

# The Northeast Complexities and its Determinants

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Sreeradha Datta

Even after fifty years of India's independence, its Northeast continues to draw national attention for several reasons. The intensification of ethnic differences poses significant security challenges for India. Taking a holistic approach, the book examines the roots of the turmoil in the region, the inadequate economic development as a contributing factor as well as the regional implications of the protracted violence and instability.

The book also highlights the role of external forces in accentuating the situation and the linkages that some of the militant groups in this region have managed to forge and thrive on. The book could be of interest to policy makers and scholars interested in this region of India.

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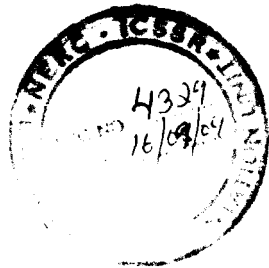
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# 1

## Introduction

It has been rightly said when people in Delhi think of the Northeast, they think of the distance and that translates into a mental gap. When the people of the Northeast think of Delhi, they think in terms of different levels of development, and this translates into an emotional gap.

—S.K. Sinha<sup>1</sup>

The Northeastern region of India covering a total area of 255,037 sq. km, bordering China, Myanmar, Bhutan, and Bangladesh is a post-colonial region. Until the advent of the British, Northeast was not there as a concept. The geo-political contour of a Northeast frontier first emerged by the turn of the last century, during the eastward sweep of the British leading to the subjugation of the territories between Bengal and erstwhile Burma.<sup>2</sup> The colonial rule took a long time to consolidate and different units came under British rule at different times; Assam plains in 1826, Cachar in 1830, Khasi Hills in 1833, Naga Hills in 1835, Garo Hills in 1872-73 and Lushai hills in 1890.

If one studies the pre-independence writings, the expression 'Northeast region' is seldom encountered. The designation of a region called Northeast is a post-1947 development. The partition aggravated its geo-political isolation as the region is linked with the rest of

the country by a narrow land corridor and is surrounded on all sides by international borders. Earlier, various tribal regions had closer ties with the adjoining areas of Bengal and Burma than with each other, but the partition all but physically separated the Northeast from the Indian heartland. This and the Chinese take-over of Tibet replaced the earlier soft territorial frontier. In other words, an area of more than a quarter of a million square kilometres bordering China, Bhutan, Myanmar, and Bangladesh (erstwhile East Pakistan) now only has a tenuous connection with the rest of the country by the 21-km wide Siliguri corridor.<sup>3</sup> Less than one per cent of the external boundaries of the region is contiguous with the rest of India and the remaining ninety-nine per cent is international borders.

The partition caused the severance of the inland water, road and railway communication through East Pakistan/ Bangladesh and access to the Chittagong port was lost. The Chinese take-over of Tibet and the virtual closure of border with Burma/Myanmar added to the isolation of the region. All these factors had an effect on the traditional economic linkages with the neighbouring areas and the Northeast India could never recover from the consequences and trauma of partition. (see p. 147, Table 1. for some basic data of Northeast states.)

### **Isolation and Separateness**

The colonial interests dictated the political and administrative arrangements of the region and this in turn consolidated and accentuated separateness. The

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administrative convenience and strategic consideration led the British to group and regroup territories. Assam emerged as a nodal point in the British administration, and a series of legal and administrative decisions were taken between 1874 and 1935 providing for separate and distinct identities of the different areas in the Northeast.

Despite conferment of autonomy and statehood, separateness nursed during the colonial period has survived and is frequently expressed through insurgency to bolster demands for autonomy, economic concessions, political representation, and for independence from the Union.

More important than the geographical isolation and seeds of separation during the colonial rule, it is the cultural chasm and lack of psychological integration with the rest of the country that makes for the distinctiveness of the region. The nationalist struggle for freedom which otherwise unified the diverse Indian population did not touch the Northeast.<sup>4</sup> The region remained immune to the process of 'Indianness.' The tribal Northeast remained aloof to the unifying influence of freedom struggle. In the words of Jawaharlal Nehru:

The essence of the struggle for freedom, which meant raising some kind of liberating force in India, did not reach these (tribal) areas, chiefly the frontier areas that are the most important tribal areas. The result is that those frontier areas were not (so) psychologically prepared. In fact, they were prepared the other way by British officers or sometimes by missionaries who were there.<sup>5</sup>

The profound economic and political changes in the wake of independence created a sense of unease among the tribal population of the region. There were apprehensions that the tribal traditions would be submerged into the mainstream, leading the tribal communities to differentiate themselves from the heartlanders. The attitude of the heartland, namely the Hindu-Hindi belt, towards the region and its people has not helped the situation. There is complete lack of knowledge and awareness of the Northeast, its history, diversity and place in other parts of India, reinforcing the psychological distance.

Migratory pressures form a principle component of the turmoil in the Northeast. Until recently, migration and security were considered distinct subjects of academic studies and political discourse. Analysts focussed mostly on defence strategy and power relations between states. Preserving the territorial integrity of the state and the stability of the government in the face of the external or internal military threat was considered a matter of 'high politics' while migration was considered 'low politics'. However, in recent years there is a growing recognition that migration does not only involve human and personal security and human rights issues but also has internal and international security implications.<sup>6</sup> Migration is now considered one of the 'new security threats' and Myron Weiner has treated population flows as an independent rather than dependent variable in his security analysis. He identified five categories of situations where migrants or refugees may be perceived as a security threat.<sup>7</sup> The large-scale migration into the Northeast region fits well into the category of 'unwanted migrants'.

Several of these states witnessed violent movements rooted in the foreigners' issue. The Chakmas are the "foreigners" in Arunachal Pradesh, Bengalis in Tripura, Chin refugees (from Myanmar) in Mizoram and Manipur and Bengalis and other non-Assamese in Assam. A strong 'anti-foreigner movement' against the Chakma residents of Arunachal Pradesh has rocked the state. Chakma refugees were settled in the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) region (now Arunachal Pradesh) in the 1960s and since 1994, Chakmas and Hajongs have been facing deportation threats and discrimination.<sup>8</sup> All Arunachal Pradesh Students Union (AAPSU) has been fighting for the eviction of Chakmas, Hajongs and Tibetans from the state. The issue of granting citizenship to the Chakmas is still hanging in balance in spite of the recommendation of a Parliamentary Committee.

The Chin refugees from Myanmar are no longer welcome in Mizoram. The resentment over the increase in the number of Chakmas in the state is another cause for worry. Mizos allege that a large number of Chakmas from Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) region of Bangladesh have settled in the Chakma Autonomous District Council in the state. The tribal-outsider dichotomy has generated violence in Meghalaya, Tripura and Assam and hence, there is a silent out-migration of the non-tribal population from these states. The success of Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) in coming to power on the anti-foreigners' platform induced some of the other political parties to pursue similar postures.

The economic and security implications of the mass migration into the region have not been addressed properly. Measures to check infiltration from across the borders have not been successful.<sup>9</sup> Refugee flows into the region have only compounded the picture.

### **Economic Resources**

Northeast is endowed with an abundance of natural resources but the region continues to remain backward. It is endowed with numerous natural resources such as oil reserves, tropical forests, hydro-electricity potentials of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries, tea, coal, timber, silk and jute. Some of these resources have been explored while others remain under-utilised. High rates of population growth, a restricted range of resources, labour immobility, restricted land market, volatile and uncertain political and social environment and largely subsistence economies are the defining characteristics of the region. Sluggish economic growth, poor infrastructure, lack of market accessibility and under-utilisation of the natural resources of the region have plagued the economies of the states of this region. The British encouraged the growth of tea plantation at the cost of other industries. The partition, which cut-off the existing transport and communication facilities, dealt a severe blow to the economic prospects of the region. Overruling the predominant view of the local population, Chittagong Port and the CHT area were awarded to Pakistan. The region is yet to recover from the after effects of the partition. As B.G. Verghese observes:

The physical and psychological severity of the blow was not fully appreciated elsewhere in the country and the disruption in communications and markets was not repaired soon enough nor infrastructure developed to match the new needs completed as expeditiously necessary. Isolated and traumatised, the Northeast turned towards a succession of insurgencies and movements to seek separation or autonomy, a desire to assert identity or exclude foreigners and outsiders aggravated the hiatus, with the rest of the country coming to think of the Northeast with disinterest as a far-away place, perpetually troubled. Beset with its own internal problems and complexes, the Northeast fell behind economically, and despite its inherent wealth remains at the bottom of the heap as a conglomeration of seemingly impecunious special category states.<sup>10</sup>

After independence, some efforts were made at industrial diversification, but industries that came up were concentrated in certain pockets of Assam. The region continues to remain mainly agricultural and less than 40 per cent of the geographical area is under cultivation. The prospects for modern industries are not bright, as there is a lack of local or regional market. It is possible to suggest that one of the important reasons for the economic stagnation of the Northeast is the resistance of the people to socio-economic changes and the structural rigidity of a traditional society. The resentment of and the movements against the outsiders have robbed the region of investments, which could have given fillip to economic development.

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Out-migration of people from business class and professions has sent a wrong signal to the investors. Development has been a major casualty of insurgency and rampant violence and at times the insurgents have disrupted economic development projects either to protest against the perceived extractive and exploitative nature of such projects and/or for keeping out outsiders. Examples are galore: stopping oil exploration and production in Nagaland, preventing railway extension in Khasi Hills, regular and systematic disruption of oil supply and railway lines in Assam.

A closer examination of the turbulence and unrest in the region would reveal a number of underlying economic factors. Despite the prevailing sense of economic neglect, various central government departments have been generous towards the region. The central allocations for the region are higher compared to other parts of the country.<sup>11</sup> Modernisation theorists would argue that insurgency and violence are transient phenomena that would decline in proportion to economic development. However, massive subsidies, grants and special allocation for the region which are supposed to contain insurgency and propel the region to prosperity, may indeed have exacerbated the problem.<sup>12</sup> The nexus between the politicians, bureaucrats and contractors is responsible for siphoning off the government funds and a part of this fund finds its way to the underground for financing the violent campaigns. It is widely believed that the political discontent in the region has been fuelled by the unemployment problem. Rampant presence of small arms in the region is

attributed to this factor. Compared to the rest of India, the literacy rate in the region is quite high but in the absence of industries and business opportunities, employment prospects for the youths are dim. The resultant discontent and frustration is exploited by the militants to swell their ranks.

## **Conclusion**

Northeast is not a homogeneous area and it cannot be seen as constituting a single, indivisible, geographical whole. People do not have a common historical, inherited and interlined development problem. Yet, amidst divergent pattern of unrest, there are many similar elements and various causes and factors responsible for the turmoil. The geographical isolation of the region and burden of history, particularly the effect of partition on the economies of the region are the main determinants of the discontent and violence. Massive migrations from East Pakistan/ Bangladesh and Nepal into the region have worsened matters.

Various central government agencies or departments have assisted the Northeastern states with subsidies, grants and special development packages, much more in comparison to other states. However, investments in infrastructure and industries, something which is more important for the region given its geographical location and topography, have been negligible. The backwardness of the region and insurgency are interlinked, the lack of economic development has fostered discontent and violence, and this in turn has impeded development.

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The psychological distance from the rest of India, limited economic development/progress and the problems associated with the economic migrants from outside the region have culminated in a number of conflicts in Northeast. The tribes and various other sections of society have frequently revolted against the established order and have waged armed struggle for secessions as well as to bolster various other sets of demands. The proximity of international borders has facilitated external support for various insurgent groups to be active in the region.<sup>13</sup> The demographic changes brought about by the continuous influx of outsiders both from across the borders as well as from different parts of the country have sharpened division and 'anti foreigner' sentiment which has spawned dozens of movements and agitations. A number of groups and organisations have sought to press for their demands for autonomy, economy concessions and political representation through violent means.

## References

- 1 S.K. Sinha, Violence and Hope in India's North-east, *Faultline* January 2002 (10), p.21.
- 2 For an account of the history of the region refer to, Sir Robert Reid *History of the Frontier areas Bordering on Assam 1883-1941*, Delhi: Eastern Publishing House, 1942 (reprinted 1983) p. 303; Verrier Elvin (Ed.), *India's North-east Frontier in the Nineteenth Century*, Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1959 p. 473.
- 3 In December 1998, Bangladesh agreed to extend facilities to use its port, road and railway links to transport goods and passengers to the North-east.
- 4 For details read Nirmal Nibedon *The North-east Ethnic Explosion*, New Delhi; Lancers, 1981, specially chapter 2, pp. 18-54.
- 5 Cited in B.G. Verghese, *India and North-east Resurgent: Ethnicity, Insurgency, Governance, Development*, New Delhi; Konark, 1996, 2nd edition, p. 34.
- 6 On September 20, 1999, the Supreme Court expressed its concerns about unabated migration of Bangladeshi refugees to the North-east and asked the Union Government to make "honest and serious" attempts to stop the influx. The Assam government affidavit presented to the Court maintained that 405,267 illegal migrants were detected between 1952 and 1999 and out of them 347,689 were deported. In recent past, the affidavit maintained, that there appears to be a close nexus between the illegal migrants and fundamental organisations on one hand and between fundamental organisations and Pakistan's ISI on the other. The Tripura government told the court that it had pushed back 143,188 illegal migrants since 1971. *The Times of India*, September 21, 1999 and *The Hindu*, September 21, 1999.

- 7 Myron Weiner, Security, stability and international migration, *International Security*, Winter 1992/93, 17 (3), pp. 91-126.
- 8 Omprakash Mishra, Forced displacement in India's North-east, in Sanjukta Bhattacharya and Rochana Das, (Ed.), *Perspective on India's North-east*, Calcutta: Bibhasa, 1998, pp. 117-32.
- 9 In December 1998 Bangladesh Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad said that his government is opposed to any Indian move to fence the borders and added: "It is not in the interest of the improvement of bilateral ties between the two neighbours. ...It is not a good omen for bilateral ties and also not conducive to present initiatives on the creation of a South Asia Free Trade Area." *Asian Recorder*, January 22, 1999, pp. 256-78.
- 10 Verghese, no. 5, pp. 336-37.
- 11 In a significant move, in 1996 Prime Minister Deve Gowda had announced special economic assistance package for the region amounting to Rs. 61 billion. This package was to strengthen infrastructure, especially power and communication. In Guwahati, he said. "We would take steps to repeal the ineffective laws and strengthen legal and administrative measures for dealing with foreigners in consultations with the states.", *The Hindu*, October 28, 1996.
- 12 Samir Kumar Das, Ethnic insurgencies in North-east India: A framework for analysis, in B. Pakem, (Ed.), *Insurgency in North-East India*, New Delhi: Omsons, 1997, pp. 37-59.
- 13 During the visit of Prime Minister Deve Gowda to Bangladesh in January 1997, an agreement was signed to activate a joint working group to combat insurgency in North-east and Chittagong Hill Tracts. In November 1998, India and Bangladesh agreed to enforce 1991 agreement on illegal immigration and the latter agreed that no one would be allowed to use its soil for anti-Indian activities. *The Times of India*, November 23, 1998.