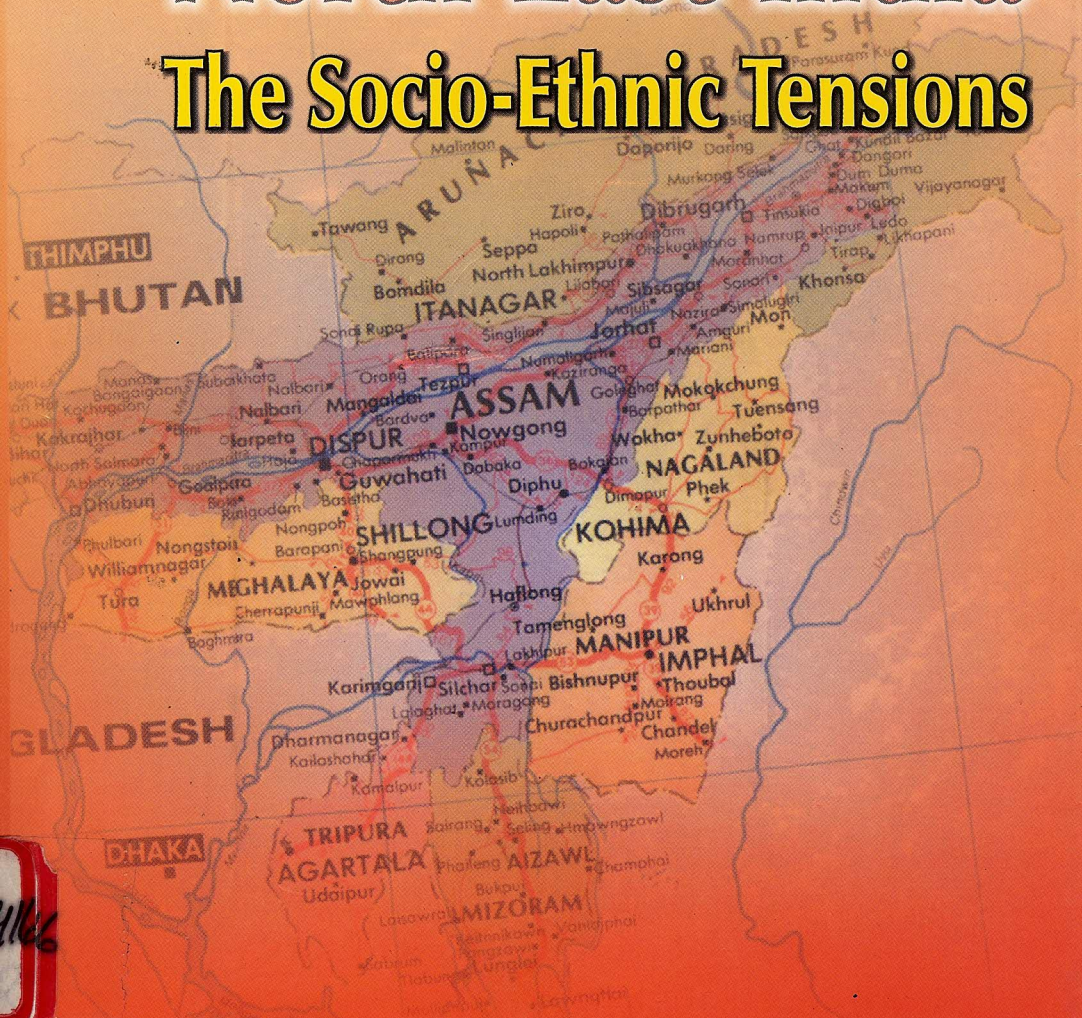


Security Threats to North-East India

The Socio-Ethnic Tensions



Lt Gen N S Narahari, PVSM

The North-East Region is a crucible where Aryan, Dravidian and Mongoloid races are intermixed. This region is about 2,65,000 sq. km. in area with a population of forty million. It is enveloped by Bhutan, Nepal and China in the North and North-East, and in the South by Bangladesh and Myanmar. It is connected to the rest of India by the sole 20 km wide Siliguri corridor through which all lifelines to North-East pass. This region is therefore very sensitive from the point of view of national security and national integrity.

The remoteness of this region and its ethnic mix is further complicated by the influx of refugees and illegal Bangladeshi Muslims in large numbers. It has created socio-ethnic tensions, identity crisis and dilution of political power to indigenous people. These factors with the additive of lower economic growth and development have resulted in serious discontentment, insurgency and demands for secession. Some of the neighbouring states have aggravated this problem that has now been raging for four decades or so.

This book traces the genesis of the problem that each state of the North East is going through and how they impact on national security. Certain options have been suggested to bring peace and prosperity to the region.

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The Socio-Ethnic Tensions

Lt. Gen N. S. Narahari PVSM (Retd)



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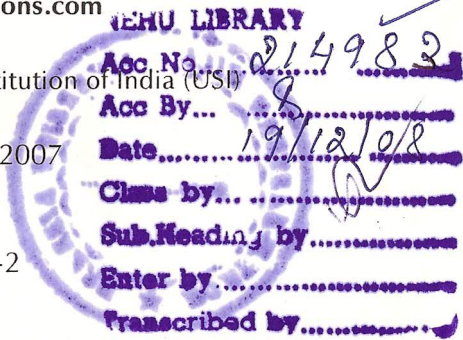
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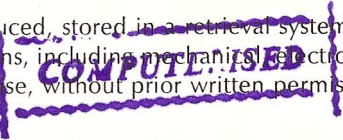
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Preface

The North Eastern Region makes a fascinating study of diversified people, of fauna and flora. It is an anthropologist's dream and a statesman's nightmare. This Region is dominated in the North by the snow capped Himalayan ranges 5000 to 6000 meters high, which gradually come down to 1000 to 1500 meters on its Eastern rim i.e the Patkai Bum ranges. The mountain slopes are steep, interspersed by narrow and deep valleys, covered by thick tropical forests. Three major valleys, Brahmaputra, Barak and Surma, are named after the three-river system, which drain the region. These have attracted immigrants on a large scale for several years, and influenced the course of the history of this region.

The North East Region has been the eastern gateway into the Indian Subcontinent. The earliest known large-scale immigration was of people of Austeric stock, speaking Sino-Tibetan languages and this took place in and around 5 BC. These were, probably, the progenitors of the present day Bodos, who settled down in Brahmaputra Valley. These were followed by other tribes from South West China via Northern Burma over the Patkai mountain ranges, who settled down in the hill areas, bordering the valleys. The Bodo tribes gradually pushed westwards along the valley and their presence extended into North Bengal and Eastern Bihar. Around the first millennium BC Aryan movement and Sanskritisation of the Gangetic plains started. As the Aryans moved eastwards, they overwhelmed the Bodos and pushed them further eastwards. This contact was the beginning of the Aryanisation of Indo-Mongoloid stocks, who were then known as Kirats and Mlechhas by Aryans. Last of the major migrations, then, took place in Thirteenth Century AD, when militarily better organised and

equipped Tai-Ahoms came in from South Western China via South East Asia. North Eastern India is thus a crucible, in which Mongoloid races are intermixed with Austero-Indians, Aryans and Dravidians. Subsequent migrations, ie, after Seventeenth Century till date, of Bengalis, Nepalese and tribals (Tea labour) from Chota Nagpur plateau, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, have added to the diverse mosaic of the population of this region.

North East India was the last region to be subjugated by the East India Company. The East India Company got entry through a commercial treaty with the Ahom King in 1793 and were gradually drawn into the vortex of internecine royal squabbles. By the end of Nineteenth Century, the entire North Eastern Region was under British suzerainty, as was the rest of India. They encouraged internal migration to facilitate their local administration, productive exploitation of natural resources of the region and building up of surface communications. By the time India became independent, major demographic changes had taken place in the Brahmaputra Valley. Post-Independence Hindu diaspora from East Pakistan took place into Brahmaputra Valley and Tripura. Illegal East Pakistani/Bangladeshi Muslim immigration also took place, and continues to take place, due to internal economic problems and political turmoil in Bangladesh. This has affected adversely the entire North Eastern Region including the Hill States of Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya, Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh. This demographic invasion into North Eastern India is creating economic, cultural, linguistic problems in this region. Appendix A to Chapter 3 will give the demographic details and comparisons between North Eastern States and the States of rest of India. Population movement, not termed as immigration, when Nation State concept and sanctity of International Boundaries were not enforced rigidly, was a common phenomenon. Large scale movements by people, looking for greener pastures or following on the heels of successful discoveries and invasions, have taken place for centuries, viz. Americas (North and South), India, South Africa and so on. Natural

growth of population, when mixed with immigration, puts pressure on the available resources. It creates social, economic and, in some areas, ethnic tensions. When nation states adopt democracy as their political way of life and voting becomes a means to power, the demographic invasions then take a more critical turn, because indigenous people feel the fear of dilution and even loss of their political power. In extreme cases this might lead to balkanisation of nation states, viz Yugoslavia.

Effective British Indian administration, exposure to gradually expanding school system, pro-independence movement, and the Second World War, which necessitated improved surface communication, created an awareness in the people of the North Eastern Region. They felt that their cake, whose size had increased due to increased productive activity in different sectors, is being claimed by more and more people, who did not belong to the North Eastern region. Concurrently with this, the Inner Line Regulation of 1873 was legislated by the British Indian administration, firstly, to reduce their administrative costs and, secondly, ostensibly to protect the isolated and alienated hill people from being exploited by the people from the rest of India. The Inner Line Regulation, however, did not affect the gradual expansion of Christian missionary work in the hill regions. Thus, the influence of the missionaries grew rapidly in most hill areas, with the exception of Imphal Valley, Tripura and the present day Arunachal Pradesh.

The Independence movement compelled Britain to send in Simon Commission, Cripps Commission and the Cabinet Mission. During these commissions, there were representations from a number of tribal areas for separate independent states, viz Nagaland and Manipur; besides claims for autonomous districts and hill states separated from Assam. Assam province at that time consisted of the entire North Eastern region, barring Arunachal Pradesh and the princely states of Manipur and Tripura, under its administrative umbrella. This was the beginning of sub nationalism.

The growth of sub nationalism was due to the combination of several factors; firstly, a sub national group, not identifying itself with the rest of the nation, because of its historical and geographical isolation from the so called mainstream of the nation. (This is not surprising in a diversified Nation State like India); secondly, due to the perceived social, cultural and economic injustice actually or likely to be heaped on them; thirdly, due to elite groups in the sub nations seeing themselves out of the centre stage of power. These fears grew after independence, despite the Indian Constitution and its Sixth Schedule giving special status to the Schedule Castes/ Schedule Tribes (SC/ST) of the North Eastern region. These fears and subregional aspirations gave rise to several separatist movements, starting with Nagaland, followed by Mizoram, Manipur and the tribal belt of Tripura. All these movements slipped into militancy and then on to insurgencies. It is a pity, that only after considerable loss of lives and property due to hostilities, the Central Government yielded to create the States of Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram. The state of insurgency and feeling of bitterness and alienation continues in Nagaland, Manipur and Tripura.

The case of Assam, which has been adversely and seriously affected by demographic invasion, is slightly different, though militant activities there are quite virulent. The state of affairs in this Region, which has 99 per cent of its external boundaries with foreign nations and only a narrow 20 kms contact with the rest of India, is not conducive both from the point of view of national security, as also from the point of view of national integrity, especially because of separatist movements. We shall study these aspects in detail, State by State, in the subsequent chapters.

The North Eastern region's sensitivity with regard to its geographical location became critical after the partition of the subcontinent and its inadequate assimilation with the rest of India. Despite this, the Indian political leaders and the media, who should have educated the leaders and public, remained uninterested and

ill informed, barring a few exceptions. This can be illustrated by a letter written to Nehru by none other than Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel in 1950, quote "Our Northern or North Eastern approaches consist of Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, Darjeeling and tribal areas of Assam. From the point of communication they are weak spots. The contact of these areas with us is by no means close and intimate. The people living in these areas have no established loyalty or devotion to India. Even Darjeeling and Kalimpong areas are not free from Pro-Mongoloid prejudices." unquote. (MD Agarwal (ed), *Ethnicity, Culture and Nationalism in North East India*) If this sort of attitude existed in the nation's top leadership, it would permeate to others, especially to the top bureaucracy. This was probably responsible for so many ethnic and secessionist movements in North East India; as well as the inadequate attention it received in the earlier five-year plans. The so-called 'Main Stream' is wholly responsible for it. It is only the Sino-Indian War of 1962 that gave a jolt to our leaders, but by then, the psychological and socio-political damage had already been done.

The Pakistan Syndrome and 'Threat from North West mindset' has affected the national leaders and the media. Hence, the North East gets very little mention even now in national newspapers with rare exceptions. The price the nation has paid in terms of human lives and material damage has been no less than in Jammu and Kashmir. The scope of this study includes all areas East of Easting 88 degree, i.e East of North Bengal and Sikkim, which is the only gateway to the North Eastern region; and its socio-ethnic problems are similar to those of rest of North East India.

I have deliberately not gone into details of agitation and insurgency movements, because they are the offshoots of socio-ethnic tensions. This book, however, analyses the historic development of socio-ethnic tensions, causative factors contributing to the present state of affairs in the North - Eastern region, and their effect on national security and national integrity. I have concluded this study with my humble suggestion for its solution.

NS Narahari
Lt. Gen.(Retd.)

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Lieutenant General NS Narahari is an engineering graduate from Bangalore. He obtained his M.Sc (Defence Studies) from Madras University after obtaining 'Distinction' for his dissertation "Sino-Indian Border Dispute: Historical and Legal Aspects". He has a couple of dozen articles published in professional journals and newspapers.

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Lieutenant General Narahari has held several important command and staff appointments and retired as the Commandant of College of Combat, Mhow (MP). He has also served as a faculty member of Defence Services Staff College, Wellington (Nilgiris), Tamilnadu.

The USI awarded him the Field Marshal K M Cariappa Chair to carry out research on the socio-ethnic tensions in North-East India; a historical perspective and the effect of these tensions on national integrity and security. This book is the outcome of that research.

(Map not to Scale)

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