

Emergent North-East India

A way forward

Prof. Himansu Chandra Sadangi



The ethnic mosaic of North-East India offers a fascinating area of academic discourse which needs to be examined for a clear understanding of the elements of separatism or integration which necessarily carry socio-political ramifications. It attempts to assess the contours of ethno-cultural plurality in the social dynamics of the region as well as about its history, geography, economic and concurrent political scenario fogging with insurgency and terrorism. To be more precise, it deals with the land, the people, history, economic, cultural heritage, ethnical composition, with a socio-political relevance of each state of the North-East India.

The present book should be of interest to student, scholars, journalists and policy makers interested in the study of ethnic conflicts, politics, insurgency and identity politics. It should be an indispensable reference for students of Political Science, Sociology, History and Anthropology.



Prof. Himansu Charan Sadangi has a prolific profile of academic career. He is an M.A. M. Phil. in Sociology from J.N.U. and also did M.Sc. in Physics from IIT Kanpur. This brilliant pedagogue is professing now at Government College Bhawanipatna as the Head, Department of Sociology. He has an experience of over 17 years in teaching.

This multifaceted author has some outstanding research work to his name. The worth mentioning among those are Small Scale Issue Oriented, Marginal Culture, Rehabilitation Displacement, Alternate Development, Discrete Cultural Element and Practices, Indigenous Practices Related to Technology, Culture and Medicine, and Appropriate Technology.

EMERGENT NORTH EAST INDIA
A Way Forward

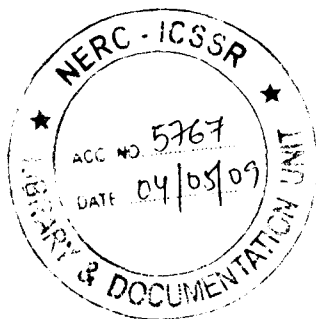
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Introduction

North-east India is the easternmost region of India consisting of the contiguous Seven Sister States and the state of Sikkim. Seven states commonly known as the “Seven Sisters”. They are Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura.

The North-east is a true frontier region. It has over 2000 km of border with Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh and is connected to the rest of India by a narrow 20 km wide corridor of land. One of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse regions in Asia, each state has its distinct cultures and traditions.

From times immemorial, India's North East has been the meeting point of many communities, faiths and cultures. A place renowned for its magical beauty and bewildering diversity, North-east India is the home for more than 166 separate tribes speaking a wide range of languages. Some groups have migrated over the centuries from places as far as South East Asia; they retain their cultural traditions and values but are beginning to adapt to contemporary lifestyles. Its jungles are dense, its rivers powerful and rain, and thunderstorms sweep across the hills, valleys and plains during the annual monsoons.

The lushness of its landscape, the range of communities and geographical and ecological diversity makes the North-east quite different from other parts of the subcontinent. In winters, mist carpets the valleys but swirls around the traveller in hills during summer rains, thus creating an enchanting and romantic atmosphere. The region has borders with Myanmar, Bhutan and Bangladesh.

The festivals and celebrations in the North-eastern states of India are a colourful reflection of the people and their lives. Throughout the year, different people celebrate festivals with lot of fanfare in different ways, most of them centring around their modes of living and livelihood.

Each state is a traveller's paradise, with picturesque hills and green meadows which shelters thousand of species of flora and fauna. In addition, the states provide scope for angling, boating, rafting, trekking and hiking. Besides, there are a number of wildlife sanctuaries and national parks where rare animals, birds and plants which will surely provide fascinating insight to the visitors.

Before Independence this entire area was known as Assam Province. Time to time seven different states have been separated from the same area. The region is also known as the land of seven sisters.

The North-eastern states are very different in many ways from the other parts of India. These States have the maximum number of tribes living within. Many tribal languages are spoken throughout these seven states. The North-eastern states have the highest percentage of Christians. Territory-wise this region is the most sensitive region touching many countries like China, Tibet, Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangladesh. Permits to visit the states of Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura are no longer required. Permits to other states are to be obtained from the local office.

The states are famous for their scenic beauty. The states also have many other tourists attractions like Kaziranga wildlife sanctuary where one can see one horned Rhinoceros and the famous Tawang Gompa.

<i>States</i>	<i>Capital</i>	<i>Area in sq.kms</i>	<i>Languages</i>
Assam	Dispur	78,438	Assamese, Bengali
Arunachal Pradesh	Itanagar	83,743	Tribal
Nagaland	Kohima	16,579	English
Manipur	Imphal	22,327	Manipuri

Mizoram	Aizwal	21,081	Mizo
Tripura	Agartala	10,492	Bengali, Tribal
Meghalaya	Shillong	22,439	Khasi, Garo

Of these, Sikkim became an Indian protectorate in 1947 and a full state in 1975. The states border Nepal, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh. However, they share only 21 km common border with the rest of India via the Chicken's Neck.

Origin of the Sobriquet: Seven Sister States

The sobriquet, the Land of Seven Sisters, had been originally coined, coinciding with the inauguration of the new states in January, 1972, by Jyoti Prasad Saikia, a journalist in Tripura in course of a radio talk. Saikia later compiled a book on the interdependence and commonness of the Seven Sister States, and named it the *Land of Seven Sisters*. It has been primarily because of this publication that the sobriquet has caught on.

The Seven Sister States are a region in North-eastern India, comprising the contiguous states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura. The region had a population of 38.6 million in 2000, about 3.8 per cent of India's total. The ethnic and religious diversity that characterizes the seven states distinguishes them from the rest of India. For most of their history, they were independent, and their complete integration with India came about only during the British Raj.

The reference Seven Sisters is symbolic of their relative isolation from mainstream Indian culture and consciousness.

The Number Seven

When India became independent from the United Kingdom in 1947, only three states covered the area. Manipur and Tripura were princely states, while a much larger Assam Province was under direct British rule. Its capital was Shillong. Four new states were carved out of

the original territory of Assam in the decades following independence, in line with the policy of the Indian government of reorganizing the states along ethnic and linguistic lines. Accordingly, Nagaland became a separate state in 1963, followed by Meghalaya in 1972. Mizoram became a Union Territory in 1972, and achieved statehood - along with Arunachal Pradesh in 1987.

ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS COMPOSITION

Except for Assam, where the major language, Assamese, is the easternmost of the Indo-European languages, the region has a predominantly tribal population that speak numerous Tibeto-Burman and Austro-Asiatic languages. Hinduism is the predominant religion in this region. The proliferation of Christianity among the Seven Sister States sets it apart from the rest of India. The work of Christian missionaries in the area has led to large scale conversion of the tribal population. Christians now comprise the majority of the population in Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya and sizable minority in Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh. The bigger states of Assam and Tripura, however, have remained predominantly Hindu, with a sizeable Muslim minority in Assam.

NATURAL RESOURCES

Main industries in the region are tea-based, crude oil and natural gas, silk, bamboo and handicrafts. The states are heavily forested and have plentiful rainfall. There are beautiful wildlife sanctuaries, tea-estates and mighty rivers like Brahmaputra. The region is home to one-horned rhinoceros, elephants and other endangered wildlife. For security reasons, including inter-tribal tensions, widespread insurgencies, and disputed borders with neighbouring China, there are restrictions on foreigners visiting the area, hampering the development of the potentially profitable tourism industry.

INTERDEPENDENCE

The landlocked North-eastern region of the country comprises eight separate states whose geographical and

practical needs of development underscore their need to thrive and work together. A compact geographical unit, the North-east is isolated from the rest of India except through a slender and vulnerable corridor, flanked by alien territories. Assam is the gateway through which the sister states are connected to the mainland. Tripura, a virtual enclave almost surrounded by Bangladesh, wholly depends on Assam even for bare existence. Nagaland, Meghalaya and Arunachal depend on Assam for their internal communications. Manipur and Mizoram's contacts with the main body of India are through Assam's Barak Valley. Raw material requirements also make the states mutually dependent. All rivers in Assam's plains originate in Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and western Meghalaya. Manipur's rivers have their sources in Nagaland and Mizoram; the hills also have rich mineral and forest resources. Petroleum is found in the plains.

The plains depend on the hills also on vital questions like flood control. A correct strategy to control floods in the plains calls for soil conservation and afforestation in the hills. The hills depend on the plains for markets for their produce. They depend on the plains even for food grains because of limited cultivable land in the hills.

DEVELOPMENT IN NORTH EAST

North East Council

This region is officially recognized as a special category of states. The North East Council (NEC) was constituted in 1971 as the nodal agency for the economic and social development of the eight states, the North Eastern Development Finance Corporation Ltd (NEDFi) was incorporated on August 9, 1995 and the Ministry of Development of Northeastern Region (DONER) was set up in September 2001.

To provide a forum for collaboration towards common objectives, the Indian government established the North Eastern Council in 1971. Each state is represented by its Governor and Chief Minister. The Council has enabled the

Seven Sister States to work together on numerous matters, including the provision of educational facilities and electric supplies to the region.

The North Eastern Council was constituted in 1971 by an Act of Parliament. The constitution of the Council has marked the beginning of a new chapter of concerted and planned endeavour for the rapid development of the Region. Over the last thirty five years, NEC has been instrumental in setting in motion a new economic endeavour aimed at removing the basic handicaps that stood in the way of normal development of the region and has ushered in an era of new hope in this backward area full of great potentialities.

Formation

The North Eastern Council (NEC) came into being by an Act of Parliament, the North Eastern Council Act, 1971 to act as advisory body in respect of socio-economic development and balanced development of the North Eastern Areas consisting of the present States of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. The NEC started functioning in the year 1972.

Organisation

The members of the NEC consist of the Governors and the Chief Ministers of the Eight Member States including Sikkim. Apart from the Chairman and three Members nominated by the President of India.

Functions

The North Eastern Council was constituted for performing the following functions:

- To discuss any matter in which some or all of the States represented in the Council have common interest and advise the Central Government and the Governments of the States concerned as to the action to be taken on any such matter, particularly with regard to

- (i) Any matter of common interest in the field of economic and social planning;
 - (ii) Any matter concerning inter-State Transport and Communications;
 - (iii) Any matter relating to Power or Flood-control projects of common interest.
- To formulate and forward proposals for securing the balanced development of the North Eastern Areas particularly with regard to
 - (i) A unified and coordinated Regional Plan, which will be in addition to the State Plan, in regard to matters of common importance to that area;
 - (ii) Prioritizing the projects and schemes included in the Regional Plan and recommend stages in which the Regional Plan may be implemented; and
 - (iii) Regarding location of the projects and schemes included in the Regional Plan to the Central Government for its consideration.

Where a project or a scheme is intended to benefit two or more States, to recommend the manner in which such project or scheme may be executed/implemented and managed, the benefits there from may be shared, and the expenditure thereon may be incurred.

- To review, from time to time, the implementation of the projects and schemes included in the Regional Plan and recommend measures for effecting coordination among the Governments of the concerned States in the matter of implementations.
- To review progress of expenditure and recommend to the Central Government the quantum of financial assistance to be given to the States entrusted with implementation of any project included in the Regional Plan.
- To recommend to the Governments of the States concerned or to the Central Government the undertaking of necessary Surveys and Investigations of projects to facilitate inclusion of

new projects in the Regional Plan for consideration.

- To review, from time to time, the measures taken by the States represented in the Council for the maintenance of security and public order and recommend to the concerned State Governments further measures necessary in this regard.

About NEDFC

North Eastern Development Finance Corporation Ltd. (NEDFi) was incorporated under the Companies Act, 1956, on August 9, 1995 with its registered office at Guwahati, Assam, for the development of industries, infrastructure, animal husbandry, agri-horticulture plantation, medicinal plantation, sericulture plantation, aquaculture, poultry and dairy in the North-eastern states of India.

NEDFi has been promoted by All India Financial Institutions - Industrial Development Bank of India, ICICI Ltd., Industrial Finance Corporation of India, Small Industries Development Bank of India, Insurance Companies - Life Insurance Corporation of India, General Insurance Corporation and its subsidiaries, Investment Company - Unit Trust of India and Bank - State Bank of India.

After the creation of DONER, NEDFi has come under the administrative control of this Ministry.

Genesis

The States in the North-eastern region of India comprising Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura are endowed with rich natural resources such as oil, natural gas, limestone, coal, other minerals and nearly one-third of the country's hydro power potential (84,000 MW).

The Region, however, is yet to experience industrial development on a scale achieved by other regions of the country. Reasons are not far to seek. Large infrastructure deficiency, basic service backlog, high educated unemployment and fluid law and order situation has crippled economic development initiatives in the region.

For historical reasons and also for the reasons mentioned above, the North-East region has lacked entrepreneurial success stories in the past. But in the recent years, a new breed of entrepreneurial class is emerging, who are well educated and well informed and who want to do something on their own.

Hence, the need for a regional development financial institution having grass root knowledge of the region was felt so that financial assistance as well as professional guidance can be provided to the local entrepreneurs. It was also felt that a special financial institution would go a long way in solving some of the problems mentioned above, if not all.

The Borthakur Committee Report in 1994 conceptualized the formation of a North-Eastern Development Bank to cater to the needs of the North-Eastern Region and to mitigate some of the problems of the region as discussed above.

Birth of an Institution

Quite befitting the ardent need of the region, the then Finance Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh, in his budget speech for the year 1995-96 announced setting up of a development bank for the North East Region.

Pursuant to this, the North Eastern Development Finance Corporation Ltd. (NEDFi) was incorporated under the Companies Act, 1956, on August 9, 1995 with its registered office at Guwahati, Assam. The Corporation was formally inaugurated by the then Prime Minister, Shri P.V. Narashima Rao on February 23, 1996.

NEDFi is the premier financial and development institution of the North East of India. The main objects to be pursued by NEDFi as per its Memorandum of Association is:

To carry on and transact the business of providing credit and other facilities for promotion, expansion and modernisation of industrial enterprises and infrastructure projects in the North Eastern Region of India, also carry on

and transact business of providing credit and other facilities for promotion of agri-horticulture plantation, medicinal plantation, sericulture plantation, aquaculture, poultry, dairy and animal husbandry development in order to initiate large involvement of rural population in the economic upsurge of the society and faster economic growth of different parts of the North Eastern Region.

NEDFi with its aims to be a dynamic and responsive organization catalyzing the economic development of the North-east of India.

ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES OR CONTINUING STAGNATION

The North-eastern region of India has often been visualised as the remote landlocked backward region of a dynamic economy on the march. The difference between the potential and actual economic performance is most startling for the region that has large international borders with several neighbours like Bangladesh, Bhutan, China and Myanmar and is close to Nepal and Indo-China. It has the potential to serve as the *entrepot* for the entire Indian hinterland. Yet, the reality is vastly disappointing.

Is this gap between potential and achievement due to the backward nature of the economy of the North-eastern region or does it has anything to do with the process of incorporation of the region into Indian Union? Did India's economic and foreign policy impose costs on the region that were significantly different from those borne by the rest of the country?

In the recent decade, India has opened its economy to international trade and has launched initiatives to forge closer trade and economic ties with immediate neighbours. We looks at the economic opportunities for the states of the North-east in India's emerging trade strategy in the region, especially its 'Look East' policy and the spate of preferential trading arrangements (PTA) and the free trade arrangements (FTA) with neighbouring countries like Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand. If isolation

was the cause of economic backwardness, will not these treaties benefit the North-east? Or are there constraints or policies due to which North-east will once again be left in the lurch.

Historically, the North-east had extensive links with the neighbouring region of Tibet, Bhutan, Burma and Indo-China. It formed the southern trail of the silk road. However, as India became an important colony for Great Britain, barriers were erected between Bhutan and Assam, while traditional links with other countries acquired a strategic hue. Soon Burma and Tibet became the Empire's buffer against the French in Indo-China and Russia in the north, disrupting economic ties.

Despite this legacy, prior to 1947, the region comprising the North-east had substantial economic and social intercourse with the neighbouring countries. East Bengal (later called East Pakistan and ultimately Bangladesh) was well integrated with the North-east. There is evidence that trade and migration into territories today comprising Tibet, Myanmar, Yunnan province of China, Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim were important to the economy of the region.

However, partition and independence ended whatever remained of this intercourse. The partition transformed the region at the crossroad of emerging Asia, into a landlocked outpost of a large continental economy. The huge landmass comprising the seven states (Assam, Arunachal, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura), approximately 225,000 sq. km., was now cut off from its hinterland by the creation of East Pakistan. Linked by 37 km. wide Siliguri corridor with the rest of India, it soon lost its natural advantage as its integration with the economy in the south and the west was disrupted by trade and industrial policies pursued by independent India.

The partition of the country and the slow decay of rail, road and river links with the territories of East Pakistan, due to increasing hostilities, further disrupted trade and economic activity in the North-east. This isolation was accentuated during the mid-1960s as war on Kashmir,

communal violence in East Pakistan led to tearing of rail lines and closure of bus routes.

In the first two decades of planned development, the region was transformed from being a potential outpost for trade with neighbouring countries emerging from colonial rule and war, into a small captive market for the produce of the Indian hinterland. Its exports of tea and forest produce, though an important source of export earnings initially for India, soon lost their importance as Indian exports diversified towards manufactures. Its petroleum, whether in crude form or processed, ultimately found its way to the major markets in the north and western states of India.

Though there is little research on the link between the effect of isolation and trade disruption on the extent of poverty in the North-east, there is little doubt that the impact on the region was highly regressive.

Today, the region also has very high levels of absolute poverty, measured as number of persons with income below US\$ one per day. The eastern region of India has poverty levels ranging between 41% for West Bengal to 58% for Bihar while the North-east states fall in between this range. In other words, the eastern region has absolute poverty ranging between 42-58% making this one of the most backward regions in India. Its per capita income too is far below the national average, with Assam having a per capita income of Rs 10,000 in 2001-02, compared to Rs 18,000 for India.

The structure of the economy in the region resembles the economy of the least developed parts of the globe, with the primary sector accounting for 55-60% of the income, and underdeveloped secondary and tertiary sectors. The secondary sector constitutes only a meagre 11-16% of the total income, making it India's industrially most backward region.

The human development indicators (HDI) too are equally dismal. In terms of infant mortality the states of the North East are ranked far below the national average. States like Arunachal and Tripura have child mortality rates above 100.

In terms of HDI, the only exception to this dismal situation seems to be the high rates of literacy in many of the states of the North East. It would not be unfair to say that the social and economic trends in the North-east diverge radically from the rest of the country.

The fact that North-east is today the most backward region in the country is fairly well known. That this backwardness is the direct result of policies pursued by the Central Government is inadequately appreciated. The impact of the development strategy followed by independent India was highly regressive to the region. India's industrialization strategy during the period of 1956-1991 was based on import substitution and was biased against exports. During this period India erected high tariff walls and quotas were put in place under the import licensing regime to foster industrial growth.

The border conflict with China in 1962 and the deterioration in India's relations with Pakistan led to a disruption of rail, road and river links between the North-east and other eastern states and the neighbouring countries. Here was the North-east region with a 37 km. link with India, but with 4500 km. of border with the newly emerging nations of Asia, comprising, of China, Burma (Myanmar), East Pakistan, Bhutan, and Nepal. Yet the trade and industrial policies failed to use these links and potential access to its advantage.

The policies promoting import substituting industrialisation and high tariff walls and regime of strict import licensing not only shut out so-called non-essential imports from western countries, but also barred simple consumer goods from traditional neighbours. India's economic ties with the smaller neighbours like Nepal, Bangladesh, Burma and Tibet dwindled significantly, with regressive impact on economic agents engaged in such trade. The impact on states of the North-east varied, but all were affected negatively.

In other words, the government of India's policies on trade and industry and its inward looking economic strategy

deprived the northeastern states of their natural markets and access to products produced in the neighbouring countries just across the border. All products consumed in the North-east came to be imported from distant manufacturing regions in India. The cement came from Orissa and Madhya Pradesh while chemicals came from Gujarat and Maharashtra, adding substantially to the landed cost. A World Bank study estimated that costs of logistics and damages added 60% to the cost of a bag of cement and 14% to general cargo, moved from Calcutta to the North-east.

The Central Government has tried to compensate for this high transport and logistic costs by providing some transport subsidy. Thus the railways were asked to carry goods at a marginally concessional rate while products produced in the North-east were offered similar transport subsidy. These subsidies have, however, failed to offset the disadvantage of the region. The northeastern states could easily procure many of these goods from across the border at a fraction of the cost goods transported from distant Indian sources. But the policy induced isolation that barred access to the neighbouring sources of commodities and markets for its produce subjected the region to very high economic cost.

The Indian government also offered backward area subsidies and concessions for locating new industries in the states comprising the North-east region. Given the fact that the neighbouring markets were cut off, all produce (e.g. refined petroleum products from refineries at Digboi, Guwahati and Numaligarh) had to be shipped at high cost and delays to the markets in the Indian hinterland. In the presence of free trade and open borders, the North-east would have attracted industry to cater to the emerging markets in Bangladesh, south-west China, and Indo-China. With closed borders, there would be little economic justification for locating industry in this remote corner as local markets were small and consumer spending too low to provide economies of scale.

It is hardly surprising that though India has made rapid industrial progress, the entire northeastern region has remained largely an agrarian economy. The only industries that came up were set up by the public sector. The North East's ties with the Indian hinterland have been expensive and regressive.

However, even more significant is the social and political tension nurtured by isolation and lack of economic opportunities amongst the youth. The North East was soon transformed into a troublesome region, with fissionary trends that needed to be curbed with the armed might of an emerging Indian state; a region whose future did not fit into the vision India had set for itself. Economic engagements with the neighbouring countries came to be based on the strategic and military posture of the governments in New Delhi, rather than a development paradigm.

The successive regimes in Delhi have been unable to appreciate the consequences of their isolationist policies as they curtailed social and economic links of the North-east region with its neighbours. To disinterested regimes consolidating power in the remote centre of Delhi and with grand designs of independent industrialization, the North East was best left to army and police to manage, while the only development objective seemed to be to build infrastructure to militarily secure its frontiers.

As mentioned above, from 1991 the Indian state made a radical shift in its economic policies. Trade barriers have been dismantled, import licensing abolished and foreign investment welcomed in most sectors of the economy. In addition, India has tried to promote Preferential Trade Arrangements (PTAs) with the neighbouring countries, even by going outside the SAPTA/SAARC framework and entering into bilateral trade agreements. India is also committed to regional trade through initiatives like South Asia Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ), South Asian Subregion for Economic Cooperation (SASEC), Bangladesh-India-Myanmar-Sri Lanka-Thailand-Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), etc. India is trying to link up with the Greater Mekong Subregion

of which China is a partner along with Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, and has renewed its trade ties with Myanmar.

Will these initiatives open up a new chapter for the North-east? Or, will these initiatives once again result in economic trends that will bypass the North-east? To answer these questions we need to review India's recent experience with regional trade initiatives and the result this has had on India's trade with its neighbouring countries and the impact of this trade on the backward region of eastern and north-eastern India.

During the 1990s, India offered Preferential Trade Arrangements (PTA) to all the member countries of SAARC/SAPTA. Under this the SAPTA members were required to pay only 50 per cent of the custom duty levied on imports. However, given the high tariffs and numerous non-tariff barriers there was little increase in exports to India under the PTA. There were also a large number of non-trade barriers and transit restrictions that aborted possibilities of rapid expansion of trade. The most significant of the non-tariff barriers was the restrictions on transit, visas and custom regulations. Local content requirements (stipulation that at least 30 per cent value addition in domestic market) and quarantine regulations on agriculture commodities meant that the so-called PTA was a smoke screen behind which India protected its market from even its weak neighbours.

However, from the mid-1990s, the government led by I.K. Gujral made a serious attempt to promote regional trade. India offered unilateral trade concessions to its neighbours and encouraged them to export to India. Indian firms were encouraged to invest and source from these countries. Nepali goods were granted duty free access to the Indian market in 1996 and Sri Lanka in 2000. Other members of SAARC were offered lower tariffs and possibilities of FTA if they signed bilateral treaties with India.

In 1995, India made attempts to improve its political and economic ties with the military regime in Myanmar.

The Indo-Myanmar border trade was inaugurated in April 1995 with the opening of the border trade along the Tamu (Myanmar)-Moreh (Manipur) sector. Recently, more trading routes, especially at Longwa, Rih and Pangsau Pass, have been opened.

A developed trade across Indo-Myanmar border will be of advantage mainly in reduced costs while accessing the market of South East and even East Asian countries. Despite this potential, the trade through the Manipur-Myanmar route has remained small and insignificant, amounting to a few crores per year and with little impact on the regional economy.

For the first time, India has initiated FTA with Thailand and is in the process of negotiating similar agreements with Singapore and Malaysia. In other words, India is keen to expand its free trade initiative to countries outside the SAARC region. FTA with Thailand is likely to facilitate Indian access to the Indo-China region and become a partner in the Greater Mekong Subregion initiative as well as the rapidly growing ASEAN region.

The PTAs, on the other hand, have failed to foster trade as shown by the Indo-Bangladesh and Indo-Myanmar experience. The slow progress in economic ties with these countries is due to the military and security establishment playing a major role in shaping India's foreign policy to these two countries. Trade with both these countries has been stagnant and there seem to be differences with Bangladesh over transit arrangements that India seeks for its links to the North-east, about the existence of training camps for insurgents in their territory. Similarly, trade with Tibet and Yunnan provinces of China have been totally absent, though India and China have agreed to initiate border trade through the Himalayan pass between Tibet and Sikkim. It needs to be noted that trade routes between Arunachal Pradesh and Tibet are still closed in the absence of a border agreement and links to Yunnan through Manipur, Mizoram or via Myanmar is not on the horizon.

This dramatic expansion of India's trade and economic ties with Nepal and Sri Lanka, where with FTA trade has

expanded several fold, points to the potential gains from trade that were undermined by restrictive policies. It also points to the gains that North-east states can reap if they too are encouraged to tap neighbouring markets across the border rather than manufacture for the distant Indian consumer.

It is clear that in the days to come India is willing to pursue closer trade and economic ties with its eastern neighbours, and there are possibilities for the entire north-eastern region to seize its place as India's eastern *entrepot*.

We have argued above that the closure of the borders between the North-east and the neighbouring countries to the north, east and south (Tibet/China, Myanmar and Bangladesh) has been regressive on the economy and society in the North-east. The question to ask is: Will the North-east gain from India's opening to the neighbouring countries in the east? In other words, will India's 'Look East' policy usher in a new era of economic growth and increasing trade and commerce in the region?

The accompanying table provides data on India's direction of trade during the last 15 years. It needs to be emphasised that with outward looking policies, India's foreign trade, which was below \$ 40 billion in the early nineties, has risen dramatically to US\$ 140 bn. by 2003. Foreign trade as a ratio of Indian GDP has risen from 12% in early '90s to more than 23 per cent by 2003, pointing to increasing openness of the economy.

There has also been substantial progress in India's trade with other developing countries and with Asia, thanks to the 'Look East' policy. The share of developing countries has doubled to about 30 per cent of India's trade, while Asia's share has doubled to 24.2 per cent. In other words, about a quarter of India foreign trade now comes from its Asian neighbours.

India's immediate neighbours in South Asia too have found easier access to the Indian market and have trebled their share, though it is still very small and far below the

potential. India's trade with countries bordering the North-east has seen the most dramatic expansion, with the share going up more the five times (from 1.7 per cent to 8 per cent). This dramatic expansion of trade with India's eastern neighbours has had little or no impact on the North East. Most of this trade expansion has taken place through the seaports. It would not be incorrect to argue that the North East has once again been marginalised. India is Looking East, but not through its contagious borders!

It needs to be emphasised that the physical infrastructure for facilitating trade and economic links between the North-east and the neighbouring countries is largely absent. Indeed, one can argue that the links are weaker today than they were in 1947. The Stilwell Road is now a mere muddy track and the rail links with Bangladesh stand severed. Infrastructure bottlenecks and delays at border points add substantially to the transaction cost in international trade. It is hardly surprising that with closed borders and open ports, the North-east is not part of India's trade expansion strategy with eastern neighbours.

Hence, in all probability the bulk of trade with the Greater Mekong Subregion, Bangladesh and ASEAN is likely to move through the international sea lanes, completely bypassing the North East region. The regions gaining so far are the hinterlands of Chennai, Vizag and the Calcutta port on the eastern flank. It would be reasonable to argue that given the state of infrastructure and the poor state of road, rail and air links with the neighbouring countries in the North East, the bulk of the trade is likely to move through the sea ports of India.

For the North-east to gain from India's PTA and FTA with the economies of the east, the key variables are transit arrangements, proliferation of trade routes and custom check post, easy visa regime making it possible for traders, businessmen and transport operators to move in and out of the region. For this to be possible would require substantial investments in infrastructure, construction of highways and bridges, re-establishment of rail links and communication facilities. The Shukla Committee on

'Transforming the Northeast', estimated such investment to exceed Rs 25,000 crore.

However, it is not the investment that is the key issue. It is coloured glasses through which policy-makers perceive the region and its problems that is the main road block. India's entire policy towards the North-east region has been heavily coloured by the security establishment and the armed forces in the name of fighting insurgency and securing its eastern frontier. They are suspicious not only of the region's economic, but also ethnic and social ties with the neighbours. Not only is India's Look East policy totally devoid of any plans to seriously end the isolation of the North East and open up the region to the neighbouring countries, its policy-makers are downright suspicious of such links. Yet, in the absence of such an initiative to open borders with neighbouring countries, it is unlikely that the North East will gain in any material sense from India's Look East policy.

A serious attempt to integrate the North-east provides innumerable possibilities of economic transformation. The vast hydroelectric resources can be harnessed to export electricity to the neighbouring countries. An integrated plan of harnessing hydrocarbon resources with a grid of pipelines to move gas and petroleum products into the entire region is another possibility. Harnessing the vast river networks to move goods cheaply in and out of the region would substantially add to its attractiveness as an investment destination. Investment in large plants catering not only to the North East but to the neighbouring markets in Bangladesh, Nepal, Tibet-Yunnan are also possible. But so far there seems to be no such initiative on the horizon.

POLITICAL ISSUES AND INSURGENCY

India's 'troubled Northeast' has become a permanent stereotype, and most outsiders imagine a vast region of unending disorders and violence. Patterns of violence have, however, been showing continuous decline over the past years and, more significantly, the residual violence is now

substantially concentrated, principally, in Manipur and Assam. The total fatalities in insurgent and terrorist violence for the region stood at 1515 in 2000 and have shown a continuous annual decline – with an aberrant spike in year 2003 – to 462 fatalities in 2006 (till October 6). Manipur remains the worst affected, accounting for over half (235) of all militancy-related fatalities in the region. Assam, with 96 dead, accounted for another 20.77 per cent of annual fatalities, and 60 deaths (12.98 per cent) in the fratricidal conflict between the two factions of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) in Nagaland.

Fatalities in the Northeast: 2000-2006

Year	Civilian	Security Force Personnel	Terrorist /Insurgent	Total
2000	839	144	532	1515
2001	724	131	614	1469
2002	302	148	460	910
2003	463	82	548	1093
2004	352	109	371	832
2005	332	69	314	715
2006*	160	76	239	475
Total	3172	759	3078	7009

* Data till October 6, 2006.

Source: Institute for Conflict Management

State-wise Fatalities in the Northeast – 2005-06

States	2005			2006*					
	Civilian	SFs	Terrorist	Total	Civilian	SFs	Terrorist	Total	
Assam	149	10	83	242	51	30	28	109	
Nagaland	9	0	31	40	8	1	51	60	
Meghalaya	2	1	26	29	7	0	16	23	
Manipur	138	50	143	331	83	35	117	235	
Tripura	34	8	31	73	11	10	27	48	
Total	332	69	314	715	160	76	239	475	

* Data till October 6, 2006.

Source: Institute for Conflict Management

Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Sikkim remained entirely peaceful, and there was significant improvement in the overall law and order situation in Tripura and Meghalaya. Nagaland's relative clam was disturbed essentially by turf wars and bidding for control over extortions networks between the NSCN-IM and NSCN-K, and factional clashes accounted for six civilian and 48 militant deaths. Assam, the region's most populous and strategically important State, has witnessed a dramatic decline in violence, though killings, extortion and intimidation by the United Liberation Front of Assam remain a problem.

According to the Union Ministry of Home Affairs, during the current year (till June 30) as compared to the corresponding period in 2005, the number of violent incidents had declined by eight per cent (from 688 to 638) and the combined number of security forces (SF) personnel and civilians casualties had declined by 15 per cent (from 185 to 159). So also, during, 2003 and 2004, militancy related fatalities came down by 24 per cent (1093 to 832) and 14 per cent (832 to 715) in 2004 and 2005. Other aspects of the trends in violence include:

- Manipur topped civilian fatalities contributing to 51.87 per cent of the total 160 civilian fatalities in the region. Assam stood second with 31.87 per cent.
- Manipur again topped SF fatalities contributing to 55.55 per cent of the total 63 SF fatalities in the region. Assam stands second with 39.47 per cent.
- Manipur further topped the list of militant fatalities, contributing to 48.95 per cent of the total 229 militant fatalities during the period. Nagaland stood second with 21.33 per cent, principally due to the continuing clashes between the two NSCN factions.

The demands of various groups engaged in violence in the Northeast have varied from autonomy to secession. In view of the nature of the violence in the region, exacerbated by external manipulation and support, the society and politics of the region have been victims of a sustained culture of violence. This culture of violence has assumed an

autonomy of its own and entrenched a subversive pattern of politics across the region.

The militant groups operating across the North-east have usually found refuge and safe haven in neighbouring countries, principally Bangladesh and Myanmar. Fencing along the 4,095 kilometre-long border with Bangladesh, suggested as a remedy to the problem of militancy, has not been completed and militants have easy routes to access and exit their area of operation. Similarly, a number of militant organisations in Nagaland, Manipur and Assam take shelter in Myanmar, which shares a 1,643 kilometre-long porous boundary with India. On September 16, 2006, during the Home Secretary-level talks with Myanmar at New Delhi, India provided a list of 15 camps of the ULFA, the People's Liberation Army, the United National Liberation Front and the Khaplang and Isak-Muivah factions of the NSCN, on Myanmarese territory.

None of the major militant groups in Manipur has shown any inclination to eschew violence. Instead, militancy acquired a new impetus on August 16, 2006, when unidentified terrorists bombed the crowded Krishna Janmashtami celebration (a festival that marks the birth of Lord Krishna) held at the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) temple complex in capital Imphal, killing six civilians, including two children, while over 50 others, including five Americans and two French nationals, were wounded. This was the first major attack on a place of worship in the history of the militancy in the State. Talking to reporters at the Leimakhong Army Headquarters in Imphal on September 19, 2006, the General Officer Commanding of the 57 Mountain Division, Major General E. J. Kocheikkan, stated that insurgency in Manipur is more complex than in Jammu and Kashmir and that "Unlike in Jammu and Kashmir, where most ultras were from foreign territory, insurgents in Manipur are from its own territory, making it tougher to deal with them."

In Assam, the ULFA continues its subversive agenda targeting SF personnel and civilians, bombing markets, oil and gas pipelines and various State establishments and

installations. The peace initiative to facilitate direct talks between the ULFA and Union Government has remained a non-starter. The Union Government suspended Army operations against ULFA on August 13, 2006. However, the "suspension of operation" was called off on September 24, following continued violations of the truce by the militant group. The final provocation came when ULFA killed a tea estate manager, Harendranath Das, at Digboi town in the Tinsukia District on September 23. A day earlier, a policeman was shot dead at Than Gaon village in the Dibrugarh District. On September 24, one ULFA cadre was killed, while three soldiers were wounded during an encounter at Majmamoroni Gaon in Tinsukia District. The slain ULFA cadre was suspected to have been involved in the killing of Harendranath Das on September 23.

In Nagaland, the two NSCN factions continue to train their guns against each other, but barring this fratricidal war, the State is relatively calm. 2006 has already seen 61 incidents of factional clashes in Nagaland (till October 6) in which at least 55 militants were been killed – 32 of the NSCN-IM, 17 of the NSCN-K and three of the Naga National Council (NNC), and three unidentified. These incidents occurred primarily in the Zunheboto, Peren and Districts.

Tripura, in the meanwhile, is carving out a success story in its counter-insurgency campaign, as its Police force reorganizes radically to evolve a counter-insurgency strategy that has left entrenched militant groups in disarray.

In Meghalaya, counter-insurgency operations have marginalized the Hynniewtre National Liberation Council to a great extent. Following the cease-fire agreement between the Government and Achik National Volunteer Council and the subsequent confinement of the ANVC cadres in designated camps, the Garo Hills in Meghalaya has been relatively peaceful.

The major incidents of militant violence in the Northeast in 2006 include:

- January 3: Three SF personnel were killed and five others sustained injuries during an encounter with

- UNLF cadres in Longpi village in Manipur's Tamenglong District.
- April 29: National Liberation Front of Tripura militants killed three SF personnel and injured eight civilians in an ambush at Karnamuni Para in Tripura's Dhalai District.
 - June 9: At least five persons were killed and 16 persons wounded in a powerful explosion triggered by the ULFA at Machkowa vegetable market in Guwahati city, Assam.
 - August 11: At least six police personnel were killed after suspected ULFA militants ambushed a police convoy at Ratanipathar in Assam's Tinsukia District.
 - August 14: Three persons were killed and seven others wounded when suspected ULFA militants triggered a grenade explosion targeting security convoys near Lifecare Nursing Home at Duliajan town in Assam's Dibrugarh District.
 - August 16: At least five civilians were killed while over 50 others, including five Americans and two French nationals, sustained injuries when suspected terrorists lobbed a powerful grenade at a crowded temple in Manipur's capital, Imphal.
 - September 12: Four SF personnel belonging to the Assam Rifles were killed, while three others sustain injuries when a column of Assam Rifles was ambushed by PLA cadres at a spot between Leisiphou and Oksu in the Imphal West District of Manipur.
 - September 20: Five NSCN-IM cadres were killed in a clash with rival cadres of the NSCN-K at Old Chalkot village in the Peren District of Nagaland.
 - October 6: Thirteen Railway Protection Force personnel were killed in an ambush by the Black Widow faction of the Dima Halim Daogah in Assam's North Cachar Hills District.

Significant counter-insurgency operations yielded:

- January 4: Four NSCN-K cadres were killed by the SFs near Chandraman bridge under Kangpokpi Police Station in the Imphal West District of Manipur.
- January 23: Four suspected PLA cadres were killed in an encounter with the SFs at Sandankhong in the Bishnupur District of Manipur.
- April 25: Four Kangleipak Communist Party cadres, including the Thoubal 'district commander', were killed following an encounter with the police at Nungei Khunou in the Thoubal District of Manipur.
- May 11: Assam Rifles personnel killed People's United Liberation Front, 'Commander-in-Chief' Bashir Lashkar along with his 'deputy home secretary' Mohammad Shafi in an encounter at Kakmayai in Manipur's Thoubal district.
- June 14: Three PLA militants were killed and four others wounded in an ambush laid by the SF personnel at Wakshu in Manipur's Chandel District.
- August 11: Three UNLF cadres were killed while two others sustain injuries following an exchange of fire with the SF personnel at Semol in the Chandel District of Manipur.
- September 5: The general secretary of the UNLF, Kh. Ibotombi was arrested by a team of Manipur Police from a hospital at Coimbatore in the southern State of Tamil Nadu.
- October 4: Three UNLF cadres were arrested at New Delhi's Indira Gandhi International Airport, en route to Kathmandu.

Pursuant to the Government of India's policy of engaging with any group that abjures the path of violence and seeks resolution of their grievances within the framework of the Indian Constitution, several militant groups have come forward for talks with the Government. One of the important outcomes of Government-initiated peace talks with some of the insurgent groups has been the decisive decline in the numbers of militancy-related

fatalities. Presently, at least six militant groups have entered into a ceasefire / suspension of operations agreement with the Union Government: NSCN-IM and NSCN-K in Nagaland; Dima Halim Daogah (DHD), United People's Democratic Solidarity, National Democratic Front of Bodoland in Assam; and ANVC in Meghalaya. The ULFA-constituted People's Consultative Group (PCG) of Assam held three rounds of talks with representatives of the Union Government to bring the outfit to the negotiating table. However, these efforts have now decisively ended as the PCG pulled out of the peace process on September 27, 2006, as its members claimed that the Centre was "backing out from the commitments made during the last three rounds of talks with us." The Government has been insisting that ULFA provide a written commitment that it was ready to hold direct talks with the Centre and that the top leadership of the outfit would participate in these. This was one of the conditions the Government wanted to be fulfilled for the release of five ULFA leaders (Pradip Gogoi, Bhimkanta Buragohain, Mithinga Daimary, Pranati Deka and Ramu Mech) from jail, as demanded by the outfit.

In Manipur, the Union Government managed to arrive at 'cessation of hostility' accords with eight minor Kuki militant groups in September 2005, but major outfits like the UNLF and PLA have not displayed any willingness to engage in negotiations. Indeed, the Chairman of the UNLF, Sanayaima, in an interview with Reuters in Hong Kong on September 14, 2005, ruled out negotiations with the Union Government without United Nations mediation. Sanayaima stated, "Whether we remain with India or whether we become a sovereign, independent nation, let the people decide. Considering India is the largest democracy in the world, I think they should accept the challenge." A 'plebiscite' is a major demand of the UNLF. Similarly, PLA President Irengbam Chaoren, in a message on the occasion of its 28th raising day on September 25, ruled out accepting the Union Government's offer for peace talks, saying that entering into a dialogue with New Delhi would not 'restore freedom'.

Nevertheless, talking to reporters in Imphal on October 1, Manipur Chief Minister Okram Ibobi Singh ruled out a full-fledged military offensive against militant groups operating in the State, saying that his Government was trying to establish contact with leaders of these organisations to bring them to the negotiating table: "We believe that one day the leaders of these armed groups will realise the futility of violence. It may take some time but they will surely accept our offer for talks."

In many cases, however, the process of dialogue with militant groups is yet to yield tangible solutions. The high-profile nine-year-old peace talks involving the NSCN-IM and Union Government have so far been unable to arrive at any major breakthrough to resolve the decades-old Naga conflict. Militant groups, on the contrary, have taken advantage of these long-drawn 'peace talks' and continued with rampant extortion and intimidation with impunity. Endless fratricidal clashes between well armed rival cadres have turned their respective ceasefires into a 'public mockery'. Talking to reporters in Kohima on September 22, 2006, the Inspector General of Assam Rifles (North), Major General S.S. Kumar, stated that the NSCN-IM has been consolidating its strength and position, taking advantage of the ongoing truce. "The ceasefire is giving the NSCN an opportunity to consolidate. We have conveyed our concern to the Ministry of Home Affairs." He disclosed, further, "Earlier, there were about 800 cadre of the NSCN-IM. Of late, the figure ranges between 2,000 to 2,500."

Similarly, since they entered into a formal cease-fire on May 25, 2005, at least 27 cases of extortion had been filed against NDFB cadres till July 10, 2006, and 63 of its cadres had also been arrested in connection with several cases.

Nevertheless, there are signs of a gradual return to peace, if not 'normalcy' in wide areas of the Northeast, and this creates enormous opportunities for political and developmental initiatives to restore this long unsettled region to a measure of civilized governance. Regrettably, the oft-promised 'peace dividend' has seldom materialized, as

political parties and Governments remain trapped in a culture of violence and subversive relationships. Even Mizoram, which has seen an unbroken peace since 1986, is yet to taste the fruits of the 'peace dividend'. Development, modernisation and a measure of efficiency in governance are the central challenges of policy, as violence slowly retreats in India's Northeast.

Running Guns in India's North-east

On September 21, 2002 security forces operating in the upper Assam district of Tinsukia recovered 31 AK-56 rifles from a suspected United Liberation Front of Asom hideout. A few days later, in a series of raids between September 28 and 30, a large quantities of arms and ammunition belonging to the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak-Muivah were recovered near Khonsa in the State of Arunachal Pradesh. The cache included RPG propellers, mortars, SLRs and substantial quantities of ammunition. On October 24, the police in Jorhat seized some 600 detonators on the Nagnimora bound passenger train that originated in Nagaland. The problem is rapidly extending into areas that were largely peaceful in the past, and in one of the largest ever seizures of ammunition in the State of Meghalaya, police on November 1, 2002, destroyed a Hynniewtre National Liberation Council hideout at Khlaw Roman in Mawlai Nongpdeng and recovered 460 M-16 live shells, 169 AK-47 bullets, two 7.62 SLRs and two high-explosive hand grenades, along with some other cartridges. Incidents like these leave behind a combined sense of relief and trepidation: each such recovery is another counter-insurgency success story, but it points towards the length of the road that needs to be traversed before India's North-east can be salvaged from the menace of small arms, and the spiral of violence they support and provoke.

For the insurgents in the region seeking sufficiency in arms supplies, it has been a slow and steady growth to perfection. The Naga insurgency, considered to be the mother of all insurgencies in the North-east, initially managed with the assistance of their counterparts in neighbouring Myanmar, until the Southeast Asian illegal

arms bazaars unveiled itself before their eyes towards the late 1980s. The underground markets in Thailand and Myanmar (then Burma) offer abundant supplies of AK series rifles, RPGs and an array of other sophisticated small arms and explosives. In its new avatar, the NSCN-IM not only used these bazaars for its own perpetuation, but also introduced new players in the arena, such as the ULFA in Assam, to the world of the arms dealer. Soon, the ULFA was not only surfing the Southeast Asian bazaars but also ventured into deals with European players. The ability of the insurgent groups in the North-east to engage the Indian state in protracted little wars is substantially the result of the easy access to these tools of terror.

Ironically, there has been little commensurate growth in terms of access to comparable weapons among the police forces in the region. As the Annual Report of the Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), 2001, noted, "the condition of police forces in the North Eastern States is quite poor. Many of the militant groups have far more modern arms and equipment than the State Police." There is little evidence of any dramatic transformation in the circumstances since this observation was made, and, in the absence of the Army and para-military forces - Forces modelled on a brawnier archetype with a better range of weapons - the police in the various States of the region retain very limited capacities to engage with the terrorists.

A September 2002 report on the State of Meghalaya, for instance, revealed that the Police in the district of South Garo Hills - the smallest among the State's seven districts, but spread over 1,850 square kilometres - have access to only 3 AK rifles and 2 Carbines. This, in spite of the fact that the district is not only a hotbed of a local insurgency led by the Achik National Volunteers Council but also serves as a key transit route for groups like the ULFA and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland, which operate in neighbouring Assam, from and to their safe havens in Bangladesh.

Official estimates of the quantity of weapons available to the insurgents vary, and are necessarily approximations.

However, if seizures are the proverbial 'tip of the iceberg', the region is awash in arms. A total of 6196 weapons have been seized in the period between 1991-2002. A senior officer of the Border Security Force (BSF) in the State of Manipur observes: "security force personnel operating in Manipur are up against 6,770 cadres of 12 terrorist outfits armed with 3750 numbers of sophisticated weapons. The People's Liberation Army, with a cadre-strength of 2,000 has 700 weapons; and the United National Liberation Front with 1,500 cadres has 800 weapons." Evidently, not only is access to weapons a relatively simple affair, but the time lag between the origin of an insurgent group and its graduation into a full-scale armed guerrilla group has become awfully short. Most of the insurgent groups operating in the North-east secure very rapid access to sophisticated small arms, often through the mediation of the larger established militant organisations.

The availability of huge numbers of arms and ammunition with the insurgents also needs to be analysed against the background of the growing networking among the terrorist groups and also the uninhibited extortion set-up that they administer with impunity. ULFA's newfound association with the Manipuri group, the United National Liberation Front, is one such marriage of convenience. Linkages between the ULFA, the Kamatapur Liberation Organisation, the NDFB, the ANVC, the NSCN-K and the All Tripura Tiger Force have, at least in part, emerged as facilitators of successful gunrunning across the North-east region. The Indian state is, consequently, pitted against a confederacy of insurgent groups with a vast and assured supply of sophisticated firearms.

The easy availability of such weapons is sourced primarily in Southeast Asia. Even a decade and a half after the cessation of hostilities in Cambodia, Southeast Asia remains an unending arms dump of the arms released from that conflict, and these cater to the ambitions of every malcontent in the region. Cox's Bazaar, a completely unmonitored port in Bangladesh, has emerged as a major transit centre for the supply of illegal arms and ammunition, not only feeding criminal and extremist elements in that

country, but also the medley of insurgent outfits in the India's north-east. Most of these arms and ammunition passing through this port originate from countries like Cambodia, and are routed through southern Thailand on tiny high-speed boats. The frequency of such delivery is also a matter of concern. In the past year alone, two major consignments are known to have found their way to ULFA's armoury alone. Intelligence sources suggest that another such delivery reached the NSCN-IM cadres in the month of December 2001. In the latter case, the contraband safari started from the Gulf of Thailand and, through multiple modes of transport, including small steamers as well as porters, reached the NSCN-IM's bastions in Nagaland.

It is true that the range of weapons available with the insurgents in the North-east is yet to reach the level of sophistication of their counterparts in other theatres of conflict, particularly Jammu & Kashmir. If the recovery of weapons by the security forces is any indication, the AK series of rifles still constitute just a small fraction of the total arms seized. Over the last five years, recoveries in Assam are mostly in the range of pistols, revolvers, rifles and other unspecified guns. The AK series rifles constitute less than six per cent of the total number of seized weapons.

This, however, gives little scope for complacency. There have been occasions where the militants have used an eclectic mix of small arms and explosives to execute major operations and the fatalities have remained high for nearly two decades. Thus, in a neatly planned ambush on May 16, 1996, ULFA with the assistance from the People Liberation Army, a Manipuri group, and the NSCN-IM, used weapons including 9 mm pistols, AK-56 rifles and rocket launchers to eliminate the Superintendent of Police of Tinsukia district in Assam. And on January 27, 2002, suspected ULFA terrorists killed Kamrup district Deputy Superintendent of Police Devajit Pathak and his driver, using a sophisticated Improvised Explosive Device (IED) on the Boko-Nalapara Road near the Nalapara village.

The impact of the easy availability of such a range of small arms and explosives is that most of these extremist

groupings have been able to continue with their unrestrained extortions over wide geographical areas. Insurgents have not only been able to kill with impunity (403 deaths have already been reported from the NE region this year), but have also usurped the political space in States like Manipur.

There is little prospect of curbing this liberal flow of arms in the foreseeable future in the absence of an international mechanism to impose accountability on the sources of supply and distribution. Regrettably, efforts to curb, monitor, or account for, the international production, stockpiling and diffusion of small arms have always been stonewalled by the major armament producing nations. Measures to account for the immense stockpiles that were transferred into the Asian region in the many 'little wars' of the Cold War era have also seldom gone beyond an elaborate charade, and the sheer volume of weapons floating about in the region becomes a primary source of escalation and transformation of social tensions into armed conflict. Within this context, the efforts of state agencies, within individual victim nations, to secure some degree of control through border management and counter-insurgency operations, are at best fire-fighting measures with limited possibilities of success. This is particularly true in the vitiated atmosphere in the South Asian region, where several states and their intelligence agencies actively support subversion, extremism and terror in neighbouring countries.