

The UN Indigenous Decade in Northeast India

Walter Fernandes
Gita Bharali
Vemedo Kezo

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Walter Fernandes
Gita Bharali
Vemedo Kezo

North Eastern Social Research Centre
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Walter Fernandes
Gita Bharali
Vemedo Kezo



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Chapter 1

The Indigenous People in Northeast India

The “Seven Sisters” of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura comprise the geographical region that is called Northeast India. A recent addition to the North Eastern Council (NEC) is Sikkim, separated from the other states by North Bengal. This report, however, is concerned only with the “Seven Sisters”. There is diversity even among them but they also have some commonalities, one of them unfortunately being the ethnic clashes for which much of India knows the region. Some of its areas have witnessed conflicts for 50 years or more. A few of them arise from demands for socio-economic equality or regional autonomy and others from competition for land and political rights. Some groups demand “sovereignty” by which they do not necessarily mean independence. The conflicts, many of them around the indigenous issue, are indicative of the ethnic and cultural diversity of the region. This report is not about conflicts but about the UN Decade of the Indigenous Peoples 1995-2004. It will discuss issues of diversity, conflicts and other events as occasion arises because they represent the challenges and problems that the region faces particularly on the indigenous question.

1. The UN Indigenous Decade

This book is based on an Assessment of the United Nations Decade of the Indigenous Peoples 1995-2004. The study was done in five countries each in South Asia and Southeast Asia. In “South Asia” the countries studied were Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India and Nepal. The studies were done under the aegis of the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), Kathmandu, which is an organisation of eight governments around the Hindu-Kush Himalayas. In India the assessment was done by North Eastern Social Research Centre, Guwahati (NESRC) for the Northeast and by Indian Social Institute (ISI), New Delhi for the rest of India.

The Indigenous Peoples

According to the United Nations (UN), the world has at least 5,000 indigenous groups with a total population of 300 million living in more than 70 countries. Around 70% of them live in Asia, 84 million of them in India. Despite these numbers, the U.N. has never defined the word "indigenous". The concept was born in the Americas and Australia-New Zealand where a clear line divides them from the continents' later conquerors. In South Asia "the majority populations have lived in the area for millennia" (Sanders 1993: 126). As a result, there is difference of opinion on who is indigenous to these countries.

The indigenous movement that culminated in the UN Decade can be traced back to 1923 when the Cayuga Chief Deskaheh, a representative of the Iroquois of Ontario in Canada went to the League of Nations to represent the "Six Nations of the Great River." He carried a passport issued by the "authority of his people". Already before this in 1921 the General Body of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) showed concern for indigenous workers, who were among the most exploited. In 1926 ILO created a "Committee of Experts on Native Labour" and in 1936 its Governing Body adopted Convention No. 50 "Concerning the Regulation of Certain Special Systems of Recruiting Workers". In 1939 it adopted Convention No. 64 "Concerning the Regulation of Certain Special Systems of Recruiting Workers" (Ibarra 1993: 131-132).

However, the real indigenous rights movement began only with decolonisation after World War II. Autonomy movements began in several independent countries that were in reality federations of many nations. The Naga Nationalist Struggle is one of the best known among them (Sanyu 1996: 98). Most such movements were in Latin America whose indigenous populations were feeling doubly exploited. On one side foreign companies controlled their wealth and on the other the national elite collaborated with those foreign corporations. A specific contribution of World War II was the awareness of genocide. In the context of the Nazi pogrom of Jews, Gypsies and Poles. Many indigenous communities of the Americas asked questions about the genocide of their own ancestors (Varese 2006: 38-40). Additionally, European indigenous peoples began to become more aware of their rights.

These movements created heightened awareness in some international organisations, especially ILO whose mandate is protection of workers' rights. Since indigenous workers were among the most exploited, their welfare too was initially entrusted to this organisation. Awareness of possible genocide of indigenous populations added to the concern about their exploitation. The result was ILO Convention 107 of 1957 "Concerning the Protection and Integration of Indigenous and Other Tribal and Semi-Tribal Populations in Independent Countries." Its focus was protection and integration but its approach was more assimilationist than integrationist (Ibarra 1993: 132-133).

Towards the Indigenous Decade

These steps would eventually lead to the UN Decade of the Indigenous Peoples. Because of the ILO conventions and the struggle of the indigenous peoples, by the 1980s the indigenous issue began to be perceived as one of human rights. Since any talk of their "minority rights" was stalled at the UN General Assembly, in 1971 Augusto Willemsen Diaz of Guatemala who was on the UN staff in Geneva shifted his focus to the UN mandate to prevent any form of discrimination. In 1971 he got the U. N. Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and protection of Minorities to commission a study on discrimination against indigenous peoples. In the mid-1970s two non-governmental organisations of the Americas were granted accreditation with the UN Economic and Social Commission. Since the awareness of indigenous rights was growing also in Europe, two European organisations were founded in the 1970s viz. the Work Group for Indigenous Affairs at the University of Copenhagen and Survival International in London. The first NGO international conference on indigenous affairs was held in 1977. From the 1980s, Norway and Holland gave importance to the indigenous issue in their international relations (Sanders 1993: 123-125).

These movements would eventually coalesce as the centenary of Christopher Columbus in 1992 approached. That became the immediate event leading to the Decade of the Indigenous Peoples, 1995-2004. While the white populations of the Americas wanted to celebrate Columbus' voyage and the fifth centenary of the "discovery" as a triumph, the

descendants of the original inhabitants who were subjugated by the conquerors asked: "Who discovered whom?" (Ellacuria 1992). They observed it as an anniversary of their oppression and demanded that they be recognised as the original inhabitants of the conquered continents because they have been deprived of their right to be fully human.

In response to this the United Nations declared a UN Year of the Indigenous Populations from October 1992 to December 8, 1993, the anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, it was felt that the communities that had been suppressed for five centuries deserved more support than the observance of a single year. As the refusal of the original Native Americans showed, they were becoming aware of their right to be human. The very nomenclature "indigenous" is a result of that awakening. In Australia the awakening of the Aborigines is symbolised by the Mabo case through which indigenous peoples challenged the right of non-indigenous peoples over many territories of the country. The Australian high court upheld this contention (Brennan 1995: 16-18).

Thus, the declaration of the Indigenous Decade 1995-2004 is a tribute to the original inhabitants and conquered peoples who were demanding their right to be human. The goal of the decade was to "strengthen international cooperation for the solution of the problems faced by indigenous peoples in the areas of human rights, culture, environment, development, education and health. Its theme is "Indigenous People: Partnership in action". It was hoped that indigenous leaders and friends would be able to use the decade both to help their communities to become aware of their identity and make other communities aware of their situation.

About This Study

In order to reinforce this effort, a second decade of the Indigenous Peoples was declared 2005-2014. In order to make it effective it was thought necessary to see what had happened as a result of the first. This assessment is a response to this need and is meant to ensure that the momentum is not lost. The study was done in four States in the Northeast

and five in mainland India. The States chosen in the Northeast are Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya and Nagaland.

After literature review, the researchers studied national and State policies relevant to the tribal communities of the Northeast. Simultaneously the budgets of the Governments of India and Assam were analysed in order to understand their relevance to the tribal communities. People's opinion was got through 8 group discussion sessions in these 4 States, interviews with 37 tribal leaders and 118 individuals. The individual interviews were in Arunachal Pradesh, with the Angami tribe and student leaders belonging to many tribes in Nagaland, the Dimasa of Assam and the Garo of Meghalaya. Group discussion sessions were held among the Boro, Dimasa and Karbi of Assam, three tribes in Arunachal Pradesh and the Garo and Khasi of Meghalaya. The tribal leaders were mainly from among the Adi of Arunachal, the Boro and Dimasa of Assam and the Khasi of Meghalaya.

Based on these findings, after a background of the Northeast and of the indigenous peoples of this region the book will analyse the national and North Eastern policies from the tribal perspective. The policies of Assam will follow. After it comes the analysis of the indigenous decade as revealed by the interviews with individuals, indigenous leaders and group discussion. The final chapter will summarise the findings and make suggestions for the second decade.

2. The Northeast as a Region

With 2,55,037 sq. km the region accounts for some 9% of India's geographical area. According to the 2001 census, the seven States together had a population of 38,444,026 or 3.6% of India's total. Its decadal growth declined from 27.4% in 1981-91 to 25.29% in 1991-2001 but remained higher than the national average of 21.54%. Among the seven States the decadal growth during 1991-2001 varied from a low 16.03% in Tripura to a high 64.52% in Nagaland. It declined in Mizoram, Meghalaya, Assam and Tripura and increased marginally in Nagaland and Manipur by 8.3 and 0.7 points respectively. Possible reasons of their high growth rate are large families and influx of immigrants from outside the region (Table 1.1).

The geographical features of the region represent the complexities of the sub-Himalayan ranges. Parts of Tripura and the Imphal Valley represent areas of low relief. The Brahmaputra Valley and the Hills are interdependent ecosystems but differ from each other geographically. The Assam valley is an alluvial expanse created by the Brahmaputra and its tributaries. The mountain range to its north is high in AP, loses height towards the south and ends in the low hills of Mizoram. The altitude of the Manipur and Naga hills varies from 900 to 2,100 metres. The Mizo hills rise rarely above 900 metres; the Shillong Plateau and the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia Hills are 1,200-1,800 metres. The highest peaks in the region are *Dapha Bum* (4,579mts.), Lohit district, AP and *Japfu* (3,048mts) and *Saramati* (3,926mts.) in Nagaland.

Table 1.1: Total Population and Decadal Growth in the North Eastern Region

| States | Total Population | | % decadal growth | Tribal Population | Tribal % to Total |
|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------|------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| | 1991 | 2001 | | | |
| India | 846387888 | 1028737436* | 21.54 | 84,326,240 | 8.20 |
| Arunachal Pr | 8,64,558 | 10,97,968 | 26.21 | 7,05,158 | 64.22 |
| Assam | 2,24,14,322 | 2,66,55,528 | 18.92 | 33,08,570 | 12.41 |
| Manipur | 18,37,149 | 22,93,896* | 24.86 | 7,41,141** | 32.31 |
| Meghalaya | 17,74,774 | 23,18,822 | 30.65 | 19,92,862 | 85.94 |
| Mizoram | 6,89,756 | 8,88,573 | 28.82 | 8,39,310 | 94.46 |
| Nagaland | 12,09,546 | 19,90,036 | 64.52 | 17,74,026 | 89.15 |
| Tripura | 27,57,205 | 31,99,203 | 16.03 | 9,93,426 | 31.05 |
| North East | 30,682,752 | 38,444,026 | 25.29 | 10,354,493 | 26.93 |

* Including the estimated figure of Mao-Maram, Paomata and Purul sub-divisions of Senapati district. **Excluding the population of Mao Maram, Paomata & Purul Sub-divisions.

Source : Registrar General and Census Commissioner. 1991 & 2001a and 2001b.

Nearly 54% of the geographical area of the Northeast is recorded as forests that range from the tropical forests in the plains to the sub-tropical, temperate and alpine ecosystems in the Hills (FRI 1999). They contain more than a third of India's biodiversity. Together with Myanmar it is one of the world's 25 mega-biodiversity zones and one of its 18 biodiversity hot spots. Its biodiversity depends on its unique climatic and topographic conditions. The region is also strategically important because all seven States border on one or more neighbouring countries of Bangladesh, Myanmar, China and Bhutan. The border stretches to over 1,450 km.

The Tribals of the Northeast

10,354,493 or 12.28% of India's 84,326,240 tribals live in the Northeast where they are 27.68% of the population but are neither homogeneous nor equally distributed among the States. Geographical and ethnic diversity go hand in hand. In 1991 tribals were 94.7% in Mizoram, 87.7% in Nagaland, 85.5% in Meghalaya and 34.4% in Manipur. Their proportion remains the same in Mizoram, Nagaland and Meghalaya but in AP they declined from over 90% in 1951 to 69.8% in 1981 to 63.6% in 1991 and rose to 64.22% in 2001 and in Tripura from 58% in 1951 to 30.4% in 1991 and 31% in 2001.

Tribals are a minority in the populous States of Assam, Manipur and Tripura. The NC Hills and Karbi Anglong are the only tribal majority districts in Assam. In Manipur their percentage is high in the hill districts of Senapati, Ukhrul, Tamenglong, Churachandpur and Chandel. In Tripura they are a majority only in Dhalai (Table 1.2). In States where they are a minority, the tribals feel discriminated against by the non-tribal majority. As a later section will show, in Assam the Mizo struggled against what they considered Assamese domination and got their State as the Naga had done earlier (Fernandes 2005a: 91-92).

The autonomy demands of other tribes resulted in the Sixth Schedule being extended to the Karbi and the Dimasa in Assam, the

formation of Meghalaya in 1972 and the Boro Territorial Council in 2003. The Naga outfits have been demanding the inclusion of all the Naga-inhabited areas in Nagalim (Greater Nagaland). The State most affected by this is Manipur, where one of the current demands is that the Naga majority districts should be brought under the Nagaland School Board. The Centre has arrived at a compromise by allowing them to use the textbooks of Nagaland without bringing them under the Nagaland Board (*The Telegraph*, July 23, 2006). Other conflicts around land will be mentioned later.

Table 1.2: District-wise Tribal Proportion in the Northeast in 2001

| Sl. No. | State & Districts | Tribals as % of population | Sl. No. | State & Districts | Tribals as % of Total population | Sl. No. | State & Districts | Tribals as % of Total population |
|---------|-------------------|----------------------------|---------|-------------------|----------------------------------|---------|------------------------|----------------------------------|
| | Arunachal | 64.22 | | Assam | 12.41 | | Assam Continued | |
| 1 | Tawang | 74.99 | 1 | Kokrajhar | 33.67 | 14 | Tinsukia | 5.84 |
| 2 | W Kameng | 49.53 | 2 | Dhubri | 1.98 | 15 | Dibrugarh | 7.45 |
| 3 | E Kameng | 86.71 | 3 | Goalpara | 16.03 | 16 | Sibsagar | 3.94 |
| 4 | Papum Pare* | 56.56 | 4 | Bongaigaon | 12.23 | 17 | Jorhat | 12.32 |
| 5 | Lsubansiri | 90.09 | 5 | Barpeta | 7.48 | 18 | Golaghat | 9.92 |
| 6 | Usubansiri | 89.53 | 6 | Kamrup | 9.92 | 19 | KarbiAnglong | 55.69 |
| 7 | West Siang | 81.72 | 7 | Nalbari | 17.63 | 20 | NC Hills | 68.28 |
| 8 | East Siang | 69.13 | 8 | Darrang | 16.60 | 21 | Cachar | 1.28 |
| 9 | Upper Siang* | 78.21 | 9 | Marigaon | 15.55 | 22 | Karimganj | 00 |
| 10 | Dibang | 46.48 | 10 | Nagaon | 3.86 | 23 | Hailakandi | 00 |

| | | | | | | | | |
|----|------------------|--------------|----|---------------------------|--------------|---|----------------|--------------|
| 11 | Lohit | 38.18 | 11 | Sonitpur | 11.60 | | | |
| 12 | Changlang | 36.15 | 12 | Lakhimpur | 23.49 | | | |
| 13 | Tirap | 83.66 | 13 | Dhemaji | 47.29 | | Manipur | 34.2 |
| | Meghalaya | 85.94 | | Mizoram | 94.45 | 1 | Senapati | 78.45 |
| 1 | West Garo | 76.61 | 1 | Mamit* | 93.41 | 2 | Tamenglong | 95.38 |
| 2 | East Garo | 96.54 | 2 | Kolasib* | 89.78 | 3 | Churachandpur | 93.23 |
| 3 | SouthGaro* | 95.67 | 3 | Aizawl | 93.23 | 4 | Ukhrul | 95.53 |
| 4 | West Khasi | 98.01 | 4 | Champal* | 96.8 | 5 | Chandel | 91.93 |
| 5 | Ri Bhoi* | 87.02 | 5 | Serchhip* | 98.08 | 6 | Bishnupur | 2.94 |
| 6 | East Khasi | 77.49 | 6 | Lunglei | 95.29 | 7 | Thoubal | 1.17 |
| 7 | Jaintia | 95.96 | 7 | Lawngtlai | 95.4 | 8 | Imphal West | 4.75 |
| | | | 8 | Saiha* | 96.21 | 9 | Imphal East* | 6.25 |
| | Nagaland | 89.14 | | Nagaland Continued | | | Tripura | 31.05 |
| 1 | Mon | 93.92 | 5 | Wokha | 95.50 | 1 | West Tripura | 25.25 |
| 2 | Tuensang | 96.03 | 6 | Dimapur* | 60.69 | 2 | South Tripura | 37.72 |
| 3 | Mokochung | 93.78 | 7 | Kohima | 90.54 | 3 | Dhalai* | 54.02 |
| 4 | Zunheboto | 96.07 | 8 | Phek | 96.47 | 4 | North Tripura | 25.46 |

* District created in 2001. Source: Registrar General and Census Commissioner. 2001a.

The main tribal groups of the region are the Naga, Mizo, Lushai, Hmar, Kuki, Chin, Mizo, Bodo, Dimasa, Karbi, Kachari, Borok, Tripuri, Reang, Jamatia, Garo, Jaintia, Adi, Aka, Apatani, Nyishi, Monpa, Paite etc (Box 1). The Government of India recognises many of them as Scheduled Tribes. Some of them, like the Boro and Dimasa, live in the plains but most others inhabit the hills. Some tribes are small and others big. As a family,

the Nagas, living in Nagaland, AP, Manipur and Assam are the most numerous followed by the Boro, the *Khasi-Jaintia*, the *Garo*, *Mizo*, *Tripuri*, *Mikir*, *Kachar*, *Kuki* and *Chakma*. The *Adi* are 26.9% and the *Nyishi* 21.7% and the *Aka* only 0.6% of the AP population. The three tribes i.e. the *Garo*, *Jaintia* and *Khasi* together account for 90% of the population of Meghalaya. The *Mizo* are 87.3% of Mizoram. However, percentages by themselves do not mean much. The more than 3 million Assam tribals, though proportionately small in that State, is bigger than the population of any tribal majority State.

Box 1: Ethnic Groups Recognised as Scheduled Tribes

Arunachal Pradesh

Arunachal Pradesh has more than 80 ethnic groups but only 12 are recognised as Scheduled Tribes. 1. *Abor*, 2. *Aka*, 3. *Apatani*, 4. *Dajla*, 5. *Galong*, 6. *Khampti*, 7. *Howa*, 8. *Mishmi*, 9. *Mongba*, 10. *Any Naga Tribe (Wancho, Tangsa, and Nocte)*, 11. *Sherdukpen*, 12. *Singpho*.

Nagaland

Five groups are listed as Scheduled Tribes in Nagaland; 1. *Garo*, 2. *Kachari*, 3. *Kuki*, 4. *Mikir*, 5. *Nagas*.

Manipur

The tribes in Manipur can be broadly categorised as *Naga* groups, *Kuki-Chin-Zomi* and others. 29 (Twenty nine) of them are recognised as Scheduled Tribes. **A. Nagas:** 1. *Anal*, 2. *Angami*, 3. *Chiru*, 4. *Chothe*, 5. *Kabui*, 6. *Kacha Naga*, 7. *Koireng*, 8. *Lamkang*, 9. *Mao*, 10. *Maram*, 11. *Maring*, 12. *Monsang*, 13. *Moyong*, 14. *Sema*, and 15. *Tangkhum*. **B. Kuki-Chin-Zomi:** 16 *Aimol*, 17 *Gangte*, 18 *Hmar*, 19 *Vaiphei*, 20 *Koirao*, 21 *Kom*, 22 *Any Mizo (Lushai)*, 23 *Paite*, 24 *Purum*, 25 *Ralte*, 26 *Suhte*, 27 *Simte*, 28 *Suhte* and 29 *Thadou (Kuki)*.

Meghalaya

In Meghalaya 17 (Seventeen) ethnic groups are recognised as Scheduled Tribes. 1. *Boro*, 2. *Kachari*, 3. *Chakma*, 4. *Dimasa*, 5. *Garo*, 6. *Hajong*, 7. *Hmar*, 8. *Khasi*, 9. *Jaintia*, 10. *Koch*, 11. *Any Kuki Tribe*, 12. *Lakher*, 13. *Man (Tai speaking)*, 14. *Any Mizo*, 15. *Mikir*, 16. *Any Nagas*, 17. *Pawi, Rabha, and Synteng*.

Mizoram

The word “Mizo” refers to the people, and “Ram”, the land. The State has 14 (Fourteen) ethnic groups listed as Scheduled Tribes: 1. *Chakma*, 2. *Dimasa*, 3. *Garo*, 4. *Hajong*, 5. *Hmar*, 6. *Khasi*, 7. *Jaintai*, 8. *Any Kukis*, 9. *Lakher*, 10. *Man (Tai speaking)*, 11. *Any Mizo*, 12. *Mikir*, 13. *Any Nagas*, 14. *Pawi*, and *Synteng*.

Tripura

19 (nineteen) groups are recognised as Scheduled Tribes in Tripura: 1. *Bhil*, 2. *Bhutia*, 3. *Chaimal*, 4. *Chakma*, 5. *Garo*, 6. *Halam*, 7. *Jamatia*, 8. *Khasi*, 9. *Any Kuki*, 10. *Lepcha*, 11. *Lushai*, 12. *Nag*, 13. *Munda*, 14. *Naotia*, 15. *Orang*, 16. *Reang*, 17. *Santhal*, 18. *Tripuri*, *Trupiri*, *Treppera*; 19. *Uchai*.

Assam

Assam has some 23 Scheduled Tribes: 1. *Chakma*, 2. *Dimasa*, 3. *Garo*, 4. *Hajong*, 5. *Hmar*, 6. *Khasi*, *Jaintia*, *Synteng*, *Pnar*, *Bhoi*, 7. *Any Kuki tribe*, 8. *Lakher*, 9. *Man (Tai speaking)*, 10. *Any Mizo (Lushai)*, 11. *Mikir*, 12. *Any Naga*, 13. *Pawi*, 14. *Sytheng*, 15. *Barmans*, 16. *Boro*, 17. *Deori*, 18. *Hojai*, 19. *Kachari*, 20. *Lalung*, 21. *Mech*, 22. *Miri*, 23. *Rabha*.

Source: Shimray 2006: 7.

Diversity exists also in their origin. Many communities that are indigenous to the Northeast belong to the Mongoloid stock and speak Sino-Tibetan languages. Apart from the tribals, the communities belonging to the Mongoloid stock also include some non-tribal groups like the Meitei of Manipur and the Tai-Ahom of Assam. However, those of the Mongoloid stock are not the only inhabitants of the region. It also has non-Mongoloid groups such as the ethnic Assamese and some Bengali communities who consider themselves indigenous to the region. Among the other inhabitants of Assam are the Adivasi and other plantation labourers who immigrated from Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, Orissa and their neighbouring areas in the 19th and early 20th centuries and the more recent Bihari, Bangladeshi and Nepali immigrants. The Bengali majority of Tripura is made up mostly of post-1947 Hindu immigrants from present day Bangladesh. It is important to understand this diversity because it is one of the major causes of the conflicts that will be discussed later. The indigenous demand in the Northeast that is

different from that of the tribals of the rest of India arises to a great extent from this diversity.

Table 1.3: Population of Some Major Ethnic Groups in the Northeast in 1991

| States | Major Ethnic Groups | | | | | | | | | | |
|--------------|---------------------|--------|--------|------------------------|--------|---------------------------|---------|---------|--------|--------|--------|
| | Nagas | Kukis | Mizo | Garo <i>Jaintia</i> | Khasi | Kachari <i>Trepera</i> | Tripuri | Boro | Adi | Karbi | Chakma |
| 1. Arunachal | 78282* | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 109196 | 285811 | 55200 |
| 2. Assam | 15354 | 21883 | 1031 | 17998 | 11358 | 198619 | 0 | 1267015 | 0 | 0 | 4187 |
| 3. Manipur | 334085 | 121994 | 8240 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 4. Meghalaya | 715 | 4054 | 3007 | 546734 | 870165 | 3436 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 7275 | 700 |
| 5. Mizoram | 74 | 31077 | 500146 | 82 | 420 | 131 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 54217 |
| 6. Nagaland | 1029587 | 16100 | 0 | 2272 | 0 | 8244 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 703 | 0 |
| 7. Tripura | 0 | 10628 | 4910 | 9360 | 358 | 0 | 461531 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 96,096 |
| Totals | 1458097 | 205736 | 517334 | 576446 | 882301 | 210430 | 461531 | 1267015 | 109196 | 293789 | 210400 |

* These are *Nocte*, *Wancho*, *Tangsa*; Source: Shimray 2006.

3. Tribal Economy and Land

Most traditional tribal economies of the Northeast are centred round shifting or wet rice terrace cultivation with an alder tree-based agro-ecosystem that is home to a variety of indigenous wild as well as cultivated crops, plants and animals. These systems are "closely linked with a variety of natural forested ecosystem types, ranging from dry deciduous to humid rainforest systems. They live in harmony with their natural environment obtaining

a variety of resources that may provide cash income. They are also involved with a wide range of land-use activities, chiefly for food production, from shifting agriculture on one extreme to a variety of sedentary agro-ecosystem types on the other. All these agro-ecosystem types have close interconnection both with natural forest and with complex village ecosystem" (Ramakrishnan 1999: 176).

Dependence on Land

The role of land is seen in the extent of the dependence of the workforce on it. The accurate division of the workforce by sector and tribe is not yet available for 2001. In 1991, 83.3% of the tribal workforce in the region depended on the primary sector and only 2.3% and 14.4% respectively on the secondary and tertiary sectors (Dubey and Gangopadhyay 1998). The primary sector consists of agriculture, forestry and mining, the secondary sector is industrial production and the tertiary is the service sector. This proportion is considerably different from that of the region as well as of India's whole. In 1998, 75.26% of the Nagaland workforce, 74.81% of Meghalaya, 73.99% of Assam and 70% of Manipur was in the primary sector, against an All-India average of 67.53%. The secondary sector employed some 4% of the workforce in 5 States and 8% in two, against an All-India average of 11.97%. The tertiary sector employed around 24% in AP, 20.45% in Assam, 21.46% in Meghalaya, 21.26% in Nagaland and 29% in Mizoram against an All-India average of 20.5% (D'Souza 1999: 16). The 2001 data show that the situation has not changed substantially (Table 1.4). Thus, the proportion of the workforce in the tertiary sector is high in the tribal majority States. But their low proportion in the population of the region as a whole shows that relatively few of them are employed in the secondary and tertiary sectors in the populous States of Assam, Manipur and Tripura.

The main reason of high dependence on the primary sector is low investment in the secondary sector. In 1996 the seven States together had only 166 major and medium industries, 118 of them in Assam (D'Souza 1999: 14). Very few new industries have been established, and some old ones have been declared sick and closed down. They include all 16 in Nagaland (Ezung 2003). Assam had 5,686 sick industrial

units including small scale (SSI) in 1985. Their number had grown to 11,448 in 1994 (Bhattacharyya 1998: 2). Thus, no new major and medium industries have been opened in recent years and many of the existing SSIs have been declared sick. Such a decline in industrial production also means that the share of the secondary sector has grown in the State Domestic Product (SDP) more because of a decline in agricultural productivity than because of higher industrial production.

Table 1.4: Distribution of total workers by category in percentage in 2001

| States | Cultivators | | Agricultural Lab | | | HH Industry | | | Other Workers | | | |
|--------|-------------|------|------------------|------|------|-------------|-----|-----|---------------|------|------|------|
| | T | M | F | T | M | F | T | M | F | T | M | F |
| AP | 75.0 | 68.0 | 82.6 | 2.3 | 2.1 | 2.5 | 1.2 | 1.0 | 1.5 | 21.5 | 26.9 | 13.4 |
| Ass | 67.7 | 68.8 | 66.2 | 11.6 | 9.0 | 15.4 | 3.7 | 1.3 | 7.1 | 17.0 | 20.9 | 11.4 |
| Mani | 64.9 | 63.5 | 66.4 | 7.4 | 6.4 | 8.5 | 5.7 | 2.9 | 8.8 | 22.0 | 27.2 | 16.3 |
| Megha | 52.9 | 51.6 | 54.5 | 18.6 | 17.3 | 20.3 | 2.1 | 1.6 | 2.5 | 26.4 | 29.6 | 22.4 |
| Mizo | 58.1 | 54.7 | 62.1 | 5.9 | 5.2 | 6.8 | 1.5 | 1.3 | 1.8 | 34.5 | 38.8 | 29.3 |
| Naga | 71.4 | 65.0 | 79.0 | 3.5 | 3.2 | 3.9 | 2.6 | 1.9 | 3.5 | 22.4 | 29.9 | 13.6 |
| Trip | 41.6 | 43.7 | 38.9 | 36.2 | 30.7 | 43.5 | 2.1 | 1.1 | 3.5 | 20.0 | 24.5 | 14.2 |
| Sikkim | 56.1 | 51.5 | 62.4 | 5.4 | 4.8 | 6.3 | 1.4 | 1.2 | 1.6 | 37.0 | 42.5 | 29.7 |

Source: Census of India-2001: CDs.

The Role of Land in Conflicts

These conditions are the setting for an understanding of development and of conflicts in the region. Most tribes depend on subsistence agriculture, supplemented by utilisation of the forest. "The forest, rangelands and

farming systems were managed by the tribal societies as multiple systems. They met their needs through a long tradition of carefully maintaining forest resources. The cultural beliefs contributed a lot to biological diversity and environmental protection, along with materials such as food, shelter, medicine, plants and many social customs and religious rituals. The principle of co-existence between the natural environment and human beings is thus developed and presented as a distinctive physical phenomenon in this mountain region.” (Aier and Changkija 2003: 334).

Such high dependence goes hand in hand with a shortage of land, caused by factors that include immigration, development projects, and alienation to non-tribals as well as within the tribe. Since the shortages add to tension, one has to situate land alienation in the context of high dependence on it: most conflicts arise from competition for land. Land use is the only economic alternative in the region in which investment in the secondary sector is low and the level of education is high especially in the Hills. The primary and tertiary sectors are saturated and secondary employment generation has deteriorated in recent years.

Conflicts are also offshoots of certain unequal power relations among the ethnic groups. Calls for political autonomy are among such causes but many of them have more to do with their aspirations such as protection of ethnic territories and resources than with political independence. Over time, changing land relations have become crucial to the conflicts because they affect the cultural system, which is based on community and individual rights. Such conflicts are found in most States. For example, in the 1990s Manipur faced social turmoil and political instability that included ethnic clashes between the *Naga-Kuki* (Haokip 2007a) *Meitei-Pangal* and *Paite-Kuki* (Haokip 2007b). 2001 saw Naga-Meitei tension with the latter opposing the demand for the political integration of all the Naga inhabited areas (Maring 2007). The sides involved in it viewed integration as an effort to control land and jobs (Shimray 2006: 12). Land has been central also to past conflicts such as the Bodo-Santhal (Roy 1995) and the Dimasa-Hmar tension in Assam (*The Telegraph*, 23rd April 2003), the Tripura tribal demand for a homeland (Bhaumik 2003: 84-85). At stake is their livelihood based on land, water and biodiversity around

which most communities of the region have built their culture, economy and identity. The indigenous issue becomes central in the effort to claim exclusive rights over the resources.

Immigration and Conflicts

Immigration has been a major cause of land alienation and, by implication, of conflicts. Many immigrants encroach on tribal land and cause shortages. However, immigration itself is not new to the Northeast. The myths of origin and the languages spoken in the region show that for over a thousand years nomadic communities from East and Southeast Asia have settled down in the Northeast and have integrated themselves with its peoples. For example, the Mizo legend traces their origin to Singlung in China and their migration to a conflict. The Khasi who speak a Mon-Khmer language seem to have come to the present-day Meghalaya from Annam in Cambodia (Ghosal 2003: 47) but according to their tradition they are people of the seven huts that broke away from the sixteen huts of heaven and landed in the Khasi Hills (Khonglah 2002; 161-162). This indicates that a conflict forced them to move out of their earlier homeland. During a discussion the Aka elders of West Kameng District, AP told the present researchers that they are descendants of the younger son of an Ahom king. His elder brother sent him into exile as punishment for killing his father. The forest conservation myths of the Angami are based on the fear of the spirit, not on the totem linking the origin of the clan to a tree or an animal as among the Middle India tribes. It is an indication that they migrated to the region much after the clan got an identity of its own. When they came to their new habitat, their main concern was the village, not the clan. So they built beliefs in the spirits of the village and of the forests (Khekhrieseno 2002: 179-180).

Conflicts did exist at the time of these peoples' arrival, but immigration did not cause a major loss of livelihood because resources were abundant. Thus conflicts declined after they settled down. The region continued to be one of immigration in the 19th and 20th centuries, but with the difference that this resulted from deliberate British policies. This is the locus of the origin of many present day conflicts. Prominent among such immigrants are the Adivasi and other tea garden workers

who were displaced and impoverished by the *Permanent Settlement 1793* in Jharkhand and its neighbouring regions. They were brought to Assam as indentured labour to work in its tea gardens (Guha 1977). The Ahom, Bodo-Kachari, Koch and others had lost their land to the tea gardens as a result of the *Assam Land Rules for Special Cultivation 1838*, which were meant to make land acquisition by British plantation owners easy (Barbora 1998). Apart from the fact that tea garden management kept the Adivasi isolated in the Lines, the local people could also perceive the newcomers as outsiders who were developing the tea economy on land alienated from them. Besides, when there was excess labour the management encouraged them to establish their villages on land that the British perceived as State property but local tribes considered the source of their livelihood (Roy 1995).

Since the British administrative system was considerably different from that of the Ahom, the colonial regime brought with them Bengalis who were conversant with the colonial administration (Gopalakrishnan, Jhunjhunwala and Shalaja 2002: 52-53). Their presence affected several tribes. In the Barak Valley of southern Assam, the Bengali service class of clerical and semi-skilled workers who came as administrators of the British and as railroad workers turned Bengali into the medium of instruction. The Dimasa people are among those affected by this policy, and who have had to struggle to retain their cultural traditions, history and identity. They are today reacting to what they consider the imposition of an alien ethos and are trying to re-invent their origin by "going back" to their traditional culture and identity (Fernandes and Barbora 2002a: 56-58).

The link between immigration, cultural hegemony and land loss that began in the colonial age continues today. The region witnessed massive immigration of Bengali Hindus at the Partition and of the Tibetans in 1959 (Subba 2002). Since the late 1970s focus has been on the Bangladeshi Muslims but Hindus from Bangladesh and from Bihar and Nepal have also come to the region. Because of the immigration of Bengali Hindus the tribal population of Tripura has declined from 58% in 1951 (Sen 1993: 13) to 31% in 2001 (Registrar General and Census Commissioner 2001). According to estimates, there are more than 200,000 Burmese refugees in its neighbouring countries, over 40,000

of them in the Northeast, mostly in Mizoram (Das 2002: 75). Immigrants also come from other Indian States, especially North India. The number of each group is difficult to know, but the 2001 census indicates that Assam has about 16 lakh Muslims of Bangladeshi origin and some 24 lakh Hindus mostly of Bihari and Nepali origin (Fernandes 2005b: 3238).

The push factor in this immigration is poverty, feudalism and the lack of land reforms in the immigrants' place of origin, i.e., Bihar, Nepal or Bangladesh. The first pull factor is the legal system that encourages encroachment on the tribal commons (CPRs). The formal law, which recognises only individual ownership, treats the CPRs as State property even though they are critical sources of tribal sustenance. For example, Bihari immigrants have encroached on what were called wastelands of Karbi Anglong. The Karbis allege that they get *pattas* by bribing State officials. There may be some truth in this because a study (Fernandes and Barbora 2002b: 65-66) shows that many of them have *pattas* in Lanka in Nagaon District that does not come under the Sixth Schedule, but that their land is in tribal majority Karbi Anglong, where its transfer to non-tribals is banned. The decline in the tribal proportion in Tripura since 1951 is attributed mostly to Hindu Bangladeshis who came first in 1946 and encroached on tribal land because the Tripura Land and Land Revenue Act 1960 recognises only land that has been registered in the name of an individual, while tribal sustenance is their CPRs (Shimray 2006: 14). The Bengali Hindu influx continues. They have settled down, have acquired Indian citizenship and have become its dominant community (Bhaumik 2003: 84). The second pull factor is the need for cheap labour. The immigrants are involved in daily wage work in construction and other areas at lower wages than the local people demand.

While these factors encourage immigration, the separate histories of the local people and the immigrants add to the tension. Since most immigrants are agricultural labourers, they know advanced cultivation techniques. They prosper by using them to grow three crops on the fertile land they occupy. Most people of the Northeast have lived in a single-crop economy because of the sharecropper system in some parts of Assam and the temporary (*eksonia*) *patta* system in other areas. These historically deprived peasant agriculturalists of motivation to grow a second crop because half or more of what they grew went to the *zamindar*

(landlord) (Majumdar 2002: 107-108). The hill areas depended on *jhum*, which is essentially a single crop system.

Immigration is an encounter of these two histories. Conflicts result when the local people try to defend their livelihood by reacting at first to all outsiders who, they feel, prosper at their cost. When shortages overtake them, they compete among themselves for scarce resources.

Land and Land Laws

Changing land laws and land relations have to be seen in the context of such threats to their livelihoods. Changes in immigration as well as changes in law began in the colonial age and intensified after 1947. 19th Century colonial expansion and post-independence State reorganisation in the region brought many tribes under different States and kept them divided. For example, the Nagas are divided among the states of Assam, Manipur, AP and Nagaland, the Garo between Meghalaya and Assam, and the Mizo between Mizoram and Manipur. This creates more conflicts and tensions. In that sense the concept of State territorial politics was imposed on them. Many laws introduced after 1947 facilitated land alienation. For example, because of legal changes the number of tribal blocks in Assam in which land alienation is banned has declined from 35 to 25 (Shimray 2006: 12-13). Land alienation intensifies the shortages. Additionally, in States like Nagaland where it is not easy for outsiders to get land, much alienation is within the tribe and that leads to hidden absentee landlordism. But their elites that monopolise these assets divert attention from it by concentrating only on the outsiders and immigrants (Khekhrieseno 2007).

Closely linked to land alienation is the tendency to view the nation from the point of view of the centre rather than the periphery. This has implications also for the land laws and land relations in the region. For centuries, the predominantly community-based tribal customary laws and management systems have treated the natural resources as renewable and have built a culture and an economy based on their sustainable use. On the contrary, formal land laws are individual-based and are founded on the principle of the State's eminent domain. In this view land is only a commodity for cultivation and construction, while in the tribal

worldview it belongs to an ecosystem with the local community at its centre. The formal law ignores this view and imposes its own outlook on them (Fernandes and Pereira 2005: 9-10).

This view became prevalent when the colonial regime enacted in the 19th century land laws in order to exploit the resources of South Asia and change its economy in order to turn the colony into a supplier of capital and raw material for the British Industrial Revolution and a captive market for its finished goods. Basic to this objective was monopoly over land for the mines, plantations, railways, roads and other schemes. The principle guiding the land laws was the State's eminent domain, called *terra nullius* (nobody's land) in Australia. White colonisation of native land there and in the Americas is based on the principle that land without an individual title belongs to no one, and as such anyone can occupy it. In 1992 the Australian judiciary declared this unconstitutional (Brennan 1995: 4-5) but Indian land laws continue to be based on the American interpretation of the principle, known as the State's eminent domain. Its first facet is that all biodiversity and land without an individual *patta* is State property. The second is that the State alone has the right to define a public purpose and deprive even individual owners of their assets. This power is overriding (Ramanathan 1999: 19-20). The process of turning land into a commodity and facilitating its transfer began with the *Permanent Settlement 1793*, continued in the *Assam Land Rules for Special Cultivation 1838* and other laws and culminated in the *Land Acquisition Act 1894 (LAQ)* that remains in force today (Upadhyay and Raman 1998).

Colonial practice left the hill areas of the Northeast largely untouched, since these areas were needed more for taxes and handicrafts than for land. For example, after the conquest of Manipur in 1891, Britain retained the dual administration that kept the hill areas directly under the British Crown and entrusted village administration to the chieftain. The *Manipuri (Meitei) Maharaja* was recognised as the sole ruler of the Valley and claimed absolute ownership of all its land, but the British exercised more control over it than over the hills (Guite 2000). Changes affecting them began with *The Assam Land and Revenue Regulations 1886 (AL&RR)* that superseded the Settlement Rules of 1870 and 1883. After 1947 these impositions became the basis for others where the

need to occupy tribal land arose. The AL&RR was promulgated in Manipur and Tripura as the *Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reform Act, 1960* and the *Tripura Land Reform and Land Revenue Act, 1960* without changing its basic structure (Das 1968: 13).

The Prince of Tripura, too, claimed to be the sole owner of land but his reign came to an end after 1947 and eventually the State legislature passed the TLR&LR, under which all lands were declared State property, on the plea that it had to bring the cultivators in direct contact with the State and guarantee them permanent heritable and transferable rights over the land they cultivated. This legislation had an adverse impact on the tribals since it recognised ownership only of land registered under individual names. Since most tribals lived on the CPRs, they lost most of their land, on which the Bengali immigrants were resettled (Bhattacharyya 1988: 37-38).

Mizoram villages had independent Chiefs as the absolute owners of all lands within them. Traditionally, they granted homestead and arable land to the members of their community. The British kept the system of Chieftainship undisturbed and collected the house-tax under the *Chin Hill Regulation* through headmen. The British did not interfere in the Garo and Jaintia Hills either. After 1947 these areas as well as Nagaland were brought under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. Most AP tribes vest land management in the village community. Some have individual land whose owners have a right to parcel it out but under many restrictions such as a ban on transferring or selling land to persons outside the tribe or village. The *Sadiya Frontier Tract Jhumland Regulation 1947* was enacted to regulate the rights and liabilities around *jhum land* over which a community had a customary right. It is not transferable to another community or individual except with the permission of the Land Conservator or Deputy Commissioner (Shimray 2006: 15-16).

Nagaland does not have comprehensive land laws because its civil affairs are run according to their customary laws. Only a few acts exist such as the *Nagaland Jhum Land Act, 1970* and the *Nagaland Village and Area Council Act, 1978*. The NJL Act is the same as the *Frontier Tract Jhum land Regulation, Arunachal Pradesh*. NV&AC Act bans

transfer of land outside the tribe without the consent of the village council, which is to maintain written records about it. But very few records exist. Customary laws regulate the remaining land relations among them (D'Souza 2001a: 16-17).

Conclusion

This introductory chapter has discussed the background of the Northeast in order to establish the context in which the indigenous issue is to be situated. It has shown the close link between the tribal economy, culture and identity and the threat emanating from immigration, land encroachment and the individual-based legal system. Land is central not merely to indigenous peoples' culture and identity but also to many ethnic conflicts. That is the reason why the next chapter will go into the details of how land laws evolved and their implications for the diversity of ethnic groups that has been mentioned in this chapter. It will lead to the main issue of the indigenous status of the people of the region and the manner in which they react to what they consider threats to their land, culture and identity. Such knowledge of the specificities of the Northeast around their identity, culture and indigenous status is required in order to understand their reaction to these issues. Autonomy is one of their demands and the next chapter will begin with a discussion on it.