BEYOND
Counter-insurgency

Breaking the Impasse in Northeast India

edited by SANJIB BARUAH

OXFORD

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

SANJIB BARUAH

Indian policy towards its Northeast has seen significant reorientation in recent years. In 2001, a cabinet-level Department for Development of the North Eastern Region (DONER) was launched to put the economic development of the region on a fast track. Northeast India is the only region in the country whose development is the specific mandate of a department of the national government. Enormous public resources are being spent in trying to bridge the region's 'development gap'. There is an industrial policy in place that gives attractive tax incentives for investing in the region. The Northeast Business Summit held periodically since 2002, co-sponsored by DONER and the Indian Chamber of Commerce, showcases potential investment opportunities in the region. The Asian Car Rally and a number of similar events have drawn attention to Northeast India's future as a 'gateway to Asia', in line with the Look East policy—India's efforts to solidify diplomatic and economic ties with Southeast Asia. In 2007, India's External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee visited the cities of Shillong and Guwahati in Northeast India to explain to local audiences the promises of the Look East Policy for the region. Both events were sponsored by the public diplomacy division of the Ministry of External Affairs. Rarely has a country invested so much in 'public diplomacy' at home.

The Look East Policy, in the words of a former External Affairs ministry official, 'envisages the Northeast region not as the periphery of India, but as the centre of a thriving and integrated economic space linking two dynamic regions with a network of highways, railways, pipelines, transmission lines crisscrossing the region' (Sikri 2004). The then Secretary-East of the Ministry of External Affairs, Rajiv Sikri, said that his hope was that one day it would be possible to drive from Kolkata via Dhaka, or from Guwahati to Yangon and Bangkok in three

or four days, and trains and buses would carry 'millions of tourists, pilgrims, workers and businessmen in both directions' (ibid.).

Despite such ambitions, when it comes to the festering low-intensity armed conflicts of the region, there are few overt signs of a policy reorientation, or of any awareness that the persistence of armed conflicts and the existing restrictions on travel and on land and labour markets are formidable hurdles to the region becoming a 'gateway'. Yet the exceptional efforts on the part of India's foreign policy establishment to explain the benefits of the Look East Policy probably reflect the expectation that convincing the locals of those benefits would translate into reduced sympathy for the region's rebel groups. The restrictions on land and labour markets are the legacy of the boundaries drawn by British colonial rulers between spaces of law and spaces of custom. Today they serve multiple goals including national security and protective discrimination for scheduled tribes (STs).[1] It is hard to imagine that these restrictions would end without the political resolution of key conflicts. Yet their incompatibility with the vision of a dynamic transnational economic space is rather obvious. The hope in policy circles seems to be that counter-insurgency operations, and negotiations with leaders of insurgent groups, when feasible, would keep armed conflicts within manageable limits, until some day, development, turbo-charged by cross-border economic ties, magically trumps the conflict story. The issue of gradually removing these restrictions, it is assumed, can be safely postponed until that day.

Phrases like 'ethnic insurgencies', 'cross-border terrorism', and 'proxy wars' are the staple of Indian official talk about the Northeast, though there is no evidence that policies spelt out by this vocabulary have successfully grappled with the sources of the region's multilayered conflicts. This vocabulary also underscores tensions between the preferences of national security managers for the close monitoring of borders, and the openness of borders envisaged by a transnational

[1] The category 'tribe' despite all its conceptual problems is part of Indian political and policy discourse primarily because of a system of protective discrimination that exists in favour of groups listed as tribes. The term 'scheduled tribe' refers to groups that are included in the official schedule of 'tribes' as being entitled to protective discrimination. Later in this chapter I shall discuss the difficulties that the Indian political system faces for leaving open the question of which groups are entitled to protective discrimination, constitutionally and politically.

economic space. The national security-centric discourse about the Northeast—shaped mostly by former bureaucrats and retired army, police, and intelligence officials—is 'heavily pro-state and insensitive to the vulnerabilities of the common man and dismissive of the frequent transgression of rights of its own citizens by the state' (Dasgupta 2004: 4469). In the scholarship on armed civil conflicts in the world—and on managing, resolving, or transforming them—there has been a virtual intellectual revolution during the past decade or so. But policy thinking in India has been mostly insulated from these debates and insights. Even the Look East Policy has, in effect, been hijacked by the military and security establishment. Unlike China that has been successful in using closer economies ties with Southeast Asia for developing its border regions, says Sushil Khanna of the Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta, comparable Indian efforts at economic integration have been lukewarm. A policy of 'opening up' has been used to 'strengthen ties with the military regimes in Bangladesh and Myanmar and launch counter-insurgency movements against the groups from North Eastern India'. Thus 'the fruits of rapid growth and closer integration with the global economy' that characterize the Indian economy in general have 'totally by-passed the border region of North East India' (Khanna 2008: 9, 14–15).

Viewed through comparative lenses, Northeast India's conflicts are of 'extraordinary duration' and the sheer number of rebel groups makes Northeast India 'an outlier by world standards' (Lacina in Chapter 15 of this volume).[2] Rebel groups remain active for long periods even though they know that goals like secession have little chance of success. The protracted nature of rebellions, mostly by ragtag bands of militants, makes the region a counterpoint to India's present image as a mature democracy, a dynamic economy, and an emerging global power. But thanks partly to the government's travel restrictions—for instance, research visas to foreign scholars to study Northeast India are almost never granted—the story remains marginal to the popular global image of contemporary India. While New Delhi expects the magic bullet of development to eventually come to its rescue, for the moment, in a region that is peripheral to the national imaginary, the costs of letting low-intensity conflicts proliferate and fester are seen as affordable. The naïve and economically deterministic faith in a development fix is not

[2] References to chapters in this book are not cited with page numbers. Only references to other works are cited with full bibliographic information.

likely to find much support among contemporary scholars of conflict and peace studies. To be sure, the notion of a development fix does respond to structural factors cited in many popular explanations of armed civil conflicts. Poverty, underdevelopment, and lack of economic opportunities are, after all, everyone's favourite bogey as causes of armed civil conflicts. However, state weaknesses and state failure—the other structural factor typically cited in the academic literature as the cause of such conflicts—evoke little interest in Indian policy circles. But India is not immune to this phenomenon. State weakness, albeit localized, is endemic in areas like Northeast India (Baruah 2005a; Saha and Mallavarapu 2006: 4259). Yet, except for a rhetorical nod, substantive measures for building and nurturing institutions of good governance scarcely feature in the policy agenda of Indian counter-insurgency experts or believers in a development fix.

A World Bank report finds existing institutional arrangements to be the principal obstacle to the utilization of Northeast India's vast water resources for sustainable development. The relevant institutional structure, it points out, is highly centralized: one that suffers from 'the paternalism of central-level bureaucrats, coercive top-down planning, and little support or feedback from locals'. Local stakeholders mistrust these centralized structures: they do not believe that developmental initiatives really have their best interests in mind. So dysfunctional are the institutional arrangements that even an embankment project designed to help people of an area may be opposed by its intended beneficiaries (World Bank 2006: 13–14). This observation can be extended to the institutions of governance in Northeast India more generally: a centralized approach and a gulf between power holders and stakeholders apply even more to the institutions engaged in counter-insurgency. For contributors to this volume, the quality and health of India's democratic institutions, on which Indian policy talk is relatively silent, is perhaps the most important area of policy intervention.

Perhaps one exception to the relative insulation of Indian policy from the academic literature on armed civil conflicts is the theory mooted by some scholars that zeroes in on rebel finances—which they describe as 'greed'—and discounts 'grievances' as the cause of armed civil conflicts.[3] The theme finds an echo in Indian policy talk. Rebellions, in the greed view of armed civil conflicts, are more like organized crime. Rebels are its prime movers, civilians the victims,

[3] For a classic formulation of this argument see Collier (2000).

and the state by definition a friend of the civilian population (Marchal 2001). An implicit assumption in this kind of analysis is that once these rebellions are eliminated—by whatever means necessary—a 'normal' peaceful democratic polity would return. Such assumptions underlie many writings by Indian security experts and members of the counter-insurgency establishment. They seem to believe that extortions, violence, and doing the bidding of foreign intelligence agencies are all that is there to the rebellions of Northeast India.

In the public debates in the region, there is deep scepticism about such simple-minded characterizations and explanations, though these ideas, popular among key officials especially in central government organizations, have a profound influence on Indian policy. Thus Hiren Gohain, a widely respected Assamese intellectual, and known for his consistent opposition to the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), asks rhetorically: why is it that Assamese who condemn ULFA's atrocities still 'demur at the plan to physically exterminate them and insist on a sincere attempt at peace'? The Assamese by and large do not believe that the 'extremists' are all puppets of Pakistani intelligence. Whatever may be their shortcomings, the Assamese see them as being related to 'some legitimate and sound ideas of self-determination'. ULFA as a political movement, says Gohain, cannot be understood except in the context of the history of modern Assam. Yet there are 'very powerful and influential quarters determined to choke off all rational discussion of the issue' (Gohain 2007: 1012). Manipuri newspaper editor Pradip Phanjoubam writes in Chapter 7 of this volume that whether or not the charges of 'criminalization and lumpenization' of rebel groups are true they cannot explain Northeast India's rebellions. Unemployment may indeed be a factor, but 'youth frustration and unemployment' is more likely to find an outlet in 'drugs and other socially deviant behaviours' than in rebellions.

While the notion of a development fix, or the premises of the greed theory may be flawed, it does not mean that particular grievances articulated by insurgent organizations are better guides to understanding Northeast India's conflicts. Despite recurring themes in rebel narratives such as political autonomy, economic justice, and cultural rights, any consideration of rebel groups in Northeast India must come to terms with the multiplicity of voices, and the tensions that often exist between competing rebel agendas. A rebel group with a particular ethnic constituency may be at war with another rebel group, and indeed its primary opposition may not be with the Indian state

at all. It might even cooperate with government security agencies in fighting a rival group and when such ties with official security agencies develop, the public commitment of such groups to armed struggle or sovereignty can be a source of embarrassment for those in charge of defending the legal political order.

This volume comes out of a project of the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi. Most of the essays included here were discussed and debated at two workshops held in Guwahati and New Delhi in 2005 and 2006. Dissatisfaction with conditions on the ground, and with the policy prism through which the conflicts are generally viewed, bring the authors of these essays together. The emphasis of the project, 'Rethinking Northeast India's Conflicts', and of this volume, rests on the term 'rethinking': on new ways of approaching these conflicts, and on ways to resolve them. The volume is not intended to be inclusive: notable writers on the region—including well-known security and counter-insurgency experts—are not represented. However, apart from a critical distance from conventional wisdom, the contributors share neither a common theoretical perspective, nor a single political position. They work for a variety of institutions in India and abroad and they include academics—from the social sciences as well as the humanities—journalists, and an administrator. A majority of them have roots in Northeast India. Incorporating local voices has been one of the goals of the project. However, since there are multiple claims made to territory in this region, and multiple memories, counter-memories, and visions of the future at play, it was not our goal to find representative or 'authentic' local voices: there is no singular local voice on any issue. Instead we have tried to incorporate the local by including contributors whose work embodies the critical rethinking of the conflicts that is going on in the region's rich public intellectual life. The authors all come from diverse intellectual traditions, and their political convictions vary.

Strange Multiplicity[4] and the Landscape of Conflicts

What explains this multiplicity of mostly ethnically based low-intensity conflicts? Certain factors specific to postcolonial Northeast India[5] provide the backdrop: (*a*) the region's particular ecology and the history of state formation; (*b*) certain legacies of colonial knowledge;

[4] I have borrowed the phrase 'strange multiplicity' from Tully (1995).

[5] Parts of this section reproduce material earlier published in Baruah (2007).

(*c*) the frontier quality of the region and the massive demographic transformation that it has been going through in modern times; and (*d*) the effects of certain peculiarities of postcolonial India's constitutional political order. James C. Scott's distinction between state spaces and non-state spaces[6] gives us a comparative handle on the region's well-known linguistic and ethnic diversity. One of the world's 'largest, if not *the* largest remaining non-state space', writes Scott, is:

> The vast expanse of uplands ranging from northeastern India and eastern Bangladesh through northern Burma, northern Thailand, three provinces of southwestern China, most of Laos, and much of upland Vietnam all the way to the Central Highlands—more than two million square kilometers. Lying at altitudes from 500 meters above sea level to more than 4,000 meters, it could be thought of as a Southeast Asian Appalachia, were it not for the fact that it sprawls across seven nation states (Scott 2006: 8).

Historically, this vast region's ethnic landscape has had a 'bewildering and intercalated "gradients" of cultural traits' (Scott 2000: 21–2). In the case of the Nagas of Northeast India and Burma, for instance, ethnographers and missionaries engaged in a struggle 'to make sense of the ethnographic chaos they perceived around them: hundreds, if not thousands, of small villages seemed to be somewhat similar to each other but also very different, by no means always sharing the same customs, political system, art or even language' (Jacobs et al. 1990: 23).

Scott suggests that such a confusing ethnoscape[7] has something to do with swidden agriculture—the common mode of livelihood in the hills. Historically, in these parts of the world land was abundant, but manpower was in short supply. The problem confronting the states emerging in the valleys was to have large enough subject populations. Wars were not over territory, but about capturing subjects and slaves. The labour-starved states of the plains could not capture the dispersed and mobile populations in the hills for forced labour or military service; nor were tax collectors able to monitor their numbers or their holdings

[6] The argument is premised on the work of James C. Scott (2000 and 2006). I am grateful to Scott for permitting me to cite his unpublished work.

[7] For an elaboration of the term 'ethnoscape' see Arjun Appadurai (1990). Appadurai coined the term to deal with the flows of people across international borders and the emergence of multiple forms of diasporic identities. For Appadurai the suffix 'scape' serves to draw attention to the fact that these are not objectively given relations but 'deeply perspectival constructs'. Ethnic identities in Northeast India too are perspectival constructs.

and income. Thus non-transparency in relation to the surveillance systems of the lowland states, Scott suggests, was the very rationale of the lifestyles of the hills, and might even explain the ethnic landscape (Scott 2000: 2).

The non-state spaces in the hills and the state spaces in the lowlands were in a symbiotic relationship. But categories like hill tribes and valley peoples—product of the hills–plains binary of colonial knowledge—are 'leaky vessels' in Scott's words. There were back-and-forth movements between the hills and the plains. Wars produced movements in both directions. While the attractions of commerce and what the lowlanders like to call civilization may have generated movements of hill peoples downwards, it was not a one-way flow. Thanks to the extortionist labour demands of the lowland states, and the vulnerability of wet-rice cultivation to crop failures, epidemics, and famines, there were also movements to the hills where more subsistence alternatives were available (Scott 2000: 3–4). It is this symbiotic relationship that is probably reflected in a world where languages, in philosopher Mrinal Miri's words, 'live so close to each other' that 'in many cases, one gets inducted into the life of the community not just through one language but several languages, so people grow up as naturally multilingual beings'. When one switches from one language to another and mixes different languages in a conversation, writes Miri, 'one doesn't move from one vision of the world to another in a kind of schizophrenic frenzy; but one is, as it were, a native citizen of a multi-visionary world' (Miri 2005: 55).

In grand historical terms, the consequences of the transformation of non-state spaces and peoples into state spaces become most vivid in the 'massive reduction of vernaculars of all kinds: of vernacular languages, minority peoples, vernacular cultivation techniques, vernacular land tenure systems, vernacular hunting, gathering and forestry techniques, vernacular religion, etc' (Scott 2006: 7). Contemporary Northeast India's linguistic and cultural diversity reflects the resilience of a historic non-state space despite powerful odds. For pre-colonial states such as the valley states of Assam (the Ahom state), Manipur, and Tripura, the project of transforming non-state spaces into state spaces was, to borrow Scott's phrase, no more than 'a mere glint in the eye'. But the colonial state as well as the postcolonial Indian state is able to mobilize unprecedented amount of resources to realize such a project.

The massive demographic shifts in the region that began in colonial times and continue to this day tell a story of this transformation. Some

long-term trends in the agrarian history of South Asia give concrete evidence of this process at work. During the century after 1880, writes historian David Ludden, 'when statistics appear for the first time' permanent cultivation expanded at extremely high rates in Northeast India—'faster than almost anywhere else in South Asia'. Much of this expansion was the result of lowland agriculturalists 'investing in land at higher altitudes'. Indeed 'the physical expansion of cultivated farmland remained the major source of additional increments of agricultural production in South Asia until 1960' (Ludden 2003: 17). The expansion of agriculture has also meant massive immigration into the region from other parts of the subcontinent, and increases in the density of population, and along with it, the minoritization of many indigenous communities, and the fear of other such communities of becoming minorities. In that sense the Northeast Indian story is part of the larger story that Scott outlines: the 'world's last great enclosure movement' taking over the vast Asian transnational non-state space 'albeit clumsily and with setbacks' (Scott 2006: 4–5).

A particular legacy of colonial knowledge gives a territorial frame to the postcolonial politics of ethnicity in the region. British colonial ethnography, to borrow Paul Gilroy's words, had a 'bio-cultural' notion of ethnic traits as 'fixed, solid almost biological' and inheritable (Gilroy 1987: 39)—and 'tribes', these officials and ethnographers believed, all had their supposed natural habitats. The distinction between 'hill tribes' and 'plains tribes', and the assignment of particular hills to particular 'hill tribes', fundamentally at odds with local cultural dynamics and spatial practices, is one of its major legacies. The ethno-territorial frame that colonial officials used to create boundaries between administrative units and to devise various rules of exclusion, continue to shape notions of entitlement and the aspirations of ethnic groups—as articulated by political organizations speaking on their behalf.

Certain characteristics of the postcolonial India's constitutional order fuel the proliferation of ethnic demands. India's protective discrimination practices have made 'scheduled tribe' status a passport to educational and public employment opportunities. India's constitution leaves the question of which groups are entitled to preferences constitutionally and politically open (Weiner 1983: 46). Preferential policies, as Myron Weiner has observed, tend to create a particular political process affecting the ways in which groups are organized, the demands that are made, the issues that constitute policy debates, and the way coalitions are formed. By facilitating group mobilization in

support of new preferences or the extension of existing preferences, preferential policies create 'political struggles over how the state should allocate benefits to ethnic groups, generating a backlash on the part of those ethnic groups excluded from benefits, intensifying the militancy of the beneficiaries, and reinforcing the importance of ascription as the principle of choice in allocating social benefits and facilitating mobility' (Weiner 1983: 49).

The Indian constitution empowers the president of India to specify by public notification the 'tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within tribes or tribal communities which shall for the purposes of the Constitution be deemed to be Scheduled Tribes'. According to Marc Galanter, a major scholar of Indian law, ethnic communities listed on the schedule were 'defined partly by habitat and geographic isolation, but even more on the basis of social, religious, linguistic and cultural distinctiveness—their "tribal characteristics"'. Just where the line between 'tribals' and 'non-tribals' should be drawn has not always been free from doubt (Galanter 1984: 150.) The phrase 'tribal characteristics', for instance, includes criteria such as 'primitive background' and 'distinctive cultures and traditions'. A remarkable contemporary example of a group trying to meet such standards in support of its demand for ST status is the case of those who call themselves Adivasis (or indigenous people) in Assam. Descendants of indentured labourers, who were brought to the tea plantations of Assam in the nineteenth century, trace their roots to the Munda, Oraon, Santhal, and other people of the Jharkhand region. Adivasi activists argue that since their ethnic kin in their places of origin are recognized as STs, they should have the same status in Assam: they use the bow and arrow as an ethnic symbol—presumably to meet the test of 'primitiveness'. A group that provided the muscle for the nineteenth-century capitalist transformation of Assam surely has as solid a claim as any for full citizenship rights and compensatory justice. That they have to borrow an idiom of remembered tribal-ness to assert their claim underscores the contradictions of the Indian policy discourse that carry with it some problematical traces of colonial knowledge, and its constitutive effects on ethnic militancy in the region.

India's demos-enabling federalism (Stepan 2001: 338–9) puts few constraints on the central government's power to make and break states. To create a new state by changing the political boundaries of an existing state, it has to barely consult the elected legislature of the state concerned. While the more powerful states—those with better representation in

the Indian parliament or the central government—may be able to block such changes, less powerful states have less capacity to resist. Today the phenomenon of elected state governments under the control of ST politicians, and the presence of a visible and well-to-do ST elite, has captured the imagination of political activists in Northeast India. There is a perception that the STs in the states with the most comprehensive protective discrimination regimes and rules of exclusion have done well economically, and have been relatively successful in insulating themselves from being swamped by immigrants. In most cases of ethnic mobilization, leaders draw attention to legitimate grievances and matters of injustice. But the political forms and the particular demands have a lot to do with the particular constitutional–legal context. Thus new groups demand ST status and those who have it seek territorial autonomy available under the constitution's Sixth Schedule, originally available only to 'hill tribes'—governed by custom, and not by law in colonial practice—and those with Sixth Schedule status demand full-fledged states. Postcolonial political developments reinforce the idea that such demands might be successful if backed by sufficient evidence of political support, including capacity for violence. This is a factor in the persistence of ethnic militancy in Northeast India. On the other hand, the same constitutional and political openness has also produced anxiety on the part of certain groups that parts of their territory can be bargained away in closed-door negotiations between the central government and leaders of some rebel groups.

A number of chapters in this volume, notably 8 and 12, draw attention to conflicts between competing rebel agendas. While the tactical goals of India's counter-insurgency establishment may sometimes coincide with the interests of one or another rebel group, such cooperation does not depend on a commitment of rebel groups to giving up their violent ways. If the absence of collective alternatives defines legitimate government (Przeworski 1991: 54–5), Northeast India's resilient rebel organizations, and the intermittent complicity of civil society with them, coupled with the reliance on a permanent regime of exception by the Indian state for asserting sovereignty, point to a chronic, albeit localized, crisis of legitimacy. Even though the people of Northeast India elect their state governments and representatives to the national parliament in regularly held democratic elections, it is difficult to interpret that as a sign of the relative strength of India's democratic institutions. Democratic politics and the world of armed rebellions intersect in complex ways in Northeast India. It is often hard

to draw a sharp dividing line between mainstream and rebel political actors, or as Bethany Lacina puts it, rebel groups are 'embedded in the workings of Northeastern civilian politics' (Chapter 15, this volume).

Drawing on the comparative literature on armed civil conflicts, it may be useful to think in terms of three levels of explanation. There are structural determinants such as poverty and underdevelopment and some of the factors that are specific to postcolonial Northeast India outlined above. But structural conditions do not necessarily lead to armed civil conflicts. A second level of analysis is the nature and politics of weak states, especially strategies adopted by elites to maintain power. The third level is that of agency. The destruction of 'non-violent discourses', and its replacement with socially constructed 'war discourses', is the most important precipitating factor in armed civil conflicts (Jackson 2004: 63–4) and there are identifiable actors responsible for such discursive shifts. The question of agency draws attention to multiple actors with diverse motives. One has to consider the pleasures of agency: 'the positive effect associated with self-determination, autonomy, self-esteem, efficacy, and pride from the successful assertion of intention' (Wood 2003: 235). There is also what has been called the 'subaltern and "popular" character' of ethnic violence, which academic writings typically 'hesitate to acknowledge, much less explain' (Mamdani 2001: 8). On the other hand, it is not merely societal actors that may be involved in the construction of a discourse of violence; the national security anxiety of state managers can, for instance, shape a discourse that emphasizes military solutions to armed civil conflicts. When such a discourse trumps over one that emphasizes political solutions, it can itself become a factor in the resilience of armed civil conflicts. The essays in this volume do not systematically look at all three levels, but they touch on all of them. The essays are organized under five rubrics that highlight an aspect of each essay. However, this structure is somewhat artificial. The same essay could have been as easily placed under another rubric.

Stalemated Conflicts: What Cost?

Vaclav Havel once wrote—expressing the kind of hope that makes activism possible during times of state repression and widespread conformism and despondency—that he was not afraid that life in his country would ever 'come to a halt', or that history could be 'suspended forever'. He worried only about the 'surcharge' that would be imposed

'when the moment next arrives for life and history to demand their due' (Havel 1989: 34–5). The costs of the low-intensity conflicts in Northeast India may seem tolerable to India's national security managers, but to assess the less tangible costs of the kind that Havel alludes to, it is crucial to venture beyond their intellectual horizons.

In July 2004, a remarkable act of protest occurred in Manipur's capital city of Imphal. Amidst strong emotions against Indian security forces following the abduction, suspected rape, and killing of a woman, a dozen Manipuri women stood naked in front of the headquarters of the Assam Rifles with banners that read 'Indian Army Rape Us', and 'Indian Army Take our Flesh'. In Chapter 2, political theorist Ananya Vajpeyi reflects on the meaning of that protest. The nakedness of the women, she argues, brought out emotions that may lie 'concealed in every heart'. The state 'neither wins nor loses' in Northeast India but the people are defeated daily. Reconciliation does not seem likely, and yet fighting back is not an option. Only one political emotion makes sense in this condition, says Vajpeyi: resentment. Resentment, according to her, 'counteracts the process of the social acceptance of historical wrongs and . . . militates against the arrow of time'. Through their nakedness and the bland and declarative banners—'a semiotic masterstroke', says Vajpeyi—the Manipuri women announced to the world: 'the raping of us Manipuri women is what the Indian Army does. We stand here to say this out loud and clear: this is the way it is. We embody resentment.'

If for Vajpeyi raw emotions that do not easily express themselves through familiar modes of political protest tell a story of the long-term costs of Northeast India's stalemated conflicts, Bodhisattva Kar's provocative question, 'when was the postcolonial?' provides a historical perspective on the region's contemporary predicament. In Chapter 3, he draws attention to one of the legal institutions that restricts land and labour markets in the Northeast: the colonial-era Inner Line that regulates the access of citizens and foreigners alike to the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, and Mizoram. Kar reminds us that the Inner Line was 'not only a territorial exterior of the theatre of capital—it was also a temporal outside of the historical pace of development and progress'. The communities beyond the Line were seen as 'belonging to a different time regime—where the time of the law did not apply; where slavery, headhunting, and nomadism' could exist. What provides continuity between the colonial and the postcolonial, Kar suggests,

is that peace is still 'imaginable only within the grids of capital and development'. But the postcolonial political order faces an interesting dilemma: it seeks development and progress in a zone that was once marked off as being on the temporal outside of such a process. Yet it lacks the political capacity to change the colonial spatial order and consider removing the Inner Line that had fenced off that region as being outside the 'theatre of capital'.

Nation and Its Discontents

In the national security mindset, the nation is typically viewed as an irreversible 'done deal' rather than a process (Wee and Jayasuriya 2002: 7–8). But if state nationalism is seen as an identity trying to be 'a sort of trump card in the game of identity' (Calhoun 1997: 46), narratives of state nationalism necessarily coexist with its counter-narratives—albeit with different levels of resonance in society. Nations are formed in the tension between unity and disunity.

In Chapter 4, Dolly Kikon looks at this tension and asks how the Northeast figures in the postcolonial Indian national imagination. She uses the National Museum in Kolkata as a site and starts at the museum gates. In Indian government museums and official heritage sites, foreigners are typically charged a higher entrance fee than Indian citizens. But in a country where there is no mandatory personal identification system, an unintended consequence of this practice is that museum security guards sometimes have to make judgements about a person's citizenship status based on phenotypic features. Thus 'as a Naga stands at the queue meant for Indians,' Kikon recalls, 'there is a request to switch over to the foreigners' line'. An impromptu citizenship test follows and it involves 'speaking in Hindi, a brief lecture on history, geography and the Naga people'. Following the test, 'the Naga/Indian' manages to enter the National Museum. Inside the museum, clay and terracotta models represent ethnic groups from the Northeast and their habitats. They are displayed in glass cages that, says Kikon, resemble prison cells. She reads the display as evidence that in India's national imagination, 'the colonial construct of primitiveness and savagery', continues to shape the image of communities like the Nagas. The models all look alike: 'Mongoloid and slightly yellowish' and put together carelessly; a Naga couple wears Karbi fabric, and a Khasi couple wears the attire of the Assamese peasant. The stereotyping and the confusion, she suggests, tie in with the reality outside: that certain people do not have 'a secure place within the nation state'.

In Chapter 5, Rakhee Kalita attempts to construct what she calls a kind of 'situated knowledge' of 'terrorism' in Assam. She examines three Assamese language texts to explore how Assamese society has engaged with 'terrorists'—a term that the Indian security establishment has begun using to describe Northeast India's rebels. Through this exercise in literary criticism, she gives us an extraordinary and intimate account of the ups and downs in the relationship between Assamese society and ULFA—something that has mystified most Indian commentators. The texts she looks at negotiate the binary oppositions that the term 'terrorist' relies on: between the good and the bad, between the hegemonic–national and the subversive–local, and between legitimate and illegitimate forms of violence. It is perhaps not insignificant that the author of one of her texts—a distinguished Assamese fiction-writer and public intellectual—is a former police chief of the state. While only posterity would be able to make a definitive judgement on ULFA—'as rebels, political terrorists, revolutionaries or as mere opportunists', Kalita shows that in contemporary Assamese writing there is a great deal of unease about 'how to name, or more importantly, define the way of these rebels seen both as necessary and problematic in the shaping of Assam's destiny in the larger national space'.

Nandana Dutta, in Chapter 6, looks at how popular narratives in the region of neglect or persecution 'are constructed, refurbished, elaborated and disseminated', and how narrative shifts occur. In Assam there is a history of antagonism between ethnic Assamese and ethnic Bengalis. However, in 2005–6 a significant narrative shift occurred when popular support was mobilized in support of an ethnic Bengali contestant for the title 'Voice of India' in a musical reality show on television. Viewers from all over the country voted by telephone or text messages to decide the winner in each round. Predictably, there were allegations about discrimination against this singer. Certain student organizations in Assam, traditionally associated with a primarily ethnic Assamese constituency, and not generally expected to enthusiastically back an ethnic Bengali singer—repeated 'the conspiracy leitmotif that is implicit in the narrative of neglect and alienation', and organized a campaign urging supporters to vote for him. Thanks partly to those efforts, the singer won the contest and the narrative of Assamese–Bengali confrontation was quietly jettisoned. Dutta's argument is a warning against privileging fixed ethnic identities in explaining Northeast India's conflicts and assuming that pan-Indianism and assertive regionalism—even in its militant form—are always in tension. The celebration of the

recognition of a singer from the Northeast as the 'Voice of India', she points out, was 'a tacit political alternative' to separatism: it expressed a wish to 'be counted as part of the Indian nation'.

Discourses of Inclusion and Exclusion

As I have earlier said, an important level of explanation in the study of armed conflicts is the question of 'how conflict discourses arise, what distinguishes them from other non-violent discourses, the ways in which they "defeat" alternative (non-violent) discourses, and how they can be de-constructed and replaced with democratic and inclusive discourses' (Jackson 2004: 63). Three essays in this volume directly engage this theme.

In Chapter 7, Pradip Phanjoubam emphasizes the role of ideas in conflict transformation. In the particular context of Manipur, he writes: the 'script-writers of ideologies and ideological wars' must come to terms with Manipur's 'peculiar history, even the most traumatic chapters'. Rather than adhering to 'inward-looking' constructions of identity, he pleads with conflict entrepreneurs to pay attention to changes in the world and to look afresh at the commonly held assumptions about the 'presumably ancient "imagining" called Manipur'. Given what we know about polities in the pre-colonial world outside of Europe, the specificities of ancient Manipur as a 'nation' and a polity need to be rethought. He also calls upon the intelligentsia to debate issues like what development should entail—and not let a 'grotesquely skewed' conception of development dominate political practice. The responsibility for bringing about conflict transformation does not lie on societal actors alone. State managers too find the management of conflict to be 'simpler than formulating a transition of conflict into a condition of peace'.

Bhagat Oinam, in Chapter 8, reminds us of the multilayered nature of the conflicts: that the voices of dissent in multi-ethnic Northeast India that shape the region's many rebellions reject not only the Indian national narrative, but often also the narratives of ethnic communities living closely with one another. One reason why the conflicts are intractable is that discourses are typically 'reiterative and declarative'. Often the same information or an idea is repeated 'without any reasonable justifying criterion' and such discourses become the foundation for rigid knowledge claims. He makes the case for a dialogic discourse that minimizes stereotyping and overcomes the boundary between the 'insider' and the 'outsider'.

Discourses of exclusion can also emerge and become triumphant quite suddenly as products of particular political conjunctures. In Chapter 9, Makiko Kimura looks at the discursive construction of the enemy at the village level during the Nellie massacre in Assam in 1983. The context in which it occurred was the Assam movement of 1979–85 that saw extraordinary mobilization against illegal immigration and the enfranchisement of non-citizens that, said the campaigners, were turning the 'indigenous' peoples of Assam into a minority. The chapter draws attention to a factor that provides the backdrop to many of Northeast India's conflicts: immigration from the rest of the subcontinent and the resultant fear of minoritization by many of the region's 'indigenous' ethnic groups. British colonial officials viewed Northeast India as one of the subcontinent's last frontiers with plenty of 'wastelands' to be settled by immigrants. The flow from densely populated East Bengal began in the 1920s. The Partition of 1947 intensified the migration pressure since Hindu refugees now joined the flow. A controversial election took place in 1983 at the height of the Assam movement. It was boycotted by the campaigners since the inclusion of the names of thousands of non-citizens in the electoral rolls was at the core of their campaign. They labelled the election Assam's 'last battle for survival'. In Nellie, the battle lines were drawn when rumours circulated in the village about violence in villages a few miles away. Kimura finds that the Assamese and Tiwa villagers, who attacked neighbouring Bengali Muslim villages, knew that their neighbours were not recent immigrants. Yet in a climate of deep anxiety, amidst rumours of 'foreigners' finding shelter in those villages, Bengali Muslim neighbours became transformed into dreaded 'foreigners'. Kimura shows that local actors were not pliant tools of those higher up in the movement's hierarchy: village elders made crucial decisions to attack neighbours, bringing Assam's 'last battle for survival' dangerously close to a civil war.

The Assam movement ended with an accord signed between the Indian government and the leaders of the movement. According to the accord, based on various 'cut-off dates' of entry into India, some foreigners were to be given Indian citizenship, some were to be disenfranchised temporarily, and more recent illegal immigrants were to be deported. But in a context where citizens have no mandatory identification papers, among Assam's large population of East Bengali origin, determining who is a foreigner and who is not proved nearly impossible. The most enduring legacy of the failure of the Assam

movement is the ULFA. Its position on the issue of foreigners is more accommodative, but it views the failure of the Assam accord as one more piece of evidence that India's political leadership is uninterested in addressing issues the Assamese public cares deeply about.

Making Peace, Making War: India's Peace Policy

In the literature on Northeast India's conflicts, the negotiated end of the Mizo insurgency is often portrayed as a success story, though some observers disagree with that assessment.[8] In response to the Mizo rebellion that began in 1966, Mizoram, once a district of Assam, was made into a Union Territory in 1971 and into a full-fledged state in 1987 following the accord between the Mizo National Front (MNF) and the Government of India. The guerrilla organization, the MNF, became a mainstream political party, initially winning an election and later losing another, but choosing never to go back to the path of armed struggle. In Chapter 10, M. Sajjad Hassan takes up this story.

Mizoram's peace, according to Hassan, cannot be explained by the peace accord signed between the government and the Mizo rebels alone, but by a number of favourable historical factors, some going back to the colonial era. Colonial administrators promoted 'institutional uniformity' in what was then called the Lushai Hills district, as well as the power of the administration at the expense of local chieftains. The modernizing role of Christian missionaries helped as well. The Mizo rebellion created an inclusive Mizo identity. Today state–society contests in Mizoram are muted because organizations such as the Church and the Young Mizo Association work in alliance with the political leadership rather than against them. A key lesson of the Mizo story for the region's unresolved conflicts, says Bethany Lacina in her chapter in the next section, is that 'the incorporation of rebels into the lawful political process is not a bad thing—what is detrimental is when active insurgents can distort political life through illegal means, most notably extortion and corruption'.

In Chapter 11, Samir Kumar Das reviews India's 'peace policy': that is the approach towards armed rebels. When faced with them, the Indian government tries to 'establish the superiority of violence at its command'. Indeed, the government enters into a peace dialogue only when it determines that a rebel organization is 'considerably

[8] See, for instance, Baruah (2005a: 13, 70–1), Chandra (2007: 52–3), and Samir Kumar Das in Chapter 11 of this volume.

weakened—if not decimated', so that it would accept peace on the terms laid down by the government. Consequently, peace accords in Northeast India do little more than proclaim 'the state's victory in reestablishing its command over the legitimate instruments of violence'. There are small signs of some changes in this policy. For instance, in recent years, the Indian government has been prepared to negotiate with leaders of Northeast Indian rebel groups even in foreign cities like Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Geneva, or Amsterdam. On the other hand, India's counter-insurgency's establishment has remained unenthusiastic about peace talks with the ULFA despite strong support for negotiations among the Assamese public. Clearly, the quest for a victor's peace—that Das believes defines the Indian state's approach to negotiations with rebel groups—is still alive and well.

In Chapter 12, H. Kham Khan Suan draws attention to an important layer of the conflicts in Manipur that makes the task of state building in this part of the country especially challenging. The postcolonial state, he says, is an inheritor to a 'state–society rupture' between the hills and the Imphal valley. Consequently, state building in Manipur, he argues—including the central, the state, and the local levels in his definition of the state—gets implicated in the 'majoritarian language' and the 'totalizing project' based in the Imphal valley. This is resisted 'by the hill people as "alien" and antithetical to their cherished traditional institutions and world view'. India's state-building project has to be sensitive to this divide: state institutions have to be imaginatively redesigned to accommodate this difference.

Breaking the Impasse

A problem with the idea of a development fix, with which I began this Introduction, is that it avoids one crucial question: what kind of development? In Chapter 7, Pradip Phanjoubam says that development in Northeast India appears to mean little more than 'externally delivered economic packages which can be translated through various backdoor means and leakages, at the soonest possible into hard cash'. He reminds readers of Amartya Sen's ideas about development as freedom: that development is about overcoming 'unfreedoms' imposed by poverty, famine, and lack of political rights (Sen 2001). To a significant extent the crude notion of development that has dominated political practice in Northeast India at least till recently, is shaped by the perceived imperatives of conflict management.

Land, argues Subir Bhaumik in Chapter 13, is the key to any durable political settlement in the region. It is both 'the major resource and also the major source of conflict'. In Tripura, the primary cause of conflict is the loss of land by the state's indigenous tribal population to Bengali settlers. The loss of land occurred through multiple means, including as the consequence of dams built to produce hydroelectric power. Thus, in one area, as the result of a dam, the 'once prosperous tribal peasantry' became 'pauperized'. The contrast between their situation and the 'huge benefits that Bengali urban dwellers gained by electricity and Bengali fishermen gained by being able to fish in the large reservoir was not lost on a generation of angry tribal youths who took up arms'. He proposes the decommissioning of a dam that, even by conventional economic measures, is of questionable value. In 2007, the subsiding water level of the reservoir of the dam opened up large tracks of fertile land. The decommissioning of the dam and redistribution of that land among Tripura's indigenous tribal population, Bhaumik argues, can be a powerful step in achieving ethnic reconciliation.

In Chapter 14, Betsy Taylor outlines an alternative vision of development for Arunachal Pradesh. She laments that some 'see only infrastructure problems in the fiercely precipitous terrain of the eastern Himalayas'. What gets lost in this way of seeing is the fact that the terrain also 'harbours ecological mega-diversity which could provide a uniquely intact material basis for decentralized, post-industrial "green" economies based on small-scale industries'. Under the right political conditions, 'ecologically embedded and resilient economies' could 'diffuse economic prosperity through dispersed rural populations in ways that nurture cultural and political security, creativity, and equity.' She also finds in Arunachal Pradesh 'fascinating, new experiments in, and possibilities for, democracy'. Unfortunately, given the policy prism through which the region is viewed by New Delhi and the national security-centric and developmentalist mindset that dominates Indian policy thinking, there is little chance that Northeast India would embrace the alternative path that Taylor outlines.

There is neither a development fix nor a military fix for Northeast India's conflicts, says Bethany Lacina in the final chapter of this volume. Those who put forward such easy solutions do not address the embedded nature of rebel groups in the political process. Only concerted efforts to establish the rule of law, a system of accountability, and faith in the formal institutions of governance can break the cycle of violence. Since the popular image of most rebel groups today is rather

negative, Lacina believes that a political system less ambivalent towards the rule of law—in theory as well as in practice—can marginalize these groups relatively easily. Rather than the Indian state's current 'persecuted attitude' vis-à-vis human rights groups, she believes that it can turn them into allies. At no cost to the state exchequer they can monitor its agents and their infractions. This can be an important asset in efforts to rebuild the public's faith in the rule of law and the procedures of democratic accountability that is critical for creating a culture of peace in the region.

Conclusion

Despite their resilience, the narratives of rebel organizations are often vague and confused, and goals like secession—aptly called a 'state-shattering form of self-determination' (Wohlforth and Felgenhauer 2002: 251)—would seem unrealistic to many. Yet the rebellions are also voices of protest by people facing profound threats to their sense of ontological security—a sense of confidence in 'the continuity of ... self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action' (Giddens 1991: 92). Many people appear convinced today that they do 'victims of culture death' a favour by 'breaking them out of the stagnant structures of their lives' (Taylor 2007). In earlier centuries, decisions shaped by this mindset had devastated many societies across continents. Albeit in a less imperious form, this style of thinking has become fashionable once again in our era of globalization—and it is rather pronounced in India, given the current triumphalist national mood. The notion of a development fix for Northeast India that fuels the current spending spree exemplifies this mode of thinking. Despite its democratic institutions, when it comes to Northeast India, where the political centre senses danger, India's political and intellectual culture has little room for reading rebel narratives—even from a historically disadvantaged cultural borderland—'through acts of strong hermeneutical generosity' (Benhabib 2002: 44). As long as a crudely developmentalist and national security-centric mindset continues to shape policy, the goal of achieving peace in Northeast India is likely to remain elusive.

BEYOND COUNTER-INSURGENCY

Breaking the Impasse in Northeast India

Northeast India has endured decades of conflicts that have kept much of the region militarized, subject to restrictions on civil rights, and economically underdeveloped. In this volume, contributors from diverse fields—ranging from the social sciences, philosophy, and cultural studies, to journalism and the civil services—reflect on new ways of approaching and resolving these conflicts.

Dissatisfaction with conditions on the ground and with standard policy prescriptions is the common thread that runs through the book. The essays provide analyses of the conflicts at three levels: structural determinants like poverty and underdevelopment; the nature and politics of the postcolonial state; and the agency of multiple actors with diverse motives. The authors argue that neither a development nor a military fix can achieve peace in the region. Only concerted efforts to establish the rule of law, a system of accountability, and faith in the institutions of government can break the cycle of violence.

Conveying a sense of Northeast India's rich and vibrant public discourse, this book will be useful to all those interested in armed conflicts, the state of Indian democracy, civil liberties, and Northeast India.

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Jacket photograph: Boys in a village in Mizoram playing with bamboo guns, courtesy Kazimuddin (Kazu) Ahmed, Guwahati.

'Sanjib Baruah has compiled an exceptionally diverse anthology. Including voices from social science, history, literature, cultural studies, and government, it reveals the region's vibrant public discourse and provides an antidote to security-centric proclamations. *Beyond Counter-insurgency* is a model of creatively engaged and academically astute public intellectual work.'

—David Ludden
Professor of History, New York University

'Baruah and his contributors paint a rich, vital picture of the spatial disorder that has unfolded within Northeast India's multiple "inner lines". This complex and unvarnished story is told without romanticism or cynicism. Between the apparent impossibility of peace through "reconciliation" and victory through repression or terror, the book envisions the possibility of an open, more inclusive future.'

—Siddharth Varadarajan
Strategic Affairs Editor, *The Hindu*

'This rich volume opens up a crucial space for re-imagining this highly complex yet remarkably poorly understood region. Shunning facile remedies, its proposals for a better future include redistributing key resources, restoring public trust in the rule of law, and harnessing the region's exceptional ecological diversity.'

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