

Edited by
Jaideep Saikia

Frontier in
Flames

North East India in Turmoil


Even after sixty years of independence, integration with the rest of India has eluded the states of the North East riven by insurgencies and secessionist struggles.

What are the conflicts that inflame the North East frontiers of India? Does the Indian government understand the complexity of the forces that impair the region? Is it aware of the North East's feeling of alienation from the rest of India? What are the shortfalls in security in this region laid waste by relentless violence? In its quest to zealously guard the nation's frontiers, has New Delhi unconscionably ignored concerns of development?

In this collection, eleven specialist commentators on the North East critically examine aspects of security in the region. *Frontier in Flames* is a definitive departure from the existing debates on this topic in its censure of the Indian government's policy towards the region. In their analyses, while agreeing on the principal reasons why the land of the seven sisters continues to burn, the writers suggest strong remedial measures to establish peace and prosperity in the region.


Jaideep Saikia is a security and terrorism analyst who has served the governments of Assam and India in security advisory capacities, as an expert on the North East.

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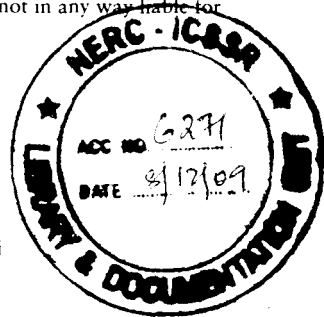
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Turbulence in the Abode of Clouds

Militant Resurgence in Meghalaya

PATRICIA MARY MUKHIM

There was never any question of an armed insurgency [in Meghalaya].

—B.K. Nehru

Introduction

Fears experienced in North East India range from the region being swamped by illegal migrants from Bangladesh to apprehension that the Indian government treats the region primarily as a security imperative. However, the biggest problem in this neglected sector of India is that its people do not feel 'Indian'. Every tribe or ethnic community, and there are at least two hundred and fifty of them, is affiliated and loyal primarily to its own group. This exclusivity protects and guards the identity of the group; an identity which the group perceives as fragile, pure and in need of nurture. Not surprisingly, every now and again there are violent assertions aimed at ethnic cleansing—that is, purging of elements which the group perceives as threats to its identity and its inalienable rights over the land and its economy.

This distinctiveness springs from the fact that there is no shared historical past or common geographical space with regard to the rest of India. What is today called the North East became part of 'India' only about sixty years ago. Before that it was a fragmented region inhabited by different ethnic groups which had migrated from Central and South East Asia. The political destiny of this region is now inextricably intertwined with that of India—one of the largest democracies of the world with a surging economy with an annual growth rate of eight per cent.

India's rapid economic growth rate has, however, had little impact in the North East. In each of the seven states, the economy's growth rate does not exceed four per cent. Although the region is rich in natural resources, possesses sixty-three per cent of the forest area of India and contains rich deposits of oil, coal, limestone and even uranium, it is economically weak. Lack of appropriate technology to create industrial units that utilize the resources of the region in an environmentally sustainable manner is a significant reason for the poor growth rate. All the minerals are taken out of the region for value addition and manufacturing elsewhere in the country. The region's economy, therefore, does not match with the situation in the rest of the country. As a result, the economic chasm widens every year, and more people fall below the poverty line while unemployment spirals.

The creation of Meghalaya

Carved out of the state of Assam, Meghalaya was christened by Indira Gandhi on 21 January 1972. The movement for a separate state had started in the 1960s, prompted by the desire of the then composite government of Assam to impose Assamese as the state language. The three major tribes in present-day Meghalaya—the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo—felt that the imposition was not just an attempt to marginalize their languages, but also a threat to their constitutional liberties. They also perceived the language issue as an indicator of the eventual reduction of their political importance.

From 1972 till about two decades later, the tribal political leadership engaged in electoral politics, presenting unstable coalitions, corruption, and ambiguous, short-term political goals and nepotism. Ironically, the tribal leadership was so involved in playing political games, that they had no time to clearly demarcate Meghalaya's boundary with Assam. Disputes continue, marked by frequent skirmishes between the Assam and Meghalaya police along the areas of Khanduli bordering the Jaintia Hills, Langpih in the West Khasi Hills and Pilangkata in the East Khasi Hills.

The creation of Meghalaya resulted in the emergence of a tribal elite in politics, business and bureaucracy. Non-tribal businessmen who had monopolized the supply and contract business within the government were immediately replaced by the local tribal population. In many a glaring instance, non-tribal businessmen conducted their businesses in the name of the tribal, thus paving the way for a flourishing benami trade carried out under fictitious identities. However, this development did not boost the economy because a considerable sum of the money earned in Meghalaya was invested elsewhere. Even banks were of no help to the general tribal population. The credit-deposit ratio has never gone beyond fourteen per cent. Of this, at least about ten per cent is invested in businesses outside the state as credit is mostly availed by non-tribal corporate houses and businesspersons.

By the mid-1980s it was evident that the economic growth was uneven. Meghalaya's present internal revenue generation from all sources is a mere Rs 350 crore, which is roughly 17.5 per cent of the amount that comes from New Delhi—approximately Rs 2000 crore.¹ The Meghalaya government spends Rs 840 crore annually on payment of salaries to its own staff. This leaves only about Rs 1160 crore for development activities. Of this amount, a good portion is spent on roads, buildings, water supply and sanitation. But the allocation of funds is hardly judicious. Development has always been urban-centric because the populace living in these centres is vocal and demanding.

Unequal economic spending created an unequal social structure marked by a rise in acquisition of real estate by the privileged few.² A total of 1.83 lakh families are listed as living below the poverty line. This constitutes roughly eight per cent of the total population of twenty-three lakh people.³

In a society that was inherently egalitarian, a new privileged class had emerged. Everybody aspires for a better life. However, if aspirations remain unfulfilled over a long period of time, frustration arises. Thus have the seeds of militancy been sown in Meghalaya.

The roots of conflict

Conflict is usually assumed to arise between parties perceived to be in pursuance of incompatible objectives. Wallensteen sees conflict as a social interaction in which a minimum of two parties strive at the same time to acquire the same set of scarce resources.⁴ In the subjective approach to conflict theory, conflict is viewed in relation to values or resources. Conflict is not built into the structure, but evolves out of interaction between relevant parties. The subjective approach presupposes the existence of two or more parties, the interaction between them and then the manifestation of conflict which arises from the interplay of values and choices.

For tribals, land, whether forest or agricultural, was a common property resource that served the needs of the community. Until recently, land was not considered a commodity for sale. But the market economy has played out its own dynamics. Those who were exposed to the market and interacted with market forces saw the advantage of owning land, particularly forest land. With the discovery of minerals like coal and limestone there was a growing demand for land in mining areas. It was only a matter of time before the urban moneyed class became absentee landlords, owning huge acreage of farmland acquired from those who were struck by poverty due to crop failure and other such calamities.

The process was accompanied by an erosion of tribal values and ethos. While the affluent could exercise a wide range of choices about how to utilize and multiply their wealth, the poor were left with fewer and fewer choices. Farmers who had availed of loans to purchase seeds and fertilizers depended so much on the weather that they were doomed when it failed them. Their children had to drop out of school and take up work to supplement the family income. The deprived began to feel they could forcibly take away what they perceived to be rightfully theirs, which had been taken away from them in the first place through subterfuge. Thus the culture of extortion was born. To sustain this culture, renegades needed guns. To capture the

imagination of the people they had to spin a romantic ideology that perhaps even they did not believe in. To set the idea in motion they needed an attractive slogan, a propaganda machine and, above all, a name which is closely linked to the myths and patriotic ideals of a tribal society caught in a confused political predicament.

For years, the political leaders ruling the state of Meghalaya fed people a diet of unfulfilled promises. Politicians were unable to tell their constituents that jobs in the government sector had reached a point of saturation. They continued to engage in rhetoric, promising jobs that were non-existent. The education system too bears part of the blame. There was no vocational education. Since there was no human resources planning, the government continued to send young people to courses that no longer came under the ambit of the employable. Engineering and agricultural graduates also entered the unemployed category. They were potential candidates for militant organizations. Although the first batch of militants did not come from a professional class, the leaders were definitely unemployed graduates.

The aggressive and militant Khasi Students' Union (KSU) was one of the early proponents of armed rebellion in Meghalaya. Drawing from the example of the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) that had started the anti-foreigners agitation against illegal migrants from Bangladesh in Assam in 1979, the KSU demanded for a cut-off year to determine the citizenship issue. In 1979, the first communal clash aimed at ethnic cleansing occurred in a state that was otherwise known to be peaceful.⁵ Ironically, not a drop of blood was shed during the hill state movement when the Khasis, Jaintias and Garos had demanded that Meghalaya be carved out of Assam as a separate state. After 1979, there has been tension between the tribal and non-tribal residents of Meghalaya almost every year. Although on the surface everything appeared normal, there was always an undercurrent of tension, with such tension invariably peaking during the annual

Durga puja celebrations. The first bout of violence in 1979 was sparked off by someone throwing a stone at a puja pandal. The non-tribals took this as an act of sacrilege.

Khasi nationalism

According to R.P. Sharma, to the Khasi, nationalism is a paradox.⁶ Nationalism for a Khasi springs from his being a native of the soil. As a native he is attached to a family, clan, village. Nationalism means speaking and understanding the same dialect. At its narrowest, Khasi nationalism is parochial because it excludes others. It is sectarian because it tends to align with people of the same faith. When a different level of nationalism as propounded by the nation state of India was imposed on the Khasis, they reacted vehemently. In fact, one of the Khasi chieftains, Wycliffe Syiem, migrated to Bangladesh in protest against what he termed as forced assimilation of his chieftainship by the Indian state. The assimilation of the thirty-two Khasi chieftainships by subterfuge continues to infuriate Khasi society. It is the fodder upon which present-day revolutionaries feed. Khasi revolutionaries never miss an opportunity to attack the political class and the bureaucracy as puppets of the Indian state who have been co-opted to further the designs of New Delhi.

What a Khasi calls 'ka ri' actually comprises only the boundaries of the land inhabited by the Khasi people. In their collective consciousness, that land and territory is 'the country'. After 1947, 'ka ri' should have consciously included the larger territory of India with the Khasi state being just a small part of the land mass that makes this vast country called India. But this psychological adjustment and transition did not happen, and indeed has still not happened. The Khasi chieftains or syiems continue to refer to the Instrument of Accession and the Stand-Still Agreement that clearly states that the Indian state will have jurisdiction only over matters of defence, foreign policy and currency while every other area of governance was vested with the syiems.

The history of migration into the region illustrates that during the British occupation people were brought in from different parts of India to work in the administration. Non-tribals were encouraged to conduct business in the area. The demographic pattern of the Khasi-inhabited areas, until then administered by Assam, began to change drastically. The tribes woke up to the reality that non-tribal traders controlled business; that much of their prime land was also in the hands of non-tribals; that a large number of non-tribals were employed in government and other financial institutions. Their fear of the situation was camouflaged as protests about being swamped by Bangladeshis from across the border. The Khasis describe the Bangladeshis as 'mynder ri' or alien, but in Khasi society anyone who is non-Khasi is 'mynder ri'. The Sylheti Bengalis who had settled in Meghalaya in the wake of the 1971 India–Pakistan war—they had been allocated a settlement area by the then government of Meghalaya under B.B. Lyngdoh—are also labelled Bangladeshis by the Khasis. These legal migrants were settled in different parts of Shillong in areas designated as revenue plots. This provoked the KSU to harass Bengalis in the name of ethnic cleansing.

The Nepalis were targetted a few years later, in the early 1980s. Once again several families were uprooted from their homes and had to live in camps at Barapathar. In Mawlai, an entire family was burnt to death. Such acts of cruelty were hitherto unknown among the Khasi people. What could have been the possible trigger of such backlash? Were these acts of desperation? Were these politically motivated? The violence had generated an altogether different type of brutality—armed conflict.

Armed insurrection

Armed violence happened first in the Garo Hills. Injustice and corruption were at the root of the conflict. The Achik Liberation Matgrik Army (ALMA), which began as a vigilante group, was lured to the gun by the National Socialist Council of Nagalim, Isaac-Muivah group (NSCN (IM)).⁷ The latter used the ALMA

as a source for revenue generation. NSCN (IM) provided cover to ALMA while they looted a branch of the State Bank of India in the Garo Hills. The proceeds from the armed robbery were shared. Even at its peak, ALMA had only about thirty cadres. This made it difficult for the outfit to survive the inhospitable malaria-prone terrain of the Garo Hills. Some Baptist church elders involved themselves in trying to barter peace with the outfit. After nearly fifteen rounds of talks, ALMA surrendered in 1994. Meanwhile, some radical elements of KSU, perhaps in collaboration with a disillusioned, breakaway group of ALMA, started a version of their own militant outfit in the early part of 1992. They called it the Hynniewtrep-Achik Liberation Council (HALC). The HALC fired its first salvo when it shot and killed Rajesh Saigal, a spare parts dealer, in broad daylight. He was killed because he refused to comply with the extortion demands of the HALC. The act caused fear among non-tribal traders. People, especially non-tribals, restricted their movements after sunset. Shops closed early and life came to a standstill after dusk.

The HALC issued diktats from time to time restricting people from celebrating independence day and republic day. They lashed out at the state politicians, calling them lackeys of New Delhi and traitors to the cause of tribal justice. It was around this time that the issue of the Instrument of Accession, a document that had signed away the rights of the Khasi chieftains to the newly created Indian nation, was raked up. Allegations were made that the method by which the signatures were obtained in the document was suspect. HALC's demand was tantamount to secession, as it alluded to the pre-independence status of the Khasi-Jaintia states. Though HALC was popular among the people, the Khasis and Garos differ on a number of issues, especially that of reservation, and it was only a matter of time before the HALC split into its Khasi and Garo versions. The Khasi outfit came to be known as the Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC), signifying an exclusive Khasi identity, while the Garo outfit, which included disgruntled elements of the surrendered ALMA, called themselves the Achik National Volunteers Council (ANVC).

E.K. Mawlong's government fell as a result of corruption charges in January 2002. The new Meghalaya government, led by an independent legislator, F.A. Khonglam, had just about a year in office, but it had a clear mandate to root out militancy, which was disrupting business on a large scale. R.G. Lyngdoh was the home minister at the time. Under his stewardship, the state police went on an offensive against HNLC and ANVC. Arrest warrants were issued against business people and others who acquiesced to the extortion demands of militant outfits. Relatively unimportant cadres of HNLC and ANVC who survived by extorting smaller amounts in and around Shillong or Tura found themselves hard hit by the government's initiative. Their sources were drying up. Several cadres sent feelers to the government about surrender. At least two hundred cadres of the two militant organizations have come over ground since then.

Lure of 'rehabilitation'

The rehabilitation and surrender package involved placing the surrendered militants in camps as preparation for their reintegration into society. The ex-militants were then given Rs 75,000 as seed money to start business ventures. About seventy-five were given permits to run local taxis. The rest started cyber cafes and grocery stores. The deputy commissioner of Shillong, D.P. Wahlang, has said that he personally approached the banks on behalf of surrendered militants for grant of loans. The money was not given in cash, but was deposited with the banks as margin money. In addition, every weapon surrendered had a price.

In the year 2004, ANVC sent feelers to New Delhi through former Lok Sabha speaker, P.A. Sangma, stating that they were agreeable to a ceasefire, pending talks.⁸ Subsequently, a ceasefire was signed in Shillong. Regular ceasefire rules were drawn up, one of which stated that the militants would live in designated camps while the groundwork for talks was being worked out.

A major setback to the process was caused by Dilash Marak of ANVC, who was not agreeable to the ceasefire. He continues to remain elusive. Marak is reported to be living in Bangladesh, just as the HNLC leaders Julius Dorphang, Cherister Thangkhiw and Bobby Marwein continue to live and conduct prosperous businesses there. Accounts provided by surrendered HNLC militants who have come over ground due to the extreme hardships they faced in the malaria-infested jungles of the border areas between Bangladesh and Garo and Khasi Hills indicate that the top leaders were greatly removed from the welfare of the junior cadres.

R.G. Lyngdoh returned as home minister after the 2003 elections and remained as the head of the home department for about a year. During the downsizing that happened in mid 2004, he lost his portfolio, but he once again returned as home minister in June 2006. Since then he has been vigorously pursuing the carrot and stick policy which he had applied earlier. When I interviewed Lyngdoh, he expressed his cynicism about the so-called 'peace bonus' which his predecessor had promised to the ANVC cadres. He feels that peace cannot be bought. It must be a conscious decision of the warring parties to work towards peace because they believe it has more lasting dividends. Lyngdoh is also skeptical about New Delhi's direct involvement in the ceasefire with the ANVC, because the state government is then only a monitoring agency to ensure that ceasefire rules are not violated.

Despite the ceasefire, extortion and violence have not abated in the Garo hills and the police say they have no option but to take a tough stand. Lyngdoh, who seems to have understood the militancy phenomenon rather well, is also skeptical about the rehabilitation packages. He feels that such schemes are inherently flawed. Since the state is paying money to the surrendered militants, young people find the path of militancy and consequent surrender convenient and lucrative. His analysis seems to be borne out by figures, with many young men joining

militant outfits for a short period of time, only in order to surrender.

Conclusion

While militancy as propounded by the HNLC and the ANVC is on the wane because of the dissonance between the ends and means adopted by the leaders, and the incongruity between their propaganda and action, it cannot be said that the last chapter in Meghalaya's tryst with militancy has been written. Deeply embedded in the Khasi-Jaintia tradition is the notion of egalitarianism where no one was landless and accumulation was unknown. The market-driven economy has introduced a new fashion of individualism among the tribes. Individualization or privatization of community property, including common property resources like water bodies and forests, has widened the gap between the affluent and the poor. This economic chasm needs to be bridged through enlightened legislation such as a land ceiling act and through redistribution of agricultural land among the landless poor. But such legislation would be unpopular among the powerful who control the government. In Meghalaya, it is the politicians, bureaucrats and business people who comprise the new generation of landowners. They would do everything to stop such legislation from taking shape.

Poverty is on the rise and the poor at some point will become belligerent. Their protest may take the form of violence. The constituency of the poor is expanding and educated youth leaders are emerging. These leaders are fairly well acquainted with the kind of power that comes from 'revolution'. Initially this power would stem from the support of deprived communities. Later, such power has the potential to intoxicate and cause repercussions. These are aspects of the cycle of assertions by different constituencies whose needs are not addressed by the constitutional machinery, and who are compelled to adopt illegal means to meet justifiable ends.

The submissiveness of the academic community and the intelligentsia is a matter of concern. The onus is on them to translate the larger meaning of globalization to the people. They have a responsibility to explain that ethnocentrism is at odds with the current market-linked economy. Non-governmental organizations have failed too. They have not succeeded in creating links between people's organizations and the government. But there is little that NGOs can do to improve livelihood and wealth rankings.

Traditional institutions, which are still exclusively monoethnic bodies, have to be helped to become more inclusive instruments of governance, without losing their basic character and values. Traditional institutions are the only link between the people in villages and the formal structures of governance and power. At present, the constitutionally mandated institutions of governance are being seen as exploitative and anti-poor. If this feeling could be reversed through a conscious process of rural empowerment and social auditing of funds that have been spent, Meghalaya would be able to avert conflict and violence in the future.

Notes

1. Figures sourced from Department of Economics and Statistics, 2005–2006, Government of Meghalaya.
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