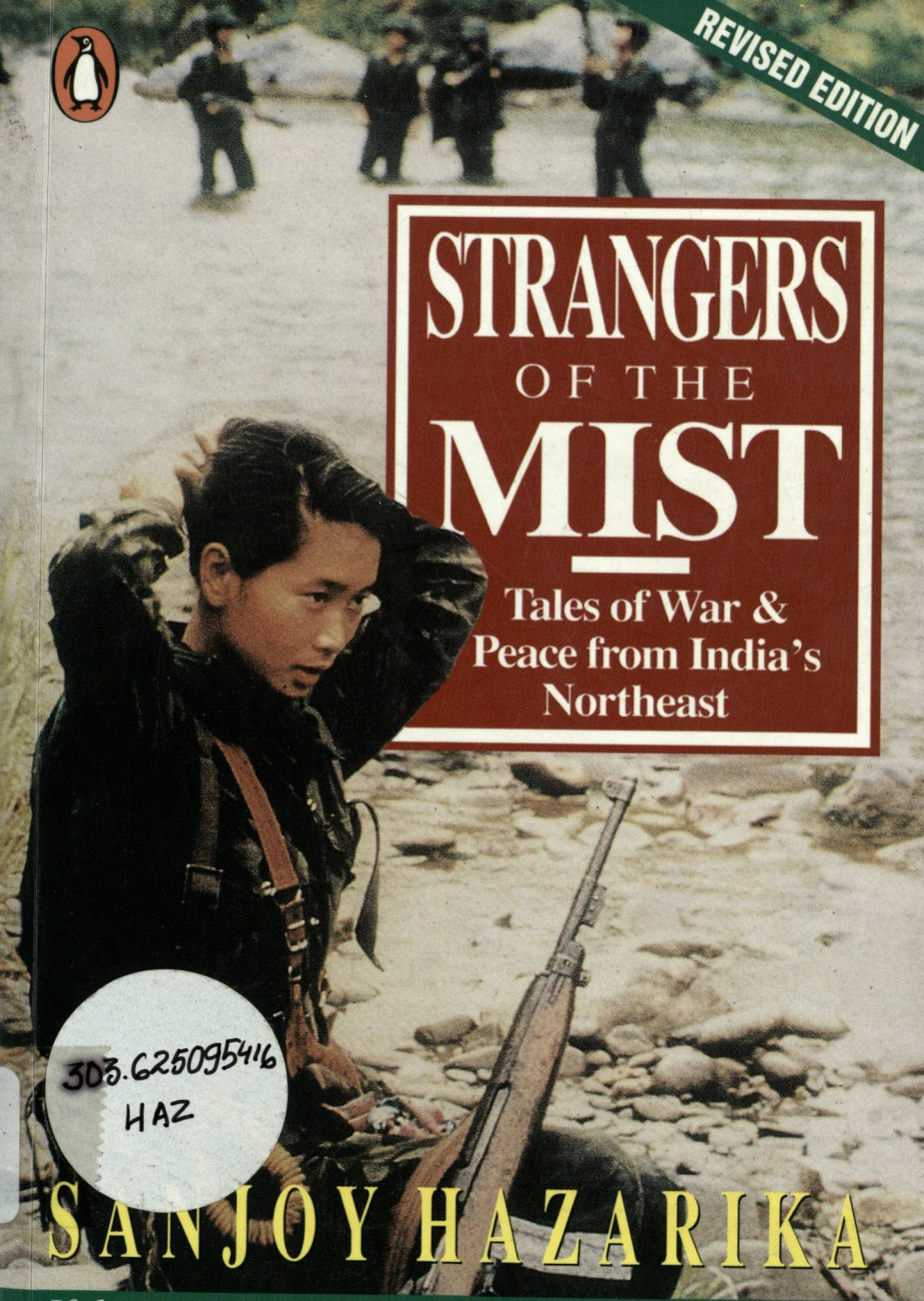


REVISED EDITION

STRANGERS OF THE MIST

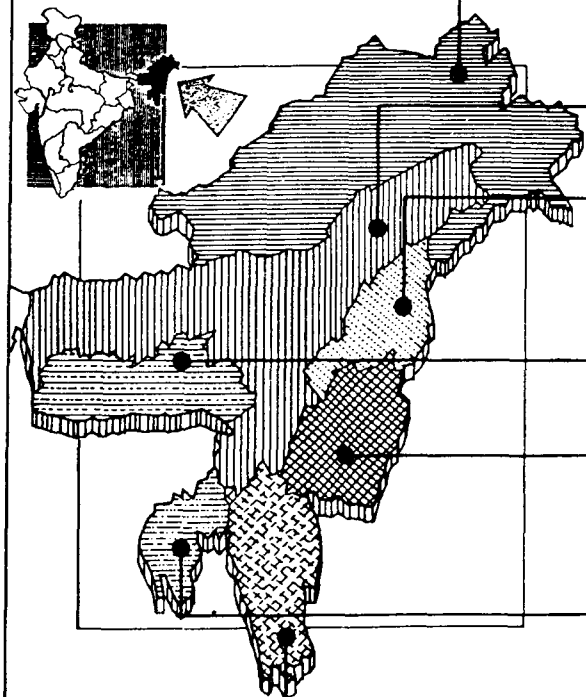
Tales of War & Peace from India's Northeast

SANJOY HAZARIKA

If the North-East is not to be lost, this book should ... be compulsory reading for every thinking Indian...

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

Major Militant Groups in India's Northeast



The following major militant groups have been active in the Northeast

Arunachal Pradesh
- United Liberation Volunteers of Arunachal Pradesh (ULVA).
- United People's Volunteers of Arunachal Pradesh (UPVA).
- United Liberation Movement of Arunachal Pradesh (ULMA).

Assam
- United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA).
- Bodo Security Force. **(BSF)**

Nagaland
- National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak/Muviah), (NSCN I/M).
- National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Khaplang)-NSCN(K).
- Naga National Council (Adinno)/Naga Federal Govt.(NFG).
- Naga National Council (Khodao)-NNC(K).

Meghalaya
- Achick Liberation Matgrik Army (ALMA).

Manipur
- National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN I/M)
- People's Liberation Army (PLA)/Revolutionary People's Front (RPF).
- United National Liberation Front (UNLF).
- Peoples Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK)

Tripura
- All Tripura Tribal Force (ATTF).
- Tripura National Volunteer Force (TNVF)

Mizoram
- Hmar People's Convention (HPC).

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Sanjoy Hazarika

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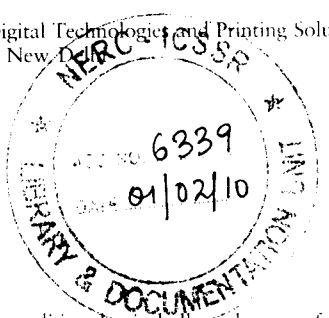

PENGUIN BOOKS
STRANGERS OF THE MIST

Sanjoy Hazarika was born in Shillong (then capital of Assam) in 1954. He went to school at St Edmund's College there and later studied journalism and printing at London. He began his career with *Himmat Weekly* and later worked for the *Hindustan Times* and the *Associated Press* before joining the *New York Times* for which he has reported extensively out of the South Asia bureau since 1981. He published his first book, *Assam: A Crisis of Identity* in 1980. He was the recipient of a New York Times Publishers Award for his reporting on the Bhopal gas tragedy in 1984. His second book, *Bhopal: The Lessons of a Tragedy* (Penguin India) which was listed by the *Observer*, London, as among the ten best science books released in 1988. In 1993–94, he was awarded a fellowship to study the changes in US environmental law after the Bhopal disaster at the Joan Shorenstein Barone Center of Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University.

Sanjoy Hazarika lives in New Delhi with his wife and daughter. He is co-authoring two volumes of a study of the crisis before India with T.N. Seshan, the Chief Election Commissioner.

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From Dhaka To Delhi

My search for a key to the crisis that is overwhelming the Northeast of India took me to a squalid slum in Delhi.

Ikram Ahmed lives here, in a basti at Nizamuddin in New Delhi, a short distance from the cloistered tomb of the Urdu poet, Mirza Ghalib. The tomb itself is surrounded by beggars and boon-seekers, armed with flowers, couplets and hopes. The flowers are from the flower-kiosks in the narrow lane that begins at a mosque near the famous Karim's restaurant. Ahmed's home is in a congested colony of ragpickers, rickshaw pullers, labourers and petty traders. They live in a sprawl of fetid lanes, one-room huts of cardboard, tarpaulin and, if they are lucky, tin and asbestos sheets. The swarm of settlers has overwhelmed a once-gracious sixteenth-century mahal of the Mughal era that is located near the mosque, itself a short distance from the tomb of the Emperor Humayun.

Welcoming a visitor to his newly-whitewashed small house—among the few brick buildings flanking the basti, which has expanded to the Nizamuddin flyover near the plush Oberoi Hotel—Ahmed beckoned to a young nephew hovering nearby.

'Go get the tailor,' he ordered in Hindi. And when the young man hesitated, the lord of the Nizamuddin basti and local Congress Party leader, barked: 'The tailor, that Bengali fellow, from Bangladesh, what's his name Basheer or Shameer.'

The young man walked quickly away as a blistering sun beat down on us, and Ahmed, a gruff-voiced man of indeterminate age, sporting a messy stubble but clad in the rumpled khadi homespun pajamas and kurta that politicians of all hues and strata wear in this nation, spat a few times and talked.

'We have people from everywhere, from Bengal, from Madras, from Punjab and even from Bombay. And there are many from Bangladesh,

they've come in over the years,' he remarked as we waited in the lane outside his house. The battered wooden door leading to his courtyard creaked open in the warm, moist breeze. Ahmed, who described himself as a leader of the Congress Seva Dal (a band of volunteers whose main job is to organize obsequious receptions for visiting party bosses), talked about the dispute between a Hindu temple nearby—it blares mantras and pujas over loudspeakers—and his community. 'They're encroaching on our land and since the Bharatiya Janata Party has become strong, they're getting more aggressive.' The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is seeking power in Delhi on the main ground that, in their own land, under successive Congress and Janata Party regimes, Hindus who are the majority have been discriminated against to appease Muslims. The party's leaders say they will remedy this, once in power: a tall promise, unlikely to be kept—or as likely to be implemented as the call to Garibi Hatao or Banish Poverty by Indira Gandhi in 1972.

Ahmed spat again and spoke of the Hindu-Muslim riot in that neighbourhood a few months ago. In the violence, police attacked the rioters with clubs, fired teargas and bullets at them, as they chased the crowd through the narrow lanes and entered homes to seize suspects. In his mind and in those of others who listened, the police were anti-Muslim. At least two persons were killed and a curfew proclaimed.

The bitterness of those days was still fresh in Ahmed's mind and on his tongue.

At this moment, a slight man in a lungi and a loose shirt came upto us and waited, unsure of himself.

'This is the fellow you should meet, reporter sahib,' scowled Ahmed. And, he said, there were many others like him.

The visitor gave his name as Sheikh Barah. He sported a stringy beard, and watched the reporter sahib with shifty eyes.

Yes, he was from Bangladesh, he said. He had come in 1971 with his wife; they were newly-married at the time. As he responded to questions, the flow of conversation became smoother despite a bunch of curious onlookers who gathered to listen.

A few months before the Indian army went into East Pakistan to liberate that unfortunate nation from the brutal repression of West Pakistan, Barah was a tailor in Dhaka, the capital of the eastern province. He lived in a tiny room with his wife. The uncertainty of their times, lives

and of the country made them restive. Finally, Barah felt he could not take the tension any longer. He decided to leave and move to India.

'I never thought of going to Calcutta to live, I always wanted to go to Delhi,' he said. It was as if he wanted to go farthest from his homeland. The continuing brutal crackdown, one of the worst military repressions by any country on its own people since the Second World War, the disappearance of people, the constant rumours decided them. One night, he and his wife bundled up their meagre possessions—cooking utensils, a few clothes, an aluminium pitcher for water—and boarded a bus to the West Bengal border. Once there, they waited again for nightfall before slipping across the frontier. They did not meet a single guard.

From there, the couple travelled by bus, train and on foot to Calcutta, investing much of their savings of a few hundred taka on the journey. And on by train from the noisy Howrah station to Delhi.

At the time, he said, there were some friends and relatives in Delhi. He did not elaborate. He stayed with them for some time before learning that plots were being parcelled out in Nizamuddin, one of the oldest parts of the capital, near the majestic tomb of Humayun, second of the Mughal dynasty.

The Nizamuddin basti was not very crowded in those days. The ragpickers and rickshawwallahs who are its mainstay had just started coming. Sheikh Barah found work and, as the local politicians took the newcomers under their wing, found a place to live. They built their tiny shacks on their own with friends, relatives, and children helping. In the months and years to come, other things also became available: facilities such as ration cards for the family. Their sons studied at local government schools. But the best was yet to come.

In 1984, Sheikh Barah, who said he was about forty-five, received the stamp of authority on his illegal presence: his name was registered as a voter from the basti. Thus, to all purposes, Barah is now a legitimate Indian. He supports a lifestyle, income and advantages that many others in the country of his adoption lack, although his lifestyle is neither luxurious or even middle class.

But he is a survivor.

He enjoys these advantages without formally having filed an

application for citizenship, a process that takes years. He has not reported or been reported by local neighbours to a police station as an alien.

'We will never go back, there is nothing for us in Bangladesh, here we have a house, a regular income, schools where the children can study,' said Sheikh Barah emphatically, in Bengali, his native tongue. His wife and the boys help him with cutting and sewing when they are free.

There are tens of thousands more like him in New Delhi alone, fleeing the destitution and desperation of Bangladesh for a better life. Here they earn two or even three times of what they could have earned in the land of their birth.

One intelligence official told me that there could be as many as 3,00,000 Bangladeshi migrants in the capital. That means that illegal aliens number as much as three per cent of the total population of this ancient city that is sandwiched in time and culture, with overwhelming pressures outstripping efforts to give enough people enough land, drinking water, electricity and jobs.

Police talk of efforts to drive the migrants out. But this is just not happening. In early 1994 hundreds of settlers were reported to be leaving Delhi, complaining of police harassment under a BJP administration. The consequences of continuing neglect of this issue will be a terrible social and political price that the poorest and the most vulnerable in these areas may eventually have to pay, as has happened in the Northeast.

And they are only trail followers, not blazers. They are walking on a road cleared over decades by millions of settlers who came to Assam, little Tripura and West Bengal (I am leaving out the Western sector of India and Pakistan, where clear migrations followed the Partition but virtually ceased in its aftermath). They first came at the end of the last century, and then surged in the 1930s before growing again in the 1950s to 1980s.

The trend is inexorable.

Many, of course, do not travel thus far. It is in the nature of migration and refugee/migrant movements that people move to the places nearest them where there is a friendly environment and where they can work and survive. Millions have, therefore, slipped out of their villages to neighbouring towns and districts in Bangladesh. According to one estimate, one million people are displaced every year by extensive river bank erosion in Bangladesh.

Others moved across the border into India, as Barah did, smoothly. Some bribed border guards on either side of the manmade frontier that zigzags uncertainly and without logic over forest and vale, stream and river, paddy field and marsh.

The Bengali diaspora, especially of Muslims from impoverished East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, has spread across South Asia with nothing but contempt for the international frontiers that the British drew up, carving up two nations out of one, on the basis of religion. And where there were two nations, there are now three.

The outflow from East Pakistan, accelerated by the trauma of Partition, when Hindus joined the flood, drew sharp reactions from the host population. For example, the classic acquisitive figure in the Assam valley was described as a Mymensinghia, a Muslim from the district of the same name which is now in Bangladesh. The area is one of the poorest in that country.

As far back as 1921, C.S. Mullen, the Census Commissioner for Assam wrote in a census report:

> Whither there is wasteland thither flock the Mymensinghias. In fact the way in which they have seized upon the vacant areas in the Assam Valley seems almost uncanny. Without fuss, without tumult, without undue trouble to the district revenue staffs, a population which must amount to over half a million has transplanted itself from Bengal to the Assam Valley during the past twenty five years. It looks like a marvel of administrative organization on the part of Government, but it is nothing of the sort: the only thing I can compare it to is the mass movement of a huge body of ants.

These days, a walk along the banks of the Jamuna in Delhi provides striking proof that a similar situation is developing in the capital of India. Bangladeshi groups have mushroomed here especially in the Shahdara belt, on the side of the Jamuna bordering Uttar Pradesh. They are industrious: they ply rickshaws, work as maids and day labourers at construction sites, sell fresh fish catches in the areas, often near the Nizamuddin Bridge that connects more affluent neighbourhoods in Delhi with their poorer cousins across the river.

These are enterprising men who go from house to house, neighbourhood to neighbourhood selling the beautiful, unmatched Tangail and Jhamawar saris, shimmering, exquisite pieces of craftsmanship renowned in South Asia and beloved to women who can afford to buy them.

It is not merely a question of throwing out a few million migrants and demolishing their homes, as right-wing irredentists seek, but the crisis in Bangladesh, an unending cycle of poverty, overpopulation and hopelessness that is fuelling these flows of people into India. This, as much as any other factor, is creating the social and economic storm which is tearing society apart in Assam, Tripura and other parts of Northeastern India. The results are insurgencies and endemic violence by groups seeking to protect and assert their cultural identity in the light of threats or perceived threats. These problems can be viewed within Bangladesh itself, where settlement of Muslims on tribal lands in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) has led to alienation and armed revolt.

The unabated influx into eastern India has created problems of law and order, confrontations between Indian and Bangladeshi security forces, led to a spurt in smuggling and transfrontier gang wars in West Bengal as well as domestic troubles in Bangladesh where, one Member of Parliament complains, Indian goods, especially consumer items like chillies and medicines, flood the local markets, crushing local enterprise and products.

Bangladesh also blames India for what its elegant High Commissioner in New Delhi, Farooq Sobhan, describes as 'turning the tap on and off' at its own whim. Sobhan was referring to the dispute over the sharing of Ganges river waters; Bangladesh says that India is diverting most of it for irrigation, cultivation, industrial use and to flush Calcutta port of silt. It accuses Delhi of not caring a bit for the devastation downstream in its lands, which are becoming desertified with growing salinity in the water of the river, which is also unfit for human or even industrial consumption. One fourth of all of Bangladesh's 120 million people depend on the Ganges for their survival.

The crisis in Bangladesh has the potential of triggering security and societal crisis all across India. One reason for the lack of violence in parts of India other than the Northeast against the settlers can be ascribed to the absorptive capacity of society and the need of developing industries and

agriculture for more labour, especially cheap and hard-working workers.

But what happens when the industrious begin to displace local people—sons of the soil or others—from jobs, land and edge them out in competitive deals? That is when the absorptive capacity of any society ends, where tolerance is exhausted and the disruptive reaction of awakened and embittered local populations begin.

This is the Bangladesh Syndrome, the Malthusian nightmare that has stalked that country for decades and now is surely overwhelming that unfortunate nation: too many people on too little land. The classic overpopulation versus natural resource base conflict is best seen in Bangladesh. It is coming to India too where the pressure of numbers is fast outstripping resources and facilities, such as energy, water supply and sanitation. India cannot afford the additional numbers from Bangladesh.

In the ragpickers' colony in Nizamuddin, men and women sweat as they sift through piles of plastic bags, mounds of newspapers and old magazines, soft drink bottles and beer crates and even empty bottles of Martell. In the background, a male singer's voice crackles over an old tape recorder: the bard from Bengal sings soothingly in the messy slum of the lush green paddy fields of his homeland, its great overflowing rivers and the beauty of its women.