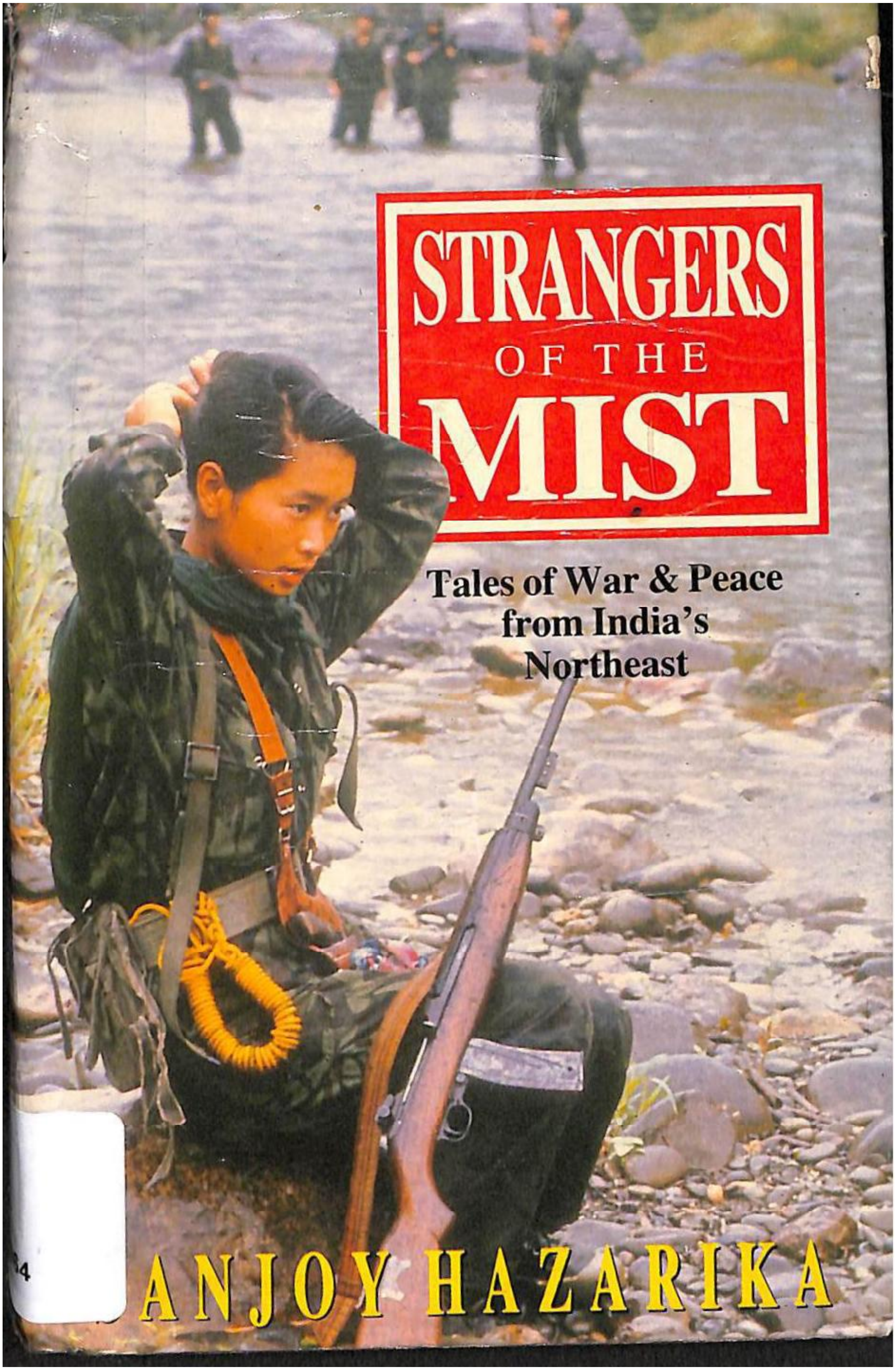
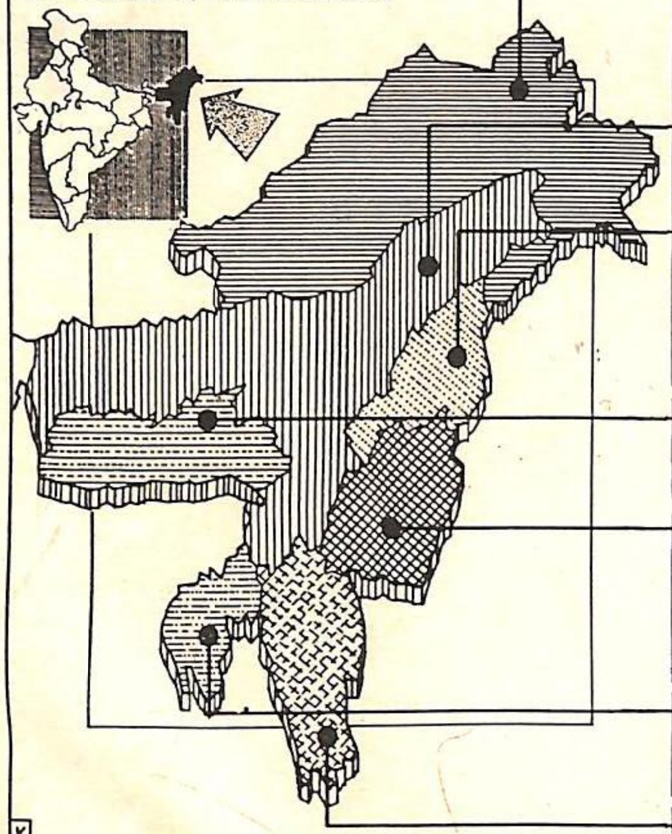


# STRANGERS OF THE MIST

## Tales of War & Peace from India's Northeast

ANJOY HAZARIKA

# Major Militant Groups in India's Northeast



## The following major militant groups have been active in the Northeast

**Arunachal Pradesh**

- United Liberation Volunteers of Arunachal Pradesh (ULVA).
- United People's Volunteers of Arunachal Pradesh (UPVA).
- United Liberation Movement of Arunachal Pradesh (ULMA).

**Assam**

- United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA).
- Bodo Security Force. (BSF)

**Nagaland**

- National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak/Muviah), (NSCN I/M).
- National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Khaplang)-NSCN(K)
- Naga National Council (Adinno)/Naga Federal Govt.(NFG).
- Naga National Council (Khodao)-NNC(K).

**Meghalaya**

- Achick Liberation Matgrik Army (ALMA).
- Hynniewtrept Volunteer Council (HVC).

**Manipur**

- National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN I/M)
- People's Liberation Army (PLA)/Revolutionary People's Front (RPF).
- United National Liberation Front (UNLF).
- Peoples Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK)

**Tripura**

- All Tripura Tribal Force (ATTF).
- National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT).

**Mizoram**

- Hmar People's Convention (HPC).

KBK

M-7099

Source: Ministry of Home Affairs

## Sanjoy Hazarika

# Strangers of the Mist

## *Tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast*

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*For my father and mother*

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This book would have been completed earlier but for events that disrupted millions of lives across India, including those of journalists: the demolition of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya, by a Hindu mob on 6 December 1992 and the communal riots that followed across the country. In January 1993, the selective massacres of Muslims at Bombay and the devastating revenge bomb blasts there two months later led to extensive travelling and reporting for the *New York Times*. In addition, there was 'normal reporting': the Punjab, environmental, economic and political issues such as the billion dollar scam in the Bombay stock market, corruption charges and infighting that brought Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao's government almost to its knees.

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Many relatives have lavished affection and more on me and on my brother, Sujoy, in Nowgong (now Nagaon), Shillong, Guwahati and elsewhere for years. They were always ready to listen to yarns, views and maintained an interest in my work—without expecting anything in return. Not that I had much to offer, anyway.

Closest among them to me are my grandmother, Amiya Baruah, and my brother, Sujoy. My grandmother, teller of stories and religious woman, has been companion all these years to her daughter—who also is my mother. Sujoy—cricketer, car engineer, artist, photographer and doctor—has been a friend, despite the physical distance between Delhi and Tura, the town in Meghalaya where he tends to people's bodies and spirits.

Minal, my wife, and Meghna, our daughter, have patiently handled carpenters, masons, exams, visitors and illnesses and borne my cantankerousness, long silences and absences stoically and with good humour. They will be relieved that their current ordeal is over.

A deep regret is that my father, Chaitanya Nath Hazarika, who died when I was barely fifteen, is not around to view this offering. Many people in the Northeast spoke to me for this book out of affection for him.

This book is dedicated to him and to my mother, Maya Hazarika, who has always been supportive.

Without them *Strangers of the Mist* could not have been written.

*New Delhi*
*22 February 1994*

*Sanjoy Hazarika*

'Our traditions are being destroyed. Soon, we will be the nowhere people, without a past or a future. I tell the young men, "Do not throw away your traditions. Not all of them were bad."

'In the ways of the new government, the new rulers, there is no love, there is no care. India has not done anything for us except after the Chinese aggression of 1962: it needed a shock to do something for the Northeast. Now at least, people are clothed, they are learning personal hygiene, they are getting educated, there are some health services. It may not be bad that some traditions are going. But we have to ask ourselves: where are we headed?

'The new officers, they sign files, they come to work for some time and go away without touching the lives or hearts of ordinary folk. These big officers and politicians, they have no knowledge of what is going on: they step in and out of big offices, cars, airplanes. Our boys are following their example. People have stopped doing things for the common good. Nowadays, the first thing that they want to know is what is in it for themselves.'

– *Village elder at Thankip village, Arunachal Pradesh.*

# Note From The Author

India's Northeast, home to seven states and many more insurgencies, is part of a great tropical rainforest that stretches from the foothills of the Himalayas to the tip of the Malaysian Peninsula and the mouth of the Mekong river as it flows into the Gulf of Tonkin.

As the crow flies, it is closer to Hanoi than to New Delhi.

For me, as for millions of others, it also is home and sanctuary, where I grew up and which holds a special, magical attraction with its mist-clad hills, lush green forests and smooth valleys, the bewildering range of its languages and the rich, colourful mix of its people, ranging from former head-hunters to city slickers.

All this has changed in my lifetime. At times, dramatically; and other moments, covertly.

It has changed in every way: the shape of the Northeast—or rather its shape on the maps of the world—has been altered with new lines drawn to recognize new political and administrative realities. The names of these units have changed: the Naga Hills became Nagaland, the Lushai Hills changed to Mizoram and the North Eastern Frontier Agency, still known to many simply as NEFA, was converted to Arunachal Pradesh, the Land of the Rising Sun. I am sure that those who coined the last title meant no offence to Japan.

And if these frontiers have changed, so have attitudes among its people; so have the skylines of its cities and towns. So has the way people talk to each other, the things they talk about and in which they involve themselves and one another.

Its forests of pine, teak, sal and mangrove swamps are being maimed by plunderers. Yet, thick bamboo, coconut and banana groves, rubber and tea plantations, clusters of frangipani and bougainvillaea still dot the countryside. Its hills are terraced with rice fields. So are its steamy plains.

One image that endures is of wiry farmers with Mongolian features, balancing bamboo poles across their shoulders with cane baskets filled with vegetables, chickens or eggs at either end, walking jerkily to market.

Another image is of naked, cheerful children on water buffaloes, prodding the animals along narrow village tracks.

These images could be true of any part of this belt, which comprises a single geographical entity. Yet, under this postcard-like facade of calm and exotic locales, smiling faces and lushness lie deeper emotions: grief, terror, war and all the torments, tragedies and gore that accompany them. For decades, this jungle has seethed with unrest, rebellion and violence.

The jungles of Southeast Asia sweep down from Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh across seven other nations—Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Kampuchea, Malaysia, and Vietnam—spanning political boundaries, irreverential even of physical frontiers. Ethnic coalitions, oral traditions and lifestyles based on respect for nature have mattered more in these regions than frontiers. Here men and women, with common origins but different nationalities, share a racial, historic, anthropological and linguistic kinship with each other that is more vital than their links with the mainstream political centres, especially at Delhi, Dhaka and Rangoon.

It is this affinity that has played a role in the unrest and insurgencies that have long troubled the Northeast of India. The embattled communities have been bonded by suffering and opposition to the brutality of government crackdowns against militancy and revolts.

Affinity and Identity. These, more than any other factors, represented the principal compulsions that triggered the Naga, Mizo, Meitei, Tripuri and Assamese affirmation of separateness from the non-Mongolian communities that dominate the Indian subcontinent.

India's Northeast is a misshapen strip of land, linked to the rest of the country by a narrow corridor just twenty kilometres wide at its slimmest which is referred to as the Chicken's Neck. The region has been the battleground for generations of subnational identities confronting insensitive nation-states and their bureaucracies as well as of internecine strife. It is a battle that continues, of ideas and arms, new concepts and old traditions, of power, bitterness and compassion.

Yet, it also holds warm memories.

Some of these are of the years in school: crisp mornings, the joy of friends and St. Edmund's School, run by largely-cheerful, occasionally sherry-laden Irish missionaries from the Christian Brothers. Cramming for exams, lunches from tiffin boxes brought by servants and served in the Great Hall (where exams were held three times a year for senior classes), cricket on the playing fields on Sundays and on the back lawn of the sprawling bungalow where we lived during my father's tenure as head of the Reid Chest Hospital, a treatment centre for tuberculosis patients. We broke more windows with our home cricket than I care to remember. There were picnics in the hills among pine trees and streams with relatives and school friends. Above all, the fresh aroma of pine in the air, the sight of golden and pink flowering orchids growing wild.

And the rains: steam rising from smartly macadamized roads with the first sharp showers of early summer, the wet, warm, sensuous smell of fresh earth washed by rain, so fresh that you could almost taste it.

In winter we gathered in one main bedroom around a crackling fire where we dozed in our chairs, munching on sweet oranges, throwing pips into the fire and listening to their sputter as they exploded in the heat. The fire also slowly baked the large sweet potatoes, placed under the iron grate, with a mixture of heat, embers and ash.

We were exposed too, to the power of nature. I remember watching with awe as a thunderstorm slammed into Shillong and crumpled our garage like a piece of paper. Then, as if in slow motion, the wind picked up the heavy asbestos roof and hurled it 100 feet away, spinning above the servant's outhouse into a vegetable patch.

In many ways, it was a carefree existence. But we were also aware of the turbulence around us.

During the 1965 war with Pakistan, all the windows of our home and of every home in Shillong, the capital of undivided Assam and located nearly 5,000 feet above sea level, were plastered with blackened paper to prevent any light from escaping and indicating our presence to the enemy (a flight of planes? A spy, perhaps?).

We went through air raid drills at school, flinging ourselves enthusiastically at the red, wet earth by the playing fields, ruining our sparkling, starched white shirts and grey flannels. There were mock drills but there was one which came late at night when we were at home.

'Out,' snapped Father, as he switched the lights off and opened the front door. We dashed to the nearby khud, flung ourselves face down on the grass and covered our heads with our hands as we had been trained to do. I was frightened and excited. And before the All Clear sounded, I broke discipline: I looked up.

Moving noiselessly and gently against the starlit sky, a small band of planes flew above us, their lights twinkling peacefully until they swept out of sight.

The Northeast has best been described as Asia in miniature, a place where the brown and yellow races meet and mingle. The oral history of the tribes of Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur and other areas tell of ancestors from the shadowy past, from mountains steeped in mist and romance, from lands far away, of snake gods and princesses, epic battles and great warriors.

Its people have a fear of being swamped by 'outsiders', of lifestyles and histories being destroyed by modern nation-states that bother little about small communities but pay more attention to 'strategic' considerations such as the natural resources of the area, their exploitation for the national 'good' and the region's proximity to a friendly or inimical neighbour. Decisions for the little peoples of such regions—the historian Amalendu Guha describes as 'sub-nationalities'—are made by bureaucratic and political mandarins in national and state capitals, far removed from the realities of the customs and beliefs that govern the thoughts and lives of the indigenous peoples.

The women are pretty, the men handsome. The girls of Imphal in Manipur who ride cycles and scooters, resemble their Thai and Lao counterparts. They could easily be placed either in Bangkok or Vientiane. The seductively swaying Manipuri dances are similar to the gentle rhythms of the Khmers and Laotians as well as the Thais and Indonesians. The distinctive shawls of Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram, each colourful strand proclaiming a tribe, a lifestyle and an identity, share a commonality with communities across the borders in Myanmar and Thailand.

That diversity was seen every day at school, located on a series of gentle hills several of which had been flattened to make space for playing fields, tennis and squash courts, and buildings. To them came Khasis and Garos, Assamese and Punjabis, Bengalis and Anglo-Indians, Bodos and Garhwalis; we were Christians, Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims and we were not infected by the viciousness of today's society.

Our friends, especially the Khasis, had delightful names. Parents gave their children the names of their favourite rock star or any other name that caught their fancy: there was Elvis Presley Lyngdoh, North Star Diengdoh and a politician named Hopingstone Lyngdoh.

The buildings were of sturdy wood, and had a rough-hewn attractiveness about them. The best classroom was the Senior Cambridge room, located above a stone porch and looking out over the front lawn. These days, the buildings are of ugly concrete; the senior classroom has been pulled down, the solitary date palm tree has gone too. Those days, a businessman, old man Goenka, would chug in every afternoon in his 1926 model Ford, lovingly polished and cleaned, to pick up his grandchildren. Now the narrow road leading to the school is packed with Marutis, jeeps and outsized Contessa cars as school ends to the clanging of the great bell, located above the water tower in the old wing.

The bell has remained constant in the midst of these frantic changes.

The physical transformation to the school reflects the larger changes in Shillong where pretty bungalows of wood and plaster are giving way to concrete and brick monsters, faceless, heartless, ugly and symbolic of the devastation that easy money and irresponsibility have wrought on the place.

These days, it is easier to walk from my mother's home, on the hill above the Fire Brigade, to Police Bazar, a distance of about three kilometres, than to travel by taxi or bus. The reason lies in the traffic of buses, trucks, taxis, private and government vehicles that swamp the roads.

Every winter, we travelled to Nowgong, home of our grandparents and lazy days of cricket, films, playing with the dogs, cycling and picnics. We would race our dogs and plunge in together into the smooth and gently flowing Kolong river, scrub the animals with soap and brushes, towel them down. Then would come the best part: as all of us, wet and happy, would sprint along the sandbanks, over the narrow lane home, each trying to outrush the other.

Home here was where my grandfather and his younger brother, a doctor, whom we affectionately called Da, lived. And it was at Da's clinic where my brother and I learned of the kaleidoscopic sweep of the ethnic mosaic of that little town: Muslim Mymensinghias, who seemed to complain the loudest, came to him; so did Lalungs, a major tribe, Kacharis and Assamese and Bengali Hindus. Da is a figure that perhaps exists in every family around the world: selfless, always prepared to attend to a call at any time of the day or night and ever patient with questions that all children ask. His sturdy Austin 16 car was a landmark in the district, the only one of its kind at the time.

But there was an anger below this placid surface of a society apparently at peace with itself that was always trying to get out.

My first glimpse of public anger was in my father's company one day, when while returning from school, we were suddenly confronted by a furious mob, waving clenched fists, shouting something incomprehensible. As we watched, the mob surrounded a city bus, forced all the passengers out and then with a great surge sent the vehicle toppling on its side. The bus was then set on fire.

'Go away from here,' said a bystander. As he spoke, my father swerved the car and took a safer route home.

The people of the Northeast are the guardians of its most precious asset: its uniqueness. Which other area has such beauty among its people and its environment? Which sees such a range of religions, creeds, communities, lifestyles and traditions? Which other area can match it in the sheer raw power of nature: whether it is the Brahmaputra that resembles a great sea during its rain-swollen, flood-hungry days; or the force of its gales and the grace of its waterfalls, the lushness of its forests and bamboo thickets. And the solitude of its spirit, found in the mist of the mountains.

But these days, those of the area are grappling with the changes that the modern age relentlessly brings. And it is these changes and alienation that are at the root of the militancy, the insurgencies, the desperation and the growing violence.

This book does not purport to be an analytical treatise on insurgency and the superiority of the political wing over the military arm. Far from it. It is largely a look at how little men and women have reacted to imperial, insensitive administrations, politicians and policies through their eyes and mine.

There are no Shangri-Las left. Perhaps it is just as well for the people of the region—ranging from Bhutan to Bangladesh and Nagaland to Nepal—as they confront each other and India, strangers in the mist, and span a thousand years in a lifetime.

# SECTION ONE

## The Bangladesh Syndrome

# From Dhaka To Delhi

My search for a key to the crisis that is overwhelming the Northeast of India took me to a squalid slum in Delhi.

Ikram Ahmed lives here, in a basti at Nizamuddin in New Delhi, a short distance from the cloistered tomb of the Urdu poet, Mirza Ghalib. The tomb itself is surrounded by beggars and boon-seekers, armed with flowers, couplets and hopes. The flowers are from the flower-kiosks in the narrow lane that begins at a mosque near the famous Karim's restaurant. Ahmed's home is in a congested colony of ragpickers, rickshaw pullers, labourers and petty traders. They live in a sprawl of fetid lanes, one-room huts of cardboard, tarpaulin and, if they are lucky, tin and asbestos sheets. The swarm of settlers has overwhelmed a once-gracious sixteenth-century mahal of the Mughal era that is located near the mosque, itself a short distance from the tomb of the Emperor Humayun.

Welcoming a visitor to his newly-whitewashed small house—among the few brick buildings flanking the basti, which has expanded to the Nizamuddin flyover near the plush Oberoi Hotel—Ahmed beckoned to a young nephew hovering nearby.

'Go get the tailor,' he ordered in Hindi. And when the young man hesitated, the lord of the Nizamuddin basti and local Congress Party leader, barked: 'The tailor, that Bengali fellow, from Bangladesh, what's his name Basheer or Shameer.'

The young man walked quickly away as a blistering sun beat down on us, and Ahmed, a gruff-voiced man of indeterminate age, sporting a messy stubble but clad in the rumpled khadi homespun pajamas and kurta that politicians of all hues and strata wear in this nation, spat a few times and talked.

'We have people from everywhere, from Bengal, from Madras, from Punjab and even from Bombay. And there are many from Bangladesh, they've come in over the years,' he remarked as we waited in the lane outside his house. The battered wooden door leading to his courtyard creaked open in the warm, moist breeze. Ahmed, who described himself as a leader of the Congress Seva Dal (a band of volunteers whose main job is to organize obsequious receptions for visiting party bosses), talked about the dispute between a Hindu temple nearby—it blares mantras and pujas over loudspeakers—and his community. 'They're encroaching on our land and since the Bharatiya Janata Party has become strong, they're getting more aggressive.' The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is seeking power in Delhi on the main ground that, in their own land, under successive Congress and Janata Party regimes, Hindus who are the majority have been discriminated against to appease Muslims. The party's leaders say they will remedy this, once in power: a tall promise, unlikely to be kept—or as likely to be implemented as the call to Garibi Hatao or Banish Poverty by Indira Gandhi in 1972.

Ahmed spat again and spoke of the Hindu-Muslim riot in that neighbourhood a few months ago. In the violence, police attacked the rioters with clubs, fired teargas and bullets at them, as they chased the crowd through the narrow lanes and entered homes to seize suspects. In his mind and in those of others who listened, the police were anti-Muslim. At least two persons were killed and a curfew proclaimed.

The bitterness of those days was still fresh in Ahmed's mind and on his tongue.

At this moment, a slight man in a lungi and a loose shirt came upto us and waited, unsure of himself.

'This is the fellow you should meet, reporter sahib,' scowled Ahmed. And, he said, there were many others like him.

The visitor gave his name as Sheikh Barah. He sported a stringy beard, and watched the reporter sahib with shifty eyes.

Yes, he was from Bangladesh, he said. He had come in 1971 with his wife; they were newly-married at the time. As he responded to questions, the flow of conversation became smoother despite a bunch of curious onlookers who gathered to listen.

A few months before the Indian army went into East Pakistan to liberate that unfortunate nation from the brutal repression of West Pakistan, Barah was a tailor in Dhaka, the capital of the eastern province. He lived in a tiny room with his wife. The uncertainty of their times, lives and of the country made them restive. Finally, Barah felt he could not take the tension any longer. He decided to leave and move to India.

'I never thought of going to Calcutta to live, I always wanted to go to Delhi,' he said. It was as if he wanted to go farthest from his homeland. The continuing brutal crackdown, one of the worst military repressions by any country on its own people since the Second World War, the disappearance of people, the constant rumours decided them. One night, he and his wife bundled up their meagre possessions—cooking utensils, a few clothes, an aluminium pitcher for water—and boarded a bus to the West Bengal border. Once there, they waited again for nightfall before slipping across the frontier. They did not meet a single guard.

From there, the couple travelled by bus, train and on foot to Calcutta, investing much of their savings of a few hundred taka on the journey. And on by train from the noisy Howrah station to Delhi.

At the time, he said, there were some friends and relatives in Delhi. He did not elaborate. He stayed with them for some time before learning that plots were being parcelled out in Nizamuddin, one of the oldest parts of the capital, near the majestic tomb of Humayun, second of the Mughal dynasty.

The Nizamuddin basti was not very crowded in those days. The ragpickers and rickshawwallahs who are its mainstay had just started coming. Sheikh Barah found work and, as the local politicians took the newcomers under their wing, found a place to live. They built their tiny shacks on their own with friends, relatives, and children helping. In the months and years to come, other things also became available: facilities such as ration cards for the family. Their sons studied at local government schools. But the best was yet to come.

In 1984, Sheikh Barah, who said he was about forty-five, received the stamp of authority on his illegal presence: his name was registered as a voter from the basti. Thus, to all purposes, Barah is now a legitimate Indian. He supports a lifestyle, income and advantages that many others in the country of his adoption lack, although his lifestyle is neither luxurious or even middle class.

But he is a survivor.

He enjoys these advantages without formally having filed an application for citizenship, a process that takes years. He has not reported or been reported by local neighbours to a police station as an alien.

'We will never go back, there is nothing for us in Bangladesh, here we have a house, a regular income, schools where the children can study,' said Sheikh Barah emphatically, in Bengali, his native tongue. His wife and the boys help him with cutting and sewing when they are free.

There are tens of thousands more like him in New Delhi alone, fleeing the destitution and desperation of Bangladesh for a better life. Here they earn two or even three times of what they could have earned in the land of their birth.

One intelligence official told me that there could be as many as 3,00,000 Bangladeshi migrants in the capital. That means that illegal aliens number as much as three per cent of the total population of this ancient city that is sandwiched in time and culture, with overwhelming pressures outstripping efforts to give enough people enough land, drinking water, electricity and jobs.

Police talk of efforts to drive the migrants out. But this is just not happening. In early 1994 hundreds of settlers were reported to be leaving Delhi, complaining of police harassment under a BJP administration. The consequences of continuing neglect of this issue will be a terrible social and political price that the poorest and the most vulnerable in these areas may eventually have to pay, as has happened in the Northeast.

And they are only trail followers, not blazers. They are walking on a road cleared over decades by millions of settlers who came to Assam, little Tripura and West Bengal (I am leaving out the Western sector of India and Pakistan, where clear migrations followed the Partition but virtually ceased in its aftermath). They first came at the end of the last century, and then surged in the 1930s before growing again in the 1950s to 1980s.

The trend is inexorable.

Many, of course, do not travel thus far. It is in the nature of migration and refugee/migrant movements that people move to the places nearest them where there is a friendly environment and where they can work and survive. Millions have, therefore, slipped out of their villages to neighbouring towns and districts in Bangladesh. According to one estimate, one million people are displaced every year by extensive river bank erosion in Bangladesh.

Others moved across the border into India, as Barah did, smoothly. Some bribed border guards on either side of the manmade frontier that zigzags uncertainly and without logic over forest and vale, stream and river, paddy field and marsh.

The Bengali diaspora, especially of Muslims from impoverished East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, has spread across South Asia with nothing but contempt for the international frontiers that the British drew up, carving up two nations out of one, on the basis of religion. And where there were two nations, there are now three.

The outflow from East Pakistan, accelerated by the trauma of Partition, when Hindus joined the flood, drew sharp reactions from the host population. For example, the classic acquisitive figure in the Assam valley was described as a Mymensinghia, a Muslim from the district of the same name which is now in Bangladesh. The area is one of the poorest in that country.

As far back as 1921, C.S. Mullen, the Census Commissioner for Assam wrote in a census report:

> Whither there is wasteland thither flock the Mymensinghias. In fact the way in which they have seized upon the vacant areas in the Assam Valley seems almost uncanny. Without fuss, without tumult, without undue trouble to the district revenue staffs, a population which must amount to over half a million has transplanted itself from Bengal to the Assam Valley during the past twenty five years. It looks like a marvel of administrative organization on the part of Government, but it is nothing of the sort: the only thing I can compare it to is the mass movement of a huge body of ants.

These days, a walk along the banks of the Jamuna in Delhi provides striking proof that a similar situation is developing in the capital of India. Bangladeshi groups have mushroomed here especially in the Shahdara belt, on the side of the Jamuna bordering Uttar Pradesh. They are industrious: they ply rickshaws, work as maids and day labourers at construction sites, sell fresh fish catches in the areas, often near the Nizamuddin Bridge that connects more affluent neighbourhoods in Delhi with their poorer cousins across the river.

These are enterprising men who go from house to house, neighbourhood to neighbourhood selling the beautiful, unmatched Tangail and Jhamawar saris, shimmering, exquisite pieces of craftsmanship renowned in South Asia and beloved to women who can afford to buy them.

It is not merely a question of throwing out a few million migrants and demolishing their homes, as right-wing irredentists seek, but the crisis in Bangladesh, an unending cycle of poverty, overpopulation and hopelessness that is fuelling these flows of people into India. This, as much as any other factor, is creating the social and economic storm which is tearing society apart in Assam, Tripura and other parts of Northeastern India. The results are insurgencies and endemic violence by groups seeking to protect and assert their cultural identity in the light of threats or perceived threats. These problems can be viewed within Bangladesh itself, where settlement of Muslims on tribal lands in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) has led to alienation and armed revolt.

The unabated influx into eastern India has created problems of law and order, confrontations between Indian and Bangladeshi security forces, led to a spurt in smuggling and transfrontier gang wars in West Bengal as well as domestic troubles in Bangladesh where, one Member of Parliament complains, Indian goods, especially consumer items like chillies and medicines, flood the local markets, crushing local enterprise and products.

Bangladesh also blames India for what its elegant High Commissioner in New Delhi, Farooq Sobhan, describes as 'turning the tap on and off' at its own whim. Sobhan was referring to the dispute over the sharing of Ganges river waters; Bangladesh says that India is diverting most of it for irrigation, cultivation, industrial use and to flush Calcutta port of silt. It accuses Delhi of not caring a bit for the devastation downstream in its lands, which are becoming desertified with growing salinity in the water of the river, which is also unfit for human or even industrial consumption. One fourth of all of Bangladesh's 120 million people depend on the Ganges for their survival.

The crisis in Bangladesh has the potential of triggering security and societal crisis all across India. One reason for the lack of violence in parts of India other than the Northeast against the settlers can be ascribed to the absorptive capacity of society and the need of developing industries and agriculture for more labour, especially cheap and hard-working workers.

But what happens when the industrious begin to displace local people—sons of the soil or others—from jobs, land and edge them out in competitive deals? That is when the absorptive capacity of any society ends, where tolerance is exhausted and the disruptive reaction of awakened and embittered local populations begin.

This is the Bangladesh Syndrome, the Malthusian nightmare that has stalked that country for decades and now is surely overwhelming that unfortunate nation: too many people on too little land. The classic overpopulation versus natural resource base conflict is best seen in Bangladesh. It is coming to India too where the pressure of numbers is fast outstripping resources and facilities, such as energy, water supply and sanitation. India cannot afford the additional numbers from Bangladesh.

In the ragpickers' colony in Nizamuddin, men and women sweat as they sift through piles of plastic bags, mounds of newspapers and old magazines, soft drink bottles and beer crates and even empty bottles of Martell. In the background, a male singer's voice crackles over an old tape recorder: the bard from Bengal sings soothingly in the messy slum of the lush green paddy fields of his homeland, its great overflowing rivers and the beauty of its women.

# Neighbours And Disasters

More than any other nation in the world, Bangladesh represents the Malthusian nightmare: overpopulated, with a growing landless community, and not enough food to feed itself.

Or too many people on too little land. The latest estimates place the population at 120 million, growing at about 2.2 per cent per year. The population has doubled in the past thirty years and shows no sign of faltering in its inexorable surge into the twenty-first century.

Yet, a visitor to this nation can be taken in by the lushness of its greenery, the mathematically precise, mapped strips of paddy fields and vegetable patches that begin at the edge of its highways and country roads and stretch for miles in either direction. Nearly eighty per cent of the agricultural land is covered by rice. Despite its teeming fertility, its rivers flowing with fish, especially the carp that all Bengalis prize for its taste and flesh, its rich soil and wiry, hardworking people, Bangladesh is one of the poorest nations in the world.

According to an account in *Time* magazine (2 August 1971): 'Unexpectedly lush and verdant beauty, whose emerald rice and jute fields stretch over the Ganges delta as far as the eye can see . . . . The soil is so rich it sprouts vegetation at the drop of a seed, yet that has not prevented Bengal from becoming a festering wound of poverty. Nature can be as brutal as it is bountiful.'

It has a per capita income of less than 170 dollars per year. This was exactly half of India's per capita income in 1991, before the drastic devaluation of the rupee.

What was once described as the 'basket case of Asia', also scores in a series of dubious firsts.

Bangladesh is the world's most densely populated country, with a density of 969 per square kilometre. In the rest of the world it is sixty-three per square kilometre. The Bangladeshi figure has soared from 624 in 1981, the last census year, to 969 in a single decade. Its family planning programmes have slowed: the government wanted to reduce the annual population growth rate from 2.4 per cent to 1.8 per cent in the third Five Year Plan (1985–1990). It has gone down but to 2.2 per cent. Every year 2.8 million Bangladeshis are added to the national population, increasing the pressure on health services, education systems, land, food, water and the rapidly-diminishing commons.

Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia says that the population boom will have 'disastrous consequences', if unchecked. The number of landless families in the nation rose from 5.7 million in 1976, five years after the Liberation War waged by Indian troops and the Bangla freedom fighters, the Mukti Bahini, that routed Pakistani forces, to 7.8 million in 1990.

A staggering seventy million Bangladeshis, or about sixty per cent of the population, live below the poverty line these days, compared to twenty-five million in 1963–64.

The country survives on foreign aid: between its inception in 1971 and 1990, Bangladesh received about 20.69 billion dollars worth of loans and grants. The huge size of the international assistance leads to a vicious cycle of paybacks: according to one estimate, Dhaka uses thirty-eight per cent of its export earnings to repay loan instalments and interest on foreign loans. The external debt was estimated at 10.7 billion dollars in 1989.

Clearly there are major flaws in Bangladesh's development strategy. A system of patronage and power has bred corruption on a scale that is matched only by Bangladesh's own extreme poverty.

Accounts of investigations launched after the nine-year rule of army strongman, H. M. Ershad, alleged that he and his relatives profited immensely from major domestic and international contracts awarded for development work. This has meant that money that should have gone to benefit people—in building roads, health centres, flood control measures—has lined the pockets of corrupt politicians, bureaucrats and groups close to them in the military.

Bangladesh is also the fourth largest peasant society in the world but its landlessness is rising at a faster rate than its population growth, forcing migrations that will spill over into India.