

# FRONTIER TRAVAILS

NORTHEAST: THE POLITICS OF A MESS



Subir Ghosh

Opinions always differ, as do perceptions. And when the opinions and perceptions in question are related to the Northeast, they are as many as there can be. Given the enormous diversity of the region itself and varied subjective convictions and viewpoints about these Frontier States (also addressed as the Seven Sisters), both of the people who live there as well as experts who have an interest in this turbulent region, the average Indian does not know where to begin, or whom to believe.

This very impetus permeates the *raison d'être* of the book, which has been compiled and stitched together to review and assess the situation in the Northeast—be it political, social, economic, or cultural—for, the present militancy and chaos in the region is not something that has dropped from the skies. The current flux is an outcome of both the recent and the not-so-recent past. It is foolhardy to make sweeping statements without a contextual reference to the backdrop. Hence, these travails of the Frontier dwell on issues from both the micro and macro standpoints, in a bid to disentangle the threads that make the Northeast an apparently incomprehensible conundrum.

Given these parameters, the book looks at the Northeast—the result of a political mess that it has been perforce made to be. Issues and subjects naturally overlap—but have still been discussed threadbare under the fewest heads possible. If the secessionist movements and the autonomy outcries were to be even just looked at, the region would be a politico-cartographer's nightmare. The ethno-political equations are too intricate and sensitive to be left to the politicians alone. But it is these very Neroesque politicians, both far away at the Centre as well as back home, who have subverted genuine aspirations, fanned ludicrous demands, and raked in the lucre—all at the expense of the commoners who have little to say, far less to do, with the machinations that have decided and distorted their futures.

The author desists from making predictions for the future, but if the present were to disregard the past, then history would not repeat itself as a tragedy, but a gory farce. Penned with a perspective as detached as could have possibly been, the treatment is essentially journalistic. But it does provide the average lay Indian with a starting point—the Northeast is not just a Common Noun denoting a direction, it is a Proper Noun that must be accorded the dignity and understanding that it deserves, but is rarely accorded.



Subir Ghosh (R), during a visit to the region.

Subir Ghosh, 34, has been associated with journalism and publishing for over a decade. A graduate of University of Calcutta, he commenced his working career as a sales professional in the Northeast—a region which, ironically, he was not enamoured with at first blush. As chance would have it, his curiosity in the Northeast was kindled while working on the eastern metropolitan desk of *Press Trust of India* (PTI), handling news from the region. The inquisitiveness grew into a passion during his stay at the Calcutta daily, *The Telegraph*, where he penned a series, *Travels on the Frontier*. Ghosh was among the first few journalists to be selected for the National Foundation for India's (NFI) Northeast Media Exchange Programme. As of now, he is maintaining a cyber news archive on the Northeast, *Northeast Vigil* ([www.northeastvigil.com](http://www.northeastvigil.com)), and is working closely with the Centre for Northeast Studies and Policy Research. He can be reached at [subirghosh@northeastvigil.com](mailto:subirghosh@northeastvigil.com).

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# **FRONTIER TRAVAILS**

**Northeast: The Politics of a Mess**



### **By the Same Author**

Co-authored prize-winning science fiction, *The Dream Machine*, with Richa Bansal, Children's Book Trust, New Delhi, 1995.

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Northeast: The Politics of a Mess



Subir Ghosh



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*Let us rather/Hold fast the mortal sword; and like good men  
Bestride our down-fallen birthdom.  
Each new morn/New widows howl, new orphans cry.*

—William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

# Author's Note

## Knots by Northeast

*I shall be content if those shall pronounce my 'History' useful who desire to give a view of events as they did really happen, and as they are very likely, in accordance with human nature, to repeat themselves at some future time—if not exactly the same, yet very similar.*

—Thucydides, *Historia*

The portentous clouds hovering over that dark, wintry evening when I docked in Guwahati sank my already melancholic spirits. The Northeast was the last place I could have hoped for as a posting—my first job that it was. The year was 1988, the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) was on an upswing and the Bodo movement was peaking too. Bengalis are not welcome in Assam, I had been forewarned. I was on my way to Agartala to eke out a decent living as a marketing professional. Tripura, for me, was a State where tribal militants had been massacring Bengalis.

It was with this baggage of preconceived notions and pieces of advice from ill-informed people, that I had my first blush with the Northeast. It was not love at first sight.

It did not take long for me to comprehend how much I had been put on the wrong track. I had stayed in Guwahati only for three days *en route* Agartala that winter. But how many friends did I make during that sojourn? Was it 20? No, it must have been more. And, most of them were Asomiyas, who not only bore no ill-will towards this outsider Bengali, but also went out of their way to make me feel at home. The tribals of Tripura were not that hostile either as I had been made to envision. They were simple-minded people for whom black and white were black and white—as straight as that. I never

had to ask for help from the same person twice—be it Guwahati or Agartala. If I ever grasped what selflessness meant, it was here.

I quit that job in a matter of a few months. The homesick lad returned, but memories lingered on. Be it those gossip sessions at a dingy tea shop in Ulubari Chariali in Guwahati filled with banter and camaraderie, or trying to explain to our diminutive Tripuri cook how he was to woo the maiden he was enamoured with in a ramshackle rest house in Dharmanagar in Tripura—they still seem just like yesterday. Fond memories never die.

Neither can one forget that equally gloomy evening when I landed in Kohima for the first time. Saddled with a heavy bag that I could barely carry up the steep roads, trying to find my way to a hotel, I was accosted by a youth. This was a Bengali fella who wanted to help me for a small price. I agreed. What, with sunlight fast receding and the drizzle growing heavier. Barely 100 feet had we made, the youth dropped the bag. Standing akimbo, he glared at me and said the price would now be five times of what we had settled for. I refused. "Do you know where you are? This is Nagaland!" he informed me. I looked askance, and noticed we were standing in front of the historic Naga Club building, which now houses the office of the powerful Naga Students' Federation (NSF). No students were around at the time. It was late evening, the drizzle was fast becoming a downpour and these were still the days of insurgency. Shutters all around were down. No soul in sight.

I was contemplating whether to sock this friendly Bengali or to settle for what he wanted to extort (after all, I did not want to carry that heavy bag of mine), when a tall Naga youth landed from nowhere. "What's wrong?" he enquired. I explained who I was and what the problem was as laconically as I could put it.

The Naga said nothing. He picked up my bag and motioned me to follow. I wondered what was happening. He stopped a couple of yards ahead, looked at that Bengali youth and shooed him away as you shoo off goats. He got me into a bus, and escorted me to the hotel I was looking for. Only after

I had changed and asked for a cup of coffee, that he opened his mouth. He spoke broken English and was visibly agitated with that Bengali man. He politely refused to have any beverage or dry himself up, but he gave me company. After I was through, he left. I have never met him again.

Sweet memories, but it could have been otherwise too, sceptics have told me time and again. Yes, I have always insisted; it did not happen otherwise.

Over a decade later, as I ruminate on my maiden encounter with the Northeast, I stand convinced that I, like politicians at the Centre, have been doing for the last 50 good years, very conveniently denounced the Northeast for all the travails I had apprehended I would encounter. I did not like the North-east, home to more than 200 ethnic groups and sub-groups, because I had been made to look at the region through tinted glasses.

My chores on the Eastern Metropolitan Desk of the *Press Trust of India* (PTI) in 1991 mutated all that. What began as inquisitiveness and curiosity, and the exigency of knowing more about the Northeast if one had to handle news from the region without goofing things up for insufficiency of adequate wisdom, gradually sprouted into love and passion for the Northeast and its people. One had been left groping in the dark in the early days—perusing material worth the name was not available. There was not one book that could serve as an inception point, one which could lead me to other books on subjects I might be more interested in. Trying to brush up one's knowledge on the region was akin to striving to solve a jigsaw puzzle, not knowing where to commence from. Nothing seemed to fit in anywhere. What I ended up with in those years were disconnected fragments of information that left me wondering whether I was scripting a typical Jean-Luc Godard film that would have a beginning, a middle and an end but not necessarily in the same order.

There was a compulsion to be politically correct and play it safe as well. During a late night shift on the PTI desk, a copy landed from Nagaland. I, without blinking once, assiduously changed all the *militant(s)* and *insurgent(s)* in the copy to

*extremist(s)* and *terrorist(s)*. Within minutes of the copy being transmitted, there was a lightning trunk call from Kohima. The correspondent was livid; he sounded panicky too. "Do you want to get me killed?... What makes you think all the terms are synonymous?... Do you have an idea what will happen to me if this copy is carried in the newspapers here?" He wasn't reprimanding me; he was pleading, as if for dear life. I was quick to catch on; the corrections were carried out promptly and the correspondent did not have nightmares that night.

A former correspondent with *The Statesman* put it pithily the only time we met. We were prattling about the predicament of correspondents reporting out of conflict zones like the Northeast. "You see," he explained with a sardonic and resigned grin on his face, "we have to tackle diametrically opposite kinds of people. A lot who are sensitive (meaning, people of the Northeast, by and large), and another who are insensitive (meaning, callous people on the news desks of the non-Northeast newspapers).

The seeds of this book had been sown in my mind in 1991 itself. The idea started crystallising when I joined *The Telegraph* in January 1995. Here I wrote edit page articles as consistently as was possible, handled news from the Northeast on the region desk and made sporadic visits to the region too. At a time when I was already focusing solely on the Northeast, I was approached by a now-senior journalist in Calcutta (Kolkata). She was planning a trip to the North-east, but desperately wanted some background information on the region. So she came for a briefing session—it was as brief as I could not have imagined.

She started with Manipur, for that was wherefrom she was to begin her whirlwind tour. "The inter-outfit equations first," she insisted.

"Well, you primarily have the NSCN(IM) in the hills and also the KNF. There's PLA, UNLF, PREPAK, KCP in the valley," I began.

"And?"

"The NSCN(IM) and the KNF are gunning for each other. The PLA-PREPAK-KCP are together known as the RJC. The

UNLF-NSCN(K)-ULFA are the IBRF. They are all gunning for security forces. The NSCN(IM) and the NSCN(K) gun for each other. The NSCN(IM) and the RJC-UNLF are not yet gunning for each other as I know of... but they are not the best of friends... and yes, the security forces are gunning for all of them..."

"But why?... they are all tribal Christians?"

"No... the Meiteis are Vaishnavite Hindus mainly... but not all tribals are Christians... and tribals are not in a brute majority either in the Northeast..."

She gave up. Nothing was making sense to her (it hasn't still to many Indian leaders, so why blame her). All that she had enlightened herself with were a few proper nouns that she might forget the moment she stepped out of my house. The Northeast sounded like a melange of abbreviations and acronyms—as nebulous as that.

It was at that point of time, I had felt the dire need for a book that would have answered many of her questions. The idea, that thereafter remained ensconced at the back of my mind, was drawn out by Jyoti Sabharwal, Consultant Editor, Macmillan India Ltd, who I met on a chance visit to New Delhi sometime in the late 1990s. The outcome of my extensive discussions with her is this title.

Every visit that I undertook to the region as a journalist—right from the first foray I made in mid-June 1992, four years after my marketing executive days and the umpteen trips thereafter—were always a homecoming for me. Information was not so difficult to access. Right from the politicians who I took apart ruthlessly in my reports and articles, to the students', women's and human rights' organisation—cooperation had been forthcoming from all. Relations with underground organisations were cordial too—except the solitary misunderstanding with the Revolutionary People's Front (RPR) of Manipur which misconstrued me once to be "an Indian agent". The confusion was amicably sorted out with the publicity wing of the insurgent organisation.

No, there is nothing pretentious here. This is not an exercise in historiography. *Frontier Travails* is not a book of his-

tory, nor does it advocate a panacea for the plethora of ills that scourge the Northeast. It is not a journalistic exposé of events either. It does and does not fall somewhere in between. The subject is academic, the way of looking at it is journalistic. This book is meant to be a primer for the uninitiated—those who know precious little about the Northeast, but would love to know where to start from.

The present-day States of India described as the Northeast in this work are those of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. It does not include Sikkim. This state is neither geographically contiguous nor historically linked to the region that has come to be known as the Northeast. By just tagging along a state to the North-Eastern Council (NEC) cannot be any justification for redefining the region. Let rabble-rousers rouse rabble. I will carry on.

**Subir Ghosh**

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- My parents. Were it not for them I would not have existed.
- But for Jyoti Sabharwal, Consultant Editor, Macmillan India, this book wouldn't have seen the light of day without such inspirational impetus.
- And, above all, the people of the Northeast—if they did not exist, neither could have this book.

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# Introduction

## Importance of Being Northeast

*When they teased Vesuvius, Pompeii perished.*

—Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Cloud in Trousers*

The treatment of the Northeast has been one of a self-defeating paradox. There is socio-economic exploitation of the region on one hand, and socio-economic neglect of its hapless populace on the other. It is an incongruity that never was in the first place. Exploitation and neglect go hand-in-hand—they complement and supplement each other. You utilise the region's human and natural resources, and then leave the people at the mercy of the Lord. It is this plunder-and-dereliction syndrome that not only has a cumulative alienation after-effect, it also comes bag and baggage with socio-political turbulence. Complex ethnic equations only make matters worse. Exploitation pays for the politicians and business interests; neglect warrants that the people do not have to be paid back. It pays off both ways. The process has carried on for primarily one reason—the unimportance of the Northeast. The region never mattered when it came to Parliament elections (though things are-a-changing vis-à-vis hung Parliaments, albeit circumstantially so), and, hence, the disdainful disposition. And how could the Northeast as a bloc matter when seven states could send together only 24 members to the 500-plus Lok Sabha? Central governments never paid the price, it has been the state governments, which have, tumbling as they have like nine pins every now and then.

Politicians can never get away with dismissive attitudes unless the national media and the non-Northeast regional

media too tag along. Barring the sensational stories, the Northeast remains eclipsed from the vision of the mainland Indian citizen. In the bargain, national-level politicians are accorded the chance and justification to get away with whatever games they play. The all-pervading naiveté about the Northeast persists among Indians. Explore still more and what it all boils down to is that of mentalities and attitudes. It is fashionable to find people talking about the Northeast in such condescending a fashion—oh, it is such an exotic, serene place; but look what politicians and terrorists have done to the region. Yes, the problem lies with the people who have created and, in the days that supervened, made a mess of the system. But the problem also lies with many other people who are a part of the same system—the media for letting politicians propagate their own school of thought, and the citizenry for not demanding their right to know.

This General at the Eastern Command had sought an audience with this writer. One was not astonished that someone at the Command headquarters should want to meet one. After all, one had just completed a series of reports on the Northeast and the two sets of six write-ups, each had gone down well with most of those concerned with and about the region. As it turned out to be, this senior Armyman only wanted me to know of his preconceived ideas and opinions. Howsoever one might have disagreed about his contentions on more counts than one, the General did willy-nilly make one point. He dwelt at length on how much the Indian Army was concerned about the Northeast and went on to blame the politicians for all that has so far gone wrong in the region. He had a point, and more so when he prattled about the Durand Syndrome still being entrenched deep in the psyche of India's leaders. The Durand Line, so named after Sir Mortimer Durand, was drawn along the tribal lands in the Hindu Kush region in 1893, to demarcate the respective spheres of influence between Afghanistan and British India.

All aggressors right from the Aryans and the Huns to Nadir Shah and Ahmad Shah Abdali had always intruded from the northwest frontier of India. The threat always came from one singular direction. Post-Independence, not

much fluctuated. With Pakistan remaining a *bete noire*, any imperilment could only come from that direction. That was what was discerned and foreseen by India's leaders. That was, equally, one of the many explanations why the Chinese aggression of 1962 jolted India. After all, the peril lay on the north-western side of the Durand Line. India did learn its lesson from the ephemeral 1962 skirmish, but it has always been the Indo-Pak border, which has had to be firmly guarded. And not without reason though.

In the Pokhran-II aftermath, with the Union Minister for Defence, George Fernandes, going hammer and tongs at the Chinese, the focus did shift, albeit for a short while, from the northwest frontier to the northeast. Whatever might have been the minister's compulsions in launching his harangue against China; the Northeast is one region whose international borders far exceed those with the rest of India. The Northeast has international borders with as many as four countries—Bhutan, China, Myanmar (Burma) and Bangladesh—only two per cent of the total land border is with any Indian State, i.e. West Bengal. Nepal too is not far away.

Given the geo-political strategic location of the region, it is no surprise that international relations should have much to do with the Northeast. But the fact that it seldom does, should come as a bigger surprise. For the sake of convenience, look at it only from the point of view of insurgency and law and order. Cadres of almost all underground organisations operating in the Northeast have hideouts and training camps in one or more of three of these countries—Bangladesh, Bhutan and Myanmar. How much of covert or overt succour these insurgents receive from them is beside the point. What matters is that the degree of stability in the Northeast depends on how much and long the militants can make the best of India's inability to convince these three neighbours into flushing out the rebels.

The Northeast cannot be the headache of the Home Ministry alone; the External Affairs Ministry has a key role to play here. The key country in question is Bangladesh. Not only is that country the source of countless illegal migrants who have made substantial areas of the Northeast their home and

thrown the demographic equations out of gear, it also provides havens and transit points for militants.

There have been times, when Bangladesh has tried to adopt a hardline approach to Northeast insurgents. In early 1997, it asked Northeast insurgents to leave the country by April 15, 1997.<sup>1</sup> A minor offensive was launched and Bangladesh Rifles (its border guards) arrested 38 militants of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Swu-Muivah), People's Liberation Army (PLA), National Liberation Front of Twipra (NLFT) and United National Liberation Front (UNLF) among others. These militants were trying to enter India on April 21, 1997, through a place in Meghalaya called Dawki, right on the Indo-Bangla border. Most of the camps of Indian rebels are said to be located in the Sylhet region. Most of these areas are predominantly Meitei. The camps are mostly of Manipuri outfits. Northeast rebels cannot be pinged out from this area since it is a bastion of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party's Begum Khaleda Zia.<sup>2</sup> The BNP describes the activities of Northeast insurgents as "freedom struggle". Zia even said, "Bangladesh, which earned independence through a bloody struggle, can never support the suppression of people seeking independence."<sup>3</sup>

Senior leaders of the ULFA are known to have used Dhaka as a secure place to stay in and remote-control operations from. In spite of everything being known to all and sundry, the Indian government has scarcely done anything constructive whereby it could plug escape routes and transit points for Northeast insurgents. There is no point asking why.

The ULFA General Secretary, Anup Chetia alias Golap Baruah, was arrested by the Bangladesh police on December 21, 1997. Yet it was only on January 2, 1998, that the people

<sup>1</sup> Rajib Chowdhury; "Crackdown on Insurgents"; *North-East Sun*, New Delhi; May 1-14, 1997, pp 7.

<sup>2</sup> Rajib Chowdhury; "Crackdown on Insurgents"; *North-East Sun*, New Delhi; May 1-14, 1997, pp 7.

<sup>3</sup> Anonymous; "Khaleda Supports NE Militants"; *North-East Sun*, New Delhi; February 15-28, 1997, pp 5.

came to know about it from a BBC news item naming the Chief Secretary of Assam, VS Jafa, as its source.<sup>4</sup> Chetia was despatched to Dhaka Central Jail for unauthorised stay in the country and for being in possession of fake passports and in illegal possession of satellite phones. In spite of having as many as six specific cases against Chetia—including the Surendra Paul murder case of 1990, and the Sanjoy Ghose abduction case of 1997, the Indian government was unable to secure the extradition of Chetia. Chetia's arrest and his being held in Bangladesh for three years has been a murky affair from the beginning. A popular Dhaka magazine, *Jajaidin*, went on the offensive over the Chetia arrest and even said that he (Chetia) had helped Bangladesh refugees and freedom fighters during the Liberation War of 1971. It wondered why the country could not grant asylum to a freedom fighter when its own had been shielded by people like Chetia during the Bangla war.<sup>5</sup>

Bhutan too is a sanctuary—of the ULFA and the National Democratic Front of Boroland (NDFB). Despite several contrivances being made by the Indian government to coerce its Bhutan counterpart to drive Indian insurgents out from its densely forested foothills, nothing has so far materialised. Both the ULFA and the NDFB still use Bhutanese territory to flee back to after carrying out subversive activities in Assam. Bhutan was preferred by Bodo militants at the onset, but the two organisations began concentrating more on Bhutanese jungles after Army operations in the early 1990s, forced them on the back foot. Bhutan initially began with the pretence that there were no Bodos on its soil. Its Home Minister, Dago Tshering, asserted, "We are not aware of any request by the Indian government to allow its Army to look for Bodo militants in our country."<sup>6</sup> It is only in recent times, in the face of

<sup>4</sup> Shantanu Nandan Sharma; "Bangla Media on Chetia"; *North-East Sun*, New Delhi; March 15-31; 1998, pp 5.

<sup>5</sup> Shantanu Nandan Sharma; "Bangla Media on Chetia"; *North-East Sun*, New Delhi; March 15-31; 1998, pp 5.

<sup>6</sup> Wasbir Hussain; "No Bodos on Bhutanese soil"; *The Telegraph*, Kolkata; July 31, 1994.

pressure from both the Indian government as well as its own people, that the Bhutan government has woken up to the realities. Among the first things it did was to cancel the trade licences of Bhutanese traders who were supplying food to the insurgents.<sup>7</sup> Bhutan officials met the leaders of the two organisations, but failed to evict them. The Foreign Minister, Jigmi Thinley, expressed hopelessness in April 2000, "We want them out. They came without any invitation, but there are limits to what we can do."<sup>8</sup> At present a few hundred cadres of the two outfits are holed up in Bhutan.

In mid-2000, the official mouthpiece of the Bhutan government, *Kuensel*, said in its editorial, "We realise that the ULFA and Bodo problem is not just the case of a few thousand militants hiding behind trees. It is a part of a regional political imbroglio with complex connotations, the most significant being Bhutan's relations with Assam and with New Delhi."<sup>9</sup> This came after a prolonged, heated debate over the issue in the National Assembly. Patience was beginning to run out. The call was for a military offensive. The Royal Bhutan Government, for the first time, admitted that the ULFA was using its diplomatic bags to transfer funds to foreign countries. Two junior officials of the Foreign Ministry were sacked.<sup>10</sup> Equations turned bloody in December 2000, when Bodo militants attacked Bhutanese vehicles near the border. More than a dozen Bhutanese nationals were killed. Initial reports attributed the attacks to the NDFB.<sup>11</sup> The Bhutan embassy in New Delhi expressed concern and said that the Bodoland Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF) was responsible.<sup>12</sup> The Assam

<sup>7</sup> Staff Reporter; "Bhutan Yet to Take Firm Action Against ULFA"; *The Assam Tribune*, Guwahati; February 23, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Sanjoy Hazarika; "We Want Northeast Rebels Out, But Too Tough for Us"; *The Asian Age*, New Delhi; April 28, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Anonymous; "No Easy Solution"; *Kuensel*, Thimphu; July 8, 2000.

<sup>10</sup> Kalyan Barooah; "Bhutan Government Admits Diplomatic Bags Channel"; *The Assam Tribune*, Guwahati; July 6, 2000.

<sup>11</sup> Correspondent; "Bodo Rebels Mow Down Bhutanese"; *The Telegraph*, Kolkata; December 23, 2000.

<sup>12</sup> Staff Reporter; "Bhutan Government Expresses Concern"; *The Assam Tribune*, Guwahati; December 24, 2000.

government joined the issue insisting that since Bhutan did not want to invite the displeasure of the NDFB, it had blamed the BLTF, which had agreed to a ceasefire with the Indian government.<sup>13</sup>

The equations with Myanmar are different. The country shares borders with four Indian states—Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram. India's relations with the country can at most be described to be civil. India had always maintained a safe distance from the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) regime. Prime Ministers Rajiv Gandhi and Vishwanath Pratap Singh provided staunch support to pro-democracy Burmese activists. Dissident leader Aung San Suu Kyi was even awarded the Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding in 1995. Myanmar had retaliated by cancelling the visas of an Indian team comprising MPs and the Prime Minister's confidantes, retracing the historic march of the Indian National Army (INA) during World War II. The team was stranded and had to be airlifted back home. The thaw in bilateral relations was initiated in 1993, when Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao sent the Foreign Secretary, JN Dixit, to mend fences. Since then hundreds of ethnic Burmese minority refugees have been forced back into Myanmar.<sup>14</sup> Most of these exiles are concentrated in Mizoram. Though the Mizoram Government tolerates the presence of Chins, it, in acquiescence with the Centre, initiated a campaign to expel 40,000 Chin refugees. In September 1994, more than 1,000 Chin refugees were deported in a one-month span. Repatriation began again in June 1995, after the Indo-Myanmar trade pact was signed in early 1995. The joint military operation "Operation Golden Bird" too was a result of this bilateral arrangement.

The Kachin area in Myanmar, not so far away from the States of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Manipur, had

<sup>13</sup> Staff Reporter; "Bhutan Vehicles to Get Security"; *The Assam Tribune*, Guwahati; December 25, 2000.

<sup>14</sup> Suhas Chakma; "Victims of Eco-Politics"; *North-East Sun*, New Delhi; April 1-14, 1996; pp 27.

been not just a safe haven but also a training base for various insurgent groups of the Northeast. The erstwhile Kachin Independent Army (KIA), apart from supplying arms and ammunition, imparted them training in sophisticated weapons. The National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) was one of the first underground groups that made its way into Myanmar territory in the early 1980s. The Kachin rebels helped the Nagas set up training camps in the area. The ULFA too had its training camps. Problems for Northeast militants cropped up with the dissolution of the KIA. Only the SS Khaplang faction of the NSCN and some of its allies have any significant presence across the frontier at present. Khaplang, incidentally, is a Naga of Burmese origin.

On the non-insurgency front, the Mizoram government has tried to act tough on Burmese refugees time and again. One such move was in 1996, when Chief Minister Lal Thanhawla's government issued an ultimatum to all Myanmar exiles to leave by August 13.<sup>15</sup> The move was seen as an unabashed bid to appease the SLORC regime. Dr Za Hlei Thang, an MP of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), too was held. Thanhawla later clarified that Thang had not been 'arrested' but only taken to the police station for 'enquiry'.<sup>16</sup> He insisted that the act was aimed primarily at containing Chin rebels and was not a hunt for exiles *per se*, and asserted: "Whether they are Chin National Army (CNA) members or not, they are exiles and in recent times they have threatened the law and order situation in the state." This particular crackdown was apparently a damage control exercise. If a trade route was to be opened on the Mizoram-Myanmar front, the Indians had to do something. What had preceded the crackdown (may or may not be directly linked to it), was the landing in the state of six deserters from the 269 Light Infantry Battalion of Myanmar, which was engaged in counter-insurgency operations against

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<sup>15</sup> Richard Mahapatra; "Crackdown in Mizoram"; *North-East Sun*, New Delhi; September 1-14, 1996, pp 8.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Mahapatra; "Insurgency May Resurface"; *North-East Sun*, New Delhi; September 15-30, 1996, pp 16.

the CNA. The deserters were denied asylum and instantly lodged in police custody. No questions asked.

The Chin National Army (CNA) is the armed wing of the Chin National Front (CNF) formed in 1998, to liberate Chins.<sup>17</sup> It entered the bad books of the Indian government during Operation Golden Bird in 1995, for siding with the Khaplang faction of the NSCN. It has, since, severed ties with the group. There is another Chin group, Chin Liberation Organisation (CLO), based in Mizoram. The Chin National Democratic Front (CNDF) operates from New Delhi.<sup>18</sup> For the record, Chin and Arakanese refugees are not recognised in adjacent Bangladesh, but Rohingyas (who are Muslims) are. Hence, refugees from these two tribes have no option but cross over to India if and when they have to.

The fourth neighbour, China, apparently a mute bystander now, was fundamentally the one which started it all by providing sanctuaries, logistical training and theoretical indoctrination in Left-oriented guerrilla warfare to the Naga National Council (NNC) and the Mizo National Front (MNF) in the 1960s. Activists from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of Manipur had trained in Lhasa in the 1970s. But 1980s onwards things have been different, and China has not been abetting and funding insurrectionist movements in South-east Asia for a long time. As long as this policy of non-interference continues, the better everything augurs towards India's keeping the Northeast well under its control.

The first time in more than three decades that China was accused of helping Northeast insurgents was in December 2000, when the Union Minister of State for Home, ID Swami, informed Parliament it had reports that the ULFA was procuring arms from China. His assertion was based on the confessions of a former ULFA leader, Lohit Deori. Cadres of the ULFA had crossed over into China through Bhutan in 1995, and were able to procure a huge consignment of arms,

<sup>17</sup> Shantanu Nandan Sharma; "The Chin Connection"; *North-East Sun*, New Delhi; November 15-30, 1997; pp 7.

<sup>18</sup> Shantanu Nandan Sharma; "Burmese Exodus to Mizoram"; *North-East Sun*, New Delhi; April 1-14, 1998; pp 15.

which had to be smuggled in from the high seas. Another consignment was handed over to the ULFA in 1997, though it could make through to Bhutan only in 1999.<sup>19</sup>

Mending fences with China over border brawls has not been easy. Almost 40 years after the fleeting war, the squabble has carried on. Every few months or so comes an intermittent, desultory Sino claim on Arunachal Pradesh. The Chinese have, over the years, consistently and steadfastly refused to concede India's territorial claims based on historical rights, records and natural borders. In the Arunachal Pradesh sector, the watershed line works as a natural boundary between the two countries. This is where the catch lies. Beijing does not accept the McMahon Line, which was negotiated as the boundary between Tibet and British India at the end of the Shimla Conference (October 1913 to July 1914). China has always insisted that it would accept this as the border only if India accedes to the fact that Aksai Chin, belongs to China. Chinese troops never withdrew from the 38,000 sq kms of Aksai Chin, which it captured in 1962. On the other hand, China retreated from Arunachal Pradesh the moment it announced a ceasefire, but has not, in principle, accepted the region as Indian territory either.<sup>20</sup>

The spasmodic discussions that Indian leaders have had with their Chinese counterparts have appropriated the ostrich approach and left the contentious issue hanging fire. The Indo-China border dispute is not the one best left unresolved. In such cases, time does not heal or resuscitate—it only convolutes matters. In November 1997, a Chinese official even laid claim to Arunachal Pradesh at a function in Washington.<sup>21</sup> And China is not a country so brash, like Pakistan, which rakes up bilateral issues at international fora. The Chinese are subtler. And they have their own way of

<sup>19</sup> Staff Correspondent; "ULFA Procuring Arms from China: Govt"; *The Assam Tribune*, Guwahati; December 14, 2000.

<sup>20</sup> Subir Ghosh; "Talking Bull in a China Shop"; *The Telegraph*, Kolkata; December 12, 1997.

<sup>21</sup> Seema Sirohi; "Unofficial Chinese claim on Tawang"; *The Telegraph*, Kolkata; December 10, 1996.

settling matters. Yet, the Arunachal Pradesh issue rarely figures at Indo-China border talks, flag meetings between the two armies notwithstanding.

The situation could not have been funnier. Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Gegong Apang and his Special Secretary KD Singh were invited by the MacArthur Foundation, USA, to attend a conference at Kunming, a town in the Yunnan province in China from April 7 to 12, 1997. Apang had to cancel his trip since the Chinese embassy in New Delhi informed the Indian Ministry of External Affairs that an Arunachali would not require a visa to visit China since it considered Arunachal Pradesh to be its own territory.<sup>22</sup>

When India carried out the Pokhran blasts, most heated debates and protests centred around India and Pakistan. The China angle was little written or talked about. Among those who did were Northeast insurgents. The Revolutionary People's Front (RPF) of Manipur, which has hardly ever disclosed its 'external affairs' relations, in an open letter to China and members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) urged them to impose sanctions on India. Many of the cadres of its armed wing, the PLA had trained in ideological and guerrilla warfare in China in the 1970s.<sup>23</sup> The ULFA too criticised the nuclear tests.

Why then has India been twiddling its thumbs over the Northeast, given its geo-political strategic location? The answer can be found in the General's assessment: those in New Delhi have always suffered from the Durand Syndrome—the Northeast does not matter. The Pokhran blasts were assessed from the point of view of the proxy war between the Indian and Pakistani army in Jammu and Kashmir. Just because China no longer patronises Northeast insurgent organisations, does not mean the angle needs be forgotten all over. But what does this essentially boil down to? One of perceptions and the resultant attitudes. What else?

<sup>22</sup> Shiladitya; "No Visa Required"; *North-East Sun*, New Delhi; April 15-30, 1997, pp 6.

<sup>23</sup> Khelen Thokchom; "Chain Reactions"; *North-East Sun*, New Delhi; June 1-14, 1998; pp 10.

# THE REGION AT A GLANCE

The Northeast comprises the States of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura.

The region is connected to the rest of India through the narrow 'Chicken Neck' corridor, having an approximate width of 33 km on the eastern side and 21 km on the western side.



STATE	AREA (Sq km)	POPULATION (Thousands)	% INCREASE (1981-91)	DENSITY (Persons/sq km)
Arunachal Pradesh	83,743	864,558	36.83	10
Assam	78,438	22,414,322	24.24	286
Manipur	22,327	1,837,149	29.29	82
Meghalaya	22,429	1,774,778	32.86	79
Mizoram	22,081	689,756	39.70	33
Nagaland	16,579	1,209,546	56.08	7
Tripura	10,486	2,757,205	34.30	263

Source: *Basic Statistics of North Eastern Region 1995, NEC* Graphic: *Subir Ghosh*

## Frontier Travails...

Irrespective of whether one likes it or not, the fact remains that the region, we have started referring to as the Northeast, was actually bequeathed to India by the British in 1947. As it is, there never was an India of the kind that emerged under the British in the Nineteenth century. Historically speaking, the Northeast was never part of any of the imperial Gupta or Mughal Empires or for that matter any of the great empires the subcontinent had seen. And it became part of the British Empire because of a historical accident—the First Anglo-Burmese War and the concomitant Treaty of Yandaboo...

The preconditions towards knowing and, consequently, comprehending the ethnopolitical conflagrations of the Northeast is a basic understanding of the intricate ethnographic relations among various groups and sub-groups of the region. It is one thing to talk about peace and ethnic harmony, it is quite another to try to disentangle the threads of conflicting interests and communal hatred. It is here that lie the roots of the political aspirations and dreams of these ethnic groups and the resultant (often-bloody) antagonism of interests. The socio-cultural diversity of the Northeast makes this ethnic quandary a virtually impossible labyrinth to wriggle out of. If the relations between different indigenous groups are not complicated enough, there is the contentious aliens issue to make matters worse. It is intrinsic to all seven states of the region.

Most regional parties in the Northeast initially were formed only to serve as pressure groups. The aims of these political pressure groups were chiefly to achieve social and economic goals and welfare of their own lot of people. Many had also felt the need and necessity to protect and preserve customs, traditions, customary laws, language, religion, and the distinct ethnic identity of their own section of society. These pressure groups were to act as the voice of their own lot—to protest against their exploitation by either the ruling superstructure in their own State or that at the Centre... Some managed to rule their states, both consciously and subconsciously forgetting why they had come into being in the first place; others faded away the moment they became political parties.

To borrow a cliché, the story about counter-insurgency operations is getting caught in the proverbial vicious circle. Young men, also women, take up the path of armed struggle for whatever they might think to be a justified ratiocination. The State tries to curb militant activities. Some draconian laws, like the Disturbed Areas Act, the National Security Act and the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act have to be promulgated to tackle militancy. There is, apparently, no other way out. Once this has been done, violations of human rights, like it or not, are a foregone conclusion. Rights abuses are bound to be there when tackling law and order problems and countering insurgents tantamount to be the same thing for the forces.