

Ethnic Conflicts in North-East India

Its Vulnerability

Dr. Anuradha Prakash

The historical connections among the traditional tribes in the Northeast are largely of TibetoBurman/Mongoloid stock and closer to Southeast Asia than to South Asia. It is ethnically, linguistically and culturally very distinct from the other states of India. Northeast India is plagued by inter-ethnic conflict. The emerging educated elite of the ethnic groups articulates values and interests which generate a lot of conflict because many of them are competing with each other for share of resources. The most important form of conflict besetting the reality of this area is the one associated with, what is called in northeast India (NEI), extremist politics. Such politics, characterized by unconstitutional, and very often, violent methods, began in modern India, immediately after the British colonial rule came to an end in the middle of the twentieth century and when a section of the Nagas refused to join the newly formed republic. The book highlights the fact that contemporary North-East India remains witness to the momentous developments arising out of ethnic mobilization.

CONTENTS

Introduction; Conflict in Northeast India: Issues, Causes and Concern; The Nature of the Conflict; EthnoPolitical Situation in Northeast India; India: Multiple Conflicts in Northeast India; India Towards a Political Economy of Intra-State Conflicts; Ethnic Conflicts and Traditional Self-governing Institutions; Northeast Violence-An Overall View; Thematic of Insurgency; Ethnic Community in the Northeast of the Subcontinent

Dr. Anuradha Prakash, b. 1970, is a reputed name in the sphere of Social Science, obtained her B.A. (Hons.) and M.A. in Sociology and Ph.D. from Patna University and at present Associate Professor at J.L.C. College, Manjhi under J.P. University. She possesses a prolong teaching experience of sixteen years and attended and organized several seminars. She is a frequent visitor to N-E regions of India and wrote several articles on the problems of the people of these areas

ISBN : 978-93-80014-81-4
₹ 895/-

Ethnic Conflicts in North-East India

Dr. Anuradha Prakash



SURENDRA PUBLICATIONS

New Delhi – 110002 (India)

303.3095116

811

Published by :
SURENDRA PUBLICATIONS
4561/16, Ansari Road, Daryaganj
N. Delhi - 110002
Phone: 65159385, Mob. 9811068537
E-mail: surendrapublications@gmail.com

Ethnic Conflicts in North-East India

Reserved

First Published : 2011

ISBN : 978-93-80014-81-4



[All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior written permission of the publishers]

PRINTED IN INDIA

Printed at Deepak Offset Press, Delhi.

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	
1. Introduction	1
2. Conflict in Northeast India: Issues, Causes and Concern	16
3. The Nature of the Conflict	26
4. Ethno-Political Situation in Northeast India	49
5. India: Multiple Conflicts in Northeast India	86
6. India Towards a Political Economy of Intra-State Conflicts	115
7. Ethnic Conflicts and Traditional Self-governing Institutions	131
8. Northeast Violence-An Overall View	158
9. Thematic of Insurgency	185
10. Ethnic Community in the Northeast of the Subcontinent	238
<i>Bibliography</i>	253
<i>Index</i>	255

Introduction

It is a long history of separatist movements in Northeastern part in India. In the mid of the last century (1950s), identity of India was getting shaped just after the long struggle for its independence. On the other side, voice for separate identities in various places within India was also forming in groups. Small identify holders had fear for vanishing in the canvas of a larger identity. But, people hardly had time to think of it because large section of people was busy in celebrating after feeling free from British emperor.

Creating new policies, constructing constitutional laws, strategies for power structure and implementing those are given more emphasis. Off cause that was the need of the time and it is expected that things will be normal in time. Government formed in the centre as well in the provinces and state start functioning. But, just after thirty years of Indian independence, few university students start questioning about the foreign migratory to Assam (a State in India's Northeast). It's in 1979. And till 15th August 1985, all days and nights were stormy. One of the major turmoil ever happened after India's independence in North Eastern Part of India. Later on it is known as 'Six years Assam agitation'.

On the other side, in the same year (1979) preparation for the first separatist movement in Assam was talking place. Some of the finest brains and the cream of youths of the land left homes and universities in search of their dreams of the new world happening in real. Though the six years Assam agitation took place in a large scale, but, it was a democratic movement.

The United liberation front of Assam shortly ULFA become active in mid 80s of the last century which is taken a formal shape on 7th April 1979. Till now they passed almost 30 years of their existence along with many other separatist movements.

Apart from ULFA's movement in Assam, bulk of young youths of various ethnic groups took arms seeking for a separate state sometimes within India or sometimes outside India in 1980s. Most of these armed movements' begin out of identical crises caused by dissolving their culture, language and their people into a larger cultural and political identity. In time, it led to frequent conflict with the neighboring bigger identity holders and identity finders. The major ethnic identity movements are initiated by the Karbis, Bodos, Dimashas and Komatapuri ethnic groups. Later on most of these movements took a separatist and violent form.

The once rocked separatist armed movement of ULFA in late 1980s comes down by end of twentieth century (1999). The state and the central government take up many counter insurgency measures to control the separatist movements. As the main step the government took up the counter insurgency operations by security forces. The first major counter insurgency campaign code named Operation Bajrang on 27th nov.1990 and the next campaign called as Operation Rhino launched on 14th September 1991 mainly against ULFA. After that Operation Dibro-Chikhuwa, Operation all clear took place.

A major surrendering process took place after the Rhino operation in govt. initiatives. The govt. gave protection and cash payments for rehabilitation. This was the result of two major counter insurgency military campaigns by the Indian Army (Operation Bajrang and Operation Raino) with a series of cleaver political moves credited to the Late Ex Chief minister Mr. Hiteswer Saikia. He used to address the militants as 'The Boys' and asked them publicly to come back 'home'. He declared the surrender scheme in 1st June-1992. As a result, today we see more than ten thousands separatist militants thrown their arms and now back at the main stream. In many ways, political life and the life at the streets is better than that period. An influential segment of public opinion in Assam is also formed sided by the government's position.

The counter insurgency measures are specifically called by a unified command structure where all forces including the state police, central reserve police force and Indian army come under one operational command. Apart from that, laws like the Armed forces Special Powers Acts (AFSPA) 1958 is designed especially for India's northeast and remained for decades to control violence and bringing the boys back to the mainstream. National security act & TADA acts are also in amplification in India's northeast to control the same. Already 28 major leaders of the separatist movements are arrested under TADA and 24 leaders are in jail under National security force.

Many rapes cases take place in the process of search-and-arrest operations. Women become the worst sufferers during operations. Almost all persons picked up for questioning whether belonging to any insurgent group or not, are tortured for information. After arrest, electric shocks to genitals, cigarette burns, pulling out of finger-nails, dunking the head under water or urine, hanging upside-down for prolonged period, etc are common in the process of collecting informations. In many cases, persons picked up by the security forces have simply disappeared.

The separatist movement in Nagaland was the first to rise in India's northeast in 1950s. Similar movements in Mizoram and Manipur also followed it. The Naga, Mizo as well as the Meitei movements had their origin in the colonial period. Later on, the Mizos steeled with an agreement. But the Naga movement parted in few fractions and one fraction in negotiating with Govt and still had strong hold over Naga communities spread even to Myanmar.

Though the whole of North East India is about various separatist Movements, still Nagaland, monipur and Assam is in turmoil. Since, the movements and strong, the counter insurgency agendas by the establishment are too strong. So, encounters between the identity finders and identity holders are a regular busyness. Secret killings, purchase and sell of arms, death in unknown reasons, murders are very common in Assam. Mountain, the base camp for almost every self-determination movement of ethnic groups or the sub nationalist armed movements symbolizes man's fate and destiny of life.

SOCIO-ETHNIC CONFLICTS IN THE NORTHEAST

Media attention, hence public awareness, including those of intellectuals and power elites in India, has traditionally been directed at events occurring in the North-Western parts of India. It has been quite apparent since independence, except during the Sino-Indian war in 1962. The problems of Pakistan and Jammu and Kashmir have dulled Indian public and political sensitivities although more security personnel and civilians die annually due to insurgency and inter-tribal conflicts in the North-Eastern states than anywhere else. The contiguity of this region to several other countries, especially China which is India's strategic adversary, makes this region extremely sensitive.

Let us take a look at an important geographical aspect which affects India's security at the strategic level. Entire North Bengal and a bit of Western Assam for about 300 km is sandwiched between Nepal, Chumbi Valley and Bhutan in the North and Bangladesh in the South. The Siliguri corridor which at its narrowest is only 30 km has an average width of about 150 km. Through this corridor all surface communications, both road and railway, to the North-Eastern region pass. Any threat to this corridor or the lower Brahmaputra Valley can seriously affect all movement in peacetime or during war. There are two major factors which are causing problems in this area. The first is the illegal immigration of aliens which is affecting the demographic balance and is a constant source of socio-economic tensions. The second is the emerging socio-ethnic conflicts among the peoples of this region. This is due to a combination of several factors such as tribal groups trying to seek a separate identity because of perceived social, political and identity because of perceived social, political and economic injustice, mainly due to the short-sighted political policies of different regional and national level parties competing for power. The emerging patterns in the states of North Bengal, Assam, Manipur and Tripura are discussed here.

NORTH BENGAL

This is a complex sector. Indian Gorkhas and Indian Muslims who form two major groups of this sector have close emotional, family and cultural links with the peoples in Nepal

and Bangladesh. This, coupled with a porous border and lower economic status, provides fertile ground for illegal immigration. A senior Intelligence Bureau official posted in this region for several years revealed the following methodology of illegal entry into India in an informal conversation with the author.

People exchange property on both sides of the border and migrate. This probably refers more to Hindus from Bangladesh. Marriages take place between members of the family with links across the international border (IB) followed by the whole family migrating to live with the married members of the family on the Indian side of the IB.

There is a seasonal or frequent employment migration from Bangladesh into the border belts of West Bengal, Assam and Tripura, over a period of time. This author during a study tour in 1995 found a large number of alien rickshaw pullers in Guwahati, Agartala and even in (outsider hostile) Dimapur. Apparently this state of affairs extend to head load labourers and farm labour, especially in the lower Brahmaputra Valley in Assam. People come on pilgrimage to visit various Muslim shrines or their families and do not return to Bangladesh. Our system of detection and identification of foreigners is full of loopholes. An IG-level BSF officer in charge of the IB in North Bengal bemoaned that force levels allotted to him for border security were less than half what is available for border security along the Indo-Pak border. He opined, and so does this author after visiting some fenced areas in this region, that fencing is not a solution in this type of terrain. Since the sanction is not total the fencing is in patches (about 125 km in a 1000 km stretch in West Bengal) the BSF does not know whether to guard the IB or the fence! The connivance of the lower strata police, paramilitary personnel and local officials is common for a consideration. Photographs and ration cards are prepared even before the illegal immigration. Ration cards are only a step away from getting into the voters' list, especially with political or bureaucratic help. The population increase in North Bengal is 33 per cent as against West Bengal's and the national average of 23 per cent.

DARJEELING HILL DISTRICT

This district had Siliguri, Kalimpong and Darjeeling sub-

divisions. Darjeeling was ceded to British India after the Anglo-Nepal war in 1816 and therefore has predominantly ethnic Gorkhas of Nepalese origin. Kalimpong was and continues to be on perpetual lease from Sikkim Durbar; it also has a predominantly Gorkha population of Nepalese origin. However, people of both these sub-divisions are Indian citizens and so are the Gorkhas who have settled down here after service in the Indian Army. The migration of Nepalese people into Siliguri area and Jalpaiguri district has increased since 1970. In recent years, after the Nepalese settlers from the Terai region of Bhutan (Bhupatis) were driven out, the sensitivity of this area has increased.

At present about 65,000 Bhupatis have been located in refugee camps in the Japa district of Eastern Nepal under UNHRC. Some of these are roaming around the Dooars area of North Bengal creating law and order problems. It is in this context that we should look into the temporarily pacified Gorkhaland agitation for the demand of a separate Gorkha state under the Indian Union. The agitation under Shri Subhash Ghising, had turned violent or a couple of years in 198788. This was the time the Sino-Indian border in the Eastern sector had become active after the Chinese intrusion into the Sumdorong Chu Valley South of the McMohan line. Our surface communications to the Sino-Indian border in the Eastern Sector were in jeopardy. To appease the agitation leaders, as it normally happens in Indian politics, the Darjeeling District Hall Council (DGHC) was formed with limited autonomy in the social, cultural, developmental and educational. It had no power to raise revenue and had limited capability to cater for all the aspirations of the Gorkhas under DGHC. Should this continue beyond the tolerance level of the people or due to political manoeuvres of the DGHC (State and Central level) the Gorkhaland pot could be on the boil again. This time, taking advantage of the changing demographic pattern in Jalpaiguri district, they could even get "volunteers" from the nearby Bhupati refugee camp in Eastern Nepal. Shri Subhash Ghising has tried to extend his influence into Gorkha-dominated Sikkim and into Eastern Nepal. Off and on Shri Subhash Ghising drops hints of greater Gorkhaland to include Sikkim too. This is bound to result in serious resistance by Lepchas and Bhutiyas

who are the original inhabitants of Sikkim. They are in minority after being swamped by ethnic Nepalese who now form nearly 80 per cent of Sikkim's population. Emerging sub-nationalism and socio-ethnic tensions in this sensitive area would pose problems for national security.

ASSAM

When the East India Company established their control over the Brahmaputra Valley, it started large-scale officially sponsored migration into Assam from the rest of Eastern India. Better educated and emancipated Bengalis came as white collar workers less educated Bengalis, Bihari Muslims for farming, tribal labour from Orissa, Santhal Parganas and Bihar as tea labour, and Nepalese for coal mining in the upper Assam Valley. As early as 1931 fears were expressed about the effect of this movement on Assamese identity and culture.

While presenting the 1931 census report Mr C. S. Mullan said: "it is sad but by no means improbable that in another 30 years, Sibsagar district will be the only part of Assam in which Assamese will find himself at home!" Prophetic words. Today the ethnic Assamese population, i.e., Ahoms and all sections of the plain tribals form barely 30 to 40 per cent of the population, if one does not take into account certain early Bihari and Bengali Muslim settlers who adopted Assamese language and culture. The influence of illegal Bangladeshi Muslims continues: this not only worsens the identity crisis but also poses a threat to India's national security. Today's estimate of illegal Muslim immigrants in Assam could be two to three million, bulk of them concentrated in the lower Brahmaputra Valley contiguous to Bangladesh and the illegal immigrant infected areas of North Bengal. The areas where they are being permitted to settle are in Kokrajhar, Barpeta and Nalbari. They have been allotted pattas in the same areas which Bodos are claiming and an for an autonomous Bodoland. This has created hostility between the Bodos and Muslim settlers in what Bodos perceive as their land.

There is considerable connivance of the parties in power, and out of power, in legalizing the allotment of pattas of land for illegal immigrants. The latest entry into the game is Assam Ganatantra Parishad (AGP), who were the "knights in shining

armour" during the Assam liberation agitation in the eighties and whose main platform for this agitation was detection, identification and deportation of foreigners, i.e., anybody other than Assamese. Today ethnic Assamese, i.e., Ahoms, Bodos and other tribes, who do not want to be identified with Ahoms, are not in majority. Shri S. L. Shokdar, the erstwhile Chief Election Commissioner, in a conference highlighted the abnormally high rate of increase in an electoral college in Assam, especially in 1977 when within 10 months there was an increase of 10.3 per cent. The population growth during the census in 1961 and 1971 was 34.98 per cent as against the national average of 21.64 and 24.87 per cent respectively. >From the late seventies to the mid-eighties the Assam liberation movement kept the Brahmaputra Valley on the boil ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam), the militant wing of this agitation, committed political 'harakiri' with its excesses and is not a force to reckon with at present.

The Bodos, who supported the Assam liberation movement, were disillusioned after the AGP came to power, Plains tribes represented by PTCA (Plains Tribal Council of Assam) have always felt dominated by Ahoms. The undercurrent has been used by the powers that be to fragment Assamese society. The demands for autonomous councils of Karbi Anglong, Udayachal and Bodoland are all part of this process. An autonomous council of Karbi Anglong has been formed; the Bodo Autonomous council has been accepted but is not fully functional, In the meanwhile the Bodo Security Force, the militant element of the Bodo agitation, is actively targeting Bangladeshi Muslim settlements and villages in Bodo-claimed areas, like Kokrajhar, Barpeta and Nalbari. In some incidents in 1994-95 a number of Bangladeshi Muslims have been killed and their settlements destroyed. Muslim settlers are believed to be organizing village defence forces with active help from Bangladesh. If the illegal immigration continues, the situation could become dangerous in an area through which surface communications to the rest of North-Eastern India pass. Currently this area is swarming with security forces operating against the Bodo Security Force whose sanctuaries extend into adjacent Bhutan. ULFA, SULFA (who surrender from ULFA), who were supplied with money and weapons by the Saikia Government and Bodo militants are

extorting money from shopkeepers, truckers, tea industry workers and even common citizens. In fact this seems to have become a way of life to a generation of unemployed youth.

MANIPUR

Manipur is located in the southern part of Northeast India bordering Myanmar. To its North is the Indian state of Nagaland and on its West are Indian state of Nagaland and on its West are the Indian state of Assam and Mizoram. All these states, including Northern Myanmar, have been in a state of turbulence due to sub-nationalism, resulting in insurgency for the past four decades. Manipur is a typical example of a multiethnic and multicultural society, despite living together for hundreds of years, it can be easily affected by ethnic revelry and hostility.

Manipur has an area of about 22,000 sq km of which about one-third forms the Manipur valley and the balance hilly area surrounding the valley. The valley people numbering around 1.2 million, a bulk of whom are Meiteis, have been in contact with other parts of India for centuries. Meiteis follow Hindu religion (Vaishnavism) and culture. They are generally well-educated, culturally advanced and revel in many forms of art. The hill people, about 30 different tribes, were animists till the entry of Christian missionaries in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The bulk of them are now Christians with a sprinkling of tribes following Hinduism and Buddhism. Because of their advanced cultural heritage and identification with Hindu religion, Meiteis do not come under the Scheduled Tribes (ST) status while the hill tribes, forming one-third of the population, come under the ST category and enjoy certain privileges like job reservation, protection of their lands from settlement and ownership by non-STs even if they are Manipuris. This has led to discontent among the Meiteis who perceive that the hill tribes are getting jobs disproportionate to their population, education and culture. Manipur state was a feudal state for many centuries. When India became independent in 1947 Manipur acceded to India. It became part of the Indian Union as a 'C' state in January 1950 and became a full-fledged state on 21 January 1972. This delay was an unfortunate political error because the Meiteis the Valley people, felt that their identification with "Hindu" Indians brought them

no political or economic benefits, while agitating Nagas both in Nagaland and the hill districts of Manipur benefited because of the agitation. These feelings gave encouragement to separatist tendencies; several separatist groups claimed that they were not Hindus and belonged to the old Senamai culture. Corrupt politicians and administration, economic backwardness increased the number of educated unemployed people, who acted as a catalyst.

Insurgency

The insurgency in Manipurean be classified into insurgency in the hills which is linked with insurgency in Nagaland and the Valley insurgency connected with the Meitei separatist movement. The Pan-Mongoloid movement which started in 1956-57 was the first political step of separatists for the Meities liberation from 'Hindu' India. This simmering discontent exploded in 1980 into a full-scale insurgency. There are several militant factions like the United Liberation Front (UNLF), Revolutionary Government of Manipur (RGM), People's Liberation Army (PLA), People's Revolutionary Party of Kanglupak (PREPAK), Joint Revolutionary Council (JRC) and Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP). Each of these factions, through having similar objectives, act separately and sometimes clash with each other. "in Manipur it is as easy to launch a militant outfit as it is to launch a business project in Mumbai," says Shri Yambem Laba, a Meitei special correspondent for *The Statesman* (24 September 1993). Extortion from all sections of society seems to attract unemployed youth as a means of livelihood besides giving them the macho feeling of having power over people. The Army suppressed the insurgency to controllable levels in the early eighties. But the follow-up political action was wanting because the political leaders were busy "horse trading" and shifting party alliances to stay in power. For the same reason they started covertly backing and getting the support of different militant groups. The political instability of the state has contributed considerably to the insurgency though the current turbulence in Manipur is linked more to the intertribal conflicts. The security environment of the society is also vitiated by youths brandishing arms and brand names of one organization or the other to indulge in extortion and kidnappings.

NAGA-KUKI CONFLICT

Kukis are originally inhabitants of Northern Myanmar, bordering Manipur and Mizoram. They were basically nomads but good fighters. They were recruited by Manipur kings for their army, who later settled some of them along the border with Myanmar. Some of these settled down alongside Naga villages and tilled the land owned by Nagas with the latter's concurrence. The Kukis soon started claiming these lands and this was not acceptable to the Nagas who cited the earlier tradition of Kukis handing the land back to Naga villages before they remigrated. Now the Nagas want to drive the Kukis off their lands and villages, hence the ethnic tension and the conflict.

The Kukis are well-organized now: there is Kuki National Front (KNF), Kuki National Army (KNA), Kuki independent Army (KIA) and Kuki Defence Force (KDF). There is also a demand for 'Kukil' within the Indian Constitution, somewhat similar to the demand of Bodoland. In addition to all this is the struggle to control the border town of Moreh and the national highway linking Imphal to Myanmar which passes through Moreh. Moreh is the focal point for smuggling and drug traffic. Till the Kuki-Naga conflict started, NSCN (IM), a strong Naga insurgent group, controlled this town. Now the Kukis are controlling it. The NSCN (IM) is determined to drive the Kukis out of Moreh and out of Kuki settlements in Naga-dominated hill districts. Violence erupted between these tribal groups in June 1992 and till now there have been nearly 1000 killings; and about 2000 houses have been burnt. Nearly 100 villages are affected. The killings have been brutal and the tribal tradition of sparing women and children has been forgotten. Recently there was a brutal attack on Tamil and Punjabi traders of Indian origin from Myanmar, who have settled down in the border town of Moreh.

Mention has been made earlier about the ethnic tensions between the Nagas and the Meiteis of Manipur. In fact, so far as Manipur is concerned the socio-economic problems and lack of security for the general populace caused by ethnic conflict is more serious than the so-called separatist militant movement. The state's armed police and constabulary are incapable of controlling the situation as are the political and civilian agencies.

The police force is generally following tribal loyalties. In fact the armed police is handing over their arms to their respective clansmen at a faster rate than the central security forces can capture. National Highways 39 and 53, the only links to Manipur from the rest of India, have become "death traps".

The situation, which is essentially the result of socio-ethnic conflict, is serious. Innocent lives are being lost, properties destroyed and many security personnel are losing their lives. The politicians are playing with fire for short-term gains and lack the will and political cumen to solve these problems.

TRIPURA

Tripura is a tiny state, by Indian standards, situated in the South-West corner of the seven North-Eastern states of India. It is surrounded on three sides by Bangladesh with an international boundary of 845 km and a short corridor of contact with the mainland through Cachar district of Assam in the North. It is connected to the mainland by a National Highway and a metre gauge railway. Political changes in this part of the subcontinent, firstly by the creation of Pakistan in August 1947, and later by the birth of Bangladesh in 1971 have created upheaval in this state's demographic balance. Before August 1947, the tribal population formed two-thirds of the total population and the rest were plainsmen, most of whom were Bengalis who came in service of the king of Tripura. The situation is reversed now. The loss of identity and pressure on the tribal land has caused serious socio-ethnic tension during the past three decades.

Tripura was a princely state with its history dating back a few thousand years. It has a population (1 991 census) of about 27 lakhs in about 10,500 sq km. The 1961 census showed a decadal increase of population by 78 per cent, i.e., the aftermath of the partition as against the national figure of 21 per cent. The 1971 and 1981 censuses showed a 36.28 and 31.55 per cent increase as against the national average of around 24 per cent. This could be attributed to the migration of refugees both Hindu and Muslims from Bangladesh. Herein lies the bitter pill for the 19 tribes, the natives of Tripura. The political and economic power has gone into the chands of the immigrants. In 1967 some tribes formed a political front called Tripura

Ujjati Juba Samiti (TUJS) whose demands were restoration of tribal lands allotted to non-tribals, creation of reserve areas for tribals and creation of Tribal Area Autonomous Councils (TADC). The Tripura National Volunteers (TNV), a militant wing, was formed in 1980. The anti-foreigner's call given by it resulted in the Mandal massacre when about 1,800 people lost their lives, over 3,600 huts were burnt and there was heavy loss of property.

The Communist Party ruled the state for 10 years between 1977 and 1987 and the Congress party for the rest of the time. The former appears to have popular support and they did provide a better administration. At present while most of Tripura is quiet, there are pockets of unrest in the tribal hill areas, astride roads illegal taxation on load-carrying vehicles is imposed, extortion by kidnappings and occasional attacks on security forces are carried out. None of the so-called insurgent/liberation forces are really strong. TUJS, TNU and National Liberation Front, Tripura (NLFT) are more prominent. Their factional fights cause law and order problems as well as casualties and loss of property of innocent tribesmen. The CPI (M) and Congress(I)'s political competition reverberates through these intra-tribal and intra-militant group's conflicts. In the meanwhile illegal Muslim immigration from Bangladesh continues though not to the extent seen in Assam and North Bengal. The international border is mostly riverine. Border fencing and the border roads being constructed at a cost of a couple of hundred crores of rupees is not likely to reduce this flow of immigrants very much. The state of Tripura should not be allowed to become a festering wound in the body politics of India.

Conclusion

The Gorkhaland agitation had been within the framework of the Constitution. A more radical and violent leader than Shri Subhash Ghising could spring up and agitate for greater Gorkhaland to include Sikkim, Darjeeling Hill District and even Jalpaiguri District. This may or may not be within the framework of the Constitution. Imagine a scenario, however wild, of the demand for an Islamic state and greater Gorkhaland gaining strength from external influences taking firm roots in

North Bengal and the lower Brahmapurta Valley of Assam! This could not only isolate the rest of the North-Eastern region but also give a greater fillip to cessionist movements in Nagaland, Assam and Manipur. This could result in disintegration and dismemberment of the nation state. Is there a way out?

Yes, there is in this scribe's view. Since this problem has risen mostly due to short-sighted acquiescence, if not all the time direct connivance, the solution should come from the same source. Constitutional, legislative and administrative reviews must be done in consultation with all parties, both national and regional, to facilitate a pragmatic solution to the detection and identification of foreigners and, where required, deregistration, and deportation.

The legislations that affect the foreigners. Viz., Foreigners Act 1946, Foreigners (Tribunal) Order 1964, Registration of Foreigners Act 1939 and Illegal Immigrants (Tribunal) Act 1983, as amended in 1985 should be reviewed by a committee consisting of judges and constitutional lawyers, after hearing views of political leaders and administrators from border districts.

The Election Commission too should become more vigilant during review of electoral rolls. In doubtful cases the onus of proof should lie on the claimant and not on the establishment. Political "hands-off" understanding from dabbling with insurgents or terrorists must emerge from political parties. Such support must come under not only criminal but also corrupt electoral practices act.

A free hand must be given to the security forces to whittle down the strength of insurgency, of course within the framework network of human rights. Legislation must be reviewed to strengthen their hand. Our neighbours must be openly told that we will reserve the right to chase and destroy insurgents across the international border, if necessary, unless they take firm action to curb their activities. The US and Israel do it. Our intelligence agencies too must develop a sword arm of action to eliminate insurgent leaders sheltering across the international border. To inhibit illegal immigration from Bangladesh, India should undertake and fund specific

development projects in the border belt of Bangladesh and also be more generous in solving the problem of sharing river waters. In the ultimate analysis this will work out cheaper.

Promises are being made, and in some instances given too for grant of autonomous councils for different tribal areas to satisfy their aspirations. The constitutional validity of these councils, the extent of their financial and administrative powers should be reviewed sincerely so that they can function effectively for the good of their respective tribes.

In conclusion, one can see the gloomy picture of Balkanization in the next few decades, of the North-Eastern region. Our political leaders should take greater note of the events in this region and work out a common multi-dimensional strategy to solve the issues in the national interest because India's national security and integrity are at stake.