



The Talking Guns North East India

Nirendra Dev

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Nirendra Dev
Sr. Journalist



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Introduction

"People often dream of things that never were."

The foremost provocation to pen this book has been guided by author's deep conviction that Northeast India is a different territorial patchwork unlike the run-of-the-mill variety of the national mainstream. To make it clearer, this book is a result of my love affair with the fascinating Northeast and therefore, in overall approach it reflects my personal experience and how as an individual offspring born in the region—with continuous intuition that I am an outsider—I saw things shaping up. It is a story of making as well as unmaking of the northeast.

The volume would fail those who expect everything about the region in it. Most part of this book is based on personal experience whereas, analysis revolves around trial and error philosophy. A volume of this size cannot cover wide canvas like that of northeast. There are hundred and one such events, anecdotes and viewpoints that should have been included. And I have deliberately avoided them.

But in what ways do the exceptional virtues and vices of the northeast speak up?

This is a query I have posed to myself many a times—before and while working on the project. Amid the revealing precariousness of the region, the book is also about the

vividness and the inherent resilient power of the land and the people.

Born in Nagaland and educated partly in Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya, one has seen the region from the other side of the wall vis-à-vis the oft-heard phrase of “national mainstream”—about Delhiwallahs and people in other parts of the country.

The assessment is, therefore, from these experiences. The glance at the “national mainstream” could be made from my stay in discharge of professional duties of a journalist in the national capital New Delhi, and then in Mumbai and for five months during the riot-torn days of 2002 in Gujarat.

But at the same time, as a Bengali, one had biological and historical reasons to be identified as a “plain man” (man from the plains), as ‘Dhwakar’ or Vais (outsiders) by the natives in the northeast. Thus the risk of prejudices often could cloud objective analysis.

Nevertheless, one can find some attachment in “collective identity” to the region and thus an attempt to take a closer look could be justified. More often I have asked and sought to answer myself without much of a success whether I really think like a Naga?

This book is partly a result of those inner conflicts as well.

At the same time, my father had a job in a para-military force called Assam Rifles, founded during British regime, and which had earned the tag of being an anti-insurgency crack team. Tackling insurgency is never an easy task. But in the context of northeast it is altogether a different ball game. Right from childhood we have grown hearing tales—often of “bravery”—how insurgents were shot dead by Assam Rifles jawans. But in later stage, especially as a journalist, one came across such situations when allegations were made about the violation of human rights by Indian army and Assam Rifles.

In that context, my native childhood friends, their parents and family members—the Nagas and the Mizos—had reasons to take me as an offspring from the “enemy camp.” Such a “parichay”—I am using the *desi* term to signify identity deliberately, perhaps, to put the message across better—is something very few from the national mainstream have had. Neither fellow scribes to senior politicians nor civil servants—anyone could understand the trial and tribulations of growing up under such conditions. And hence, most of it what is reflected in this book could also be disagreeable.



Writing in different context on the problem of collective identity for South Asia as a whole, David Ludden wrote about the “historical invention and reinvention of group definitions, associations and solidarities that have shaped people’s experience, feeling, and thinking about where they live, where to they belong, who belong to them, and who and what are foreign, separate and different” (courtesy: ‘India and South Asia’, published by One World, Oxford)

These three issues of “foreign”, “separate” and “different” would ideally apply for any study on ethnic complexities of the northeast. Often I find these terms intermingling and applying to my relationship with the native Assamese or the Nagas. At the same time, in the context of the northeast, these terms could also replace each other. There is another aspect and this I feel like protesting from the top of my voice. As if nothing else happens in the region, the Northeast India steals national limelight either for bomb blasts or protestors putting a vulnerable stāte like Manipur into flames or for once in a while high profile drama like the homecoming of Naga underground leaders—Thuingalang Muivah and Isak Chishi Swu—for parleys with the Prime Minister of India.

The insurgency-related incidents and issues are reported in the national media in the manner that these groups would stop at nothing less than shattering the Union of

India by snatching "independence." Yes, the problems are complex and ought to be understood in their totality taking historical background in focus but the region put together as one canvas is still not lost and is thus our national asset.

Even during the peak of problems and violence in more than one state, there have been states like Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya behaving as "islands of peace." In mid-sixties when perhaps the entire rest of the region was burning, Nagaland was described as an "island of peace" after Naga groups came forward for peace process.

Later in 1990s and in the new millennium, Mizoram attained such a distinction and in the fiscal 2000-2001 it also begged Peace Bonus of Rs 250 crore from the Government of India consolidated fund. But when these states are in peace and the state governments and the common citizens show keenness in developmental process and focus attention on necessities like employment; seldom in the national mainstream people have asked what the far-flung region really means to the rest of India and the people.

The region is easily and quite romantically labelled—the title "hot bed of extremism" or "sensitive." From the officials to the journalists when served with a posting order to move into the northeast are first greeted with condolence notes from colleagues.

Gracefully, for a change, however, a belated realisation has dawned onto the central leadership when a Union Minister P R Kyndiah, of course himself a northeasterner, underlined the region's "strategic" importance for the sub-continent. True, this corner of the country is crucial for India in more than one way and therefore a fervent plea made in this book is—there is still time to save this region and I tell you northeast India is worth saving.

Mini-India

Cradled amidst hilly wilds, the northeastern tip of our country is an ideal description of a mini-India in all its true pluralistic, multi-lingual and multi-racial character. The region

proudly houses a number of ethnic communities—more significantly over 200 tribal and non-tribal groups—living together braving several odds. It is often said that no family can claim as great an ethnic diversity as these seven northeastern states. Even the diversity of Indian sub-continent appears only a humble submission as compared to distinctly different living styles of the tribals and the rest in the region, for more than one reason.

Historically, the various ethnic groups in the region have never been together. The northeast as a unit is thus a product of colonial legacy and thus there is a moral standing when the bogey of expansionist approach from “outsiders” is raised.

This is not a generalised statement about the vast region but it applies to each individual state also. Even the identity of the Nagas refers more to “collective identity” as a 20th century phenomenon because more than 17 tribes and sub-tribes have discovered themselves as a community hardly a few decades back. A neo-community of Chakhesangs among the Nagas has come only with a merger of three clans Chakhros, the Khejas and the Sangtams.

There have been mutual suspicions and rivalries between tribes, the clans, and even confusion on historical background. Does it then leave us with some connections on the emergence of the Naga-Kuki feud in 1990s or how do the Mizos still consider the Kukis as belonging to their stock?

The intelligence officials often do not hesitate to declare that the militants in most parts of the region, especially in states like Tripura, are “milking their own people.” From tribals to tea estate bigwigs, the militants have spelt terror for all and sundry. In around early 2003, at a high level delegation of the Union Home Ministry, the then Deputy Prime Minister L K Advani was told that in fact, terrorism in states like Tripura and Manipur has ceased to exist for any political cause. Well the description could be little stretching too far—but there is no denying the fact that the

militancy is also involved rampantly with abduction, extortion and gunrunning. By 2001-2002, Advani told a meeting of top brass from military and attended by Tripura Chief Minister Manik Sarcar and Governor Siddheshwar Prasad that a state with only 3 million has the highest rate of kidnapping for ransom. "No businessman will ever invest here if such a situation continues to prevail," Advani had said.

Advani had a serious point as with guns reigning supreme, panic had gripped the fledgling tea industry when tribal guerrillas—with tacit support from Bangladesh—regularly gone on rampage, killing and kidnapping garden-owners and staff in a desperate bid to step up their extortion activities.

On this backdrop, it is vital to ponder how did the ethnic and communal divide take a "peace-loving abode" "Meghalaya" into the lap of insurgency? Similarly, attention should be focused on the more recent "ethnic cleansing" of Biharis and Marwaris in Assam or why did the Meitei Manipuris put the state into fire on the issue—'Naga unification'.

In 2005, in a series of incidents leaving all concerned shell-shocked, the Karbis and the Dimasas fought in Karbianglong district leaving as many as 80 people beheaded. More than the steps to provide them succour what followed was politics with Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi blaming the then NDA convenor George Fernandes and vice versa. BJP MP S S Ahluwalia, who made an on-the-spot visit to the area at the directive of the party's central leadership, complained the Christians were carrying out conversion in the garb of relief works. He also made a practically ominous looking remark that perhaps conversion programme was related to 'Nagaland For Christ' goal as enshrined in the preamble of National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN).

BJP on its part also has a different angle to the Karbinaglong head-hunting. "The violence was sparked off by the Congress government to divert people's attention

from Bangladeshi immigrants issue as Supreme Court had scrapped the migrants friendly IMDT Act," said Ahluwalia, appearing in BJP's regular briefing at party headquarters in New Delhi.

No doubt, these are recent skirmishes amid cherished spirits of mutual share and care in the region for ages.

Added to this were the mutual ethnic tensions and even the culture of head-hunting as among the Nagas, making things all the more complex for the sociologists to comprehend the true nature of the problem. The maxim of 'live and let live' is often found implemented religiously—with people coming forward at each other's joy or trouble while extending a helping hand—but at times this was also thrown into wind on the slightest of pretext.

For social scientists these issues had, therefore, posed a considerable challenge.

In other words, a mere look at the socio-political aspect of the northeastern region shows the growing influence of tribalism and ethnic considerations. These parochial considerations have been often allowed to be in the driving seat in deciding the fate of any issue. In most cases, the story of local policing is of failure. From Nagaland to Meghalaya, there have been umpteen allegations that innocent "outsiders" had no law or law and order agencies to ensure their protection. Similarly, the natives believe that Indian army is only an instrument of expansionist designs. These differences have only increased and thus often been blown out of proportion making a classic case of a mountain being made out of a molehill. Thus, knowingly or unknowingly, the ethnic pluralism turned out to be a great liability practically in all states.

Therefore, in Manipur the controversy over demand for scraping of the Armed Forces Special Power Act had the local people's sanction. After all, the army or para military forces like Assam Rifles are identified with the "outsiders." Hold on! The outsiders are not foreign—neither the white

skinned scheming Britons nor the aggressive Chinese—but they are the helpless Biharis and Bengalis or for that matter Marwari businessmen who have landed in the region driven more by circumstances than by choice.

Thus, we see in Nagaland and Manipur, the extortion drive initially was directed against the outsiders—“plain man” (people from plains mainland India) in Nagaland or the “Mayangs” (outsiders) in Manipur. Is it then really altogether a different story that gradually the assault of extortion got directed against locals—leaving the natives bleeding and fleeing?

Actually, different “enemies” have been created for each tribe and ethnic group from time to time. In Assam, for instance, the initial “anti-foreigner” agitation against influx of Bangladeshis got embroiled into ‘Bongali kheda’ (chase out Bengali) campaign and by as late as 2004 it turned against Biharis on the pretext that Biharis would take away the railway jobs meant for the locals.

In Nagaland and Manipur, after years of staying together the Kukis and the Nagas found each other turn bloodthirsty against one another.

While those from the plains could leave the “disturbed” hills, the local tribals had nowhere to go. For them army on one hand continued as an image of tyranny while on the other, insurgents became the cause of lasting problems. In Manipur, Manorama Devi, though in her death attained martyrdom and as a unification factor for withdrawal of Assam Rifles from state capital Imphal and the vicinity, there was no denying that Manorama Devi was herself described by the then Manipur Chief Minister as an “insurgent.” She was, therefore, not in any act other than fighting against India’s sovereignty. This is the complexity of an issue—true not only in Manipur but the entire northeast.

In Assam, there have been often reports suggesting that the ULFA, the frontal militant organization United Liberation Front of Asom, contrary to the goal set during its christening

in 1979 often found itself at the receiving end as a victim of ethnic lobbies. For instance, ULFA general secretary Anup Chetia represented Jeriagaon, Ahoms were represented by its chairman Arbinda Rajkhowa and the third represented by the likes of Sasha Choudhuri and Pranati Deka.

A state, where original agitation was directed against the Bengalis, has today engrossed itself into a serious crisis with killings and extortion becoming the order of the day.

In Nagaland, the potent militant group National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM) remained basically a Tangkhul-Sema domain while the Khaplang faction had ethnic groups mainly from the twin districts of Mon and Tuensang besides the sizeable presence of dominating Aos from Mokokchung district.

In the history of any nation or ethnic or linguistic community, youths play a vital role. It is a shame and no less surprising for the young men not to come forward for their country or community — when it is at transitional mode and needs the younger lot most. In the northeast context, unfortunately, young students joining bodies like Naga Students Federation (NSF) or Khasi Students Union (KSU) decide the role of the youths. The organizations like NSF, KSU or All Assam Students Union (AASU) are only better known for their parochial agenda. But the young students joining these forums only end up furthering their future in the organization by spewing venom on “outsiders” and the Government of India.

In Mizoram, Mizo Students’ agitation had assumed such a proportion that the firebrand IPS officer, Kiran Bedi, the then state DGP, a national icon in New Delhi and elsewhere, had to leave the state over her daughter’s admission into a medical college from the state quota.

During my stint at PTI Headquarters in New Delhi in 1998, I happened to be at a luncheon press conference of AASU in Press Club of India wherein the student leaders were repeatedly lambasting New Delhi’s ‘gross negligence

and failure' vis-à-vis the state of Assam. Interestingly, in the same breath they could hardly speak on the role of the elected MPs from Assam.

But notwithstanding the oft seen ethnic chill, nowhere perhaps the proverb "United We Stand and Divided We Fall" is more nearer to truth. In Nagaland itself, despite the political issue of such serious dimension hanging fire for long, the Naga-non-Naga relation has remained one of the most cherished ties.

As a Bengali I can vouch for the statement, as my best friends still happen to be the Nagas. Honestly, the author has travelled across India and has stayed for good tenure in New Delhi, Ahmedabad and Mumbai but found none so great as the Nagas. Actually, the warmth shown by Naga friends is something I miss anywhere else in the country. The bond is often missing even among my relatives.

There is yet another case of certain principles Nagas have upheld quite sincerely.

In Nagaland, unlike many in other parts of India, no Hindu festival has ever been disturbed by the Nagas though almost entire Naga population swears by Christianity. Even other communities in the northeastern region itself has often fomented troubles during Hindu festivals and precipitated ethnic tensions. In post-1986 phase Meghalaya capital 'Shillong' became notorious for anti-Gorkhalis and anti-Bengali communal tension during Durga Puja or Diwali. During the height of Assam disturbance, Durga Puja, the festival generally associated with the Bengalees used to pass through in marred spirit.

In fact, the spirit of happy mutual existence is the very basic fabric of community life in the region but religious platforms have not been spared of criticism. Often, there are allegations that the church in the northeast has instigated insurgency. Once former Nagaland Chief Minister S C Jamir charged the influential Nagaland Baptist Church Council (NBCC) with "dividing the God." He was referring to

political patronisation of the church under his arch rival Vamuzo.

Again, among the commoners—the next-door neighbours, the classmates and colleagues in workplaces—the instinct for a mutual ethnic existence has been prevalent quite strong in the very psyche of the common people. Only regret is that very often the simpleton people of the region are misled by the vested interest — from both within and outside the country. It also goes without saying that for most common people, public leaders and the educated elites, the special focus on church and religious rituals is important in the public life. Any event of family remembrance, mourning or merry-making and commemoration and public sittings like assembly proceedings and election rallies often begin with a prayer.

Porous Borders

Porous international borders have facilitated large-scale infiltration disturbing the regional demographic pattern. This is another area that ought to be studied in its totality. The influx to sparsely populated hilly region has been from both sides—domestic as well as international—especially from human reservoir called Bangladesh. There is a destabilising impact of migrations from neighbouring states and countries. Various ethnic demands—often leading to ugly parochial conflicts—are consequences of such demographic destabilisation. The infiltration of Bangladeshi Muslims had assumed such ominous dimension that the very movement somewhere lost its track and had turned into a primarily “Bongali kheda (Hate Bengali)” campaign.

The very fact that the northeast shares 98 per cent of its borders with foreign countries and a negligible two per cent with the rest of India is a cause by itself for the problems haunting the region. But this vital fact has been hardly understood and looked into seriously both by New Delhi's *sarkari* policy-makers or the ivory tower experts in the mainland. This has caused tremendous harm in bringing about emotional integration.

AM Gokhale, former Chief Secretary, Nagaland is known in the state for his pioneering efforts in bringing about several developmental schemes. Among the schemes was the path breaking—Village Development Board (VDB), a model later tried in other states. Known for his candid remarks among colleagues, he had once said, “New Delhi tends to be Aurangzeb’s Delhi”—an image of tyranny and exploitation. In fact, the patronising kind of approach from bureaucrats and their influence on ill-informed politicians had only given a signal of “arrogance” for the people in the region. The reasons for most of the problems—those when minor in nature could have been handled—have more to do with the ‘official arrogance’. My PTI colleague at Aizawl, Vanlalruata has a patent sentence on this. “The arrogance leads to a big gap between the official vision of things in the region and the ground reality.” He would not spare even media and other so-called strategic experts and intellectuals from this syndrome.

Thus, by and large, there remains utter ignorance about the land and the people of the region. Somehow, the story of the fascinating region is an experience beyond comprehension of New Delhi experts and benefactors.

Inaccessibility to the mainland has also affected the trade and thereby the development of the region. The Siliguri corridor or the chicken neck is just not enough to deal with the volume of movement of goods and people forcing the inhabitants to look the other side and thus opening the flood gates for inimical elements like the Pakistan’s Inter Service Intelligence (ISI) to exploit the situation in undertaking its long-drawn low intensity war.

While the ISI operatives in Nepal and Bangladesh started fostering insurgency movement in the region, the country on its part has, however, failed to take appropriate action in dealing with our so-called friendly neighbours Nepal and Bangladesh. These issues have also been debated in the book.

I have not in the least lost sight of the role played by the countries like China and the United States of America, especially during India's pro-Soviet *avtaar*.

The book, in fact, tries to look at something beyond that meets the eyes. How and why the trouble of once in the hills of Nagaland and Mizoram, emerging mostly political in nature, could spread across the region and in such ominous portents?

Today, the provision of the Disturbed Area Act is enforced quite liberally in one time peaceful states like Tripura, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh.

In addition to the ULFA, Assam is also a host to other militant organisations like the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT). These outfits have been born primarily due to "exploitation" of Bodo tribals by the seat of power in Assam, state capital Dispur and not New Delhi. Moreover, at least 16 Islamic militant groups have surfaced threatening peace and more vitally the demographic pattern of the land.

The disease of insurgency and culture of gunrunning punctuated with frequent spells of extortion and abductions has trickled down to neighbouring North Bengal stretch also only highlighting the ominous dimension, the malady is assuming gradually.

The Kamatapur Liberation Organisation (KLO) was formed in 1995 by the Koch-Rajbongshi tribes with the objective of carving out a separate Kamatapur State, comprising six north Bengal districts in West Bengal and Goalpara, Dhubri, Bongaigaon and Kokrajhar districts in lower Assam. KLO operates in tandem with the ULFA. Tushar Das alias Jibon Singha, the 'Chairman' of KLO, was arrested in October 1999. But he could escape and agencies believe; he is again leading the fledgling outfit. Other leaders at the decision-making levels in KLO include Hiten Rai, Ravi Rajbongshi, Rahul Rai and Kajal Rai.

Apart from these prominent outfits, there are a few smaller and splinter groups. They include the Rabha National Security Force operating in the Goalpara, Bongaigaon and Dhubri districts, Tiwa National Revolutionary Force (TNRF), Bengali Tiger Force (BTF), Adivasi Security Force (ASF), People's United Liberation Front (PULF) and Gorkha Tiger Force (GTF).

In 2004, the parochial movements took yet another interesting turn when the All Adivasi National Liberation Army (AANLA) was formed giving itself the role to push the interest of the Adivasi or tea plantation workers' community across the state. After making occasional noises, the fledgling outfit shot into the limelight in 2007 after the group claimed responsibility for the December 13 bomb attack on Delhi-bound Rajdhani mail which killed five passengers and injured nine others.

Intelligence officials in New Delhi were quick to understand the significance of the attack and the subsequent claim to the blast. New Delhi viewed it as a "shadowy Adivasi insurgent group" in Assam with definite links with some of northeastern separatist groups and a "possible" nexus with the Maoists and ISI support base in Bangladesh.

The group was formed in the Singhashan hills of Karbi Anglong district, in southern Assam, to push for greater rights for the community, who have been serving the tea gardens and other key labour sector for decades in Assam and other parts of the region. The group is also demanding ST status for the community and is believed to have a listed cadre strength of less than a hundred, mostly in Karbi Anglong, Golaghat and Jorhat districts. However, it has also spread its tentacles in the eastern tea-growing districts of Sivasagar, Dibrugarh and Tinsukia.

With the first-hand experience of a northeasterner born and brought up in the lap of the wilds of the region, the author tries to analyse some of the points as highlighted.

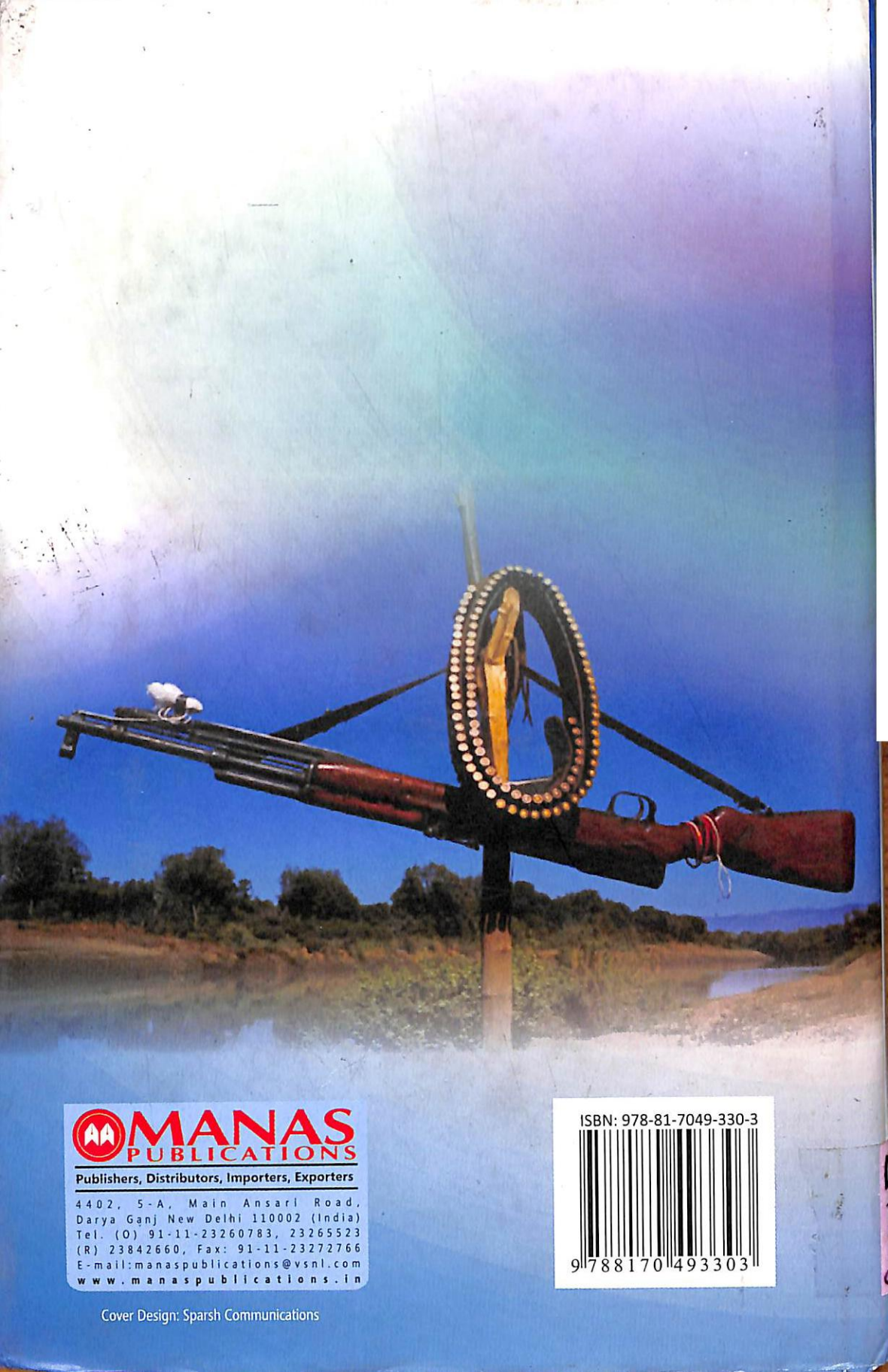
The book, in fact, tries to make penetrating inroads into the social, economic and political philosophy of the people. There are many factors responsible for the complex situation in Northeast. The book identifies most of these but my conclusive refrain would be that simple piece meal handling is no panacea. This would not only fail to bring about total normalcy but could only boomerang.

The rampant violence in Manipur in 2001 following Vajpayee government's ill-advised move to extend Naga ceasefire to all Naga inhabitant areas without assessing Meitei mindset on the issue is a case in point. Meiteis revolted against the move, which they conceived was aimed at "disintegrating" the present state of Manipur only to please the Tangkhul Nagas, the dominant tribe in the hilly region of Manipur and the ethnic community of Naga rebel leader Muivah.

It was a good realization when refusing to bow down before pressure tactics and brinkmanship of NSCN (IM), the government retracted from the move to extend ceasefire to other states.

The issue remains a hanging fire. The Nagas would not give it up and Meiteis would find it difficult to stomach. The then Home Minister L K Advani later told me on the sidelines of a function in New Delhi that, "the issue was not mere ceasefire, but territory." When I started to put up an argument that his government was ill-advised on the issue, he was frank enough in admitting that it was failure to understand the temperament of the Manipuirs. My Imphal-based journalist friend Pradip Phanjoubam later remarked on the subject, "A good section of the Central leadership still does not seem to have got the message as they still insist on acting tough, instead of being concerned that such an orientation can only harden the people's attitude."

The book points up the foreign-hand factor that has made the Union government's efforts to tackle the complexity of northeast problems often difficult. Rightly runs the chapter entitled, 'There is no short cut to solution'. Many things



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