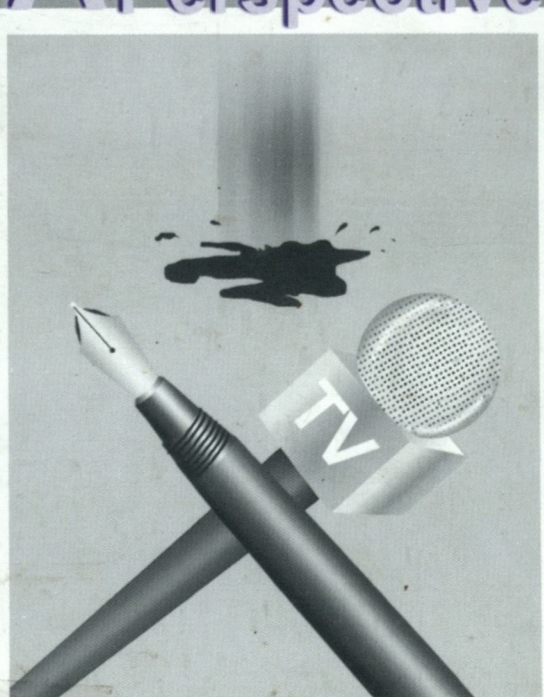


Media

in Conflict Situation

A Northeast India Perspective



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A Northeast India Perspective

An Approach to Media Research & Analysis

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Shillong

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India's Northeast or 'Far East'?

Areas of Conflict

Northeast India, some prefer to call it the "Far East of India" to emphasize the physical and psychological distance from the mainland India, has been entrapped in a maelstrom of armed rebellion, ethnic strife and stagnant economic situation. The combined factors of failed political initiatives, corrupt politico-bureaucratic nexus, random use of security forces in containing civil unrest, communication bottleneck, loss of traditional markets, lack of overall economic opportunities and the impact of modernisation process aroused sub-national feelings among the people of this part of the country and gave rise to separatist tendencies in a section of them.

During the last 50 years, though the Government of India managed to place its politico-administrative and military structures across the region and brought about a semblance of order, the situation in the frontier areas has remained under constant strain; the armed opposition to these constitutional and legal frameworks outlining the principles of governance and political relations between the Centre and the States, has engulfed the entire region, resulting in massive reinforcement of security forces in the region.

At present, the Indian security forces are engaged in a 'low-key warfare' with various militant groups in four of the seven northeast States. Arunachal Pradesh is relatively free from militant activities, even as the youths are showing signs of restlessness. Meghalaya is already suffering from militant politics, while Mizoram, after two-decades of underground warfare with Indian

security forces, is now (post-Mizo accord) readjusting itself with the fierce and manipulative overground political nuances.

In Nagaland, in the lull following the declaration of the ceasefire between NSCN factions, after five decades of intense engagements between the Naga militants and the military forces, the Indo-Naga situation has entered yet another phase of dialogue process between the Centre and the State. However, it is not clear whether this will lead to any long-term reconciliation.

Manipur, which also has been badly hit by Naga insurgency has its own militancy problem in the valley, where several armed groups—PLA, PREPAK, UNLF—are fighting what they call the ‘Indian imposition’ to establish an independent Meitei nation.

Assam and Tripura are relatively the late entrants in the separatist armed struggle—between the late 1970s and mid 1980s. In Assam, two separatist movements are going on, one led by the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) clamouring for a sovereign Assam, and another led by the Bodos for an independent Bodoland, carved out of the State of Assam. This is contrary to an Assam as envisaged by the ULFA leadership.

In Tripura separatist movements grew apparently out of a different historical context, as the tribal population felt they had been swamped by an immigrant community. Large scale immigration of Bengalis from East Pakistan to tribal Tripura in the wake of the Partition of India and subsequent wars with Pakistan, including the liberation war for Bangladesh, has rendered a majority tribal community into an instant minority. Unlike other tribal States of the region where various tribal leadership ensured their respective interests through political negotiation and constitutional guarantee, Tripura’s merger with the Indian Union has alienated the indigenous tribal population to a large extent. Once the tribals lost their right to rule—184 tribal kings have been recorded in the Royal Chronicle called *Rajmala* till the merger of the princely state with India in 1949—other rights just fell aside, particularly, the rights over land and forest. This alienated the hitherto ‘simple, friendly tribes’ into militant rebels against the Bengali ‘refugees’.

Besides militant movements over the decades, ethnic strifes all over the region hindered social order and administrative and political cohesion. In short, all these movements could be classified into six groups:

- (i) Movements for freedom from Indian nation-state;
- (ii) Movements for full-fledged statehood within the Indian Union;
- (iii) Movements for autonomy within the Indian States;
- (iv) Movements for reservation or special protection within the autonomous framework;
- (v) Strife between tribal population/groups for control over land;
- (vi) Movements against 'outsiders', 'aliens', etc.

The basic problem seems to have stemmed from the differing perspectives of 'Indian nationhood'. Who is an Indian? Are only the Hindus who constitute about 85 per cent of the total population living within a territory recognised by the comity of nations, only Indians? What makes several ethnic communities living in the northeastern frontier areas feel that they are not Indians? What exactly do they mean when they talk about 'Indian imposition' or 'colonial rule'? Is it just alienation, isolation, economic backwardness or a feeling of neglect, as many suggest? Or is it the problem of integration?

A legitimate question that follows is: what do we mean by 'Northeast'? Is there anything called 'northeast identity' which is not part of the so-called *Indianness*? Northeast is a generic term used to mean the States of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. Of late, Sikkim is also being drawn in. The moot point is that the northeast identity seems to be political and psychological (See interview series, Chapter III to understand how the media in the northeastern States explain this phenomenon).

B.G. Verghese in his book, *India's Northeast Resurgent*, described the region as "the home for Mongoloid India" which the rest of India has so long failed to recognize, not territorially but

emotionally and psychologically. The northeastern frontier has earned the *sobriquet* of an 'exotic ethnic museum', and of late, 'the ethnic minefield'. This perception or antipathy has led various communities dotting the periphery feel that they do not have space in the Indian consciousness. This feeling of alienation—political, cultural and psychological—has been bolstered by their experience of growing up within what Chandan Mitra, editor of *The Pioneer* termed as 'Indian joint family', and is aggravated by the internal social dynamics of the communities themselves.

Areas of conflict

i) *Marginal political representation*: In the existing parliamentary system, marginal political representation of the North-East States in the national law-making body and the inability of the Members of Parliament to bring the issues and concerns of the people they represent, make a plausible case for the underground organisations to launch a separatist campaign against the 'indifferent' Indian nation-state. There is a general refrain that New Delhi understands only the language of violence, guns.

"You blow up a bridge, railtracks, you see how Indian leaders react. Within a few hours time, security forces would be ordered to take care of things. That's the immediate reaction."

Ordinary people—poor, unemployed—easily get moved by such a reasoning. In States like Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura, Nagaland, Mizoram, which send just one or two representatives to the national Parliament, politicians justify their inability to highlight the problems and interests of their people in the national planning process. The marginal representation in the national decision-making process is often cited as the main problem of the north-eastern frontier States.

Therefore, the use of armed rebellion to secure social, economic and political rights has been the rule rather than an exception. Various homeland demands have been voiced at different levels such as a Bodoland State in Assam, Kukiland in Manipur or even district council within States (Hmars Autonomous

District Council in Mizoram) but failure to gain the cognizance of the powers-that-be turned these democratic acts into militant ones.

ii) *Theory of relative deprivation*: Except for the Nagas who had raised the demand for an independent Nagaland following the end of British rule, all the subsequent militant movements in the region stemmed from the socio-economic and ethnic contexts, what social scientists termed as the 'theory of relative deprivation'. The story of Reang problem aptly illustrates this theory.

Reangs are one of the major tribes in Tripura and Mizoram. Being a nomadic tribe, they lived in remote hilly areas surviving on *jhumming*—a slash and burn method of farming—and as a result always remained out of any planned developmental schemes and programmes for the tribes, including primary education and basic health care. Moreover, because of their backward socio-cultural level, other dominant tribes (Debbarma, Jamatiya, Tripuri in Tripura and Lushais in Mizoram) exploited their labour. The Reangs were treated as slaves (Bawis in Mizoram) by the Lushai chiefs. Therefore, despite being numerically a major tribe, they were not able to articulate their needs and problems.

Over the years, a few of them got education and felt the need to mobilise their people and make them aware of their situation. Thus in the mid-1980s, some educated Reang youths got together and formed a socio-cultural association called Reang Peoples Union in Mizoram. They wanted their dances and music to be included in the cultural programmes of the State as a mark of recognition to the tribe. This may have annoyed the dominant Lushai tribes who wanted to integrate all smaller ethnic groups, including the Reangs under a single identity called Mizo. Similarly, in Tripura, despite being the second largest ethnic group, the Reangs remained out of the planning process in the State while the large chunk of the development schemes were allegedly grabbed by the dominant Debbarman tribes.

iii) *Conflict over recognition of tribal languages*: Bengali language, which was patronised by the kings of Tripura, became the State

language undermining development of the tribal language known as Kokborok. Though a Kokborok script was developed in Bengali, many found it unacceptable or difficult and wanted the script to be developed in Roman script which they claimed would facilitate learning English language, an international communication medium. This offended the Bengali pride, who were wary of the use of English which would promote Christianity and Western influence among the tribes.

The row over Kokborok script grew critical over the years, as tribals began to assert their own identity and cultural space which polarised the polity. Moreover, in the multi-ethnic States of the northeast, each tribe is trying to develop its own language, and any attempt by one language group to overshadow others by imposing one's language on another has triggered off many a conflict in the region. For example, the imposition of Assamese language on the hill areas resulted in the creation of Meghalaya and alienation of other hill tribes from the mainstream Assamese society. Bodos are now demanding introduction of the Roman script for Bodo language at the primary level, instead of Assamese/Bengali script.

iv) *Tribal identity and nationality formation process:* There are four major ethnic formations which can be identified across the region. First, Greater Nagaland comprising various Naga clans through unifying and re-organisation of Naga-inhabited areas; second, Chin-Kuki -Lushai formation for greater Mizoram; third, Bodo-Borok-Bru comprising some tribes of Assam (Bodos), Tripura (Borok) and Tripura/Mizoram (Bru); and the fourth formation is the vision of a Greater Assam.

All these ethnic formations are intended to transform their respective socio-cultural boundaries into political ones and then secure constitutional recognition through political negotiations, using either the democratic process or military means.

However, since socio-cultural boundaries of one ethnic group comprising one or several clans often overlap the area of another ethnic group, there is every possibility of ethnic clashes over

such formations. The Kuki-Naga conflict in Manipur is a classic example.

The question, therefore, is how can the Nagas realise the Greater Nagaland vision by re-organising areas claimed by the Nagas, while several ethnic groups of Chin-Kuki stock are also seeking a separate homeland claiming a part of the same areas? In 1998, when reports of Greater Nagaland appeared in the press, there was an electrifying protest from the Meiteis of Manipur, the majority ruling community. Similarly, the Greater Mizoram concept spearheaded by the Lushai ethnic groups is also being opposed by smaller ethnic groups from the same ethnic stock like the Paites who are seeking another identity called Zomis, mostly in Manipur. The Greater Assam idea pursued by the ULFA is being frustrated by the Bodo movement and autonomy demands by various ethnic groups in Assam.

(v) *Complex process of social change*: Another area of friction can be seen in the complex process of social change as these communities are caught between their efforts to preserve their tradition, identity and the desire to enjoy the fruits of modernisation.

We can see how complex is the ethnic setting in the region which has been shaped by the respective social, cultural, economic, political and psychological factors. And hence, the current trends in journalism must be understood against this complex backdrop.