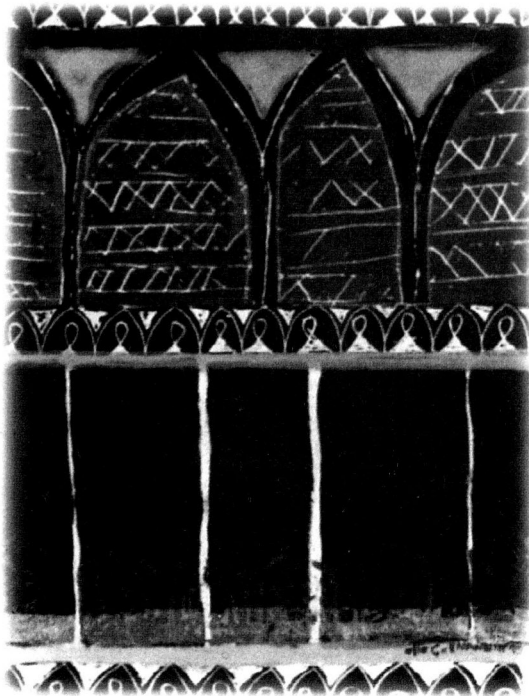


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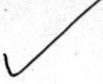
INDIA

against itself

ASSAM AND THE POLITICS OF NATIONALITY



SANJIB BARUAH



India Against Itself

... of Nationality



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Note on Transliteration

Transliteration of Assamese words and names according to common Indic norms often yields an English spelling that is at variance with the actual pronunciation. It is especially inaccurate to follow Indic convention and use the letter "s" to represent the Assamese velar fricative. I will use the letter "x" to represent this fricative. The velar fricative appears frequently in the Assamese language, indeed even in the names of the place, the language, and the people. The Assamese call themselves and their language "Axomiya" and their place "Axom." The sound is similar to the "ch" sounds in German "acht" and Scottish "loch," and to the "ga" sound in Sotho (as in the name of the South African province Gauteng). I will, however, not use "x" in the case of common proper nouns where the English spelling with an "s" has broad usage. The sound conventionally represented by "s," however, is not always a velar fricative in Assamese. In certain consonant clusters, the letter "s" is an accurate representation of the Assamese sound.

Preface

India is generally held up as a successful model of "nation-building" in a multi-ethnic polity. Even though the rise of Hindu nationalism in recent years may have raised doubts in certain quarters about the future of religious tolerance, "ethnic" or what I would call "subnational" dissent in India is seen as being generally well managed. Political scientists studying India have always been skeptical of any alarmist talk of a danger to a unified India.

When it comes to responding to subnational challenges, however, there is ample material to fuel a debate on the Indian State's approach to nation-building. Militant separatist movements have occurred in Kashmir, Punjab, and India's northeastern periphery. This book grows out of my concern with the subnational conflicts that go on in northeast India without receiving much media attention and seem to have become almost part of normal life in the region. Separatist movements have affected at least four northeastern states: Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, and Nagaland.

In most cases, separatism is not a widely shared aspiration — only a small but vocal political faction is taken by the romance of independence. Separatism is just one of the voices in a complex political landscape. Yet these movements have led to serious and sustained, albeit localized, political crisis. This has happened largely because, even though separatists may be a small or even a fringe group, they have large constituencies in their regions. These movements are located in historically constituted subnational ideological fields, and they have a dialogical relationship with pan-Indian political institu-

tions, processes, and values. Regional militants often raise issues that are intertextual in the sense that they allude to and are continuous with the mainstream social discourse of a region.¹ As a result there is often a pattern of complicity between insurgent groups and many supposedly mainstream political actors.

Indian and international human rights organizations have criticized India's abysmal human rights record in areas torn by separatist conflicts. Civilians — whether innocent or in league with insurgents — bear the brunt of the violence let loose when the State's security forces try to control militant separatists. Civilians are also victims of violence by militants. Partly because of such human rights violations, winning the hearts and minds of citizens has been more an uphill battle for the Indian State than winning the military battle against separatist militants. For to many the confrontation often appears to be a grossly unequal, even unjust one: between "our boys" — seen as a few idealist if misguided young people — and the raw power of the Indian State. Coercion, of course, has not been the only weapon in the Indian State's response to regional separatists. A variety of political tools have been used as well.

This book focuses on one of these festering subnational conflicts in northeast India: that in the state of Assam. The state is the geographical core of the region — the fertile river valley of the Brahmaputra. Northeast India is connected to the rest of India only by a narrow twenty-kilometer-wide corridor. On all other sides it is surrounded by international boundaries: Bhutan, Tibet, Burma, and Bangladesh. The tenuousness of this physical connection underscores the region's cultural and political distance from the Indian heartland.

The insurgency in Assam began in 1979 and was at its height in the late 1980s. While the explicit articulation of the goal of Assam's independence from India is a new phenomenon, the insurgency has roots in the history of Assamese subnationalism. Even though the insurgency has been somewhat contained, the political climate in Assam remains unstable, with significant occurrences of political violence and human rights violations and substantial weaknesses in the legitimacy of governmental institutions.

I began writing about politics in Assam well before I developed an academic interest in the subject. I first wrote about it in op-ed pieces

in Indian newspapers and as a contributor to a debate in the journal *Economic and Political Weekly* in the early 1980s about the "Assam movement" that had brought significant national attention to this remote region. I was then a graduate student in Chicago. During a visit to Assam I had observed the civil disobedience campaigns, with tens of thousands of participants, that were the signature of the early phases of the six-year-long Assam movement. My essays were informed by a sense of disjuncture between the political mood in the streets and homes of Assam and the perceptions of the events in the rest of India. Despite impressive intellectual trends that seek to give voice to the "subaltern," scholarly and public policy discourse in India does not by and large take seriously voices that challenge the Indian national formation. My early essays received some attention and were considered dangerous enough to be condemned by an older generation of Indian intellectuals as overly sympathetic to "chauvinistic" forces that were threatening to break up the Indian nation.

I had left Assam a decade earlier, going first to Delhi and then to Chicago. I was born in Shillong—a colonial hill station, presently the capital of the northeast Indian state of Meghalaya. Until 1971 Shillong was the capital of Assam. A part of the political meaning of this reorganization of the boundaries of Assam and the formation of Meghalaya was that the colonial hill station was being reclaimed by the Khasi people—the hill people who ruled the area before the British takeover. Shillong served as a joint capital of both Assam and Meghalaya for a brief period; then Assam's capital was moved to Dispur. Our family, like thousands of other Assamese families, then moved to the Assamese plains.

Responding to an earlier draft of this manuscript, an anonymous reader commented that he or she was "left with questions about just who Baruah is and where his interest in the whole thing lies." While "the name sounds local," the reader would have liked to know more. A reference to an episode I narrate in Chapter 8, where I end up speaking briefly at a political gathering, had to go, the reader said, if I insisted on "remaining distanced from the text." I am grateful to this reader for pointing out that parts of the text point to an interested and implicated observer, urging me to strengthen my authorial voice. As a political scientist, I was trained more in Max

Weber's ideal of objectivity in the social sciences than in the post-modern notion of an author spelling out his "positionality." However, I now wondered whether eliminating the personal references would necessarily enrich the text.

Even as my interest in Assam has become more academic and I have traveled to libraries, archives, and newspaper offices, the principal mode of my understanding of Assamese politics has remained much the same as when I wrote my early essays: a somewhat unusual brand of field research that consists of returns to Assam as much to collect material as to visit family and friends. I began to write about Assamese politics as a mode of political intervention: to influence Indian public opinion and policy towards the region. This same motivation inspired this book.

In recent years Assam has become a somewhat dangerous place. There have been acts of political violence — kidnappings, murders, extortions, and ethnic violence. From time to time gun-toting soldiers with awe-inspiring powers set up checkpoints to track down suspected militants. In rural areas these soldiers go on regular expeditions in search of insurgents. But for me Assam is still the place where I have most of my family and many friends, and I have continued to visit it quite frequently. Perhaps the very fact that the wellbeing of so many people I care for is entangled with the wellbeing of Assam gives me a very particular stake in Assam's political future. Such a stake, I have come to realize, need not be a liability for a political scientist.

To be sure, it has been saddening to see at close quarters the process by which the space for civil politics in Assam has shrunk, yielding room to the politics of guns — wielded by insurgents, by the State, and often by "unknown assailants." Yet, observing these changes in slow motion, I have also been able to see that this was not inevitable and that it is part of both the intended and the unintended consequences of small decisions by various people, among them those vested with the authority of the Indian State.

It has been astonishing to see how quickly democracies can become illiberal — ethnic violence, politically targeted violence by militant groups, State violence, and even violent crimes with a political subtext can all go on with relative impunity. The vulgar display of the State's armed capacity can become a normal part of governance, coexisting with elections and the other rituals of democracy.

As this has happened in Assam, the voice of human rights activists has become faint in the din of national security talk among the pan-Indian intelligentsia, and a compassion-fatigue has developed in the rest of the world. Yet pan-Indian ideas — laws, the Constitution, and public discourse — have profoundly shaped these subnational movements, and the exacerbation of these conflicts has often been the result of political mismanagement by those acting with the authority of the State. There are elements in the political culture of violence in Assam that have affinity with dirty internal wars in some authoritarian societies of the recent past. In order to bring about societal reconciliation some of these post-authoritarian or post-totalitarian societies have trials or truth commissions to try to make those responsible for crimes accountable — whether for crimes in support of or in opposition to the State. But within democratic India a society like Assam seems doomed to live with similar fissures that split the society apart. One hears little of the kind of politics that could lead to reconciliation.

As should be apparent by now, my response to the anonymous reader has been to say more about my engagement with Assam in this preface. Over the years my “field trips” to Assam have not just involved reading in a library, an archive, or a newspaper office, or conducting an interview or attending a political rally. I have also learned from experiences I owe to my particular connection to Assam. For instance, in January 1991, a couple of days after I reached Assam, the Indian army arrested my brother, a medical doctor who treated patients who were thought to be members of the insurgent organization United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) for his alleged ties with the insurgents. My entire four-week stay in Assam that winter was spent trying to secure his release. A judge released him on bail a couple of weeks after I left India.

In a very personal way, I experienced the effects of the draconian powers with which the Indian State deals with insurgency. With the slightest hint of suspicion, a police officer can charge citizens with complicity with “terrorist and disruptive activities,” and the police or the army can take them into custody for questioning.² The law deliberately restricts the channels of redress for those so charged in order to give the State the powers deemed necessary to deal with the threat to national security posed by insurgents.

In that climate, I discovered that civil liberties, due process, jus-

tice, and fairness soon begin to sound like words from a distant land. Influential administrators or politicians, for instance, who may be very helpful in negotiating officialdom under ordinary circumstances, may not be of much help, because they would not want to be tarred by the brush of trying to help someone accused of flirting with “terrorists.” It was easy to see that for less resourceful citizens a charge of suspicion of complicity with “terrorist and disruptive activities” could result in a long period in custody. Indeed it could be worse — as the dreadful term “custodial death” that appears in the lexicon of human rights activists working on India would imply. However, the episode of my brother’s arrest by the Indian army also taught me that, despite such powers, the Indian State’s hold on the hearts and minds of people can be quite shallow. As the news of his arrest spread, our family home in Guwahati was soon full of people — relatives, neighbors, friends, and well-wishers — who came to inquire and to express sympathy and solidarity. In that social space that day, as I wrote in an earlier article, “the rupture between State and civil society in Assam was rather apparent.”³

During periods when the Indian army or paramilitary forces were patrolling the streets of Assam, I discovered that there could be times when “looking Assamese” in Assam was risky business. Non-Assamese soldiers at checkpoints were more likely to ask someone who fitted that description for identity papers. During those phases I have had to resist the temptation of wanting to feel very at home in Assam. Because of the enormous powers of the army under laws like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in force in Assam, and because enforcement of law and order everywhere is dependent on judgments based on stereotypes, I had to be concerned about dressing the right way not to arouse the suspicion of an armed soldier, and about carrying appropriate identity papers while in Assam. I shudder to think of the effects of these conditions on less fortunate citizens; after all, the vast majority of people in India do not carry any identity papers at all.

It was equally interesting — and a pointer to the kind of fissures that exist in the Indian polity — that my “Assamese looks” are likely to produce a very different reaction in the eyes of an Assamese police officer: he is more likely to be respectful and apologetic for having to stop me and will avoid much questioning beyond a polite

"Where have you come from?" or "Where are you going?" — which is the common Assamese form of greeting one another.

Social encounters have often been a source of significant insights during my "field trips." For instance, I was taken aback when I first heard what was then a rather new term, "ethnic Assamese." Now the category has come to be used in discussions of Assam, and I myself use it in this book. At a fashionable party in New Delhi I was introduced to an officer of the Indian army who had served in the northeast. In recent years this has usually meant fighting internal insurgents rather than an external enemy. I was introduced to him as someone who lives in the United States, in Delhi en route to Assam. The gentleman asked me if I was an ethnic Assamese. Until then I was used to saying that I am an Assamese, just as in India a Bengali, a Gujarati, or a Malayalee would identify him- or herself. But why the odd qualifier "ethnic," I wondered. As I began to spend more time in Assam I wondered about the possible connection between a term that conceptually isolates a group that had historically metonymized Assameseness — and the logic of enforcing law and order in Assam. Maybe it was not accidental that I heard the term used by an army officer who had spent time in the northeast.

In Assam's complex ethnic and political landscape the category "ethnic Assamese" can define a category of people as a somewhat more likely target of suspicion as possible sympathizers and fellow-travelers of the Assamese insurgents. The "ethnic Assamese" can be distinguished from Assam's many "immigrant" communities and the "tribal" communities — the latter two, in recent years, less likely to be sympathizers with Assamese subnationalism. The category therefore manages to distinguish, in terms of stereotypical phenotypes, a particular group of people in a way that seems to be related to the logic of surveillance and social control in Assam.

While my unusual field trips have been the source of many insights, I have also had to guard against the danger of privileging the ethnic Assamese experience. Assam, after all, is a multiethnic place, and at the heart of many of its political and cultural conflicts is the fact that Assam is a land frontier with many "immigrant" communities. I have tried my best to listen to and, I hope, I have succeeded in empathetically incorporating in this book, other voices that sometimes stand in conflict with the "ethnic Assamese" voice,

notably that of her many “immigrant” communities and indigenous “tribal” peoples such as the Bodos, Karbis, and Misings.

If my connection to Assam has given a particular shape to my “field trips” and to this book, so has living in the United States and my traveling between there and Assam. Let me give a few examples. On one of my trips, I had spent some days in a “tea garden” (plantation) in Assam, where I stayed with and mostly met tea executives. I sensed a dramatic change in “tea garden life” — an expression that in those social circles refers to their lives and not to those of tea workers. I knew the idyllic life of “garden managers” living in grand bungalows amid thousands of acres of lush green, with an active social life revolving around “club days.” By contrast, this time I found a sense of deep insecurity among them: they were coping with a new reality of kidnappings, ransom demands by insurgents, and murders.

Soon after that I left Assam, and a couple of days later I was in London on my way back to New York. With the memory of the profound changes in “tea garden life” quite fresh in my mind, in London’s upscale departmental store Harrods, I noticed a fresh new way of packaging Assam tea — boutique style. There were beautiful cans of Assam tea said to be from particular tea gardens — real or imagined, I don’t know. The can I bought was packaged as “Pure Assam Narayanpur Gold Rush Tea.” This tea, said the blurb, “comes from a small estate in the lush Brahmaputra Valley of Assam.” The blurb informs the buyer that only the bud and top two leaves are picked and the “abundance of golden tips” gives the tea its “bright coppery colour, golden liquor and truly unique flavour indicative of the finest quality tea.” In my flight from London to New York I reflected on all that may have gone into the beautifully packaged can of Harrods Assam tea — the connection between Assam’s present turmoil and the often violent history of the early days of tea in Assam — trying to reconcile the image of the “small estate in the lush Brahmaputra Valley of Assam” and today’s reality of the politics of guns that has so transformed life in the tea gardens.

The political turmoil that is the subject of this book has not generally been the stuff of international news. Assam is a rather remote place when seen from the perspective of the newsrooms of the international media. But those few occasions when I read about Assam in the U.S. press have been occasions for serious reflection,

especially when I have responded to friends who, knowing my connection to Assam, on reading or hearing some news have wanted to know more. Some of my initial theoretical formulations were sparked by such reflections.

Perhaps the most memorable occasion was in 1983, when I was a graduate student in Chicago and well before I began working on this project. A massacre of more than two thousand people in Assam suddenly made international headlines. The victims were mostly "immigrant" Bengali Muslims, and the perpetrators were mobs that some international newspapers described as "Hindu tribesmen" armed with bows and arrows and machetes. I had picked up a copy of the *New Republic*, which to my surprise, had an editorial on the Assam massacres. "Modernity," declared the editorial, "is not only a historical term. It is a geographical term as well. There are places — the Indian state of Assam is one — where the slaughter of children is a form of political expression."⁴ The editorial, though not well informed about the circumstances of the violence, made a number of breathtaking assertions about its significance.

The violence in Assam, according to the editorial, revealed something about political conditions in the "third world": that it is not "porous to Western innovations." The violence, we were told, brought to dramatic focus the contradictions of the postcolonial world and the fundamental contradiction of upholding democracy "in places where it is strange." Western ideas and institutions have complicated these places, said the editorial, but they have "not completely changed them."

Sitting in Chicago, I wondered about this view of modernity and history: modernity in Assam as a list of good things brought by the West — a cargo cult theory of modernization through imperialism, as it were.⁵ Among the good things brought by the West that the editorial listed were national unity, democracy, and constitutionalism. However, given the stubborn ways of the premodern, the argument went, these innovations have had a hard time putting down roots. In a fit of obscene eloquence, the editorial asked: "What is a constitution to a place like Assam? Will Hindu animists honor Thomas Jefferson? Will men who hurl spears at children pay any heed to John Locke?"

If one accepted this view of history, I have been asking myself ever since, how would one make sense of the rest of the package that

came to Assam along with modernity, for example political conquest, tea plantations, private property, economic incorporation into larger market networks, the dispossession of peoples whose command over resources was governed by the rules of precapitalist social formations, and the violent militant expeditions of colonial modernizers against “primitives” and “savages” — that, often, were the methods of dispossession? In my mind Assam’s present turmoil in some ways can be traced back to some of these “modern” innovations. To me the violence is about the contradictions of the many worlds created by modernity rather than about a place or a people being left behind by modernity.

The name of the Assamese town Margherita serves to me as a poignant reminder of the way “modern” forces entered and transformed Assam a long time ago. When Viceroy Lord Curzon visited Assam in 1900, he insisted on seeing “Margherita and the coal mines and the oil wells and other industries” around it: “a most interesting and enterprising corner of her Majesty’s dominions,” as he put it.⁶ During my childhood in Assam “Margherita” — that has even made its way into Assamese folk music — sounded as Assamese a word as any. It is only later in life that I discovered that this coal town was named for Queen Margherita, wife of king Victor Emmanuel III of Italy.

Margherita acquired its name in 1884. At that time the area was a concession given to the Assam Railways and Trading Company for developing coal and oil production. One of the largest shareholders of the company was Benjamin Piercy, an engineer with experience in building railways in England and other parts of the world. His brother Robert Piercy had collaborated with three Italian engineers in constructing a railway in Sardinia. The company recruited the same team of engineers for its railway construction project in Assam. In January 1884 it gave the name Margherita to its settlement in Makum. According to the company’s history, the name was chosen either by the directors as a tribute to the Italian engineer Cavalier Roberto Paganini or by Paganini himself out of his patriotism. In either event, Assam’s Margherita remains “a lasting memorial to the Italian Engineer” who lived in the area, founded the settlement, and constructed the first bridge over the Dihing River and the railways on both banks of the river.⁷

Living in a Western metropolis, however, I could see the *New*

Republic's temptation to frame the news of Assam's massacres as events occurring in a remote corner of the world that constitutes modernity's "other." Such a construction can be a rather comforting feel-good story; it enables moderns to separate their achievements temporally and spatially from the unseemly side of modernity. I have had to guard against similar intellectual seductions myself. For instance, living in a cosmopolitan international city and working on a book on Assam, I could see how easy it could be to fall into the trap of what Michael Ignatieff calls a "cosmopolitan disdain and astonishment" about national passions.⁸

Ignatieff's journeys to the new nationalisms made him more sensitive to what shapes civic order in multiethnic international cities. In these great cities — London, Los Angeles, New York, and Paris — Ignatieff observed, the cosmopolitan order relies critically on the "rule-enforcing capacities" of the State. When States falter in enforcing those rules, these cosmopolitan multiethnic cities are as likely to break into ethnic warfare — as Los Angeles did in 1992 — as any East European country, or I might add, as Assam.⁹

As I have observed the shrinking space for civil politics in Assam, I too have come to appreciate more than ever the importance of nurturing the rule-enforcing capacities of the nation-state: the need to sustain law as meaning as opposed to law as power,¹⁰ to publicly debate laws and governmental decisions, to take laws and public commitments seriously, and for "public officials — lawmakers and lawgivers" — to try to create in their work "an orderly and morally directed society, fictive and a flawed guide to the daily life of its audiences though it may be."¹¹ How quickly things can fall apart when the rule-enforcing capacities of public institutions begin to falter. I believe that India can do much better in this regard. For instance, in dealing with leaders of insurgents arrested for serious crimes, including murder and robbery, the government has often circumvented the legal process by giving them *de facto* amnesty in exchange for political support. It has done so just as the Indian army has made expeditions in search of their comrades — especially less well-connected ones in rural areas — with a trail of charges of human rights abuses. Such contradictory actions have serious long-term costs in terms of the legitimacy of India's governmental institutions. Faith in the rule of law can be restored by holding insurgents as well as army and security personnel accountable for their

actions. Conditions for civil politics in Assam can be recreated. Among the reforms that would be necessary are measures to restrict the arbitrary powers of the State and efforts to create greater institutional space for subnational aspirations and identities — even in our age that some might like to call postnational.

The political positions that I take on Assam perhaps illustrate a point Kwame Anthony Appiah once made about postcolonial theory — a tradition to which I owe some intellectual debt. Postcoloniality and postmodernism, Appiah wrote, both challenge earlier legitimating narratives. But postcoloniality challenges them in the name of suffering victims and also in the name of the ethical universal — in the name of humanism. In that sense postcolonial theory is not an ally of postmodern theory but an agonist, and in this regard there is something that the latter can learn from postcolonial theory.¹² It is because of the stake I feel in Assam's immediate political wellbeing that I am probably inclined simultaneously to challenge and to rely on the legitimating narratives behind concepts such as nation, nationality, subnation, nation-state, federalism, democracy, human rights, legal order, and civil society. I consider the task of recreating a civil polity in Assam both urgent and possible — no matter what the structural odds may be. It is this postcolonial naivete that perhaps puts me at some distance from the cynical thread in postmodernist thought.

Organization of the Book

I begin in Chapter 1 with a critique of the paradigm of nation-building and make the case for designing structures of policy-making — implicit in the notion of federalism — that are responsive to debates in particular subnational public spheres. I also briefly introduce Assam and its people.

The two subsequent chapters provide historical and geographical background crucial to the understanding of Assamese subnationalism. Assam, or rather the cultural heartland of contemporary Assam that roughly corresponds with the territory of the precolonial Ahom kingdom, came under British rule in 1826. The British province of Assam was a different entity from precolonial Assam. But what came to be called Assam as a British province, first formed in 1874, and to which newer territories were added, would prove

fateful to the subsequent cultural and political history of the area. The British conquest of Assam and its economic transformation into a major tea-producing area were crucial to Assam's emergence as one of southern Asia's last land frontiers. Chapters 2 and 3 provide an analysis of Assam's political, economic, and demographic transformation that began under British colonial rule.

In Chapter 4 I discuss the nineteenth-century origins of Assamese subnationalism and its tensions with pan-Indianism. Modern politics in Assam in the late nineteenth century began in the form of a cultural movement concerned with the development of Assamese language and literature and a concern with Assam's "development" — focused mostly on demands for starting schools, colleges, and universities. Assamese subnationalism, which predated pan-Indian nationalism, did not always simply step aside to make room for the latter. I discuss some of the areas of tension between Assamese and pan-Indian politicians that were apparent even during the political mobilization of anticolonialism. Some of these tensions became more serious after independence.

Chapter 5 describes Assam's politics in the 1960s and 1970s, focusing on two developments — the controversies over Assam's cultural policy and the breakup of colonial Assam. The two are related: the adoption of Assamese as official language is sometimes seen as a major cause of Assam's fragmentation. I argue, however, that the prime mover in the breakup of Assam was the government in New Delhi. To bureaucrats and politicians in New Delhi, changing Assam's boundaries — that under the Indian Constitution can be done with a simple parliamentary majority — came to be seen as a easy recipe for containing and even preempting insurgencies. Chapters 6 and 7 discuss the Assam movement (1979–85) and the separatist insurgency that began about the same time.

Chapter 8 discusses the political mobilization among the Bodos for cultural and political autonomy and the challenge it presents to the Assamese subnational narrative. The conclusion considers whether under a more decentralized federal structure Assam's subnational conflicts could have been better managed.

Conclusion: India Against Itself

There are many myths among ethnic Assamese families, both Hindu and Muslim, that deal with their forebears coming to Assam from the Indian heartland. Assamese history does record some cases of migration from the Indian heartland, for example, ritual experts and craft workers who were invited by Ahom and Koch kings, soldiers who participated in the Mughal invasions of the region, and religious men who came on their own and made Assam their home. However, the number of ethnic Assamese families claiming that their ancestors were immigrants to Assam would probably far outnumber those that can be explained by the known cases of immigration. The myths of immigrant origin in Assam have had a function that is quite independent of their historicity. In a region on the periphery of Indic culture, such myths enabled those who assimilated into the "high cultures" of Hinduism and Islam to distinguish themselves from their "less sophisticated" neighbors and countrymen.

In recent years these myths may have come to haunt many ethnic Assamese because of the challenge to the very construction of the Assamese subnational formation posed by the Bodo and other "tribal" cultural rebellions. But whatever second thoughts they may have today, these myths convey something about the way ethnic Assamese have historically seen themselves: that they are Indians. The irony of the separatist insurgency in Assam and the popular sympathy it has commanded is that it involves a population that in the past has tried so hard to establish its connection to the Indian heartland.

I began this book with a critique of the concept of nation-building. Because all national projects are contingent and contested, the innocuous-sounding term "nation-building" could make political analysis complicit with whatever combination of coercion and consent a governing elite may choose in the name of building a nation. I have argued for a mode of political analysis that can accommodate a more historical understanding of the global order of nation states than one that is grounded in a nationalist self-representation of nations as primordial. The postcolonial Indian State is a part-legatee of a subcontinental civilization and of an empire, and is the product of an anticolonial movement that combines both pan-Indian and subnational ideological currents. As such it must have an inclusionary public philosophy that not only emphasizes pan-Indian unity, but also makes institutional accommodation to its subnational communities.

Some of the institutions with which postcolonial India has tried to accommodate subnational communities are impressive. India's states, I have argued, most of them constituted on the basis of the major language of the area, are de facto nation-provinces. At least potentially these nation-provinces can accommodate subnational communities not just within some hegemonic project of pan-Indian nation-building, but in a way that can recognize "dual but complementary political identities."¹ But India's commitment to federalism has also been rather tame. Indeed, India's Constitution-makers even shied away from actually describing the polity as federal and settled for a phrase they found safer; the Union of India.

In earlier chapters I have criticized India's weak federalism, especially the extraordinary powers of the central government to change the boundaries of states and to create new states by simple parliamentary majorities, without even the consent of the relevant state legislature. The laws that broke up Assam and created a number of new states were all passed with simple parliamentary majorities. Ironically, this power has perhaps been used more cavalierly in the northeast than in any other part of the country, because policy-makers in New Delhi regard the northeast as a sensitive border region. If the goal of breaking up Assam and creating new states was to contain and preempt separatist insurgencies, the policy has clearly failed. The policy failed to control old insurgencies or to preempt several new ones. Furthermore, by privileging separate

statehood as the preferred outcome, New Delhi's northeast policy has both created the context for ethnic violence and been a disincentive for a politics of accommodation. It is because of this policy legacy that, for instance, Bodo militants today can portray accommodation to ideas other than that of a separate Bodo homeland as a sign of weakness and successfully outmaneuver moderate Bodo politicians.

India's ambivalence on federalism is not unique. Most postcolonial States retained for their central governments enormous powers presumed necessary for the twin projects of nation-building and national development. And indeed, in the second half of the twentieth century, increased centralization of power was a feature of nation-states in all parts of the world. Critics have called even the present federal system of the United States, which has more of the formal attributes of federalism than many other polities, as having little to do with federalism in the historical sense of the term. It is, rather, a "figleaf for an inefficient nationalism." Rationalization has produced a level of centralization of power, and as a consequence, the units of most federations have ceased to be autonomous entities and have become mere administrative branches of a central government.²

Yet, in principle, federalism as an institutional arrangement is ideally suited to protect historically constituted cultural-territorial identities. In concluding this book, I would like to consider, rather speculatively, whether the subnational tensions illustrated by the Assam case would have been better managed in a more federal India. I rely here on a somewhat radical notion of federalism, not on the trivialities of center-state relations to which discussions of federalism are sometimes limited. Some of the fundamental values of federalism are worth recalling; among them are local autonomy, respect for cultural particularity, and more democracy—making up for some of the democracy deficit in today's centralized liberal democracies. Indeed, as a political principle, a federation in the sense of an "aggregate of politically organized territories" can be seen as the opposite of the nation-state. As Paul Piccone and Gary Ulmen put it, if a political system is directly related to individual citizens, rather than places, it is a nation and not a federation.³ One of the normative arguments for federalism is that it is a way of limiting government: the tyranny of countrywide populist major-

ities is checked by the constitutionally guaranteed autonomous spheres of action reserved for cultural-territorial units. But for that to happen the units of a federation must have control and lawmaking prerogatives, especially on matters that are important to the life of the unit.

Somewhat arbitrarily, let me select three sets of issues raised by the politics of subnationalism in Assam discussed in earlier chapters, and speculate on how these issues might have been addressed differently under a more federal dispensation. The three sets of issues are (a) immigration and enfranchisement policy, (b) cultural policy, and (c) developmental policy, especially the question of control over resources. The chances of political resolution of these controversies, I would argue, would have been much better if Assam had had autonomous jurisdiction over these policy arenas.

Immigration and Enfranchisement Policy

Control over immigration and enfranchisement has been at the center of much of Assam's political turmoil. Assam's incorporation into British India in 1826, followed by her nineteenth-century economic transformation, turned colonial Assam into one of the subcontinent's last land frontiers attracting massive immigration. It continued to be a land frontier through much of the twentieth century. Fortunately, in the Assamese public sphere opposition to immigration has been framed by cultural meanings derived from the Indian Constitution and laws; focusing only on immigrants whose status falls within, at least, a legal gray area. But since immigration policy falls within the jurisdiction of the central government, policymakers in New Delhi have been singularly unresponsive to debates on the issue in the Assamese public sphere. Indeed, far from seriously engaging the issue, the central government has chosen to react to Assam's immigration crisis rather opportunistically. Thus in the Assam Accord of 1985 it made a series of public commitments to respond to the immigration crisis, and yet the Indian parliament — at a time when Assam was largely unrepresented — passed laws that were sure to defeat the purpose of those very commitments. The deterioration of the political situation in Assam — including the rise of separatist militancy — I have argued, is to a significant extent the result of the nonresolution of the immigration crisis. Would there

have been a more purposeful and energetic engagement with Assam's immigration crisis if India were more of a federal polity?

I have made some comparison between Assam's demographic transformation and that of Malaysia. The latter has managed potential immigration-related tensions through a political formula that includes (a) differential incorporation of citizens according to ethnic origins, (b) preferential policies for "indigenous" groups, and (c) an immigration policy specifically geared to promoting a stable demographic balance. Officially Malaysia has frozen immigration, in principle because it is careful to avoid any characterization of Malaysia as an "immigrant society," in practice in order to prevent any increase in the proportion of non-Malays. Indeed, demographic balance has been such a priority in Malaysia's immigration policy that, while it has not permitted ethnic Chinese boat people, it has discretely permitted refugee Cham people, a minority Muslim population from Cambodia, who are thought to be distant relations of the "indigenous" Malays.⁴

By contrast, in Assam, despite significant Assamese opposition, high levels of immigration — and precisely from an area that could only worsen an already precarious ethnopolitical balance — continued for decades after the end of colonial rule. The fact that Malaysia is an independent sovereign country and therefore makes its own immigration and enfranchisement policy, while Assam is a part of India so that the debates about immigration and enfranchisement in the Assamese public sphere could be all but ignored in making India's immigration policy, at least partly explains the difference. Policymakers in New Delhi continued to ignore Assam's immigration crisis even after it began to seriously destabilize Assam.

To be sure, there are no easy solutions to Assam's immigration crisis. But what is striking is the disjuncture between the way the immigration crisis has destabilized Assam — including today's two insurgencies and political and ethnic violence, some of which look suspiciously like ethnic cleansing campaigns — and the low priority given to the issue by India's policymakers. The point is not so much that a certain number of "foreigners" could, or should, be deported or disenfranchised, as the campaigners of the Assam movement had demanded and to which the Indian State had publicly committed itself. A political settlement could actually give amnesty to all immigrants if it simultaneously made a serious commitment to

stopping future immigration and to a fair resolution of the issue of Assam's public cultural identity. Debates in the Assamese public sphere suggest that such compromises are possible. It does not take much to imagine alternative scenarios to the policy incoherence that has pushed Assam on the road to a serious crisis of legitimacy of governmental institutions. If Assam's "indigenous" communities worry about becoming minorities in their lands, a persistent cloud of suspicion about the legal status of "foreigners" have not helped Assam's "immigrant" communities either. It has put the task of creating a political culture in tune with Assam's contemporary demographic and ethnopolitical realities permanently on hold. If India's federal system had allowed the state level political arena jurisdiction over immigration and enfranchisement policy, I would venture to suggest that, without the impingement of pan-Indian politics, the shared interest in social stability would have led politicians from Assam's "immigrant" and "indigenous" communities alike to find a political settlement that would have put the immigration controversy behind once for all.

While I have focused on the question of resolving Assam's immigration crisis within the framework of the discourse of "foreigners," Assam's immigration crisis raises the larger issue of control over population movements in a federation. If particular territories in a federation are defined as autonomous political entities, and the people living in them are assumed to have the power to determine their own affairs, "such communities must be exclusionary or else they cease to be communities." If the rights and obligations of citizens are the privileges of those belonging to these communities, federal arrangements might facilitate interaction across a federation, but in the process they cannot be allowed to cripple local autonomy in the name of some abstract universalist principles.⁵ Autonomy of a community cannot be meaningful unless it includes some notion of closure. As Michael Walzer puts it, there cannot be any community without a minimum right of closure.⁶

Cultural Policy

If immigration into Assam is sure to have received more attention under a more federal dispensation, what about the problem of making cultural policy in a multicultural society like Assam? Isn't

there a danger that, if the state-level political arena were more autonomous, a potentially hegemonic group such as the ethnic Assamese would have tried to impose its cultural hegemony on cultural minorities?

In principle, a strong federation is not less conducive to its units being able to make inclusionary cultural policies. If in recent years Assamese subnationalism has sometimes seemed exclusionary, part of the explanation may lie in the embattled situation in which it finds itself. With the state-level political arena powerless to act on the immigration crisis, or against further territorial fragmentation of Assam, less inclusionary tendencies may have occasionally gotten the upper hand. It is significant that the ethnic Assamese have never been asked to choose between cultural policies with potentially exclusionary implications and the periodic divisions of Assam. In a political system that left more control over such matters to the state-level political arena, the Assamese may have had to confront such a choice. In such a political space, it is not unreasonable to expect that political bargaining could generate inclusionary and nonhegemonic cultural policies. However, in a constitutional federation, protection of the interests of cultural minorities need not be left to such an expectation alone.

An autonomous state-level political arena, backed by the discipline of constitutionalism, could better guarantee inclusionary cultural policies than could a watchful central government, with the power to cut states to size, playing the big brother. To be sure, "charter federalism" — which combines autonomy for states with a strong regime of individual and group rights — demands a fairly well-functioning set of political and legal institutions. Alan C. Cairns, who coined the term, calls it an institutional blend that requires an "even more complex, demanding, and nuanced balancing of contradictory tendencies than federalism itself." Federal institutions must not only cultivate the commitment to dual loyalties to "the provincial *ethnie* and to the country-wide community." Charter federalism adds a third limitation on majority power — minority rights against both provincial and country-wide majorities.⁷

Whatever the older rationale for giving India's central government the power to make and break states, it is important now to rethink this power. In terms of constitutional principles, this power is key to where the foundational authority of sovereignty lies. Feder-

ations must try to locate some of this foundational authority in their constituent units, not just in the nation as a whole. That in turn can allow a multicultural place like Assam the space to debate and make cultural policy without some parties to the debate being seduced by the temptation of ethnic homelands and others being threatened by the Damocles' sword of yet another territorial division.

Development Policy and Control over Resources

The question of Assam's claim to its resources has been a persistent theme in the politics of Assamese subnationalism. There is probably no other area where the political demands of separatist militants are more continuous with mainstream Assamese social discourse than the issue of Assam's economic underdevelopment and what is described either as the "neglect" of Assam by New Delhi or as a colonial relationship.

In the area of control over fiscal resources, Indian federalism is probably at its weakest. If the concern for Indian unity made India's constitution-makers reluctant federalists, their enthusiasm for national development turned them into central planners keen on grabbing as much control over resources and powers of economic management as possible. Furthermore, the legacy of a unitary colonial state hung heavy. As far as financial arrangements are concerned, the Indian Constitution has been called a "carbon copy" of a colonial law, the Government of India Act of 1935.⁸

India's central government controls the great bulk of financial resources including income tax, corporate tax, import and export duties, and excise duties on major items. It of course controls the money supply and exercises control over the central bank besides the nationalized banks, currency, and foreign exchange. Except for taxes on agricultural income and property, and sales taxes on certain goods and services, all the major sources of tax revenue are in the hands of the center. The Constitution provides for a Finance Commission to allocate the proceeds of the centrally collected revenue to the states. But over the years an extra-constitutional body, the Planning Commission, has overshadowed the Finance Commission, further strengthening the hands of the central government as the arbiter of fiscal resources.⁹

It is difficult to say whether Assam would have been economically

better off under a more federal dispensation; there are too many variables to consider for the space I have for these concluding thoughts. However, let me take up a politically no less important question: would greater federalism have given a different form to the political discourse of Assam's economic underdevelopment? In recent years, the Indian State's response to the radicalization of Assamese subnationalism has been to increase the allocation of funds for Assam's development. This has followed a pattern of the response to political turmoil in other northeastern states. Chapter 7 discusses how in Assam the focus on a few visible development projects is seen as an attempt to push under the rug the key commitments of the Assam Accord on the immigration crisis. It has failed to buy the goodwill of the Assamese. But under India's centralized fiscal system, larger financial allocations also have another problematical dimension.

K. Saigal, a former Indian civil servant who was Assam's Planning and Development Commissioner and is intimately familiar with the State-led economic development experience of the northeast, describes the process as follows. A major beneficiary of the increase of funds for development in northeastern states, he believes, has been a group of contractors and license holders—mostly from outside the region—whose “main ambition is to make a fast buck and get out of the area as quickly as possible.” As developmental funds are increased as a response to the voices of discontent in the northeast, there is therefore a “quicker siphoning off of funds to the heartland with the few benefits accruing to those in power through the usual corrupt forces of the license-permit raj.” Indeed, Saigal believes that this has led to “increasingly corrupt regimes in areas like Manipur, Nagaland, Meghalaya and, recently in Assam.” The political consequences are serious. These regimes are increasingly seen as corrupt and controlled by a comprador-like class: “representatives of the central power to keep the people in a state of underdevelopment.”¹⁰ If this interpretation is even partially correct, the northeast seems to have become a frontier in another sense: it attracts adventurer-entrepreneurs who seem to feel that doing business in this frontier land means a holiday from whatever moral codes exist in the heartland. It is scarcely surprising that insurgent groups in Assam and the northeast have sometimes successfully isolated state governments that are seen as being in league with these adventurer-

entrepreneurs, and have targeted some people who are perceived as heartland adventurer-entrepreneurs as the "enemy." At the same time, factions of insurgents have begun competing with these adventurer-entrepreneurs for a share of the loot.

Would the situation have been different if the primary responsibility for economic development, with corresponding fiscal powers, were in the hands of states? It is plausible that if Assam had complete control over its oil and natural gas resources and the capacity to collect customs duties, it would have been a considerably richer state. But that issue aside, let me examine how the political discourse of Assam's underdevelopment might have been different under a radically federal dispensation — under which the responsibility for raising resources and developing Assam was firmly in the hands of those in control of the state government. In India's centralized fiscal system, states have typically been unwilling to mobilize financial resources on their own, and have looked at the central government as a cash cow that can be milked in order to bring the state's income in line with its expenditures.¹¹ The state governments have generally taken the task of raising resources very lightly. This has been the case even more in the northeast, where insurgencies have further sapped the political will to raise local resources. Another dimension of India's centralized mode of resource allocation is that it provides incentives for state governments to get along with the government in power in New Delhi. This is not an unimportant factor in explaining why Assam's AGP and a number of other regional political parties in the northeastern states, once in power, find themselves toeing the line of the central government in New Delhi in their public rhetoric on insurgencies. If economic development and the raising of resources were more of a state responsibility, it would be reasonable to expect that there would be more of a politics of accountability. "If the economy of a state fails to take off," as economist Ashok Mitra puts it, then "the responsibility for that failure will belong to the state government; it will not be able to run to the Centre either for filling the gap in resources, or for saddling it with the blame for lack of development."¹² Mitra's point was made in the context of India as a whole. In the case of Assam, this may have almost revolutionized the political discourse on Assam's underdevelopment and significantly weakened the ap-

peal of both moderate and radical versions of the Assamese subnationalist argument.

I do not want to suggest that radical federalism would be a panacea. If that were to happen, at least in the short run, one would expect at the state level a rise in corruption and in the leakage of developmental resources. Any reorganization of the division of resources, functions, and powers between the central and state governments in India, J. D. Sethi reminds us, may only shift "irresponsibility and inefficiency" from one level to another.¹³ But unlike the centralized fiscal system of today, a radically reformed federalism at least would have had the potential for some day developing a more effective politics of accountability and of better accommodating the logic of subnationalism within a pan-Indian polity.

What then are the prospects of India becoming more of a federal polity? In the immediate future, the prospects seem bleak. One of the ideologies in political ascendancy today claims that India has always been one nation, one people, and one culture, and that *Hindutwa* has been the cultural foundation of that nation. This Hindu nationalist ideology parallels the official ideology of the Pakistani state that constructs a history of "Muslim India" separate from that of "Hindu India." Both these constructions reject the idea of India as an inclusionary civilization that had for centuries absorbed diverse peoples and cultures.¹⁴ My account of Bodo and Assamese cultural history in Chapter 8 highlights the incorporative nature of Indic civilization in northeast India. The heartland ideology of Hindu nationalism, arguably, has less resonance in this region, where, incidentally, a significant proportion of the population—the overwhelming majority in the states of Mizoram and Nagaland and a near-majority in Meghalaya—are Christians. Not all votaries of a strong pan-Indian nationalism in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), however, are unaware of the high costs of the repeated mishandling of subnational discontent. Jaswant Singh, the major BJP thinker of India's national security policy, puts it perceptively. India's "national endeavor," he writes, could be adversely affected by the State's failures in its commitments and obligations to its citizens since citizens, after all, may withdraw their allegiance. To Singh, Assam, Punjab, and Kashmir are examples of "explosions" of such discontent.¹⁵ But even if the high costs of mishan-

dling subnational dissent may be apparent to some of the leaders of the BJP government, it is unlikely that this more resolute group of nation-builders will suddenly discover the virtues of federalism.

While Hindu nationalism may have given a new lease on life, with a Hindu culturalist twist, to the argument for a centralized State in India, the secular ideologies that were markedly more influential until recently have been no less strident in justifying a centralized State. Indeed, one of the anxieties the "western-educated Indian" has lived with since the early nineteenth century, according to cultural critic Ashis Nandy, is India's supposed inability to develop and sustain central political authority. Historically there have been successful States that were pan-Indian in scope. But most modern Indians seem to believe that India has not been able to maintain such authority, and that the source of the problem lies in the very nature of Indian personality and culture. This mindset, along with the institutional legacy of the unitary system of colonial rule, has led to the half-hearted federalism of the Indian Constitution. New Delhi's knee-jerk tendency to turn to raw power to defend the nation against subnational challenges is perhaps symptomatic of that anxiety. Modern Indians find it hard to believe that India today, to cite Nandy again, "has a powerful, fully legitimate nation-state, that she has actualised the dreams of her nineteenth century social reformers and political thinkers." And at least from the perspective of the northeast, India indeed is what Nandy calls "no longer an unsuccessful soft State but a powerful hard State with all the necessary trappings of such a State."¹⁶

Fortunately, significant countervailing trends to centralization are evident in India's cultural and political realms. Among them Nandy lists the pluralism of Hindu thought, the nature of precolonial States in the subcontinent and the theoretical conceptions of the State in Indian thought, and the Gandhian suspicion of the State and what is actually a mixed legacy of the colonial State. If the awe-inspiring centralization of the colonial State impressed many Indians, it also produced distrust of central authority among many other Indians — Gandhi's political ideas being an example of that. The future therefore, Nandy believes, is not closed. For open politics in a society long used to diversity has its own logic.¹⁷

Indeed there have been moments in India's recent history when the prospects for greater federalism seemed good. As I have pointed

out in Chapter 5, the Constituent Assembly as late as 1946, when partition was not yet a *fait accompli* and the incorporation of the princely states was still being negotiated, had taken for granted that a strong federation is the only form of postcolonial polity that could work. In terms of more recent history, perhaps even more significant than the rise of the Hindu nationalist BJP is the rise of numerous "regional" — or rather subnational — parties and the role of these parties in more than one coalition government in New Delhi.

From a long-term perspective, it may be helpful to remind ourselves not only of the historicity of the global order of nation-states, as I argued in Chapter 1, but also of the historicity of existing nation-states. Until quite recently, the conflicts between European nation-states seemed never-ending. No one could have predicted that these nation-states would be on the road to forming what one day may become a confederation of European States. In that light, it is perhaps worth recalling that the Aga Khan's suggestion in 1935 that India should be made into a confederation — a United States of Southern Asia as he put it — did not seem absurd to his contemporaries. Indeed, this was the germ of the idea for a confederation — a Muslim group of provinces and a Hindu group of provinces — that was the basis of the Cabinet Mission Plan of 1946. Even though the plan fell through, it is a sobering thought that a confederation that would have included today's India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh seemed plausible even as late as 1946.¹⁸

The notion of restoring the unity of Indic civilization, in the manner of that of European civilization — from nation-states to real federation — may seem preposterous today. But the fact that such a federation was seen as a possibility not long ago may bring home an important lesson. Subnationalisms — militant or otherwise — need not be seen only as threats to "national integrity" that is, the territorial integrity of the nation-states of today. The stubborn subnational conflicts of India today — Assam, Punjab, and Kashmir — all to some extent bear traces of the destabilization and trauma of the partition of the subcontinent into two and subsequently three nation-states. From the perspective of the northeast as well as other regions torn by subnational conflicts, the vision of a subcontinental confederation may contain an important possibility. To Europeans of the Middle Ages, Catalonia, the Basque country, Corsica, and South Tyrol were familiar regions. But in the era of the nation-state

these were among the regions that did not become nation-states. European nation-states, in their heyday, saw them as threats. But in the confident Europe of today the same States seem less threatened by assertions of regional distinctiveness by these regions. It is likely that a confident South Asian confederation would have found attempts to reclaim historical identities by regions like Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, Kashmir, or Punjab less threatening. Such visions therefore can give some perspective to the self-bleeding effects of a dogmatic nation-building project.

The new willingness of nation-states to live with self-confident regions is not limited to Europe, nor are the forces pushing this process primarily political. The logic of economic globalization also has favored autonomous regional economies—politically integrated into loose federations. It has been argued that traditional nation-states have become “unnatural, even impossible . . . units in a global economy.” The viable economic units, Keniche Ohmae believes, are more focused geographical units, sometimes within a nation-state, and sometimes straddling the borders of two or more nation-states. The emergence of these “natural economic regions” in a globalized economy is the other side of the decline of the nation-state.¹⁹ Among these regions are Catalonia, Hongkong and the adjacent area of southern China, the Kansai region around Osaka in Japan, and the area combining the Canadian province of British Columbia with the U.S. state of Washington. In India, too, there are regions such as those around Bangalore and Hyderabad—the centers of India’s software and pharmaceutical industries—that might play a similar role in the global economy.

The disappearance of a few familiar national entities such as the U.S.S.R., Czechoslovakia, or Yugoslavia are only the more extreme examples of the decline of the nation-state.²⁰ The delegation of unprecedented powers to individual *Landers* in unified Germany, to the autonomous communities of Spain (including Catalonia), to Scotland and then to northern Ireland in the United Kingdom, and to the provinces in Canada, are part of the same phenomenon of the declining relevance of the nation-state.

Even though centrist nation-builders might shudder at the implications of what Ohmae calls “region-states,” the habit of control over economies by centralized States is not a permanent feature of economic life. Ohmae believes that it is partly the result of an accident of

intellectual history: of modern economic theory crystallizing at about the same time as the modern nation-state. "Had Adam Smith written one century earlier," Ohmae writes, "it might be much easier for us now to view the connections between economic theory and the modern nation-state in quite a different light." Even though there was a time when centralized power of a nation-state over economic affairs had made sense, that moment has now passed.²¹

As India takes advantage of the globalized economy and develops growth centers around cities like Bangalore, Hyderabad, Bombay, and Delhi, given the political conditions, Assam and the northeast, in the foreseeable future are unlikely to attract many investors, domestic or foreign. Well-meaning but naive commentators in India sometimes make the point that insurgents in the northeast should see the light of day, go home, and create the political space for the region's participation in the liberalized new Indian economy. Unfortunately, such expectations that put the ball in the court of insurgents are based on a misreading of the political conjuncture in the region. In the present condition of mistrust between the region and New Delhi, made worse every day by evidence of the State's human rights abuses, such well-meaning pan-Indian arguments are unlikely to shape public discourse. What is more likely is that, as some parts of India make a great leap forward, the radical argument that the northeast's economic underdevelopment is the result of the heartland's tight control and its treatment of it as a frontier will sound even more plausible. Indeed, the present impasse in Assam shows signs that the region might join the growing ranks of rough neighborhoods in the "global village."

One of the ironic lessons of history, underscored by the breakdown of the Soviet Union, is that when strong centralized States want to hold on to the "illusion of power" because they want to do good for their people, in reality that power may be already eroding.²² I hope that India's nation-builders will learn from such ironies. Those at the helm of the Indian State, I hope, will be able to distance themselves from the derivative, suffocating, and quite out-of-date paradigm of nation-building and return to a more confident vision of the civilizational unity of the subcontinent. It is only such self-confidence that can enable India to launch a bold project of genuine federation-building, which ultimately is the only way to bring subnationalism and pan-Indianism closer together.

INDIA AGAINST ITSELF
Assam and the Politics of Nationality

SANJIB BARUAH

Are decentralized forms of government better able to manage conflicts in multi-ethnic polities? In a time of failing states and ethnic unrest this questions acquires a new urgency. Baruah argues that loosely organized federations are not only less prone to violent conflicts but they also make better democracies. He traces the history of conflicts in Assam and tensions between pan-Indianism and Assamese subnationalist concerns ever since the province became a part of British India and one of the world's leading tea-producing regions in the nineteenth century. He argues that human rights abuses by both security forces and insurgents, ethnic violence, and the steady slide towards illiberal democracy are largely due to India's formally federal but actually centralized government structure. This book combines scholarship, political engagement, and an insider's intimate knowledge of northeast India. It will interest historians and political analysis.

Sanjib Baruah is Professor of Political Studies at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, USA.

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