

# NATIONAL SECURITY ISSUES

NORTHEAST INDIA  
PERSPECTIVES

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Dr Saied Ahmed

The book contains 10 articles presented in a national seminar organized by the Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development in collaboration with the Indian Council of Social Science Research, New Delhi. The articles provide a Northeastern perspective of India's national security and cover various current and divergent issues. It has a long introductory note of the Editor

**Rs. 600**

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# **National Security Issues Northeast India Perspectives**



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*Published by*  
**OMEO KUMAR DAS INSTITUTE OF  
SOCIAL CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT**  
and  
**AKANSHA PUBLISHING HOUSE**  
**NEW DELHI-110002**

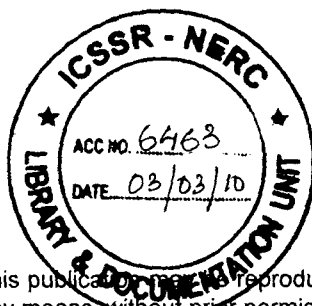
# AKANSHA PUBLISHING HOUSE

4649-B/21, Ansari Road  
Darya Ganj, New Delhi - 110 002  
Ph.: 23263193/9811582579  
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353. 1095416  
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## National Security Issues: Northeast India Perspectives

© OKDISCD—Guwahati  
First Published 2007  
ISBN 81-8370-097-7



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PRINTED IN INDIA

Published by M.P. Misra for Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi  
and Printed at Aryan Enterprises, Delhi

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# Introduction

—*Abu Nasar Saied Ahmed*

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Security, the chief pretence of civilization, cannot exist where the worst of dangers, the danger of poverty, hangs over everyone's head.

—*George Bernard Shaw*  
Preface, *Major Barbara*

The present volume is the result of a seminar on "National Security Issues: With Special Reference to Northeast India" organized by the Institute in collaboration with the Indian Council of Social Science Research. It was an attempt at understanding the problematic security scenario of India's Northeast. Ever since the first salvo of insurgency fired by A.Z. Phizo in the Naga Hills, now the state of Nagaland, at the dawn of Independence, the region has been plagued with the host of insurgency movements affecting the civic life of the people and posing a serious challenge to the national integration of the country. Although the region faced a serious external security threat in 1962 when the marching Chinese army overcame Indian defence positions and reached Bomdila of present Arunachal Pradesh, the internal security problems posed by the militant outfits of various kinds operating in the region today has become a more daunting challenge than the external sources of threat. The problem of internal threat to the security of the country has been compounded by the support extended to the militants of the region by the neighbouring countries in terms of shelter, resources and

training. The region being surrounded by a long international boundary of 4,800 km which she shares with Bangladesh, Bhutan, China and Myanmar, it has an exceedingly strategic sensitive dimension more so when its fragile link with the mainland of the country rests on a bottleneck of about 20 km wide constituting only 0.41 per cent of its total boundary. This geographical predicament exposes the region to security threat of grave import when considered from the perspective of external danger posed by some of the non-friendly neighbours. But the security crises created by internal forces in the region are graver than the external troubles anticipated. The operative domains of the forces working against the country are invisible and indistinguishable from the common masses. This makes it extremely difficult to trace and identify the insurgents and deal with them.

Some of the issues relating to internal security of the country have been discussed for the last couple of years. The need to have a national seminar on the subject has been widely felt in recent times due to the tremendous stress the country has been facing on account of the armed conflicts waged by the numerous insurgent groups in Northeast India. Although these groups differ from each other in their nature and objectives, most of them have been encouraging and fanning centrifugal tendencies. Ever since 1953 when Nagaland (at that time it was a district named the Naga Hills) started the first armed secessionist movement in a massive way against the Indian Union to be followed by another armed revolt in Mizoram in the 1960s (then a part of Assam known as the Lushai Hills) and then the militancy spearheaded by the ULFA (United Liberation Front, Assam) and Bodo militants in Assam and the tribal groups in Tripura, it appears that most of movements have ethnic roots. And now recently a religious dimension has been seen in the trouble-torn region, more particularly in Assam and Tripura, with the nabbing of the ISI agents having links with the Muslim militant groups

allegedly trained in Bangladesh. All these cause enormous social tension, besides, obstructing sustainable development in the region. The intermestic (international + domestic) dimension of the troubles such as the reported role of neighbour states in providing shelter, arms and training to the militants of the region has further complicated the security scenario of Northeast India. Unfortunately, there has been a palpable tendency on the part of the academics and the policy-makers to ignore the cauldrons that are boiling in the region despite the fact that acts of violence and terrorism of all forms, ranging from extortion, kidnapping and killing to narco-trade, and economically motivated ones, have not only become a routine affair making media headlines for decades but also a source of serious threat to national security and stability. This is largely due to the fact that security is still a low priority issue in India, and more so in the context of Northeast India, where there is still a desideratum of a sense of security concern. Naturally, a question arises, is there any commensurate intellectual response to the challenge? Unfortunately, there is none. A handful of India's security experts have been complaining that there is no security culture in India let alone a concerted effort to find its linkages with domestic variables concerning the socio-political and economic scenario. Even if there is awareness in the academic community to these problems due to the strait-jacketed disciplined structuring of our higher educational institutions, the cross-discipline structuring communication has been extremely low preventing a thorough understanding of certain least analyzed issues concerning the region.

There has been a paradigm shift in the discourse on national security. Once the concern for security against external invasion overshadows the other visible variants that are capable of destabilizing a given political order, the civil society as well as the state tends to sleep over a tinder-box capable of engineering any form of danger of violent

configuration. The newly emerging countries, which have been facing real and potential threats from hostile neighbours, put their concerted efforts to handle the sources of external threats, neglecting at the same time, the potential internal troubles stemming out of poverty, disparity on regional and sectoral basis, maladjustment of ethnic boundaries and primordial interests, and more importantly the gravity of misgovernance. When human development indices remain stuck stubbornly at the lowest ebb showing no sign of upward movement, one needs to mull over the consequential developments leading to political unrest and anomie situation. When political security is at peril, human security and other forms of security including food and livelihood security are in jeopardy. The first article in the volume tries to address the perplexed conceptual contours of security. It outlines the theoretical perspective of security to focus on multilateral dimensions of security discourse such as human development, military and non-military threats to security, insecurity due to fragility of the political environment. It addresses to other theoretical issues posed by realists and neo-realists, liberals, constructivists and globalists to convey a message in unequivocal terms that there are many facets of security which are inter-related and one cannot lose sight of these issues. There is an eclectic and broader interpretation of security, which the UNDP likes to promote and pursue so that a security culture could be cultivated against the threat from hunger, disease, unemployment, crime, social disorder, displacement, conflict, repression, gender discrimination and environmental hazards.

There was a time when attention to the security of the nation state within global and regional framework stood central to the domain of academic inquiry. This had led to concern among academics for security against external aggression. Therefore, there was a tendency among them to plead for maximization of national power understood in terms

of military buildup. Consequently, societal factors and issues under the wider coverage of human security are left out of the discourse on security.

In the changed international environment after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and in the era of globalization, the process of paradigm shift in understanding of national security got accelerated. The non-military and human security issues, the concern for non-territorial threat, the strive for livelihood, the violent movements spearheaded by ethnic groups trying to ensure their human security tend to trample human security of the others (the ethnic clashes in India's Northeast over the years point out to this kind of horrific tendencies), the borderless threat of degradation of environment and of transnational terrorism dramatically altered the concept of national security. It has become imperative to assess certain core values deeply associated with security such as economic values which bears the potentiality to neutralize domestic and international sources of conflict. Other values such as justice, freedom, democracy, secularism, gender equality, environmental protection, and cultural pluralism that promote respect for celebration of diversity in the model advanced by Immanuel Kant will follow. A chemistry of various components could be worked out to instill human security for all.

In the backdrop of an overall understanding on national security one can safely move to speak for national security from a still broader perspective to an area specific situation of India's Northeast which has been suffering from the loss of human security and military security. S.K. Agnihotri attempts to present an eclectic perspective of the national security issues in Northeast emphasizing more on human and non-military sources of threat to security. In the early phase of post-colonial India, for reasons of real and potential external threat compounded by the insurgency movements in Nagaland and at a later phase the MNF's armed struggle for independent

Mizoram and militancy in the Kashmir valley, the military approach to security dominated not only the agenda of the policy planners but also academic discourses. India has fought three major wars with Pakistan in addition to the border skirmish in 1999, one with China in 1962 when the Chinese advanced up to Bomdila in Arunachal Pradesh (at that time known as North East Frontier Agency – NEFA). The importance of Northeast India as a strategic point got fully focused thereafter. These developments had strong bearing on the security concern of the Government of India. That is why controversial legislations such as the Armed Forces Special Power Act or Prevention of Terrorist Act secure enormous importance in the security management system in the country.

Without diluting the importance of the space occupied by the concern for potential sources of external threat to national security in an ensemble way, Agnihotri tries to highlight how the concern for non-military sources of threat in the strategically sensitive region like that of India's Northeast has grown apace over the years. Issues like corruption, criminalization in politics, misgovernance, and absence of rule of law have drawn considerable attention of the academia to ponder over. It is misgovernance that has been seething the cauldron of frustration among the youth, a perennial source of trouble. Disabusing the putative theory of the Centre's neglect as the source of all ills in the region, he argues that the states of the region get relatively a better deal from the Union Government. But non-utilization of resources made available, diversion of central funds for extraneous activities and corruption have frustrated the objectives for which the sources flow to the region. The urge for separatism and territorial identity of the ethnic groups has led to a series of political dispensation with the hope that it would lead to speedy development of the respective states. But it has not worked altogether. The non-productive security engagements

have consumed time and resources in the region for more than two decades. Could there be an effort to envision a development and peace agenda for the region? The author's prescription deserves attention.

A quick look at the political geography of India's Northeast leaves no room for any security analyst to circumvent the stark reality of its security vulnerability. The strategic complexity is further complicated by the seething cauldron of frustrating ethnic strife spearheaded by too many social communities. As a pre-eminent power in South Asia, India does enjoy its comparative advantage in terms of economic strength, military power, scientific development, manpower and natural resources, geographic contour and so on. It suffers from its weakness stemming out of hostile neighbours, over-population, poverty, insurgency, ethnic turmoil in different places. Taking all the problems from an ensemble perspective it is difficult to de-basket them from the broader framework of national security. At one point of time the Nehruvian approach to security through the prism of Asianism appeared to be romantic and thrilling when Asian Relations Conference was hosted in New Delhi in April 1947. But it did not take time to get disillusioned with an unrealistic paradigm as 1947-48 India-Pakistan War broke out to be followed by the India-China War (despite a treaty with China in 1954 and seemingly workable spirit of Afro-Asian solidarity of Bandung variety), and two more wars with Pakistan. Therefore, Gurudas Das has a point to spell out the security concern in the country during the Cold War era when China-Pakistan axis posed not only a formidable external security threat but also a perennial source of unmitigated trouble as it allegedly aided and abetted the Northeast insurgents. The latter dimension did not get obliterated when China decided to withdraw from the scene. The rancorous issue of insurgency in the region remained alive and active with the external patronage from non-friendly neighbours, and thus, carried the potentiality of destabilizing

the country to a great extent. At one point of time in the Cold War era when India enjoyed the benefit of having closer and dependable relations with the erstwhile Soviet Union, the United States allegedly stepped in the scene with an agenda of Balkanization. At the end of the Cold War when the USA withdrew, a new player allegedly appeared as a reliever, the NGO with funding from the Dutch Government. In such an utterly multi-foci and problematic security scenario, Gurudas Das has a suggestion to offer – it is in the national interest to forge a multi-lateral security partnership with Bangladesh, Bhutan and Myanmar, which have historic relations with India, to ward off security predicaments caused by known external sources.

Post-colonial India has experienced the robust problem of migration of people. One such migration has been that of the Chakma-Hajong people from Chittagong Hill Tract of erstwhile East Pakistan and present Bangladesh. There was large scale displacement of indigenous people belonging to Chakma and Hajong communities living in the area due to the construction of the Kaptai hydroelectric dam (1957-1962). These people were deprived of their livelihood and habitant entitlement and were forced to leave their land. There was also a religious and communal dimension of displacement and forced expulsion of these minority communities. They had no option but to migrate to India through Mizoram, Myanmar and Tripura. Eventually, some of them, several thousand in number, entered NEFA area (now Arunachal Pradesh) during 1964-1969 and were offered settlement in the Tirap district. The casual approach to rehabilitation at the instance of an officer who had happened to be a Chakma by tribe in utter disregard to the guidelines led to a deep-rooted conflict between the indigenous tribal communities in the district and the migrants. A.C. Talukdar has addressed the problem from national security perspective and finds that any migrant, whose past credentials are in darkness and who are likely to

maintain contact with the people of their land of origin, could pose a grave security threat. The matter of Chakma-Hajong refugee problem in Arunachal Pradesh has been further complicated by human right issues, judicial interventions and political overtones due to the involvement of the students organizations, political parties and refugee forums. The only solution to the politically charged and security oriented problems, as Talukdar believes, is to disperse the people in different parts of the state and resettle them under proper watch mechanism in order to eliminate any possible threat to national interests.

Samir Das has dealt with at length the tangled question of Assamese nationalism around which the emergence of the secessionist militant outfit called the United Liberation Front, Asom, (ULFA), took place in the backdrop of the onset of the Assam movement in 1979. He has provided an elaborate intellectual insight into its paradoxical but graduated decline. Once idolized as the protector and promoter of Assamese nationalism and now downgraded as menace for its arm twisting tactics, the ULFA's road to meteoric rise and now decline is a matter to be evaluated dispassionately and intellectually. At one point of time the 'our boys' syndrome swept the mind of the Assamese middle class for which the outfit gained respectability. Yet the decline was inevitable and foreseeable. A dispassionate discussion highlighting too many events on the seemingly slow but predictable decline tends to obfuscate a proper understanding on the decline. So is the question of Assamese nationalism which remains far away from securing an acceptable definition and hence a path of resolution. It is extremely difficult to resolve the contradictions on nationalism in a multicultural state like Assam. The ULFA's inability to address the troubled question of nationalism has jeopardized the very essence of its revolutionary character. It is difficult to comprehend how an organization born to the cause of Assamese nationalism

degenerated into a petty terrorist outfit delimiting itself to a gun tottering image. It did not take time to find that those who had once sponsored it would like to denigrate it today as a big liability. Therefore, a critique of the whole issue of Assamese nationalism and the position of the ULFA in the civil society of the state in view of its current activities including its pursuit for a secured life and a safe haven in Bangladesh is necessary. The article by Das has tried to fill in the vacuum in the discourses on Assamese nationalism, the failure of the ULFA to address the resolution of a number of issues such as democracy and constitutionalism, the right to secede, the blueprint for a change, the imposition of ULFA's meaningless *diktat* to preserve Assamese culture while forgetting the principal issues like Centre's neglect thesis which constitute the core of the process of the decline the militant outfit in Assam.

Manipur, despite its rich history, culture, performing art, tradition and natural grandeur, is one of the most unfortunate states in the Northeast which has been reeling under the weight of insurgency for more than two decades. The canvas, on which the problems of insurgency in Manipur, finds expression is multi-foci and problematic. Amar Yumnam finds that there is a failure on the part of the state and the non-state actors to forge transformation of divergence to convergence of contentious issues. The shift from convergence to divergence of unresolved issues had begun in 1947 itself when the King of Manipur was forced to sign the instrument of accession and the matter came to the light soon after. It is a long perilous and painful history of militancy which has crippled and devastated the economy and social milieu of the state. The state of Manipur is now under the mercy of over 28 militant organizations, each one of which has a different agenda, although the *modus operandi* of all of them is more or less the same. It is reported that paradoxically some of the militant leaders have affiliations with more than one

organizations despite their ideological and operational differences. Yumnam finds that the risk of joining militancy is too high to afford, yet that the youth in Manipur taking recourse to it is a matter of grave import, which the academics and policy makers can hardly ignore. The longevity of insurgency in Manipur casts discredit to the state. The civil society, the economy and the political system of the state are at risk because of the prolonged insurgency related movements. It appears that insurgency in the Northeast, more particularly, Assam, Manipur, Nagaland and Tripura will stay, for, it has become an industry which no one is willing to disown. Therefore, human security, livelihood security, peace and development do not have a future in the region. It is a general phenomenon which troubles not only the people of Manipur but also all the people of the region.

In the midst of an insurgency culture in the region, an alternative model for conflict transformation has been successfully advanced by Mizoram which itself had suffered grievously because of secessionist movement for two decades. In the insurgency-dominated political panorama in the state, so pandemic of the Northeast, which had fought a bloody and prolonged battle against the Union Government in order to register their fist of fury now has dedicated itself to wage a war of development in all fronts. Zoramthanga, the present Chief Minister of Mizoram, has been not only building the blocks of peace and development in his state, but also has been extending his remarkable diplomatic skill to reach out to the Northeast insurgent groups in his quest for a conflict transformation in the region. R.K. Satapathy's article is a historiography of the process of conflict transformation, which could open new vistas of development in the region. The path is arduous and time consuming but can work at least as an anodyne to internal security disorder.

The robustness of the task of conflict transformation so intrinsically associated with all forms of security need not

deter anyone absorbed in the peace process in the region. The example set by Nagaland in engaging itself in the process of conflict transformation for the last eight years must have been inspired by the model set by Mizoram. It is easy to disturb peace and to rob the common people of their sense of security. But it is extremely difficult to instill security of all forms in the mind of the people, more so once peace is at peril due to insurgency. The peace process involving the IM faction of the NSCN (there are two factions of the militant outfit, the IM group holds the key notwithstanding the hostility of the Khaplang group) resembles to a limited extent the peace dialogue that had taken place in the 1980s between the Government of India and the MNF. The right to secede away from the Indian Union in the quest for independence, a manifestation of the total rejection of the imposition of 'alien rule' and eventually to form a great territorial sovereign entity for their respective ethnic groups was the driving force for the secessionists to take recourse to a highly risky insurgency path. The external sources of support to sustain the insurgency movements had their own matrix of limitation. A realization of this inherent infirmity led to the MNF to seek reconciliation. It augurs well if the national policy makers and those who are waging a war against the Indian Union engage themselves in a dispassionate discourse on the issues of nationalism, sovereignty, peace, development and conflict transformation; a pathfinder might surface at last. It is encouraging to experience eight years of ceasefire in Nagaland. To hold the ceasefire in the state, the state actors, non-state actors, the civil society, the Naga Hoho, the Mothers Association, the Church and importantly enough, the subaltern groups have never felt condescend about extending their cooperation in various ways despite the occasional threats and inter-group violence, knowing fully well that there is no readymade and patented panacea for peace but at the same time the understanding that when the wheel moves it

reaches the destination, if it has a driving force, has a bright future.

Like Assam, Manipur and Nagaland, Tripura has been suffering for more than two decades as a consequence of the armed conflict triggered off by about 30 tribal outfits, a staggering figure in such a small state with a land area of 10.4 thousand sq. km. and with a population of 3.1 million (Census: 2001). Although the armed tribal insurgents are not secessionists, the magnitude of sporadic violence committed by them has not only destabilized the social setting of the state but also has adversely affected its economy. While J.B. Ganguly dwells upon the economic cost of insurgency in the state, Malabika Das Gupta concentrates on the plight of the Jhumiyas who have lost their livelihood entitlement and have got alienated from their traditional mode of production, and are now forced to seek alternative means of livelihood as landless labourers in places far away from their roots. Ganguly's panoramic but painful presentation of insurgency in this smallest state of the region tells with statistical details the loss of life and livelihood, the various forms of violence leading to not only the increase of unemployment rate but also devastating the economy of the state. Tripura has the potentiality to boost its economy with natural resources such as natural gas (estimated reserve is 400 billion cubic metres) and natural rubber plantation (23,000 hectares of plantation), agricultural products, handicraft industry, and enormous scope for tourism. With militancy looming large, all opportunities for economic development get disdainfully disarranged.

Malabika Das Gupta picks up the case of the Jhumiyas to portray the plight of a poor and weaker section of the society in Tripura. Although the Jhumiyas are not the section of the people who are targeted by the militants, but insurgency related environment has robbed them of a sense of livelihood security and has forced them to abandon their traditional way

of livelihood and seek alternative means as cheap labourers. The Jhumiyas had in the past suffered when raiders from the Lushai Hills (now Mizoram) used to descend down and plunder the sleepy villages of the Jhumiyas. Repeated pillage and plunder committed by the armed marauders for several decades in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century left at one point of time the habitat of these people deserted. They migrated to safer places like Agartala and Udaipur, which were free from Lushai depredations. With the loss of jhuming cultivation, there was loss of production. With the British annexation of the Lushai Hills the armed raids came to a grinding halt. The Jhumiyas started to return to the land they belonged to. Unfortunately, an identical situation emerged since the 1980s when the Jhumiyas became the unfortunate victims of insurgency in the state, despite the fact that they were not the targets of attack by the militants. Malabika Das Gupta has analyzed with the help of two figures the adverse impact of insurgency on the Jhumiyas and their economy - a consequence of spillover effect. With the decrease of annual production in agricultural items, there is slump in the economy of the state, which cannot possibly be taken as a healthy sign. Needless to state that a decline in the economy of a state has a horrific impact on human security.

A panoramic perspective of national security cannot afford to dissuade a scholarly discourse on the internal and external problems of a secondary state located in the region, more so when the dividing line between the internal and the external affairs get blurred. Bhutan is one such country with which India has a very special relation. B.P. Misra has attempted at a critical assessment of the relationship between India and Bhutan, despite the fact that it is difficult to undertake a serious research on Bhutan which discourages any research on it. Two vitally important issues used to plague the relations between the two countries – the succession to the Bhutanese throne and the problems of Nepalese in the southern part of

Bhutan. Added to these another issue which had carried the potentiality to disturb the already brittle relations was the use of Bhutan's territory by the Northeast insurgents. This was, however, handled by the King in 2004 who not only closed the gate of entry of these militant groups into the kingdom but also used the Royal army to flush them out once for all. It was a historic measure from the perspective of national security of the country which has strengthened the bi-lateral relations of India and Bhutan to a considerable extent.

The national security issues with special emphasis on India's Northeast are multi-centric and thus are problematic. There is no straight-jacketed and handpicked solution to the insurgency problem which still occupies the arch position in the security scenario of the region. Each of the security related problems from the perspective of wider national interests has a long history and has its uniqueness in terms of ethnic, political and geographic dimensions. Just as India's Northeast does not have an atomized entity, the problems faced by the region also cannot be framed in one large and broad canvas. The tendency to club all of them in one basket and seek a military solution to all of them has made the situation all the more complicated. Leaving aside the insurgency related problems, it is highly important to address other dimensions of human security in a region which is often ravaged by flood, river erosion and malaria, issues of economic development and governance, issues relating to extra-regional configurations in the form of safe havens for the militants in neighbouring countries which perhaps need diplomatic initiatives.

It is not expected that the entire gamut of national security should come under one volume. Nonetheless, the articles in this volume represent a wide range of subjects and a diversity of approach. They may reflect divergent styles and perceptions of events and issues put in a massive social churning for decades together with little sign of immediate resolution.

Security issues undoubtedly have different shades and contours, so also theoretical concepts derived out of discourses on them. It is obvious that judged from a rarefied academic perception the concept of security encompasses a wide spectrum of ideas, some of which find attention in this volume. Just as umpteen issues might cloud clarity of thought and perception, an attempt to circumvent contentious issues raised in the wider canvas of national security might lead to trivialization of the current discourses on it. A balance, therefore, needs to be curbed to present a manageable outline of the security scenario in the region. This volume is a small endeavour in this direction.

As stated already, the present volume is the result of a seminar organized by the Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development with a financial assistance from the Indian Council of Social Science Research, which deserves profound gratitude from the organizers. My colleagues Anuradha Dutta, Indraneel Dutta, Bhupen Sarmah, Kalyan Das, Saswati Choudhury and Joydeep Baruah took great interest in the publication of the volume. Ratna Bhuyan did the copy-editing task with tremendous pain and patience. Rustam Ali completed the computer typing neatly. M.P. Misra took care to bring out the book as quickly as possible. My wife Ruby encouraged me and kept me off from daily botheration so that I could devote myself to complete the editorial work within the set time frame. All deserve my sincere gratitude.

The book is dedicated to Professor Annada Charan Bhagabati, the Founder-Director of the Institute, as a mark of profound respect to him.

October, 2006

**Abu Nasar Saied Ahmed**