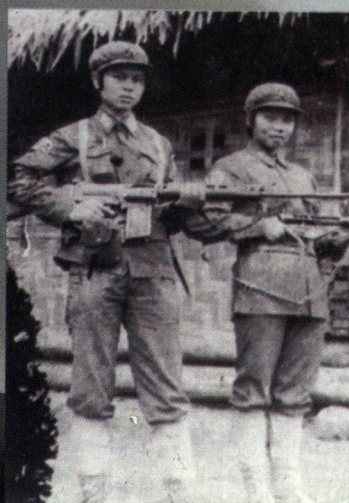


South Asia's Fractured Frontier

Armed Conflict, Narcotics
and
Small Arms Proliferation in
India's North East

Binalakshmi Nepram

A MITTAL PUBLICATION



A staggering 500,000 people are killed in the world each year by small arms, 90 percent of them women and children. 300,000 dies as a result of armed conflict in places that include North East India each year. The illegal arms industry with a \$ 3-6 billion profit together with illegal narcotics industry with \$200-300 billion profit forms the World's largest illegal trade.

"South Asia's Fractured Frontier" is the first book to directly address the interlinked issues of Armed Conflict, Narcotics and Small Arms proliferation in India's North East.

The book explains the ways in which guns have slowly peretrated the land where the only weapons were daos, machetes, spears, khukris and poison and bows and arrows. It also looks into the types, makes and sources of small arms that is flooding North East India for the last five decades. The book also traces the growth of narcotic drug use in the region and reviews the damage it is doing to North East Society. The author also points out the role that China, Pakistan and Burmese rebels have played in the North East India armed struggles. The book also illustrates the role that women in the North East are playing to survive and to bring peace in a war-zone.

This book is not only a book. It epitomizes the conviction of a young woman from the region that a day of peace, prosperity and understanding will dawn to heal this "Fractured Frontier". She is writing and working, to hasten that day.

Rs. 595



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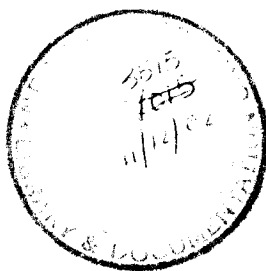
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INTRODUCTION

The States of India's North-East region are a fractured frontier in many senses. They represent a fracturing of India's political integrity. They are themselves fractured with conflicts, 'small wars' within and between them. They suffer fractured economies, and social structures. Above all, there are fractured lives, the direct and indirect effects of years of conflict. The three issues addressed in this study, conflict, small arms and drugs, are linked through the lives of young people in the North-East. The destructive characteristics of each issue reinforce the harm of the others in a damaging spiral that draws in hundreds of thousands of young lives.

For outsiders mention of the states and peoples of the North-east conjures up a host of different images: the magnificence of the mountain scenery, forests, gorges and rivers; the diversity of languages, dress and customs; the richness of tribal cultures; there are also images of strife and of the alienation of many people from 'mainland' India, of the long-running struggles for independence or autonomy, and since the 80s the spreading scourge of drug use and HIV infection. It is the tragic reality that this region, blessed in so many ways, is also afflicted by conflicts and their destructive effects.

Binalakshmi's study places the North East in its greater regional context, at the borders of China, Myanmar, and Bangladesh, in the 'cockpit' of neighbouring geopolitical ambitions. She also emphasises the ethnic heterogeneity of the North East itself, and the alienation and resentment felt against mainland India, both for its presumptions inclusion of the whole area into independent India, and for the way that inclusion has been enforced over the years. All these factors

contribute to the unfolding tragedy that needs to be better and more widely understood before it can be resolved. This study is a contribution to that resolution.

This pioneering study confronts three very sensitive, illegal, and in many contexts unmentionable topics, and, for the first time explores how intimately related they are in India's North-East. Binalakshmi writes :

"The narrative of small wars and insurgencies in South Asia is also the narrative of small arms, narcotics and insurgency as arms of all types and make are pumped in to fight the war and cultivation of narcotics in remote areas is encouraged to fund the wars." (p. 36).

Binalakshmi explores the relationship between these elements, mapping their characteristics and destructive effects. Her objective is to help turn the tide of this destruction. Her hope is that a better understanding of these issues by the communities, the leaders and people of India, and of the North-East in particular, will speed that change. It is refreshing that a young author from Manipur who has personally experienced the effects of the conflicts there, is making her analysis of the situation accessible to a wide, civil society audience. Her plea is for a rationale and constructive response to this situation.

The sensitivity of the issues have presented many difficulties in research, in getting beyond 'secondary sources', verifying the hearsay, and sharing conclusions of the research while safeguarding the sources.

Binalakshmi details the vicious cycle of insurgency, military response, lack of investment, the collapse of basic services and opportunities, which in turn feed into further insurgency. Indeed she shows that it is worse than a vicious cycle, more a vicious spiral descending into more tragedy, and becoming more intractable and complex with each rotation. Binalakshmi writes :

"The growing unemployment and corruption., and the deteriorating socio, economic and political situation and the abject lack of development further led to the rise and small arming of other militant outfits."

The economic collapse has reduced opportunities for employment, and the availability of funds for public services, such as health and education. Poor education facilities and low standards increase the inability of many young people to find employment to be able to meet their legitimate personal aspirations for success and security. The result is large numbers of ill-educated, unemployed and frustrated young people.

Outside actors from elsewhere within South Asia and beyond have been able to exploit the situation to India's discomfort, by supporting, training and supplying insurgent groups. Binalakshmi's research shows that large quantities of a huge array of small arms have flowed into the North-East region from China, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Pakistan through the "weapon warehouses" of Afghanistan and Thailand.

Additionally the proximity of the North-East region to some of the world's major drug producing areas of Myanmar and Thailand has meant that drugs are easily available. Binalakshmi documents 32 drug refineries along the Indo-Myanmar border. For the drug barons onward supply routes through conflict areas are safer than through areas with established police authority. Drug traffickers want small arms to protect themselves and their trade. Insurgents need funds for arms. The three elements are already in the melting pot of the North East region. Each takes advantage from the others. Disillusioned and unemployed young people are easily drawn into the maelstrom.

Chris Smith, of Kings College, London, a leading researcher and campaigner against small arms, remarked in March 2002 (at a follow up meeting in New Delhi to the UN conference on Small Arms), that he had seen no study to document the assumed connection between the supply of small arms, drug trafficking and insurgency. This study starts to unravel this nexus of interests in India's North-East.

The vicious spiral described above at the macro level, is tragically reflected in the lives of individuals at the micro level. Many young men, already frustrated without employment, are under pressure from insurgent groups to join them, and are under suspicion from the security forces, at

risk of arrest and abuse. They suffer extreme tensions and anxieties. Other family members, including young women, face similar pressures, at risk of harassment and abuse from either side. They suffer the traumas of losing loved ones in 'incidents', through summary arrest, violence or disappearance. With limited employment prospects, and the sense of terror or injustice from military restrictions or excesses, it is small wonder that many young people join the insurgents. Small wonder that others seek escape from the pressures of life, or from frustration and boredom, in drug use.

It is not surprising that the extreme anxieties and traumas experienced as an insurgent, or as a soldier, lead to increasing dependence on the power of the gun, to some abuse of that power, and to increased risk taking in drug use to help to cope with these pressures. The dynamics of masculinity in men under such pressure leads to an increase in their resort to violence both personal and collective, and an ever greater dependence on the 'props' and supports for that behaviour - small arms and drugs. Each increases the dependence on the other. The vicious spiral destroys the lives of individuals, as similar forces are affecting society as a whole. Women are at greater risk of sexual abuse and exploitation when men are armed - and thereby at greater risk of HIV infection.

The alarming incidence of HIV and AIDS in some states in the North East is a further symptom of the conflict situation and adds a further deadly dimension to the problems. Infection initially spread through unhygienic injecting drug use, is continuing and probably accelerating now also through sexual transmission. Dependence on drugs costs money. For the unemployed one option for raising cash is commercial sex work, another is the further supply or couriership of drugs. Drug dependence becomes a motivation to supply and make others dependent. The pressures of living with trauma, and in frustration and fear make others susceptible to trying that route of escape.

While there is widespread HIV infection elsewhere in India, in areas not particularly affected by conflict, it is not incidental that the high incidence of HIV infection in some states in the North East coincides with long running situations

of conflict and economic collapse. The spectre of widespread, and now unavoidable loss of life, leading to acute distress and suffering in tens of thousands of families, is further motivation not just to address the symptoms of this HIV epidemic - advice on prevention, individual behaviour change, care for those infected and affected - but to redouble efforts to address the root causes of the crisis.

Addressing the root causes means reversing the vicious spiral, resolving the conflicts, reducing the need and demand for small arms and creating jobs through investment. This will enable young people to fulfil their legitimate ambitions without resort to arms or drugs, and so provide a preferable alternative to the present morass in which they find themselves. Binalakshmi's study is a contribution to us turning that corner.

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