state took place on a subordinate basis as a consequence of several majoritarian policies passed by the post-colonial state. A gradual pattern of institutionalised marginalisation increased their predispositions towards assertion of discrete ethnic identities. Thus, Assam fits as an important case according to these characteristics. In addition to its diverse demographics, the choice of Assam as a case study is premised on remarkably high and persistent levels of ethnic movements in the state, launched by numerically small and competing tribal minorities seemingly poised to create self-governing administrative units. Ethnic movements in the region vary in terms of level, nature and intensity of mobilisation.

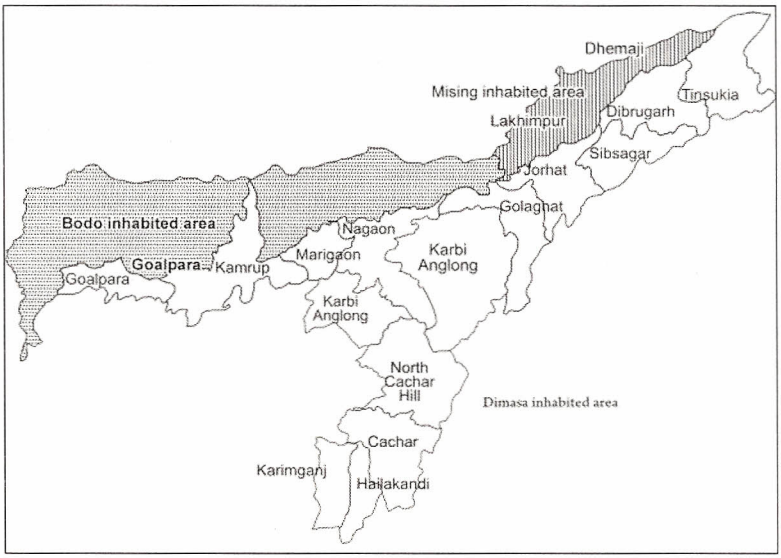
Specific Case Studies

The comparability of the Bodos, Misings and Dimasas is dependent on similarities in their common lineage, grievances and ethno-political claims. All these groups belong to the Indo-Mongoloid race, and therefore they share common ethnic origins. These groups speak languages and dialects with origins in the Tibeto-Burman group of languages using the Roman script which are very different from the majority language of Assam (Assamese) and the preponderant language in India (Hindi). Each group is more or less territorially concentrated in particular areas of Assam. The Bodos are mainly concentrated in the western and central areas of Assam, Dimasas

in parts of southern Assam, and the Misings mainly in the north-eastern areas of Assam (Map 1).

In addition to grievances related to political and economic opportunities, these ethnic groups have expressed their resentments for specific cultural policies. These groups have mobilised since the post-independence period (late 1950s) against institutional and mass exclusion by the state. The nature of their demands has been more or less similar, the demand for greater autonomy or separate states within the administrative provisions of India — a) the Misings demanding a greater autonomous region in Assam's northeastern areas; b) the Dimasas, a separate state called Dimaraji, in Assam's southern areas in the North Cachar hills; and the Bodos, a separate state comprising of areas on Assam's western boundaries.

Ethnic mobilisation involving these groups has been manifested not at the national level but at the regional or provincial level. I address ethnic mobilisation of these groups at the local level. Despite these similarities, these groups have shown considerable



Map 1: Assam — areas where the Bodos, Misings and Dimasas are located

Source: Adapted from Map of Assam (Administrative), Assam Book Depot Publishers, Guwahati, Second Edition, 2007. Courtesy of Dr Mohammed Taher; used with permission.

variance in their patterns of mobilisation. The Bodos and Dimasas adopted violent strategies in 1980s. Violent mobilisation of the Bodos was much more intense than that of the Dimasas. The Misings, the third group, have mobilised by using less disruptive means. My objective is to explore these variations related to these three dissenting groups.

Note on Methodology

Previously and in different contexts in Asia and Africa, scholars have studied cases where symbolic politics as related to resurgence of tribal identities at the local level has played a significant part in the eruption of unprecedented levels of violent ethnic conflict. Given the diversity of cases examined by different scholars, and the uniqueness of each case employing culture, economy and demography amongst other variables as tools for analysing ethnic violence, one is faced with methodological issues and difficulties in predicting and controlling the generalisable outcomes. A set of scholars propose that in order to account for predictors of ethnic violence, it is useful to examine a large number of cases in an elaborate manner. While following this methodological analysis, one can process enormous amounts of data that might render effective in order to observe the general trends in analysing such conflicts. Other scholars, however, find these large-N analyses inadequate, and argue that small-N controlled comparisons of cases make generalisations better and increase the probability of obtaining valid causal inferences.[6] This methodology works well in the comparison of cases in the context of local-level unit of analysis and the varied effects across small number of cases within a country (Snyder 2001: 93–110).

My study does not aim to offer a general theoretical model of ethnic violence, but tries to explain the mechanisms specific to each case. Each case has a unique story and historical detail which

[6] As emphasised by Gary King, Robert Keohane and Sidney Verba (1994: 30, 31, 208), our theories usually have observable implications at many levels of analysis, and 'what may appear to be a single-case study, or a study of only a few cases, may indeed contain many potential observations, at different levels of analysis, that are relevant to the theory being evaluated'.

enable me to compare the finer nuances of each case using a 'real-world problem approach'. According to King, Keohane and Verba (1994: 4–9), a 'real-world problem approach' which is opposed to a 'theoretical contribution approach', enables one to frame a comparative case study around a search for explanation of important real world questions. This method leads one to a more focused and relevant description of the cases. This, they proclaim, is a precursor to more formal, experimental design and hypothesis-testing method. According to Ragin, 'the case-oriented approach attempts to approximate experimental rigor by identifying comparable instances of phenomenon of interest and then analysing the theoretically important similarities and differences among them' (1987: 31). Similarly, as Lijphart argues, historically descriptive comparisons often generate hypotheses that can be further refined and formally tested later by using more observations (1971: 682–93).

While applying the common comparative case study method, this study tries to capture the uniqueness and particularities of the political strategies advanced by each group. In fact, this research concedes the idea that in order to better account for specificities and particular nuances, one needs to have an in-depth analysis of historical and descriptive complexities of each case. Preferably, the objective is to identify the critical variables specific to a particular case study while analysing the processes and likelihood of ethnic mobilisation turning to violence. With a careful selection of some of the key conditions, examination of each group in this book primarily rests on tracing the processes and identifying the causal connections that link some of the most important explanatory variables — the necessary and sufficient conditions to the ultimate outcome of ethnic movements.[7] My comparative case study loosely employs Mill's Method of Difference which is also referred to by Przeworski and Teune as the 'most similar systems design' (1970: 33). My cases fit this model of analysis as they share a host of similarities (origins, ethnic grievances, demands) but reveal observable differences in terms of the outcome (patterns of mobilisation).

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[7] Lijphart (1971) suggests that in most comparative case studies, the investigator is forced to limit analysis to only specific, carefully selected or 'key' causal factors (explanatory variables), and not all possibly relevant ones.

Outline of the Book

Chapter 1 offers an examination of existing debates on ethnic violence, and several strands of social movement literature, specifically on dynamics of contentious politics, collective action, etc. It provides a detailed analysis of the conditions that facilitate a group's ethnic mobilisation, the factors that increase the likelihood of violence. Finally, I integrate these conditions into an analytical framework to explain the dynamics of different outcomes.

Chapter 2 and introductory parts of Chapters 4 as well as Chapter 5 expound the historical processes that led to the formation of ethnic identities as a frame of reference for ethnic and separatist movements. Chapter 3 analyses the factors that led to violent mobilisation of the Bodos. The same pattern is followed in Chapters 4 and 5 regarding the cases of the Dimasas and Misings. These chapters illustrate why ethnic mobilisation of the Misings and Dimasas took different turns. Chapter 6 summarises the findings of the book, outlines the reasons that account for variant outcomes and some contributions that this book proffers to the study of ethnic mobilisation and ethnic movements beyond Assam involving tightly knit groups with differing intra-group networks of mobilisation. In conclusion, an attempt is made to offer some implications for further research that needs to be carried out in these areas.

This book provides important analyses and data on contemporary ethnic movements and violence in South Asia. It addresses some of the reasons for the failure of ethnic conflict management in northeast India and for the frequent emergence of violence in the region. The aim of this volume is to address such an epistemological lacunae, and compare and contrast different movements involving the Bodos, Dimasas and Misings — three ethnic groups of India's northeast who have resorted to violent mobilisation and agitation for the maintenance of their unique identity, its political recognition by the state and have called for rearrangement of territorial boundaries in their favour.

PAHI SAIKIA has completed her PhD from McGill University, Canada and is currently Lecturer at the Department of Political Science, University of Victoria, Canada. Her earlier publications include research papers and review articles in journals like *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics, India Review* and *Pacific Affairs*. Her interests include identity issues of ethnic minorities, sustainable development, social movements, ethnic violence and conflict prevention in the Asian region.

This book provides pioneering analyses and data on contemporary ethnic movements and violence in northeast India. It delineates the historical trajectory of the development of violence in the region and the social, psychological and political factors behind it. Simultaneously, it also examines the reasons for the failure of ethnic conflict management over the last two decades and examines possible reasons for the frequent eruption of violence

Issues of violence and displacement attract widespread attention in international society, especially from people who work on issues of conflict resolution, peace-building and internally displaced persons (IDPs); however, there are a limited number of academic works on autonomous movements by indigenous peoples. The aim of this volume is to address such an epistemological lacunae, and compare and contrast different movements involving the Bodos, Dimasas and Misings — three ethnic groups of India's northeast who have resorted to violent mobilisation and agitation for the maintenance of their unique identity, its political recognition by the state and have called for rearrangement of territorial boundaries in their favour.

This book will be of interest to academics and scholars of political science, international politics, social movements, conflict management and South Asian studies.

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