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Durable Disorder

*Understanding the Politics
of Northeast India*



SANJIB BARUAH

DURABLE DISORDER

Understanding the Politics of Northeast India

For decades states in India's Northeast have experienced ethnic conflict and suffered human and material losses due to insurgency and counter-insurgency operations. This book analyses the causes and seeks to comprehend the political meaning and significance of persisting political violence.

The author argues that prolonged counter-insurgency operations have eroded the democratic fabric of the region and institutionalized authoritarian practices. There is a growing dissonance between the idea of ethnic homelands and the actually existing political economy of the region that makes ethnic violence and internal displacements quite predictable.

The book explores the economic incorporation of the region into the global capitalist economy in the 19th century and the resultant conflict between global and local resource use regimes. It delves into the historical roots of the region's oldest armed conflict—the Naga insurgency, and carries a detailed analysis of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) during different phases of its power and influence.

The author argues for a reorientation of India's policy towards the Northeast and for linking it to a new foreign policy towards Southeast Asia. India should take advantage of the cultural and spatial

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proximity of the Northeastern states to the ASEAN region. The economic integration of the region with Southeast Asia through the pursuit of a dynamic 'Look East' policy could go a long way in bringing about stability, peace, and prosperity.

Opening new perspectives in our understanding of ethnic conflict and the meaning of democracy with specific reference to the Northeast, this book will be of interest to students, researchers and scholars in politics and history, journalists, policy-makers, defence analysts, and the informed lay reader.



Sanjib Baruah is Senior Fellow, Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development, Guwahati, Assam, and Professor of Political Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York.

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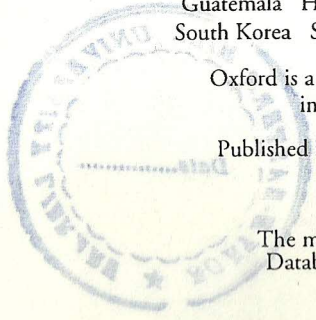
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Contents

Preface

vii

SECTION I

Introduction

- 1. Towards a Political Sociology of Durable Disorder 3

SECTION II

Governance Structure: Formal and Informal

- 2. Nationalizing Space 33
Cosmetic Federalism and the Politics of Development
- 3. Generals as Governors 59

SECTION III

Past and Present

- 4. Clash of Resource Use Regimes in Colonial Assam 83
A Nineteenth Century Puzzle Revisited
- 5. Confronting Constructionism 98
Ending the Naga War

SECTION IV
*The Life and Times of
the United Liberation Front of Assam*

- | | |
|--|-----|
| 6. Society versus State in Assam | 123 |
| 7. The Indian State and ULFA
Winning a Battle and Losing the War? | 145 |
| 8. Twenty-Five Years Later:
A Diminished Democracy | 161 |

SECTION V
Policy as an Invitation to Violence

- | | |
|--|-----|
| 9. Citizens and Denizens
Ethnicity, Homelands, and the Crisis of Displacement | 183 |
|--|-----|

SECTION VI
Epilogue

- | | |
|---|-----|
| 10. Beyond Durable Disorder
Northeast India and the Look East Policy | 211 |
| References | 237 |
| <i>Index</i> | 252 |

Preface

Northeast India's troubled post-colonial history does not fit easily into a standard narrative of democracy in India. A number of armed conflicts smoulder in this frontier region: the outside world is aware of a few of them, but only people living in remote war zones—and paying a price with their blood and tears—know the others. Reports of alleged brutality by security forces and private militias, and of popular protests against such brutality, make their way into the Indian media from time to time. But they do not capture national attention for long enough to provoke serious debates and soul-searching. The region seems distant from the hearts and minds of many Indians: its lush green landscape evokes the picture of another part of monsoon Asia, and the local people, in the eyes of many, look racially different. An undifferentiated picture of nameless 'insurgencies' and Indian soldiers engaged in the defence of 'the nation' dominate popular impressions of the region. This is hardly the climate for an informed and vigorous national debate on nearly four decades of failed policy.

It is difficult to reconcile the picture of dozens of low-intensity armed conflicts with the textbook idea that democracies are better able to peacefully resolve conflicts than non-democracies. While elections punctuate the trajectory of armed conflicts they do little more than confer an air of normalcy on both insurgencies and counter-insurgency operations. Yet the costs of letting armed conflicts fester have been high. As Vaclav Havel reminds us, societies pay an incalculable surcharge when following periods that history seems suspended the moment arrives for 'life and history to demand their due' (Havel 1989: 34–5). But on the scales used by India's security establishment such charges do not register.

Parts of India's human rights record in the Northeast would have put many other democracies to shame. Yet our debates appear to be stuck on a 'which came first: chicken or the egg' kind of a controversy on whether the security forces, or the insurgents bear the responsibility for the sorry state of human rights, or whether the Indian army, or insurgents are the worse violators, or on whether the region's fledgling human rights groups have a pro-insurgent bias. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act specially designed for the Northeast and that has remained in force for decades—despite popular protests—makes serious violations of human rights possible. The trouble that scholars have to go through to obtain permissions to visit many parts of the region—research visas being virtually impossible to obtain—challenges official claims that a stable peace is round the corner. The supposed imperatives of counter-insurgency provide a cover for a virtual loot of the public treasury and a corrosion of values in public life. Insurgent groups routinely perform crucial state functions such as tax collection ('extortion') and the provision of security to their ethnic constituents. These aspects of Northeast India's informal governance structure seems to have more in common with some weak and failing states of Africa than with the powerful Indian state that those who talk of a resurgent India imagine it to be.

The book has grown out of my sense of puzzlement about how democratic India tolerates the Northeast Indian exception. The region's troubles are usually framed as the 'insurgency problem.' But whatever the value of debates between academics and military generals on how best to fight insurgencies, counter-insurgency as an intellectual stance has produced neither path-breaking scholarship nor political positions that are defensible on ethical and moral grounds. Nor has it succeeded in the goal it has set for itself, that is, ending armed conflicts.

Durable Disorder is an invitation to think about the region's political troubles outside the hackneyed paradigm of 'insurgency'. It is an effort to think beyond the developmentalist mind-set that turns a blind eye to today's sufferings in the name of abstractions such as nation-building and development. I hope it is a step towards rescuing academic and policy discourse from the iron-grip of colonial ideas about castes and tribes; languages and dialects; and hills and plains—often dressed up these days as 'ethnic studies'. Many nineteenth and early twentieth century British scholar-administrators would have been astounded, and embarrassed by the appeal made more than a century later, to their often tentative ideas. *Durable*

Disorder is a call for a critical engagement with India's Northeast policy, keeping in mind Mrinal Miri's admonition that the idea of a nation having a 'policy' towards a part itself is odd (Miri 2002). Are Northeast India's troubles a sign of cracks along a racial fault line between India and its Northeast?

Much of the material in this book was published earlier, mostly as articles in journals and magazines. The primary reason for reprinting them is practical: to make them available in India, especially those that were published in European and American journals to which very few people have access. However, I could not avoid the dilemmas that all writers who gather previously published articles into a book must confront. If the articles need a lot of revision, as Clifford Geertz once said, 'they probably ought not to be reprinted at all, but should be replaced with a wholly new article getting the damn thing right.' And 'writing changed views back into earlier works' is a problematical enterprise. It is not wholly cricket, said Geertz, and it 'obscures the development of ideas that one is supposedly trying to demonstrate in collecting the essays in the first place' (Geertz 1973: viii).

In revising these articles I chose a middle path. The first end note to each chapter indicates when and where the original version was published. I left the arguments of the original articles intact (except for a change in a key term in Chapter 6 that I explain in endnote 3 of the chapter). Readers will easily recognize how my ideas have changed over time. I eliminated the background material that Indian readers would have found unnecessary. Certain articles, however, needed updating. For instance, the argument about 'Generals as Governors' in Chapter 3 would have been unpersuasive without some reference to developments since 2001. While rewriting it, I took the opportunity to expand parts of the essay, especially a section on the history of ideas that had to be kept short in the original magazine essay.

It was difficult to decide whether to include Chapters 6 and 7 because they were written prior to my last book *India against Itself*. Readers of that book will find the argument familiar. But a couple of reasons weighed in favour of including them. The articles are central to the theme of *Durable Disorder*. Written in the early 1990s, the chapters evoke the mood of the times. That section of the book aims at showing what happened over time to the politics of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) that once enjoyed significant public sympathy. There is also a practical consideration: those two articles are in considerable demand.

I have collected a lot of debt in writing this book, from the time when each chapter was conceived to preparing them for publication in their present form. The Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development in Guwahati, Assam, and Bard College in Annandale on Hudson, New York provided the material conditions and the intellectual space. Chapter 10 grew out of the task given to me at the OKD Institute of defining the intellectual mission of its Centre for Northeast India, South and Southeast Asia Studies [CENISEAS]. In addition, while at the institute, I wrote the introductory chapter and got the manuscript ready for publication. I am grateful to Mrinal Miri, Madan P. Bezbaruah, A.C. Bhagabati, Jayanta Madhab, Abu Naser Said Ahmed, and Bishnu Mohapatra for inviting me to the institute and for facilitating my work.

Setting up CENISEAS has given me the opportunity to interact with a new generation of talented young people working on the region. Among them are Sanjay Barbora, Anindita Dasgupta, and Boddhisattva Kar. My conversations with them and with CENISEAS Fellows Arup Jyoti Das, Bhupen Das, Uddipana Goswami, Sanjeeb Kakati, Abinash Lahkar, Mriganka Madhukailya, Sukanya Sarma, Suranjan Sarma, Pritima Sarma, and Priyam Krishna Sinha have been a source of intellectual energy that speeded up the book. Ratna Bhuyan's assistance was invaluable in getting the manuscript ready for the publisher. Without Kalindra Dev Choudhury's competent handling of CENISEAS responsibilities and Jyoti Khataniar's conscientious work habits, I would not have been able to devote time to this book. I have been fortunate in being able to count on the support of family members—Renu Baruah, Ranjib and Deepti Baruah; Karuna and Surabhi Sarma; Papari Baruah; Prantor and Sashi Baruah—and of an old friend Pankaj Thakur.

While the book took its final shape in Guwahati, most of the chapters were first written while teaching at Bard College. Bard's innovative curriculum and the quality of its engagement with the world gave me the space to stay engaged with Northeast India. The support of Leon Botstein, Michèle Dominy, and that of my colleagues in the Political Studies and the Asian Studies programmes, have been crucial in this enterprise. Mario Bick, Diana Brown, and David Kettler have read almost every word I have written.

A number of chapters got written initially in response to invitations from various institutions. Among the individuals behind these invitations are: B.G. Karlsson of the University of Uppsala, Sweden (Chapter 1), Jürg Helbling and Danilo Geiger of the University of Zürich, Switzerland

(Chapter 2), Kanak Dixit of *Himal* magazine, Kathmandu, Nepal and Anindita Dasgupta (Chapter 3), David G. Timbermann of the Asia Foundation's project 'Separatism and Autonomy in Asia' (Chapter 8), Sandhya Goswami and Bolin Hazarika of the North East India Political Science Association (Chapter 9), and Jatin Hazarika and N.K. Das of the Assam Branch of the Indian Institute of Public Administration (Chapter 10). From their conception to their appearing as chapters of this book they have benefited from various sources such as the responses I have received at conferences and seminars where I had presented earlier versions. The suggestions of anonymous reviewers and the work of editors of publications where the chapters had come out as articles are reflected in this book.

My friendship with Jupiter Yambem had for many years nourished my interest in Northeast India. Jupiter grew up in Manipur—the most troubled of Northeast Indian states. He died on 11 September 2001 at the World Trade Center. Since then there are daily reminders of the dangers of a security-obsessed mindset, and of nationalism and patriotism, entrapping us into denying the humanity of those who do not resemble us. This book, I hope, will create some awareness that India might be faced with such a danger in its troubled relationship with the Northeast.

I am grateful to Neel Pawan Barua for permitting me to see allusions to Northeast India's durable disorder in his untitled 1997 painting and for letting me use it on the cover of this book.

In my journeys between the United States and India, Kalpana Raina and Sabyasachi Bhattacharyya, formerly of New York and presently of Mumbai, have been my soulmates. Our friendship has been a driving force in my engagement with India. Zilkia Janer left New York to be with me in Guwahati—a difficult, and even lonely, place for someone working on Latin American literature and for whom the natural language of intellectual discourse is Spanish. She has been the first reader and critic of a lot of my writings. Her companionship has made a difference to my life and in being able to write this book.

September 2004

SANJIB BARUAH

SECTION I

Introduction

1

Towards a Political Sociology of Durable Disorder¹

The haunting *Madhavi* escapes the rustle of spring
Acrid with the smell of gunpowder.

Chandra Kanta Murasingh, 2003

These essays, originally written as journal articles, lectures and conference papers, seek to understand the causes, and the meaning and significance of a pattern of political violence in Northeast India that can no longer be seen as only temporary and aberrant. Deaths, injuries, and humiliations resulting from 'insurgencies' and 'counter-insurgency operations', as well as the hidden hurt that citizens quietly endure have become a part of the texture of everyday life in the region. They coexist, somewhat awkwardly, with elections and elected governments, a free press, an independent judiciary and investments in the name of development—in sum, the institutions and practices of a normal democracy and a developmentalist state.

For Indian democracy, maintaining a sustained capacity for counter-insurgency operations has meant the institutionalization of authoritarian practices that, though localized, is rather jarring. The book focuses on the formal and informal structures of governance and the democracy deficit— aspects of the region's political life that receives little systematic attention. Three of the chapters centre around the life and times of the United Liberation Front of Assam, and another is about the conflict between the Indian Government and the Nagas: one of the world's oldest continuing armed conflicts under suspended animation since 1997. The cultural politics that animate the militias of the region and their relationship to their

constituencies and to 'mainstream' social and political forces is a theme that runs through a number of the chapters. A few chapters were originally published in journals in different parts of the world; the volume is intended to make them easily available, especially to readers in India. Since the chapters often reflect the mood of the times in which they were written, I have decided not to revise them in any substantive way except to update some of the information.

'Northeast India' As a Category

Northeast India has been known this way since a radical redrawing of the region's political map in the 1960s. It was a hurried exercise in political engineering: an attempt to manage the independentist rebellions among the Nagas and the Mizos and to nip in the bud as well as pre-empt, radical political mobilization among other discontented ethnic groups. From today's vantage point this project of political engineering must be pronounced a failure. The story of what is commonly referred to as the reorganization of Assam and the advent of what I call a cosmetic federal regional order and the introduction of the term 'Northeast India' into official usage is recounted in Chapter 2, 'Nationalizing Space: Cosmetic Federalism and the Politics of Development'.

Eight of the ten chapters were written since the publication of my book *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* in 1999 (Baruah 1999).² That book's focus was Assam of the British colonial period and of the early post-colonial period—the 1950s and part of the 1960s—when it used to include five of the seven states of today's Northeast India, as well as the smaller Assam of the last three decades. In this volume, I explore the politics of militancy in Northeast India more widely, giving attention to areas both inside and outside the borders of what is called Assam today.

Partly in order not to fetishize a category of political engineering, I did not make 'Northeast India' the explicit focus of *India Against Itself*. However, since governments, political parties, and the media have come to view the area as a region it is useful to take it as a unit of analysis at least for certain purposes. At the same time it is important to keep in mind that an official region does not necessarily imply a regional consciousness corresponding to it.

The term Northeast India points to no more than the area's location on India's political map. Such generic locational place-names are attractive

to political engineers because they evoke no historical memory or collective consciousness. Indeed it is perhaps a reflection of the lack of emotional resonance of the term that in everyday conversations one hears the English word 'Northeast' and not the available translations of the word into the local languages. People tend to use the English term even when speaking or writing a regional language. Unlike place-names that evoke cultural or historical memory, the term Northeast India cannot easily become the emotional focus of a collective political project. In that sense the term might share a political rationale not unlike that of Pakistan's North West Frontier Province and is unlike the historical regions of the subcontinent. Yet it is perhaps not impossible that the category might some day be successfully incorporated into a 'place-making strategy'³ of an oppositional political project.

The Militias of Northeast India

The sheer number of militias in Northeast India is extraordinary. Indeed it might sometimes appear that any determined young man⁴ of any of the numerous ethnic groups of the region can proclaim the birth of a new militia, raise funds to buy weapons or procure them by aligning with another militia and become an important political player. According to one count, Manipur tops the list of militias with 35, Assam is second with 34 and Tripura has 30, Nagaland has four and Meghalaya checks in with three militias (ICM 2002). However, the list lumps together militias with widely different levels of organizational strength and political influence and thus it cannot be read as a quantitative indicator of the challenge posed by militias in the different states.

Ethnic ties in Northeast India do not neatly coincide with state boundaries, especially given the nature of the boundaries between states shaped by the political logic of what, in Chapter 2, I describe as a cosmetic federal regional order. Thus while the above list suggests that there are no militias in Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram, these states are not free from militancy with roots outside the state. Naga militias have significant influence among the Nagas that inhabit two districts of Arunachal Pradesh: Changlang and Tirap, though their inclusion in the category Naga is contested especially by Arunachali politicians. Ethnic groups based in Tripura and Manipur such as Reang, Brue, and Hmar have both a physical and political presence in Mizoram.

The number of militias in any state can change overnight and it is not proportional to the political challenge that militancy presents. The small number of militias in Nagaland, for instance, only reflects the fact that the political turf in the heartland of India's oldest insurgency is fully divided between two of the four militias that make the list.

Most, but not all insurgent groups can be described as ethnic militias. Indeed some of the names themselves loudly proclaim the names of the ethnic groups that they seek to defend, e.g. the Karbi National Volunteers, Tiwa National Revolutionary Force, Kuki National Front, Hmar Revolutionary Front or Zomi Revolutionary Volunteers. Even when they do not have such names it is quite clear that they are militias mobilized along ethnic lines. However, while the term ethnic militia may accurately describe the support base and even the agendas of many insurgent groups, the term can be misleading for militias that have a civic national project and seek to cultivate a multiethnic support base.

Often the names of militias point to agendas of liberating territories. Some of the place names used by militias can be found on a contemporary map as in the case with the United Liberation Front of Assam or National Socialist Council of Nagalim [Naga homeland], though the territories in question or the names may not coincide with the ones on a map. Sometimes the place names, that the names of militias indicate, are long lost in history, e.g. Kamatapur Liberation Army (of the Koch Rajbongshis), and the Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (of the Khasis). At other times the names of homelands are new and have a modern ring to them, but are based on particular constructions of the past, e.g. the Bodoland Liberation Tiger Force. Manipur's United National Liberation Front and People's Liberation Army do not refer to Manipur by name, but another militia, the People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK), refers to Manipur's historical name Kangleipak. There are, in addition, a large number of Islamicist militias mostly in Assam.

Even people living in the region may not have heard of all the ethnic groups in whose names these struggles are being waged. Well-informed Indians may have heard of a couple of militias or the names of one or two of the ethnic groups whose cause militias proclaim. But to say that outsiders may not have even heard of them is to entirely miss the point of ethno-national political mobilization. If they are about what Charles Taylor calls the politics of recognition (Taylor 1994), to say that no one has ever heard of the Karbis or Tiwas of Assam or the Hmars or Zomis of Manipur may at

least partly explain why their leaders feel the need to make their existence known.

*The Northeast Indian Ethnoscape*⁵

Considering the large number of ethnic groups that are politicized and militarized in Northeast India today, the region's ethnoscape requires some explanation. Everywhere in the world those areas that did not go through the process of standardization associated with the rise and consolidation of nation-states, e.g. the emergence of the print media, national languages, widespread literacy, and national educational systems, are perhaps significantly more diverse than areas that did. In the latter case, much of the traditional cultural and linguistic diversity has been destroyed as a result of the processes of standardization associated with nation-building and state-building. However, the notion of diversity being destroyed once for all appears theoretically more problematical today than it did a few years ago. Such notions are clearly rooted in biological metaphors of cultures and languages as forms of life and thus being susceptible to 'death'. The following summary of a debate on the 'emerging linguistics of endangered languages'—the political activism associated with the agenda of preserving endangered languages—illustrates some of the theoretical problems with which recent scholars are engaged:

In different ways these observers all argue that 'language death' is a misnomer for what is actually a 'language shift,' the sort of cumulative process of language change that results from the self-interested, rational decisions that individuals make in the course of their lives, which happen to include choices between the transmission of one language rather than other. These arguments, founded on the premise that speakers are autonomous, knowledgeable social agents, can in turn be rebutted by calling into question easy distinctions between self-interested 'choice' and institutional 'coercion,' especially in circumstances of rapid sociolinguistic change (Errington 2003: 725).

To say that Northeast India has not gone through those processes of standardization, that accompanied the consolidation of the nation-state in Europe, is not to suggest that such a trajectory would have been desirable. Nor is it meant to take attention away from the shifts and counter-shifts in language use and the language revitalization movements that are part of today's vibrant ethnoscape. In any case, the relatively weak impact of the processes of standardization does not make Northeast India very different

from other parts of India. In order to explain the region's remarkable ethnoscape of today, therefore, one would have to give closer attention to certain specificities of the region.

In Chapter 5 while discussing the Naga independentist movement, I trace Northeast India's ethnoscape to the particular ecology and the history of state formation. I draw attention to the dynamic between the hill peoples and the lowland states in pre-colonial times. From the perspective of the states in the lowlands, the hills where historically numerous cultural forms prevailed, are best seen as a non-state space to use James C. Scott's term (Scott 2000)—'illegible space' despite the existence of significant local political formations. Traditionally manpower in the region was in short supply and thus wars were not about territory, but about capturing slaves. The ethnoscape of the hills that confuses most outsiders has an affinity with the logic of slash and burn agriculture, the common mode of livelihood in these hills. The dispersed and mobile populations could not be captured for corvée labour and military service by the labour-starved states of the plains; nor could tax collectors monitor either the number of potential subjects or their holdings and income. Yet historically, the non-state space in the hills and the state space in the lowlands were not disarticulated. People continually moved from the hills to the plains and from the plains to the hills.

If wars produced movements in either direction, the attractions of commerce and what the lowlanders think of as civilization may have generated a flow of hill peoples downwards. The extortionist labour demands of the lowland states and, the vulnerability of wet-rice cultivation to crop failure, epidemics and famines produced flight to the hills where there were more subsistence alternatives. While in other parts of the world, such movements may have produced an ethnoscape of larger ethnonational formations, here what James C. Scott calls the 'lived essentialism' between the hill 'tribes' and the valley civilizations, that is their stereotypes about each other, remained powerful organizer of peoples lives and thoughts. The cultural distance between lowlanders and highlanders has been reproduced in the region's ethnoscape, though it is a continuum—no sharp line of demarcation separates them.

A Symbiosis between State and Society

A historical-institutionalist perspective that connects developments in the realm of the state with developments in society might provide some insight

into Northeast India's contemporary ethnoscape. In the case of the tradition of voluntarism that plays such an important role in American political life, albeit somewhat eroded in recent years, Theda Skocpol argues that it can be understood in terms of a 'mutual symbiosis of state and society' and not as a case of society developing apart from or instead of the state, as many American conservatives like to think (Skocpol 1999: 3).

Conservatives may imagine that popular voluntary associations and the welfare state are contradictory opposites, but historically they have operated in close symbiosis. Voluntary civic federations have both pressured for the creation of public social programs, and worked in partnership with government to administer and expand such programs after they were established (Skocpol 1996: 22).

Actually existing civil society, it is now widely recognized, does not just include associations that might conform to a liberal democratic vision of the world. But many liberal analysts seem reluctant to separate their vision of a good society from their definitions of civil society.⁶ However, for my purposes actually existing civil society includes organizations that liberal democrats might despise, e.g. illiberal cultural and social organizations and closely-knit ethnic solidarity networks. If ethnic militias are part of the actually existing civil societies of Northeast India the phenomenon can be explained in terms of a mutual symbiosis between state and society and not as a phenomenon that is independent of the state. To a significant extent the ethnic militias of Northeast India are responses to, and artifacts of, official policy.

The process can be illustrated by the efforts of the descendants of tea workers in Assam today to claim the status of 'Scheduled Tribes'. They seek recognition of the ethno-linguistic categories of the official census—into which tea workers and their descendants living outside tea plantations are classified—as Scheduled Tribes.⁷ The term 'tea tribes', as in the name of an organization such as the Assam Tea Tribes Students Association, underscores this aspiration. A section of them call themselves *Adivasi* or indigenous people emphasizing their roots in Jharkhand and other parts of India from where their forefathers had migrated more than a century ago. *Adivasi* activists point out that since their ethnic kin in their original habitats are recognized as Scheduled Tribes they should have the same status in Assam. There are now ethnic militias formed to defend *Adivasi*, i.e. indigenous people's rights, e.g. the *Adivasi Cobra Force*, *Birsa Commando Force*—named after an *Adivasi* hero—and *Adivasi Suraksha Samiti* (*Adivasi Protection Committee*).

India's protective discrimination regime creates the conditions for this political demand. 'Scheduled Tribe' status is seen as a passport to educational and public employment opportunities to which the descendants of tea workers have had limited access, and political mobilization is seen as the road to securing such status. Defending basic citizenship rights—even in a physical sense—in the face of the political mobilization by a rival ethnic community for an ethnic homeland has become an added rationale for this demand.

As I have described in Chapter 9, 'Citizens and Denizens', the practice of extending institutions intended to promote tribal self-governance and autonomy to particular scheduled tribes in specified territories—legitimizing the idea of ethnic homelands—has meant a *de facto* regime of two-tiered citizenship. This is in line with what is happening in the transnational arena in the realm of indigenous people's rights, though the ideas and categories that have shaped these institutions in Northeast India precede the transnationalization of the politics of indigenous people's rights.

Joseph Errington describes the coalescence of transnational activism in the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations as 'efforts to mobilize indigeneness as the basis of claims on behalf of communities whose members count as inheritors and stewards of particular locales and not just citizens living on segments of national territory. Aboriginality can be leveraged in this way into claims of ownership, trumping rights of access that might otherwise be claimed by and granted to encroaching "outsiders"' (Errington 2003: 724). Thus in four of the seven states of Northeast India—Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland—the lion's share of public employment, business and trade licenses, and even the right to contest for elected office are reserved for Scheduled Tribes legally considered indigenous to those states and the right of others to hold and exchange property rights in land is severely restricted. The vast majority of seats in three of these state legislatures—indeed all but one seat in the case of three legislatures—are reserved for candidates belonging to Scheduled Tribes.

For all practical purposes the model entails entitlement to jobs, business licenses and political positions for members of certain ethnic groups and subordinate status for others. Whatever its rationale, this model of two-tiered citizenship obviously imposes serious disadvantages on those that are not given the status of Scheduled Tribes within those territories. In a complex ethnoscape where there is talk of turning a territory into a homeland for specified ethnic groups and there are ethnic militias to back such demands,

political violence inevitably enters the picture. Political mobilization in support of homelands produces counter-mobilization by those who fear subordinate status in those homelands. This is the case with the Bodo demand for a homeland and the formation of the Bodo Territorial Council.

Ethnic assertion by Bodos and other Scheduled Tribes in Northeast India today has aspects that deserve celebration. For instance, recent years have seen a revival of Bodo language and culture. What a few years ago appeared to be an irreversible process of language loss now in retrospect seems to be only a temporary period of language subordination. The developments are nothing short of the overturning of Assamese and Bengali hegemony and the triumphant return of the language and culture of a subaltern group.⁸ Yet given the two-tiered citizenship inherent in the ethnic homeland model, it is not surprising that the demand for a Bodo homeland has generated opposition by non-Bodo groups, many of them no less disadvantaged than the Bodos, and has strengthened demands for Scheduled Tribe status by some non-Bodo groups including Adivasis.

These conflicts underscore the dissonance between the ethnic homeland model and the actually existing political economy of the region. The origins of the Indian Constitution's Sixth Schedule—and implicit in it today is an ethnic homeland subtext—go back to British colonial efforts to create protected enclaves for 'aborigines' where they can be allowed to pursue their 'customary practices' including kinship and clan-based rules of land allocation. Extending a set of rules, originally meant for isolated aboriginal groups, to less and less isolated groups living along with other ethnic groups and that too in the profoundly transformed conditions of the twenty-first century can only produce a crisis of citizenship, leaving citizens with the choice of either seeking recognition as Scheduled Tribes in order to be able to enjoy ordinary citizenship rights in these ethnic homelands or accept de facto second class citizenship.

Seen through the prism of the global political economy, the migration of indentured labour to the tea plantations of Assam was part of the same nineteenth century migration that took Indian labour to plantations in various parts of the British Empire, such as Fiji, Guyana, Mauritius, and South Africa. Whether a person landed in a tea plantation of Assam or in a plantation in Guyana or Mauritius was largely a function of which labour contractor he or she had signed up with. The Indian government today officially celebrates the Indian diaspora. The Pravasi Bharatiya Divas in New Delhi since January 2003 has begun honouring descendants of those

migrants to far-away shores, some who had even risen to become heads of governments of their countries. At the same time the descendants of those who had migrated to the plantations of Assam and remained within the borders of what is now India are reduced to defending their ordinary citizenship rights by organizing themselves into ethnic militias to claim tribal status. Many of them had become victims of violence committed by Bodo militants and were displaced from their homes. They remain in makeshift relief camps outside the view and care of international refugee advocacy organizations in order to save the Indian government from international embarrassment.

Whatever the transformed meaning of the term 'tribe' or 'indigenous people' in India today, efforts to claim tribal status by a community that had provided the muscle for the nineteenth century capitalist transformation of Assam, nearly a century-and-half after their forefathers had left their original habitat, is quite extraordinary. That people from this ethnic background could be physically displaced today as a result of another historically disadvantaged group's demand for an ethnic homeland, no matter how tragic the story of the latter's immiserization, is symptomatic of a crisis of citizenship that is a disturbing element in Northeast India's durable disorder.

If the demonstrated effectiveness of mobilization in support of ethnic homelands creates the conditions for the formation of rival ethnic militias, there are also examples of Indian intelligence and security agencies playing an active role in fomenting other ethnic militias. Since the activities of security agencies are not transparent it is difficult to find conclusive evidence of such complicity. However, newspapers of the region are rife with such speculations especially when ethnic militias favoured by security agencies attack rival ethnic militias that are known targets of counter-insurgency. In Chapter 8, I describe a private militia made up of former militants dependent on the government for their security, being used in vicious counter-insurgency operations against the United Liberation Front of Assam.

The saliency of ethnicity in the politics of Northeast India—the proliferation of ethnic agendas, ethnic militias, and of ethnic violence—therefore is not simply the passive reflection of Northeast India's peculiar ethnoscape, to a significant extent it is the result of a symbiotic relationship between state and society.

Beyond Militarism and Millennialism

Scholarly as well as policy-focused discussions of Northeast India today are often framed by the question of how to end insurgencies. However, counter-insurgency as an intellectual stance, with room left only for debating with military generals about differences on methods, has produced neither good scholarship nor ethically and morally defensible political positions. Rather than continuing to reinforce a false separation between 'insurgency' and the 'mainstream' of social and political life, I shall bring aspects of the ethnic militias, counter-insurgency operations, state-backed militias, developmentalist practices, and the deformed institutions of democratic governance together and suggest that for analytical purposes they can be seen as constituting a coherent whole that I will call durable disorder.⁹

A few apparent successes of counter-insurgency have permitted the assumption that each Northeast Indian insurgency could be eliminated some day by following the same old methods. But how valid is this premise? The Mizo insurgency, for example, is now a thing of the past. But there is enough happening in Mizoram and surrounding areas, where people share ethnic affinities with Mizos, that raise doubts about reading the Mizo Accord of 1986 exclusively as a success story. Mizoram's reputation vis-à-vis human rights today, in the words of a Mizo activist Vanramchuangi, 'has taken a severe beating among the world's rights activists because of the practice of mob rule in the state.' Among the examples of mob rule, he cites the role of supposed NGO activists in the forced eviction of Myanmarese refugees, the role of 'NGO vigilantes' in punishing alleged law-breakers including imposing fines and imprisoning them in steel cages. Vanramchuangi called for carrying out justice 'not by the public, but by legal means and through concerned authorities' (cited in *Telegraph* 2004a). In an important sense such practices are a legacy of the Mizo Accord and consistent with the logic of two-tiered citizenship inherent in the ethnic homeland model. The NGO vigilantism of Mizoram is often ethnically marked. The conditions for such vigilantism were to some extent inherent in the vision of an ethnic homeland that shaped the roadmap to end the Mizo insurgency a decade-and-a-half ago.

In the case of the United Liberation Front of Assam, the 'surrender' of many cadres, deaths of many in combat and the extra-judicial killing of many others, and the effects of the insurgency dividend on Assamese society have drastically cut back its size and influence. But how has it affected the

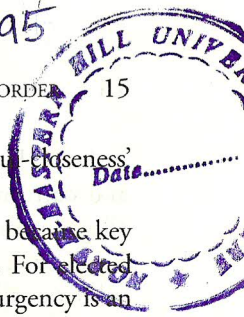
quality of everyday life in Assam after ULFA? Even in official counter-insurgency circles there is recognition that the 'peace' brought about by the existing strategy is bloody and messy. Thus speaking in 2001, Lt General S.K. Sinha, the former Governor of Assam, had already pronounced that his three-pronged counter-insurgency strategy in Assam had succeeded. While there may still be a few incidents of violence in Assam, he said, 'incidents of violence occur even in Delhi.' Assam, he argued, is no longer 'in the grips of militancy' (Sinha 2002: 21). Nandana Dutta's account of life in Assam 'in the wake of militancy'¹⁰ conveys the violence of everyday life more poignantly:

The entry in large numbers of surrendered militants ... who have brought with them this perverted education and have effected a discernible shift in the methodology of doing business or dealing with the opposition or rivals or difference—the use of brute force, the threat of guns and death, the forcible occupation of house and land. The business they are involved in is neither industry nor anything else that is remotely developmental—contracts and supply are two of the terms that have entered the linguistic stock of every individual and have become the favoured activity of unemployed youths or aspiring politicians. Each of these is a method that is peculiarly neglectful of the other—concerned purely with self. And they are ways of being that have entered mainstream society in a slow, insidious but certain fashion (Dutta 2003: 151).

Considering the conditions on the ground, Northeast India's 'insurgency problem', it can be argued, is no anathema to governance and political order. Instead the ethnic militias—those in opposition as well as those who have surrendered—can be seen as part of the evolving of actually existing governance structure of the region.

When Swedish journalist Bertel Lintner clandestinely travelled to Nagaland in the 1980s, he was struck by the contacts between mainstream political parties and the factions of the Naga underground (Lintner 1996: 53). This is not unique to Nagaland. A nexus between mainstream politicians and militants is a frequently noted dimension of the contemporary politics of Northeast India. Indeed politicians of the region are remarkably frank about these connections. In July 2003 S.C. Jamir, the president of the Nagaland State Congress and a former Chief Minister of the state said that his party 'had no quarrel with any underground organization' (*Sentinel* 2003: 10). On the same day Nagaland's present Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio explained his government's stance toward underground groups this way. While the previous government believed in 'equi-distance' from different

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Naga underground factions, his policy, he said, is one of 'equity-closeness' (Times of India 2003: 4).

One writer even argues that the Naga insurgency persists because key mainstream political players find it profitable to continue it. For elected state governments of Nagaland, argues Udayon Misra, the insurgency is an excuse to get more resources from New Delhi. Mainstream Naga politicians do not want the insurgency to end because once that happens militia leaders would compete with them for elected office. On the other hand, the ability of the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN) to run a virtual parallel government, especially in remote areas, enables it to continue recruiting cadres. At the same time human rights violations by security forces during counter-insurgency operations help the militias extend their base by creating sympathy for their side (Misra 2000).

M.S. Prabhakara makes a similar argument about the sympathy of the Assamese middle classes for ULFA. In December 2003, when the Royal Bhutan Army cracked down on ULFA and two other militant organizations taking shelter in Bhutan, Prabhakara noted that there was 'significant support' in Assam 'to the call for an end to the crackdown in Bhutan and, by implication, an easing up, if not an end to the anti-insurgency operations in the State as well.' He interpreted a statement signed by prominent Assamese citizens as evidence of this support. While the statement did not suggest that ULFA's 'separatist ideology will once again take centre stage in the ideological discourse of the state,' Prabhakara believes that it reflects a middle class mindset. 'While not supporting ULFA's separatist ideology or other varieties of extremist violence,' this class, he writes, 'recognizes only too well that militancy has now become a necessary condition for its own prosperity and well-being' (Prabhakara 2003: 7-8).

Such instrumental explanations, i.e. arguments that insurgencies survive because they serve the class interests of the middle classes or the interests of mainstream politician, are ultimately unconvincing. The turn to such convoluted explanations perhaps illustrates the puzzle that the emotionally layered relationship between militias and their constituencies present in a context where official discourse and the pan-Indian press routinely describe the militias as anti-national extremists and terrorists.¹¹ This theme is developed in Chapter 6, though it was written in 1992 at a time when support and sympathy for ULFA was barely past its peak. The reservoir of sympathy for ULFA as late as December 2003, was indeed quite striking. For by then ULFA had by all account become a spent force and most people

in Assam had read enough stories in the press about the supposedly affluent and corrupt life style of the ULFA's top leadership¹² and about ULFA's alleged complicity with Pakistani intelligence and with the government of Bangladesh with whom the anti-immigrant core of mainstream Assamese subnationalism is virtually at war.

Whether or not a certain convergence of interest between the insurgents and mainstream social forces can explain the capacity of the militias to persist, the condition of durable disorder is certainly not free of tensions. For instance, when ties between mainstream politicians and ethnic militias become apparent to the public they present a problem for Indian counter-insurgency officials. Indeed one of the primary purposes of the parallel governmental structure that I outline in Chapter 3 is the management of this problem. Furthermore, elected politicians of the region do not always accept the parallel structure, some of them occasionally challenge it.

The Security Dilemma and the Logic of Ethnic Militias

Aspects of Northeast India's durable disorder can be explained by its political logic. Especially away from major urban centres there are situations where it is quite apparent that institutions of the state cannot guarantee the security of life and property. Ethnic militias fill the vacuum. As ethnic loyalties are hardened and the obligation to ethnic militias increase, the space for cultivating habits of loyalty to state institutions become more constricted.

Students of international relations use the notion of a security dilemma to explain the 'anarchic' nature of global politics. According to this theoretical tradition, in the absence of an over-arching authority, sovereign states are forced to provide for their own security through self-help causing the insecurity of other states. It is not far-fetched to apply the concept of a security dilemma to those configurations in Northeastern India where rival ethnic groups form ethnic militias. In these situations when one ethnic group forms its militia, a rival ethnic group might see it as a threat to its security. Since the state is not seen as a reliable provider of security, the latter group then forms its own ethnic militia in pursuit of security through self-help.

While seen through the national security prism, an ethnic militia may be a part of a generalized threat of 'insurgency', from the perspective of its ethnic constituency a militia may be a reliable provider of security in a context where it faces a threat from an armed rival ethnic group. Indeed in

an ethnically polarized situation, where the actions of Indian security forces are seen as partisan, offensives against militants who are seen as security providers by their ethnic kin, may even add to the latter's sense of insecurity and an incentive for strengthening the self-help form of security.

The perceived effectiveness of militias to provide security to their ethnic kin, at least compared to that of the State, is quite self-evident to their followers and supporters. The very proliferation and persistence of small ethnic militias, in the face of the long and bloody history of counter-insurgency, would suggest that they persist and proliferate only because they serve important functions. Their incapacity to deliver on their grandiose goals such as 'national liberation' should not obscure their function as effective provider of security in a context where the state cannot guarantee it. The Indian state's financial resources and military prowess may be a significant force to reckon with, but it remains a remote entity, of limited relevance to urgent everyday needs, except as a cash cow, and with little claim to the hearts and minds of peoples.

Ethnic Militias and Taxation

Access to finance, it has been shown, is a more significant predictor of civil conflicts than deprivation or objective grounds of injustice. The co-relation between low national income and armed civil conflicts is not necessarily because objective conditions of poverty sustain rebellion, but because poverty and unemployment provide a favourable context for militias to raise money and recruit new members at a relatively low cost (Collier 2001). For the ethnic militias of Northeast India, the major source of financing is what Indian officials term extortion but in an analytical sense should be seen as taxation by private organizations.

While there are numerous stories about fund-raising by Northeast India's ethnic militias, it is hard to separate rumours from facts. Let me therefore cite as an example an account of Manipur by an unusually authoritative source, E.N. Rammohan—a senior Indian police official, who has served as Advisor to the Governor of Manipur:

For the last couple of years the valley and hill militant groups have penetrated the state and central administration and carved out specific areas of influence. Every month when salaries are disbursed, a percentage is deducted and paid to militant groups. In effect this was a replication of what was done by the NSCN [Naga Socialist Council of Nagalim] in Nagaland, as also the Naga districts of Manipur, regular

deductions are labelled as house tax and ration money. The militant groups reportedly interfere in the award of contracts and are also known to enter offices carrying files to secure signatures of officers in gunpoint (Rammohan 2002: 11).

Rammohan reported that militias had subverted even the state's public food-grains distribution system through connections with local politicians. Only the deployment of the central government's security forces in crucial state government departments eventually managed to break the penetration of government departments. He quotes government officials wryly commenting that representatives of different militias queue up at their homes every morning (Rammohan 2002: 12).

A capacity to raise money through some amount of coercion—not unlike the way states raise taxes—is not limited to ethnic militias. This form of fund-raising is a pervasive feature of political life in Northeast India today. The influential ethnic student organizations found in every part of the region, for instance, are known for this form of fund-raising. In August 2003, the Khasi commentator Patricia Mukhim reported an incident from Shillong—the capital of Meghalaya. The Khasi Students Union (KSU), according to police sources, was known to have extorted large sums of money from the traders in the city's main business district. But the KSU denied the allegation and the traders who were being extorted promptly issued a statement saying that they were not being extorted, but were voluntarily contributing for KSU's 'social activities'. The incident, in Mukhim's words, was a case of 'courage taking a backseat and the survival instinct of business rising to the fore' (Mukhim 2003: 16).

Arguably, Northeast India's ethnic militias, ethnic student associations and other political organizations have a better capacity to tax citizens than the Indian State. Government tax collectors can target only what is officially declared as income. Furthermore, the protective discrimination regime exempts wealthy scheduled tribe persons living in their 'own' states from paying income taxes. But ethnic organizations are not constrained by the taxation code of the government, and drawing on popular perceptions and rumours they are able to impose taxes based on realistic assessments of legal and illegal income. This is possible largely because of the so-called 'black economy', a sizable and growing part of the total economy that is outside the formal surveillance capacity of the state. The insurgency dividend, i.e. the leakage of government funds allocated to the region for its development, has significantly bolstered this 'black economy' in Northeast India. Indeed in 2001, the then Indian Home Minister L.K. Advani complained that

money allocated for the region's development often finds its way to the coffers of the militias (*Times of India* 2001c). But the outrage about pervasive corruption in Northeast India expressed by Indian government officials and commentators misses its central political significance as oxygen to ethnic militias, and for all the Indian state's formidable strength, it does not include a capacity to cut back on, not to speak of switching off, that source of oxygen supply.

Indian officials and the media describe the fund-raising by the ethnic militias as 'extortion'. But an implied focus on coercion alone obscures the fact that the very political culture that makes ethnic groups reliant on self-help for their security, and not on the state, also sustains notions of reciprocal obligations. Those holding official positions in the Indian state, politicians as well as bureaucrats, are expected to redistribute resources acquired through those positions among people in their patronage networks that are typically founded on ethnic solidarity. Among their followers and supporters the line separating militants from non-militants is necessarily blurred. This is what ultimately explains the so-called nexus between militias, mainstream politicians and bureaucrats.

A Diminished Democracy

Apart from tolerating taxation by militias and other ethnically organized groups and allowing the substantial leakage of funds meant for development, counter-insurgency has meant the de facto suspension of the rule of law, or at least a highly selective view of legality. In Chapter 3, I suggest the phrase 'counter-insurgent constitutionalism' to explain rules that permit the official indulgence of corruption by senior politicians in exchange for supporting harsh methods of counter-insurgency—the price that Indian democracy pays for buying local legitimacy for counter-insurgency.

While democratic elections take place and the press in the region is relatively free, many aspects of political life on the ground are rather distant from the substantive values associated with democracy. In terms of respect for basic freedoms, the rule of law and principles of accountability and transparency, there is a significantly diminished form of democracy in Northeast India today.

India's human rights record in the region is unenviable. How many democracies in the world would allow security forces to 'fire upon or otherwise use force, even to the extent of causing death', then give legal

immunity to security personnel for their actions and leave no room for an independent investigation of such incidents? These are some of the provisions of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act [AFSPA] that is in force in some parts of the Northeast (Government of India 1972). In 1997, a fact-finding team of Indian lawyers, journalists, and human rights activists that visited the region to examine the impact of the frequent use of the AFSPA. Their report *Where 'Peacekeepers' Have Declared War*, concluded, that 'despite denials to the contrary, the security forces have, over the last four decades, blatantly violated all norms of decency and the democratic rights of the people of the region.' Militarization, the team concluded, had become a 'way of life' in Northeast India (*Where 'Peacekeepers' Have Declared War* 1997: 53). Apart from the AFSPA there are other laws including the Terrorism and Disruptive Activities Prevention Act [TADA] and the National Security Act that apart from enabling counter-insurgency operations have been allegedly used to silence journalists and human rights activists (Amnesty International 2000: 81-6).

Annual reports of international human rights organizations confirm this sorry picture. The 1995 report of Human Rights Watch summarized the conditions during the preceding year as follows:

Indian counter-insurgency efforts in the northeastern states of Assam and Manipur in 1994 continued to be marked by reports of severe abuses of human rights, including indiscriminate attacks on residential areas, disappearances, extra-judicial killings, and torture of suspected militant sympathizers. In Assam, staged 'encounter' killings of young men detained, tortured and executed by the Central Reserve Police Force continued to be reported by human rights organizations and featured in the local press (HRW 1995).

The report also noted the increase of violence by the ethnic militias (HRW 1995) More recent reports include similar instances of human rights violations. 'Insurgency and increased ethnic violence,' according to the 2002 report, 'took a heavy toll in Assam and other northeastern states' (HRW 2002).

But reports of human rights organizations and accounts of authoritarian practices of the state as well as of the militias cannot quite capture the devastating impact on the quality of everyday life. Referring to Assam 'in the wake of militancy,' Nandana Dutta writes, 'the prevalence of terrorist/militant violence in a society renders that society and its people immune to the other In articulating injustice visited upon itself a society becomes

incapable of appreciating the pain of the other, or even the existence of the other' (Dutta 2003: 150).

In many ways human rights violations in Northeast India have become routine. Security forces can execute persons that they call insurgents in fake encounters and expect little effective public challenge to their version of events. Ethnic militias in many places can kidnap and kill civilians with relative impunity. Creative news management, restrictions imposed by the Indian government on visits by international human rights organizations and a compassion fatigue of pan-Indian human rights organizations, the result of the sheer persistence of the same patterns for years, have put the story of human rights violations off national and international headlines.

Credibility Gap

Yet occasional public controversies raise serious questions about the credibility of the state's version of events. For instance, in July 2003, Assam's former Chief Minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta accused the editor of a major newspaper of Assam of masterminding what until then was portrayed as an ULFA operation: the murder in 2000 of Mahanta's ministerial colleague, Nagen Sarma. Mahanta accused the newspaper editor of having masterminded the killing in order to enable his brother to contest elections from that constituency. Mahanta was the Chief Minister of Assam when the killing had occurred. Following the murder, the editor's brother had indeed successfully contested election from the seat made vacant by Sarma's death and he had become a member of the state cabinet by the time that Mahanta made this startling allegation. Soon after the murder in 2000, the two alleged killers—routinely described by security force as ULFA militants—were killed in so-called 'encounters' with security forces. Investigating the murder three years after the extra-judicial execution of the suspected killers probably would have been difficult. Yet Mahanta's accusation in the words of a newspaper commentator was 'perhaps the gravest and the most sensational of charges made in public by a responsible person like a former Chief Minister of Assam in recent times.' Still the matter pretty much ended there. Police investigators made no attempt to reopen the investigation (Kalita 2003).

There are other examples of incidents of violence first attributed to militant groups that later have turned out to be tied to more 'mainstream' actors. Such discoveries have done significant damage to the credibility of

the government's counter-insurgency posture and to the legitimacy of governmental institutions. For instance, the government and the media had routinely called incidents of pipeline blasts in Assam acts of sabotage by ULFA and other militant groups. But these standard explanation became highly suspect when the pilferage of crude oil worth crores of rupees from Assam's pipelines came to light and became a major political scandal involving government ministers, the police and officials of major oil companies. It turned out that a number of pipeline blasts had occurred during the drilling of holes in pipelines by oil thieves. There was 'a very strong possibility,' said an official close to the investigation, 'that the blasts may not have been triggered by explosives.' Instead the pipeline blasts that were described as acts of sabotage by militants were actually accidents that occurred during oil pilferage. It was easy to 'perpetuate this myth' since police officials were involved in the racket (*Telegraph* 2004c). A public counter-insurgency posture that can be seen as little more than a cover for ordinary crimes by government officials cannot exactly be expected to aid the Indian state's battle of hearts and minds vis-à-vis ethnic militants.

Insulating State from Society?

It is not surprising that organizing counter-insurgency in a context where the lines between ethnic militias and the mainstream are blurred has led to a de facto parallel political system that is authoritarian and autonomous of the formal democratically elected governmental structure. This parallel system, as I show in Chapter 3, connects New Delhi with the region with the centrally appointed governors of states as crucial nodes giving them a role that far exceeds the ceremonial functions that India's Constitution-makers had in mind. While there is limited participation of the democratically elected officials of these states in this parallel system, they are seen as the weakest link in the chain and the organizational structure effectively marginalizes them and even keeps them under watch.

There is an inherent anti-democratic, militaristic and authoritarian logic to counter-insurgency, but it is especially so under these conditions. Thus Rammohan, the security official quoted earlier, in his policy recommendations focuses on ways of insulating the development projects from the interference of 'politicians and the militants'. He recommends the further strengthening of the Indian military presence in the state. He would like battalions of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) to guard all

government offices and the residential neighbourhoods housing central and state government officials in order to stop the penetration of the government departments by militants. In addition, he recommends that ten battalions of the Central Para-Military Force (CPMF) be deployed in the Manipur Valley in a 'counter-insurgency grid' and six to eight battalions be deployed in each hills district, where roads are few, with 'helicopter support to effectively dominate them' (Rammohan 2002: 15).

From the experience of decades of ethnic militancy and counter-insurgency it can be said that it is not difficult for the Indian State—with its significant military, financial, and other resources—to control, contain, and sometimes defeat and end 'insurgences'. Indian officials often claim that only small minorities of people are committed to an agenda of political independence from India. But arguments that posit the presumed wishes of the silent majority against the will of small militias are dangerous. They make the continuation of counter-insurgency appear inevitable: the tried tactics in the state's counter-insurgency repertoire appear as the best of a number of bad options with little convincing evidence of a way out of the logic of durable disorder.

Most political scientists these days emphasize the importance of a state being embedded in society in order for it to be able to both make and implement policy agendas. As colonial states realized long time ago, state capacity is not just a function of autonomy from societal influences; it is significantly enhanced when an autonomous state is embedded in society through networks connecting state and society (Evans 1995). Yet the thrust of India's policy in Northeast India seems to be to either create a group of local stakeholders in the Indian dispensation, primarily in terms of a share in the insurgency dividend, or de-link the institutions of the state from the local societies.

The preference for a disembedded state is, of course, the result of frustration with the ethnic militias and their penetration of state institutions. I have earlier cited the policy recommendations of a security official to increase the military presence in Manipur. Rammohan's other recommendations include (a) ensuring that officers of the All India Services assigned to the state stay in the state and (b) getting central government officers to monitor all rural development projects—that are centrally financed in any case—so that 'politicians and the militants' do not interfere in the process.

According to Rammohan, ninety per cent of the officials of all-India cadres assigned to the state are 'on deputation' and they 'continually manipulate their non-return.' Newly recruited officers of the all-India cadres to Manipur in the previous five years mostly got 'cadre transfers' to other states (Rammohan 2002: 14). The reasons why an officer of the all-India cadre may want to be away from Manipur, and by extension the Northeast are varied. The absentee bureaucrats, for instance, may include those who are themselves involved in the murky world of corruption involving nexuses of politicians, officials, and businessmen. Their positions of power in a climate where counter-insurgency dominates the policy agenda provide more than the usual opportunities for personal enrichment by staking a claim to the insurgency dividend. To some of them with a frontier mentality who use the assignments in the Northeast to make a fast buck and quit, the safety of New Delhi or a place away from the Northeast may be attractive for understandable reasons.

Officers of all-India cadres include persons from other parts of India as well as some with local roots. But irrespective of ethnicity, no matter how much security and financial incentives are provided for them to stay in the region, those who view working in the region as a hardship assignment, not unlike the way many diplomats view postings in a Third World country, or as a frontier opportunity can hardly be expected to build the sort of connections between state and society that can be the foundation of a normal, legitimate democratic state.

The challenges confronting the Indian state in the Northeast therefore are more serious than what the counter-insurgency mind-set can grasp and remedy. The Indian state may be strong in certain ways, but in Northeast India, despite the easy military victories of the security forces against some militias, the weaknesses of the state that sustain the plethora of militias have a disconcerting affinity with situations of state failure.

Imagining a Different Future

In official publications and much of Indian academic writing, Northeast India's durable disorder is often explained by the region's supposed underdevelopment and poor integration into the pan-Indian 'mainstream'. In this line of thinking it is difficult to escape the failed narratives¹³ of national development and nation-building in trying to imagine an end to the current situation. In Chapter 3, I suggest a parallel between the

developmentalism that is part of Indian counter-insurgency thinking and the developmentalism that characterized the intellectual defence of empire by liberal and progressive British thinkers. In both cases dealing with a place and a people in terms of their supposed future make complicity with present injustices possible.

In Chapter 2, I develop a post-structuralist critique of the theory and practice of development in Northeast India. I argue that an important subtext to the process of extending state institutions, with an in-built developmentalist bias, to what until recently were frontier areas, is that of nationalizing space. The Indian Government has pumped enormous resources into the development of Northeast India in order to remove what it apparently sees as the structural cause of insurgencies. This has had significant impact on the region's physical infrastructure, social fabric and political life: the term insurgency dividend accurately describes some of these effects. However, to date they have not significantly altered the conditions that give rise to and sustain ethnic militancy.

The idea that Northeast India is economically backward and underdeveloped and that its ties with the national mainstream are fragile, whatever their validity, lends legitimacy to today's durable disorder. The democracy deficit, for instance, can be justified as being the result of an exceptional circumstance that would disappear when the region catches up with the rest of India—economically and emotionally—whatever that might mean. Yet arguably the region's informal structures of governance, the underpinnings of the durable disorder of today, are fairly well articulated with the institutions of the Indian state especially those, through which money for the region's development is channelled. However, whether the insurgency dividend can win hearts and minds and promote Indian nationhood, apart from providing the financial foundation of durable disorder, is another matter.

The futuristic talk of economic development and of Northeast India joining the 'national mainstream', contrasts sharply with the vision of the militias that mostly hark back to history. Thus Assamese independentist intellectuals, according to one writer, 're-read, re-interpret and even re-create history' in order to make the case that 'Assam had always been a free nation' (Misra 2000: 62). Earlier I have pointed out names of ethnic militias that evoke the memory of independent old kingdoms. Such contests over history and memory underscore the inherent tensions in all national projects, including the pan-Indian project.

Continued faith in the failed narratives of national development and nation-building can be quite dangerous in the present global conjuncture. Policies that continue to be framed and legitimized by these failed narratives can also make the situation much worse. The collapse of the Soviet Union dramatically brought home the point that even states that appear all-powerful may actually be quite weak in terms of their coherence and capacity to shape society and implement policy agendas. A post-Soviet attempt at reconstructing the history of the building of the Soviet Russian state concludes that while it had impressive formal sources of power, e.g., its coercive and bureaucratic organizations, the state's capacity was constrained by the personal networks that were the informal sources of power at the regional level (Easter 2000).

Are there ways of imagining Northeast India's future outside the failed narratives of nation-building and national development? Certain developments in the European Union provide a useful paradigm. The Maastricht Treaty of 1993 establishes the EU's Committee of the Regions in order to give local and regional interests influence in EU decision-making. Regional identities that were seen as threats by European nation-states during their hey-day are flourishing inside the EU. They are not unlike the identities that animate the militias of Northeast India that make India's counter-insurgency officials and nation-builders so jittery. The European political landscape today is dotted by paradiplomacy—international activities on the part of regions and stateless nations. Thus there are more than 200 regional 'embassies' in Brussels that lobby the European Commission and network with each other. For national groups that straddle inter-state boundaries such as the Basque Country, Catalonia, Ireland or the Tyrol, the EU affords the opportunity to pool resources and pursue a transnational politics of recognition that has been able to compensate for their marginalization within nation states.

The model of industrialization characterized by capital and job concentration that had encouraged the internal social and cultural standardization as well as the depopulation of peripheral area at the height of the nation-state, has in Europe given way to economic models that put a premium on regions that often cross national borders. Can Northeast Indian and its transnational neighbours forge such a cross-border territorial system of action?

In the epilogue 'Beyond Durable Disorder' I explore what India's Look East policy, i.e. the overtures since the 1990s toward Southeast Asian

countries, could do for Northeast India. I argue that the policy holds promises of historic proportions: there are opportunities for the region to acquire access to global markets and technology and to overcome the handicaps of its landlocked condition. At the same it could also create a transnational space for a less territorialized version of the politics of recognition that animate the ethno-national conflicts of Northeast India.

The rest of the chapters of the book are organized into five sections. Section 2 on 'Structures of Governance' has two chapters outlining the origins of today's cosmetic federal regional order and the region's parallel political systems. Section 3, 'Past and Present' includes two articles tracing the historical roots of Northeast India's current predicament to the economic incorporation of the region into the global capitalist economy in the nineteenth century. Of the two chapters in the section, one focuses on the tensions between global and local resource use regimes, a theme that gets lost in the colonial discourse of civilization and in the post-colonial discourse of development. Another chapter analyses the historical roots of the Naga conflict and traces Northeast India's contemporary ethnoscape to the region's ecology and the history of state formation. Section 4 includes three chapters on the United Liberation Front of Assam written during different phases of its power and influence. The chapter 'Citizens and Denizens' that constitutes Section 5 outlines an unfolding crisis of citizenship resulting from the tension between the politics of ethnic homelands and the logic of the region's actually existing political economy. The epilogue 'Beyond Durable Disorder' includes the chapter on the promises of the Look East policy.

Notes

¹ Parts of this chapter were published earlier in the *Economic and Political Weekly*. Reprinted with the permission of Sameeksha Trust from Sanjib Baruah, 'Gulliver's Troubles: The State and Militants in Northeast India,' *Economic and Political Weekly* 37 (41), 4178–82, October 12, 2002 and Sanjib Baruah, 'Protective Discrimination and the Crisis of Citizenship in Northeast India' *Economic and Political Weekly* 38 (17), April 26, 2003, 1624–6.

² The book was reviewed and discussed widely in India and abroad in academic journals as well as in newspapers and magazines. It is tempting to respond in details to the points raised in those reviews. However, I have decided not to do so. I have learnt from those comments and my own position on many issues have changed. An engagement with the reviews will be of limited interest to readers of this book. Yet on a couple of points in this chapter I do briefly engage two of my critics.

³ The notion of a place-making strategy is from Amy Muehlebach (2001).

⁴ There are women cadres in most militias, but not leaders.

⁵ For an elaboration of the term *ethnoscape* see Arjun Appadurai (1990). Appadurai coined the term to deal with the flows of people across international borders and the emergence of multiple forms of diasporic identities. For Appadurai the suffix 'scape' serves to draw attention to the fact that these are not objectively given relations but 'deeply perspectival constructs.' Ethnic identities in Northeast India too are perspectival constructs. This is evident in the case of the contest over the phrase 'Naga-inhabited areas' discussed in Chapter 6.

⁶ Thus Samir Kumar Das finds my notion of community-specific civil societies outlined in Chapter 6 a 'romantic projection.' He wants the conduct of inter-community relations to be a part of any definition of civil society less this area becomes the 'exclusive preserve of the state.' See S.K. Das 2002: 43–4. One can be sympathetic to the underlying vision of a 'modern' society that impels Das to refuse by definitional fiat to extend the term civil society to community-specific social spaces. But my goal is to understand the ideas and values nurtured in actually existing social spaces that animate the relationship between Northeast India's militias and their constituencies. As I show in this chapter, many commentators have been at a complete loss to explain the sympathy for ULFA especially when it had past its peak of visible political influence. In principle, my notion of actually existing civil societies is better able to grapple analytically with the emotionally layered relationships between militias and their constituencies. The kind of civil society that Das would like to see in Assam would involve the destruction or at least the marginalization of these actually existing civil societies. This imperative makes his definition somewhat complicit with the modernization project. As the case of Northeast India's durable disorder makes it apparent, the project of bringing about such a modern liberal civil society, whether it eventually succeeds or not, makes one complicit with significant state violence. While some may see this as necessary and creative destruction, the moral implications of such political analysis are problematical.

⁷ The category 'tribal' and its definition are problematical in scholarly circles. In India, however, the term is part of a policy discourse because of an elaborate system of protective discrimination that exists in favour of groups of people listed as tribals. Article 342 of Indian Constitution provides for the President of India by public notification to specify the 'tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within tribes or tribal communities which shall for the purposes of the Constitution be deemed to be 'Scheduled Tribes'. In my use, by tribal, I simply mean a group included in that list—hence Scheduled Tribe (ST). A scholar who has examined how the Indian government has arrived at the list, notes that the tribes were 'defined partly by habitat and geographic isolation, but even more on the basis of social, religious, linguistic and cultural distinctiveness—their 'tribal characteristics'. Just where the line between 'tribals' and 'non-tribals' should be drawn has not always been free from doubt' (Galanter 1984: 150).

⁸ This formulation is inspired by the theoretical discussion of linguistic transformation in Friedman 2003: 744.

⁹ I borrow the phrase 'durable disorder' from Cerny, 1998.

¹⁰ Dutta's essay includes an incisive critique of *India Against Itself*. She has read my book as a 'global citizen trying to localize himself' and charges that some of the comments printed on the book cover 'do not necessarily recognize the context he speaks from, to and about' (Dutta 2003: 148–9). Despite the importance of this critique, for reasons that I have explained in note 2 above, I will resist the temptation of responding to it.

¹¹ See endnote 6 above.

¹² It is hard to say whether these reports are true or the product of official disinformation campaigns—the product of what General Sinha describes as the psychological front of counter-insurgency operations.

¹³ I owe this phrase to Zilkia Janer (2003).

'*Durable Disorder* opens new perspectives in our understanding of federalism, the linkage between domestic and foreign policies, ethnic conflict and the meaning of democracy.'

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