

IDENTITY, CONTESTATION AND DEVELOPMENT IN NORTHEAST INDIA

Edited by

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Identity, Contestation and Development in Northeast India

India's Northeast has long been riven by protracted armed conflicts for secession and movements for other forms of autonomy. This book shows how the conflicts in the region have gradually shifted towards inter-ethnic feuds, rendered more vicious by the ongoing multiplication of ethnicities in an already heterogeneous region. It further traces the intricate contours of the conflicts and the attempts of the dominant groups to establish their hegemonies against the consent of the smaller groups, as well as questions the efficacy of the state's interventions. The volume also engages with the recurrent demands for political autonomy, and the resultant conundrum that hobbles the region's economic and political development processes.

Lucid, topical and thorough in analysis, this book will be useful to scholars and researchers in political science, sociology, development studies and peace and conflict studies, particularly those concerned with Northeast India.

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Preface

India's Northeastern Region consists of eight states and is a 'mixed bag' of several ethnic groups. Around 200, out of 635 tribal groups of the country are found in this region. Geographically, the region covers an area of approximately 263,000 sq. km (8 per cent of the country), and its population is about 4.56 crore (3.77 per cent of the country) as per 2011 population census. Around three-fourths of the region's geographical area are covered by hilly terrain, and majority of the population (around 85 per cent) lives in villages, rural areas in poverty, in the midst of abundant resources. The region is connected with the mainland India by a small strip of land, around 20-km-wide chicken's neck corridor at Siliguri in West Bengal. Physical infrastructure of the region is very poor compared to national level.

Despite its rich natural and human resources, the region is mired by a series of intractable conflicts. In the recent past, it has slowly shifted towards the inter-ethnic feuds and rendered more viciously by the ongoing amoebic multiplication of ethnicities in an already prodigiously heterogeneous region. Strident ethno-nationalistic assertions over the land and resources and articulation of grievances in terms of the 'others' have given rise to contestations over the same space shared by multiple ethnic groups. Tacit assertions and explicit demands for hybrid identity-based exclusive homelands are accentuating the latent sociological fissures into apparent fault lines and often lead to ethnic cleansing and extermination of the smaller groups or politically weaker sections in the society. The intricate contours of the conflicts are getting convoluted with the attempts of the dominant groups to establish their hegemonies, and that are being challenged by the emerging subalterns sharing the same space. Propensity of the stakeholders to use violence as a political resource in pursuit of their objectives has fostered the ecology of violence resistant to restraint. State's interventions to contain the

non-state violence with rewards and incentives along the lines of ethnicities have compounded the situation further, accelerated the growth of newer identities or hybrid identities, and it often leads to recurrence of demand for autonomy within the region. The resultant conundrum hobbles the region's economic and political development processes in the long run.

Having understood this fact, many scholars working on the issue were invited to share their scholarly works, and finally fourteen essays have been chosen for this volume. The present volume entitled *Identity, Contestation and Development in Northeast India* is outcome of it. Though the eight states of the region have different issues and challenges, these chapters made a modest attempt to understand the issue of identity, contestation and overall development of the region. How has the ethnic politics complicated development initiatives and 'take-it-easy' approach of the government compounded conflict situations in the region, are well debated in this volume.

Definitely, this volume will serve as a landmark in the region's literature on ethnic identity formation, politics of state formation and development policy formulation. It will also be very useful for the scholars, academia and policymakers for further research of the region's complex development issues. Therefore, we would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to all the contributors for their valuable contribution in this volume. It would not have been possible without their support. We would also like to thank R.N. Ravi, Former Special Director, Intelligence Bureau of India, and Prof S. Japhet, National Law School of India University, Bengaluru, for their encouragement in inception of this volume. Last, but not the least, our special thanks goes to Routledge for bringing out this volume on time.

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Introduction

India's Northeast, the confederation of eight states (i.e. Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura), is home to around 200 indigenous communities (Cline, 2006). Geographically, the region covers an area of approximately 263,000 sq. km (8 per cent of the country), and its population is about 4.56 crores (3.77 per cent of the country) as per 2011 population census. Around three-fourths of the region's geographical area are covered by hilly terrain. The region shares long land borders with as many as five countries, viz. Bangladesh, Bhutan, China (Autonomous Tibet Region), Myanmar and Nepal, and is situated at the tri-junction of South, East and South-east Asia. It is also connected to the 'mainland' India by a narrow 20-km-wide chicken's neck corridor at Siliguri town of West Bengal.

Ethnic communities living in the Northeastern Region (NER) are seemingly homogenous to laymen from outside but are in reality heterogeneous in many respects – socially, linguistically, culturally, religiously and politically. The state of physical infrastructure that includes road and communication, water, power, health, education and so on is found to be very weak compared to other parts of the country. Inter- and intra-state connectivity of the region is a challenge. This remoteness and weak connectivity could be one of the factors of perceived sense of isolation from the 'mainland' India. Its overall socio-economic structure is also characterised by inadequate transport and communication facilities, limited industrial activities, high unemployment, limited educational facilities and low per-capita income. These constitute a significant factor in studying conflict and for overall economic backwardness in this region. At the same time, New Delhi's 'take it easy approach' has convoluted the situation of conflict and ethnic relation of the region. Now the region has become an epicentre of ethnic conflict, identity conflict, armed conflict and violence in the country.

Soon after India's independence, the Nagas demanded an independent homeland, but it was denied to them. An attempt was made in mid-1947, when the Governor of Assam and the Naga National Council (NNC), a pro-independence group, agreed to set up an interim administrative arrangement in the Naga Hills. However, the proposal could not materialise as the agreement became contentious. The most controversial clause was 'The Governor of Assam as the Agent of the Government of Indian Union will have a special responsibility for a period of ten years to ensure that due observance of this agreement; at the end of this period, the Naga National Council will be asked whether they require the above agreement to be extended for a further period, or a new agreement regarding the future of the Naga people would be arrived at.' The Nagas insisted upon complete autonomy and independence once the interim period of 10 years was over, while India insisted that it only means the right to suggest administrative changes under its constitutional framework. Thereafter, India offered limited autonomy under the Sixth Schedule of its constitution, which was rejected by the Nagas. The first general election held in 1951 was boycotted in the Naga Hills, marking the beginning of the first armed struggle against India. Later on, a few pro-India Naga leaders proposed for setting up of a single administrative unit with the Indian union comprising Tuensang Division and the Naga Hills. It was readily accepted by India (hereafter, the centre/New Delhi). In 1959, the pro-India Naga leaders put up another proposal for the elevation of Tuensang Division and the Naga Hills into a state of India, and eventually, the area became the state of Nagaland in 1963. It was, however, opposed by the pro-independent NNC and hence started an armed conflict against India. Further, in 1975, an NNC faction and New Delhi signed an agreement in which the former agreed to abide by the Constitution of India and surrender arms. Unfortunately, it was rejected by another NNC faction for what they called 'an agreement to sell the Naga nation'. As a result, in 1980, the breakaway group founded the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN). It later split into two – NSCN-IM and NSCN-K. Although the NSCN-IM has been able to prove itself as the most influential one, the prospect for a long-lasting solution is not forthcoming because the demand for bringing the Nagas together into a single politico-administrative unit will not go unchallenged from other ethnic groups.

Like Nagaland, Manipur has also been affected severely by protracted conflict since the 1960s, which is primarily a political in origin over the questions of autonomy, independence and ethnicity. Historically, Manipur was one of the oldest independent kingdoms in South-east Asia,

having its own civilisation, traditions and cultural heritage (Verghese, 2012). It was ruled in succession by different kings since 1445 AA until 1949, and it was well recorded in the Royal Chronicle *the Cheitharol Kumbaba* (Tensuba, 1993). Manipur came under the British rule in 1891 and annexed to the Indian Union as part 'C' state¹ on 15 October 1949 (Sharma, 2011; Suan, 2009). Thereafter, it was directly ruled from New Delhi, and the bureaucrats of the centre were not trusted by the local people (Rammohan, 2002). Thus, a movement resisting the merger (annexation, as termed by Meiteis) started and subsequently culminated into an armed conflict. Finally, Manipur became a state of Indian union in 1972. But, it failed to end the armed conflict. Manipur is now one of the most restrictive places where the extraordinary legislations like the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) of 1958 and the Foreigners (Protected Areas) Order of 1958 are in operation.² Successive governments have not been able to tackle the problem leading to the erosion of democracy, human rights and rule of law, which resulted in a series of flashpoints. Irom Sharmila (Iron Lady) has been fasting since 2001, demanding for the repeal of the AFSPA. She is kept alive by forced feeding at a public-funded hospital in Imphal, Manipur's capital city. The alleged rape and murder of another lady, Thangjam Manorama, in 2004 by the security forces sparked a wave of protest including a nude protest by a dozen women in Imphal.

Ironically, the political aspirations of Manipur's main ethnic groups – the Meiteis, the Nagas and the Kukis – are at loggerheads with one another. On one side, the Meiteis, the dominant community who live in the plain want an independent homeland. On the other side, the Kukis and the Nagas who live in the hills surrounding the plain want bifurcation of the hill portion from the Meiteis³ and further division of the hills into two – one each for the Nagas and the Kukis. This is with the objective of enjoying political control over the territories that they dominate. The Nagas call their homeland as Nagalim, while the Kukis call their homeland as Kukiland. As a result of this, a series of ethnic conflict had happened in the 1990s due to overlapping homeland demands by the Nagas and the Kukis. Even ethnicity-based political party has emerged, for example the Naga People's Front.

By contrast, at the time of the Partition of India (1947), a large number of refugees (the Hindu Bengalis) fled towards Tripura, which became a cause for hostilities between the older inhabitants known as the Boroks (Tripuris) and the refugees (Bengalis). Within a few years, the Boroks, erstwhile majority community, were reduced to minority, outnumbered by the Bengalis. Being the single largest group, at present,

the Bengalis are elected from at least two-thirds of the constituencies in the legislative assembly; this number is sufficient enough to control the state government. Bengali and English became the official languages in 1964, but 15 years later, in 1979, Kokborok, the language of the Boroks (Tripuris), became an additional official language (currently, Bengali and Kokborok are the official languages) in Tripura. The Boroks blamed Bengali hegemony for their backwardness and accused local government (control by Bengalis) of imposing the learning of Bengali upon them.⁴ As a result of this, three decades later a deadly riot took place between Tripuris and Bengalis.

Like many other conflicts around the world, land and resources are the central issues in Tripura too. The Boroks have been practicing *jhum* (shifting) cultivation for ages. A significant number of families still continue to do so, and they are known as *Jhumias*. In order to discourage *jhum* cultivation, several steps were taken up by the government. The last king, Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya, kept a large tract of land in Khowai, called the Kalyanpur Reserve, for the settlement of the *Jhumias*. After independence, this land was allocated to the refugees. With the passage of time, the refugees or Bengalis became policymakers, politicians, ministers, moneylenders and rich farmers. The Boroks mortgaged land to obtain loan, but when they failed to pay interests in time the moneylenders took the advantage to acquire the mortgaged land. As a result, they were gradually alienated from their ancestral land and driven away to far-flung areas.

Like in Tripura, large-scale immigration into Assam started when the British introduced modern administration and started tea plantation, coal mining and oil exploration. Consequently, the identity politics started when Assam was placed under Bengal province since 1826 (continued to be ruled from Bengal till 1873). It was only in 1874 that the whole of erstwhile Assam was separated from Bengal and made a Chief Commissioner's province by incorporating a major portion of Bengali-speaking areas of Cachar, Sylhet and Goalpara.⁵ Besides, instead of Assamese, Bengali became the language of administration and education before Assamese got its dues after several decades. These developments significantly contributed to hostilities between the Assamese and the Bengalis (GoA, 2012).

As of the natural resources, Assam is one of the single largest producers of natural gas, oil and tea in the country, but the alleged over-exploitation of these resources is a cause of concern. Local people alleged that Assam served mainly as the supplier of raw materials and the market for finished goods. Assam protested against New Delhi's

decision to set up an oil refinery at Barauni town in Bihar to refine crude oil extracted from Assam. Once the refinery was built at Barauni in 1962, an oil pipeline connecting Guwahati and Barauni was hurriedly constructed for the transportation of crude oil. After a prolonged agitation a small oil refinery was set in Assam. This shows that centre listens only when Assam revolted against for their grievances (Hrishikeshan, 2002). Many more people also alleged that the royalty from crude oil and natural gas production was negligible, and 'Assam has to request, cajole or threaten the centre to pay or hike the rate of oil royalties due to the State' (Hussain, 2013). Again, most of the tea gardens were owned by the outsiders, and their corporate offices were located in the far away cities outside Assam. It was alleged that the profit was not utilised for the development of the state (Gogoi, 2007). In 1976, a committee of the Assam government noted:

A comparative study between the gardens under four different associations [the Assam Branch of the Indian Tea Association, the Tea Association of India, the Bharatiya Chah Parishad, and the Assam Tea Planters Association Brahmaputra Valley] reveals that, so far as the representation of local people in the managerial cadre (including Assistant Managers) is concerned, the position is the worst in respect of the tea gardens under the Tea Association of India, where 82 per cent of posts in the managerial cadre have been held by persons with birthplaces outside Assam . . . One striking point to be noted is that, after change-over to Indian management, almost all the posts in the managerial cadre (including Assistant Managers) were filled up by persons from outside the State of Assam without any open advertisement or without notifying the employment exchange. (GoA, 1976)

When the Chinese forces entered Assam in November 1962, during the Indo-China war, the Indian forces deserted the town of Tezpur. At that time, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had said in a radio broadcast, 'My heart goes out to the people of Assam, but I cannot do anything' (Saikia, 2004). The people were 'shocked and devastated' by this statement (ibid.: 166), and Nehru's message was interpreted as 'a parting message to the Assamese people' (Gogoi, 2007). The feelings of neglect and discrimination are reinforced by poor economic growth during the post-independence period.

Furthermore, during the Bangladesh liberation war⁶ of 1971, millions of refugees fled to India, mainly in Assam. Fearing the atrocities

in Bangladesh, many of them did not go back after the war and settled in Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura. Even thereafter, immigration driven purely by economic consideration has taken place. Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated (964 persons per sq. km in 2011) and poorest countries in the world. In addition, the country is regularly affected by natural disasters such as flash flood, riverbank erosion and landslide displacing a large number of people. This led to perennial influx of a large number of migrants into Assam and other neighbouring states. Yet, no one really knows the exact population of immigrants and refugees after the partition or the creation of Bangladesh. Neither India nor Bangladesh maintains any reliable records. However, the popular perception is that large-scale immigration is a demographic threat to the survival of small ethnic groups. This is further reinforced by the fact that the immigrants from other parts of India had control over the trade and commerce, agriculture, household labour and manual labourers in Assam. Understandably, the illegal immigration is also considered by the authorities, media and vigilant pressure groups as a 'major challenge', 'main problem', 'cultural threat', 'security threat', 'silent demographic invasion' and 'conspiracy' (MHA, 2013; Kumar, 2006). The notion of a myth of large-scale immigration still persists and is reinforced by vigilant movement against immigration. Immigration is said to have caused higher population growth, with Assam showing a decadal population growth rate higher than the all-India average during the major part of the twentieth century. The higher growth of Muslim population in Assam in the recent past, higher than the state average, has been extensively debated upon, due to immigration (e.g. Dutta, 2012), while the Chief Minister of Assam, Tarun Gogoi, in 2012⁷ says that it is due to higher illiteracy among the Muslims. There are also allegations of the enrolment of illegal immigrants in the voters' lists.

In 1960, the Assam Official Language Act of 1960 was passed. It authorises the use of Assamese for all or any of official purpose of the state, while Bengali in the Cachar district and English in the autonomous districts. Despite this measure, in the State, non-Assamese people perceived it as the Assamese hegemony. Further, in 1972, the Gauhati University, the oldest university in the region, proposed to make Assamese as the language of instruction in educational institutions under its jurisdiction. Likewise, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Bengali Hindus being politically the most significant group had used the government to consolidate their positions in the educational system. In the 1930s and 1940s, when electoral politics were introduced, the Bengali Muslims had control over the government and

attempted to use their positions to facilitate immigration of Muslims into Assam. After independence, Assamese utilised their dominance in the government to consolidate their language in the economy and social system (Weiner, 1989).

Right after the language issue was partly settled, the focus swiftly turned towards immigration and electoral politics in Assam. The death of Hiralal Patwari (Member of Parliament from Mangaldai parliamentary constituency) in 1979 required the holding of by-election. In the process, it was noticed that the number of voters in this constituency had risen abnormally. At this juncture, the main student group, All Assam Students' Union (AASU), demanded a rescheduling of election and the name of foreign nationals be deleted from the electoral rolls. This marked the beginning of a mass movement known as the Assam Movement. The movement demanded recounting the citizenship of those living in Assam on the basis of the National Register of Citizens which was prepared during the Indian Census of 1951. Spearheaded by AASU, the movement asked the centre to identify all the 'foreigners', remove their names from the electoral registrar and deport them back to their home country. The issue slowly concluded with the signing of an agreement, *the Assam Accord*, between the centre and the leaders of the movement in 1985, which promised to take appropriate actions to identify and deport all the 'foreigners' who came to Assam after March 1971 and to disenfranchise those who came between January 1966 and March 1971. It also promised constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards to protect and promote the culture, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the 'Assamese people'. But, these promises have thus far remained unfulfilled.

The movement coincided with the formation of United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) in 1979 with the goal of complete independence for Assam through an armed struggle. It insisted that Assam was never a part of India and hence the relationship between the two was 'colonial' (see Mahanta, 2012). Its founders hoped that the Assam Movement was not enough because New Delhi would not succumb to mere strike and shouting. From a more militant stream of Assam Movement it broke away from the moderate forces that were associated with it (Das, 2007). Down the line, it has softened the hard-line stance towards Bangladeshi immigrants claiming that they are an indispensable part of Assam (ibid.: 14). Instead, it started viewing the Hindi-speaking people from other part of country as more disturbing and had even warned them to 'go away'. They claimed that 'once freed of Indian bondage they would be able to solve the problem [immigration] with ease and

dispatch' (Gohain, 2007). After the Assam Movement, its young leaders set up a political party called Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) in 1985, while those who were against the Assam Accord formed another political party called United Minorities Front (UMF). The former wanted the implementation of the said accord, whereas the latter was against the accord. The AGP won the legislative elections of the state held in 1985 and 1996 but failed to solve the problem that they had been fighting for. Although the UMF had been relegated to the margins, a new political party – All India Democratic United Front (AIDUF) – has now become an important political player, and they both share the same ideology.

With the aim of checking illegal immigration into Assam, the country's parliament enacted a special legislation as well as a slew of border security measures. In 1983, the parliament passed the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act to detect and deport non-citizens, officially referred to as the 'foreigners', whereas the Foreigner Act of 1946 was enforced in the rest of the country. In addition, the policing along the border of India and Bangladesh was strengthened with the construction of a border fence, roads and floodlighting. However, India is unable to enact suitable legislation acceptable to all sections of the population. For instance, the promulgation of the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act had caused division among the local people. The Muslim groups welcome this law, while others (locals) were against it. When it was struck down by the Supreme Court in 2005, the Muslim groups alleged that the Muslims would be harassed by the police in the name of detection of 'foreigners'. By contrast, the other groups who were against this law welcomed the ruling. Thus, the public opinion is polarised on the issue of immigration, and ethnic polarisation and conflict continue. In reality, the Assam Accord was not free from criticism. Non-Assamese-speaking people objected to one of the provisions that promised to protect and promote the culture, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the 'Assamese people'. This became a rallying point in the relationships between majority Assamese and other smaller ethnic groups. Some of the smaller ethnic groups who have somehow culturally assimilated into the dominant Assamese culture have started reasserting their separate cultural and ethnic identities. For instance, the Bodos demanded a separate state to be carved out of Assam. Their movement ultimately led to the granting of limited political and economic autonomy under the Sixth Schedule of the constitution in four contiguous districts of Kokrajhar, Baska, Udalguri and Chirang known as Bodoland Territorial Areas District (BTAD) in 2003. But this settlement opened up series of violence, rather than taking care of the non-Bodos.

Like other non-Assamese-speaking people, the Mizos protested against the declaration of Assamese as the official language in 1960. The anger was further fuelled by inadequate response to famine (known as *Mautam*) which occurred in Assam's Lushai (Mizo) hill district. It was caused by the destruction of standing crops by rodents (the rodents grew exponentially due to bamboo flowering). Since the government's relief works were inadequate, several voluntary organisations including Mizo National Famine Front carried out relief work. It subsequently dropped the word 'Famine' and transformed into an armed group, known as Mizo National Front (MNF) seeking to achieve an independent homeland. Finally, centre signed an agreement (Mizo Accord in 1986) with MNF to recognise Mizoram as a separate state and the latter transformed into a political party. With this, Mizoram is now considered as one of the most peaceful states in the country. But, in reality, it was settled by oppressive manner after the Indian Air Force bombed Mizoram (Ngaihte, 2013). Besides, thousands of Brus and Chakmas have been driven away to Tripura in 1997, and the minority communities have been crushed by militant groups, in part by Mizo Youth Organizations acting as an extra-legal police force (Lacina, 2009).

When we analyse in entirety, to contain conflict in NER, centre relied on three-fold strategies – (1) a strong security approach, (2) expansion of the avenues for political dialogues and (3) allocation of more funds. Since the problem of the region is seen primarily from a law and order approach, the use of armed force is legitimised. The armed forces used by the centre are also not accountable to the regional governments for the abuse of power. The political strategy concentrated on the creation of new states and autonomous regions. When the internal boundary of India was reorganised in the mid-1950s it was believed that Assam should not be divided. But the pressures from various ethnic groups compelled Assam to bifurcate into different parts. In 1963, the Nagas got Nagaland carved out of Assam. Assam was further divided in 1972 to create Meghalaya, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh. Finally, huge funds are being pumped into this region in the name of accelerating development. These states are categorised as Special Category States, into which centre funds up to 90 per cent of their capital budget requirements. There is also a separate ministry called Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER), which deals with the planning, execution and monitoring of development projects of the region. Despite these efforts, the region is mired by a series of intractable conflicts and consequently ransoms economy.

Ethnic identity and conflict

What is peculiar to this region in the recent past is – the salience of ethnic identity as a means of political mobilisation and conflict. Hence, this section gives an introductory overview of ethnicity and identity. The meaning of *identity* varies from one scholar to another, although in broader sense, it is ‘people’s concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others’ (Hogg and Abrams, 1988). Social identities are first steps to political identities. Religion, national and ethnic identities generate powerful emotions and hence have political importance (Berezin, 1999). Since identity can be a source of pride and joy, many of the conflicts are sustained through the illusion of a unique and choice-less identity (Sen, 2006). Nevertheless, identity is an important element in the development of nationalism and conflict. According to Esman (1975), the proportion of conflict and cooperation depends on the *relative resources* at the disposition of each group. These resources are demographic (relative numbers); organisational (degree of mobilisation and capacity to put resources to political uses); economic (control of finance, means of production or trade channels); technological (possession of modern skills); locational (control of natural resources and strategic territory); political (control or influence over the instrumentalities of the state) and ideological (the normative basis for group objectives). In addition to these objective determinants of power, the quality of inter-communal relations depends on the *congruity* or *disparity* in goals between those who control the state apparatus and the leaders of the constituent groups. If the goals are same, the outcome is likely to be consensual. If the goals are incompatible, the consequences will have tension and conflict, and the outcome will be determined by the relative resources controlled by the parties. This introduces to a third determining factor – *the institutions for conflict management*, the conventions, rules, procedures and structures of conflict. Without such institutions, there can be no predictability in inter-group relations and no framework for channelling group demands or for regulating outcomes (ibid.: 392).

The ethnic group formation is thought to be a process that involves several steps, as indicated by the aforementioned discussion. The first step takes place within the ethnic group itself for control over its material and symbolic resources, which in turn involves defining the group’s boundaries and its rules for inclusion and exclusion. The second step takes place between ethnic groups as a competition for rights, privileges and resources. The third step takes place between the state [nation state]

and the groups that dominate it on the one hand, and the populations that inhabit its territory on the other (Brass, 1991). Ethnicity is central to individual and group identity. It can provide an important thread of continuity with the past and is often kept alive through the practice of cultural tradition. At the same time, it is fluid and adaptable to changing circumstances (Giddens, 2006). But, with rapid modernisation, technological advancement and increased mobility, it is now possible to choose one's ethnic identification in a self-conscious way (Hutnik, 1991). Following polarisation, the ethnic conflict constitutes a kind of implicit bargaining, even if the participants do not think so (Banton, 1998). The clustering of factors that give rise to ethnic political mobilisation is complex, may vary from case to case. However, in developing countries like India there are several commonalities. As of the causes of conflict, Ganguly (2009) identifies four sets of causal conditions which have usually combined in different ways to produce ethnic conflict in India. They are (1) the fear that assimilation could lead to cultural dilution, and the unfulfilled national aspirations; (2) the process of modernisation has sharpened their sociopolitical awareness and increased their capacity to mobilise for collective action; (3) unequal development, poverty, exploitation, lack of opportunity and threats to the existing group privileges and (4) political factors such as endemic bad governance, the growth of anti-secular forces, institutional decay and vote-bank politics on the part of the unscrupulous political parties and politicians. Similarly, Olzak and Nagel (1986) provided four propositions for ethnic mobilisation: (1) urbanisation increases contact and competition between ethnic population; (2) expansion of industrial and services sectors of the economy increases competition among ethnic groups for jobs; (3) development of peripheral regions or the discovery of resources in a periphery occupied by an ethnic population and (4) processes of state building (including those following colonial independence) that implement policies targeting specific ethnic population increase the likelihood of ethnic collective action.

Land is an important element of ethnic identity. In many societies, land and identity are inextricably linked. The history, culture and ancestors of communities are tied up with land (Dale and McLaughlin, 1999). Due to its economic, social and emotional importance, land is also an important source of power. Perceived threats to security, livelihoods or identity can mobilise communities to engage in conflict (United Nations, 2012). In reality, land alone is not the sole cause of conflict; it is only a contributing factor. Land is also often used interchangeably with territory that has been identified and claimed by a person or people.

Territory is a crucial component of ethnicity because the ethnic group is usually attached to a specific territory (Penrose, 2002). Thus, the concept of territory encompasses not just geographic space but also mechanisms of authority and rights. Thus, territoriality means 'the attempt to affect, influence, or control actions and interactions (of people, things, and relationships) by asserting and attempting to enforce control over a geographic area' (Sack, 1983). In other words, the control of space is an extremely important component of power relations. When people create territories, they create boundaries that both unite and divide space along with everything that it contains. By combining some people and certain resources and separating them from other people and other resources, the creation of territories gives physical substance and symbolic meaning to notions of 'us' and 'them' and 'ours' and 'theirs' (Penrose, 2002). In this manner, the territory becomes a homeland precisely because it is to be commonly defended, because all group members share similar obligations for its protection and because it defines who 'we' are (Goemans, 2006). A homeland may be external to the country of residence of the group, or only a portion of a country or may span the territory of more than a country. But, the homeland is a 'perception, susceptible to change over time' (Toft, 2005). Thus, a homeland is a special category of territory, not an object that can be exchanged, but an indivisible attribute of group identity. This feature explains why ethnic groups rationally view the right to control their homeland as a survival issue, regardless of a territory's objective value in terms of natural or man-made resources. Homeland control ensures that a group's language can be spoken, its culture expressed and its faith practiced (*ibid.*: 1–45). Ethnic groups seek to rule territory in which they are geographically concentrated, especially if that region is a historic homeland. They will show little interest in controlling territory when they are either widely dispersed or are concentrated only in cities. For them, territory is often a defining attribute of collective identity, inseparable from its past and vital to its continued existence as a distinct group (Smith, 1986). Territorial attachments and people's willingness to fight for territory appear to have much less to do with the material value of land, and much more to do with symbolic role it plays in constituting people's identities and providing a sense of security and belonging (Walter, 2006).

Identity can also be the consequence of policies and acts of powerful agents, states and dominant groups who define groups by assigning labels and treating them differently over generations (Gurr, 2002). Ethnic identities are enduring social constructions that matter to the people who share them. How much they matter depends on people's social and

political circumstances. Ethnic identity leads to political action when ethnicity has collective consequences for a group in its relations with other groups and states. When ethnic identity is highly salient, it is likely to be the basis for mobilisation and political action (ibid.: 6). In divided societies, ethnic affiliations are powerful, permeate, passionate and pervasive (Horowitz, 1985). According to Gurr (2002), the salience of ethnic identity at any point of time is mainly due to three factors: (1) the extent to which they differ culturally from other communal groups with whom they interact; (2) the extent to which they are advantaged or disadvantaged relative to other groups and (3) the intensity of their past and ongoing conflicts with rival groups and the state. Ethnic groups can become more or less inclusive. Some small ethnic groups merge with or absorb to other, or are absorbed by them, producing larger, composite groups. Larger groups, on the other hand, may divide into their constituent parts, or a portion of such a group may leave it to form a new, smaller group. Group boundaries thus grow wider or become narrower by processes of assimilation or differentiation. New groups are born, though old groups do not always die when this occurs (Horowitz, 1985).

A conflict is ethnic if the contenders identify themselves using ethnic terms (Stanvenhagen, 1994), and there is evidence to suggest that the 'control of the state is a central ethnic conflict objective' (Horowitz, 1985). While conceptualising ethnic conflict, different approaches have been debated upon. Firstly, the instrumentalists view ethnic conflict being driven by either the relationship between economic wants – greed and grievance – or the active manipulation of ethnic identities by political leaders for their political gain. Secondly, the constructivists attribute it as a product of historical processes over time that results in divergent ethnic identities and hostility between them. Thirdly, the primordialist theory stems from ancient hatreds between ethnic groups and that frustration comes with differences in natural ties that derive from religious, racial or regional connections (Weir, 2012). According to Baqai (2004), the ethnicity syndromes prevalent in South Asia are mainly primordial in nature. But, Dudková (2013) rejected the primordialist theory as it stresses the uniqueness and overriding importance of ethnic identity. According to him, biological characteristics, religion, language and other such characters are powerful factors that may produce ethnic conflicts in a multicultural society. According to Weiner (1989), weak modern political institutions and their inability to deal with the local religious pressures, linguistic differences and unequal power and resource sharing led to ethnic conflict in the region.

Dwelling on to the ethnic identity and conflict in India's NER, Dudková (2013) opined that granting autonomy and statehood for containing conflict, without employing consociational principle on the new states, led to the emergence of new cleavages and ethnic conflict within the newly formed states. If autonomy is given in the name of dominant ethnic group, it will make further cleavages among ethnic communities in the region (Haokip, 2012). Through their political power, the majority of the ethnic groups constantly resort to ethnic cleansing to demonstrate their control and authority (Deori, 2013). In this regard, Singh (2013) proposed a way to satisfy the aspirations of different ethnic minorities without disturbing the existing state boundaries, the 'cultural autonomy', which includes religion, culture, language, social practices, customary law and some other welfare measures. The negative effect of ethnicity can only be attenuated by the consistent application of democratic principles, norms and values through socio-economic development programmes, and the role of state is very crucial (Baqai, 2004). According to Wright (1999), in a multicultural society, a more constructive solution between majority and minority may be achieved if attention is focused upon the nature of pluralistic democracy, and the state honestly intends to achieve it, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations, rather than pursuing the recognition of some elite community or groups.

Conflict and development

All forms of social and political movement affecting NER at present are primarily ethnically driven over self-determination, secession or political dominance. At the same time, when one looks very closely, the clustering factors which caused these movements differ from one another. The root cause of some of them can be traced back to the alleged forcible integration into Indian fabric (e.g. Manipur, Naga Hills), while others can be traced back to the question about large-scale immigration and refugees and lack of development (e.g. Assam, Tripura). In response to these movements, Assam was reorganised thrice to facilitate the formation of three new states (Meghalaya, Nagaland and Mizoram), and it also enacted preferential policies for the region. However, such policies have not been able to address many of the long-standing and deep-rooted issues and challenges, and hence there is ample evidence of the effect of conflict on overall development and well-being of the people.

Yet, studying the cost of conflict is not easily defined and hence is a herculean task. Therefore, the cost can be seen in terms of loss of human

lives, displacement of people, destruction of properties and other social and economic costs. Any political or social movements and their associated armed groups, as in NER, require a large amount of money (also people, ideology and motivation) to sustain them over a particular period of time. Where does the money come from? Obviously they levy 'taxes' from local business community, public and private companies, politicians and salaried people. The best-kept secret practiced in NER is that local retailers fraudulently minimised losses caused by such taxes and other disruptive activities by creating artificial scarcities of essential commodities and selling at higher prices later.

Apart from the armed conflict between the state and non-state actors, the contesting claims over land and territory by different ethnic groups, backed by armed groups, have led to violent conflicts. These conflicts have claimed many innocent lives and displaced many more, thereby disturbing their livelihood for years in the region. The nature of conflict which was previously confined between the state and non-state armed groups has extended into the inter-group hostilities in the recent past in NER. As a result, several bloody ethnic riots have taken place. For instances, we recalled the bloody riots between Muslim immigrants and Bodos in Assam, Kukis and Nagas in Manipur, Paites and Kukis in Manipur, Khasis and Bengalis in Meghalaya, Brus and Lushais in Mizoram, Bengalis and Tripuris in Tripura and so on. This protracted conflicts and violence led the overall development process of the region to ransom. Development works suffer due to frequent strikes, insecurity, violence and levying of taxes. Armed groups interfere in the award of major contracts by government agencies and thereafter at the time of implementation. Rail infrastructure, oil pipelines and installations, roads and bridges were also targeted. Funds meant for development projects were siphoned off to support armed groups by corrupt officials. Officials of crucial government agencies colluded with them due to fear of intimidation, and in turn, this inseparable relationship promoted corruption. The presence of armed state and non-state actors restricts people's daily activities, and this in turn affects their work culture and productivity. In such state of affairs, private investments are being discouraged. The presence of such conflicts has been identified as one of the reasons for 'very slow' progress of railway modernisation works in the region, particularly in Assam (Government of India, 2005). As a result, the government's attention has been diverted away from development activities to enforcement of law and order situation in the region. Thus, there is tardy progress of development activities in areas affected by violent conflicts. It is noticed that relatively peaceful areas of the region have

grown at the faster pace (e.g. Mizoram, Sikkim) in various areas such as per capita income, per capita consumption of electricity, literacy and health care in comparison with areas affected by various forms of conflict (Singh, 2011).

In a nutshell, despite its rich natural and human resources, the region continues to be affected by protracted conflicts. But, it has slowly shifted towards internal feuds, rendered more viciously by the ongoing amoebic multiplication of ethnicities in an already prodigiously heterogeneous region. Strident ethnonationalistic assertions over land and resources, and articulation of grievances in terms of the 'others' have given rise to contestations over the same space shared by multiple ethnic communities. Tacit assertions and explicit demands for hybrid identity-based exclusive homelands are accentuating the latent sociological fissures into apparent fault lines, and it often leads to ethnic cleansing and extermination of smaller communities or politically weaker sections in the society. The intricate contours of the conflicts are getting convoluted with the attempts of the dominant communities to establish their hegemonies, and when that are being challenged by the existing and emerging sub-alterns sharing the same space. Propensity of the stakeholders to use violence as a political resource in pursuit of their objectives has fostered the ecology of violence resistant to restraint. State's interventions to contain the non-state violence with rewards and incentives along the lines of ethnicities have compounded the situation further, accelerated the growth of newer identities, and it often leads to recurrence of demand for autonomy within the region. The resultant conundrum hobbles the region's economic and political development processes in the long run.⁸

Notes

- 1 Part C states include both the former Chief Commissioners' Provinces and some princely states. Each was governed by a Chief Commissioner appointed by the President of India.
- 2 This restriction has been partly lifted with effect from 1 January 2011.
- 3 Two major hill tribal ethnic groups of Manipur – Nagas and Kukis – occupying the hills areas want bifurcation of the state into two parts – hill and valley, leaving the valley portion, covering 10 per cent of the total state area for Meiteis. The remaining 90 per cent of the hill region is preferred to get further bifurcated into two – one each for Kukis and Nagas.
- 4 Although they want to promote Kokborok, they encounter difficulty since it does not have a script of its own, and hence its speakers write it in both Bengali and Roman scripts.
- 5 Please refer to *Indian Streams Research Journal*, Accessed: <http://isrj.org/ArticleFullText.aspx?ArticleID=4538>.

- 6 It led to the demise of united Pakistan, hence East Pakistan turned into an independent nation of Bangladesh.
- 7 As Chief Minister of Assam Mr Tarun Gogoi told journalist Karan Thapar in *Devil's Advocate* programme on CNN-IBN. (Please refer <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/indiahome/indianews/article-2200792/Assam-CM-Gogois-illiteracy-jab-state-Muslims.html>.)
- 8 This section is compiled from the writings and inputs of R. N. Ravi, former Special Director, Intelligence Bureau of India.

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Politics of peace accords in Northeast India

Komol Singha and M. Amarjeet Singh

Introduction

India's Northeast region (NER hereafter) consists of eight States,¹ is surrounded by five countries² and connected to mainland India through a narrow land corridor at Siliguri of West Bengal. It accounts for about 8.06 per cent of the country's total landmass and about 4 per cent of the population. The NER is also one of the most underdeveloped parts of the country, inhabited by a large number of ethnic groups. The region is confronted with a large number of challenges simultaneously – armed conflict, ethnic conflict, poverty, inequality, etc. According to Heimerdinger and Chonzom (2012), the discontentment and assertion of ethnic identities are that a large part of the region had remained as a loose 'frontier area' and as a result, 'never came in touch with the principle of a central administration before'. It was after many years the region was brought together under a unified administration by colonial rule. This was further convoluted by the controversial integration of ethnic minority groups into newly independent India and an opaque reorganisation of States where their cultural specificities were ignored (Singha, 2012).

Since independence in 1947, the country's Central Government has been trying to tackle several armed conflicts by means of economic development, political reconciliation and use of military force. Use of significant military force under extraordinary legislations such as the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act of 1958 has been in place for the last several decades. Unfortunately, instead of resolving the problem, the use of armed force has led to its escalation (Heimerdinger and Chonzom, 2012). The conflict disrupts normal life and administrative activities, and incidences of violence have increased significantly in the last few decades. The armed groups have created parastatal organisations in the

areas where they operate and set a certain rules and regulations to protect the means and the resources necessary for their existence. In short, some armed groups have not only monitored the institutions of the State but also administered their own social welfare services. They have set up a parallel government structure in different parts of the region, and have set up their own economic policy and their own court system which provides justice expeditiously.

In addition to the adoption of military force to suppress the rebellion, the Central Government has also promoted political settlement and dialogue which led to the signing of peace accords with different armed groups and other ethnic leaders in the past. But, most of them have failed, or could not claim to be broadly successful. Based on five peace accords, this chapter seeks to evaluate their impact to the specific conflicts. The five peace accords are as follows: 16-Point Agreement (1960), Shillong Accord (1975), Mizo Accord (1986), First Bodo Accord (1993) and Second Bodo Accord (2003). These peace accords have been deliberately selected because of their significance and relevance in the course of conflicts in three States of the region, namely Nagaland, Mizoram and Assam.

Interface between armed conflict and peace accord

An armed conflict is defined as 'a contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle related deaths in one calendar year'.³ It is also a situation in which the parties use conflict behaviour against each other to attain incompatible goals or to express their hostility (Bartos and Wehr, 2002). While the government is generally reluctant to recognise the armed groups' legitimacy as a bargaining partner, some conflicts do reach a point where the two sides open peaceful negotiations. The prospect for negotiation becomes stronger for the armed groups if they survive a certain period of fighting. If the government fails to repress them early, they may be forced to negotiate under less favourable circumstances later in the conflict (Bapat, 2005). As a measure to end conflict, the negotiated settlements since 1990s have been an increasingly preferred method of conflict resolution in different parts of the world. As a result, there has been a proliferation of peace accords, successfully ending many violent conflicts (Bell and O'Rourke, 2007). Negotiation to end armed conflict is a dynamic bargaining process (Höglund, 2008) which is both critical and highly sensitive (St. John, 2008). It involves

bargaining between the parties to the conflict where both sides have power over each other (Zartman, 2008).

While conceptualising conflict resolution, the 'Ripeness Theory' of Zartman (2001) is identified as one of the most accepted theories of peace agreement (Tiernay, 2012). It is based on the notion of Mutually Hurting Stalemate, wherein the parties find themselves locked in a conflict from which they cannot escalate to victory and the current deadlock is painful to both of them. As such both parties seek an alternative policy or way out (Zartman, 2001). Henceforth, the parties enter peace negotiations or accords. Negotiation constitutes 'dialogues over time between representative of contesting forces with or without an intermediary, aimed at securing an end to hostility over issues that transcended a strictly military nature' (Arnson, 1999). Negotiation is likely to take place and is fruitful if both parties have some optimism of finding a mutually acceptable settlement, and the forces that encourage negotiation must outweigh the structural changes that keep the conflict escalating (Pruitt and Kim, 2004).

The signing of peace accord usually implies an acceptance of both parties to terminate armed conflict. Thus, the clearest method of ending an armed conflict is through a peace accord (Derek, 2003). Hence, peace accord is the 'formal agreement between warring parties, which addresses the disputed incompatibility, either by settling all or part of it, or by clearly outlining a process for how they plan to regulate the incompatibility'.⁴ It can be divided into full, partial and peace process accords. Full accords are those where all warring parties make an accord to settle the incompatibility and where there is no continued fighting. Partial accords are those concluded between some of the parties, but not all. The incompatibility is regulated between the parties concluding the accord. Sometimes fighting will cease, but on other occasions a party not included will continue the conflict. Finally, the peace process accords do not settle the incompatibility, but instead outline a process whereby the issue will be settled (Harbom et al., 2006).

Peace accords, including in Northeast India, do not produce many of the expected benefits. Peace processes always create spoilers because it is rare in armed conflict for all factions to see peace as beneficial. Even if they do, they rarely do so simultaneously. A negotiated peace often has losers, either leaders or factions who could not achieve their initial aims. Nor can every war find a compromise solution that addresses the demands of all the factions (Stedman, 1997). Similarly, in Northeast India, an inclusive peace accord might be effective. As such, signing a peace accord must include all the stakeholders, and the leaders must

represent the members of warring groups. If major leaders are not included, obfuscated peace talks can bring broad resentment and the number of groups with competing goals will emerge (Cline, 2006; Ravi, 2012).

Perhaps, the most significant debate in peace studies relates to the definition of 'peace'. It is a 'word of so many meanings that one hesitates to use it for fear of being misunderstood' (Boulding, 1978). It is an 'umbrella concept', a general expression of human desires, of that which is good, that which is ultimately to be pursued (Galtung, 1967). In this context, Gunnar Johnson made the following statement, 'that the image of peace in peace studies is blurred as a result of conflicting definitions held by researchers. . . . The conceptual chaos stems in part from a general tendency to focus on violence and war or other global issues rather than on peace per se and in part from the indeterminate nature of the term itself. Consequently, researchers are currently studying different problems and pursuing divergent goals, all under the banner of "peace"' (Johnson, 1976).

Nonetheless, peace is largely seen as the absence of violence. Johan Galtung introduced and popularised the meaning of 'negative peace' and 'positive peace'. Since then peace has largely been defined either in a negative or a positive sense. Negative peace is 'an idea of peace as the absence of organised collective violence, in other words violence between major human groups; particularly nations, but also between classes and between racial and ethnic groups because of the magnitude internal wars can have.' Thus, negative peace is the absence of violence. In contrast, positive peace is 'a synonym for all other good things in the world community, particularly cooperation and integration between human groups.' Thus, it refers to the absence of structural violence (Galtung, 1967). For Kenneth Boulding, peace is not merely the absence of war but also absence of turmoil, tension and conflict, and the positive peace is 'a condition of good management, orderly resolution of conflict, harmony associated with mature relationships, gentleness, and love' (Boulding, 1978: 3). Emmanuel Adler has, however, described positive peace as belonging to idealists who portray peace as some kind of utopia 'incorporating the improvement of politics and human nature, social justice, morality, international organization and law, and human progress' (Adler, 1998). Thus, 'analytically this division between negative and positive peace seems to be a muddle. However, it can be concluded that negative peace denotes the absence of war and that positive peace denotes something further. But exactly what these "further" things actually would be, is hard to comprehend' (Albert and Carlsson, 2009).

Insights from five peace accords

16-Point Agreement with the Nagas, 1960

The armed conflict in Nagaland (then Naga Hills district of Assam) started soon after India's independence in 1947. The Nagas claimed that their ancestral homeland was an 'independent country' in the pre-colonial period and hence wanted to regain their pre-British status. The Naga Club, an interest group, took the first ever initiative to bring the Naga people together under a single administrative unit. In June 1947, an agreement, known as the 9-Point Agreement, was concluded between the Naga National Council (NNC) (the successor of Naga Club) and the then Governor of Assam to install an interim administrative arrangement for the Naga Hills district. Ironically, it did not materialise as the terms of the agreement were thereafter contested by both sides. Initially, the Central Government was willing to grant limited political and economic autonomy under the Sixth Schedule⁵ of the Constitution of India. The offer was not only rejected, but also led to the commencement of the first armed rebellion against India.

In the meantime, a group of intellectuals of the Naga community who wanted a negotiated settlement with India within the country's constitutional framework formed the Naga People's Convention (NPC). Initially, it insisted for the constitution of a single administrative unit comprising Naga Hills district of Assam and Tuensang Frontier Division of North East Frontier Agency. The government accepted the demand and hence an administrative unit of Naga Hills-Tuensang Area was constituted in 1957 comprising Kohima, Mokokchung and Tuensang districts. Consequently, the NPC put forward an additional demand to elevate Naga Hills-Tuensang Areas into a State (Inoue, 2005). Once again, the demand was accepted by the government which came to be known as the 16-Point Agreement of 1960 and hence the State of Nagaland came into being. However, a faction of the NNC vowed to continue to fight for an independent homeland and assumed no obligation to accept the India-imposed Nagaland.⁶

Shillong Accord with the Nagas, 1975

In 1975, six Naga leaders⁷ calling themselves the 'Representatives of Underground Organisations' signed an agreement with the Governor of Nagaland, at Shillong, Meghalaya's capital, popularly called the Shillong Accord. They acted at the behest of a faction of the NNC. Accordingly, they agreed to abide by the Constitution of India and surrendered arms.

It was also agreed that they should get reasonable time to formulate other contentious issues for discussion for final settlement. As expected, it was rejected by another faction of the NNC for what they called 'selling the Naga nation'. They said that no member of theirs were involved in signing this accord (Shilling Accord).

Mizo Accord, 1986

The two-decade-old armed conflict in Mizo (Lushai) hills district of Assam came to an end in 1987. The Mizo Union, a political party in Mizo hills, was in favour of integration with India, while the United Mizo Freedom Organisation, another political party, preferred to join Burma. However, when India attained independence, the Mizo hills remained as a district of Assam. When the demand for the reorganisation of States on linguistic basis gained momentum in the 1950s, in different parts of the country, the Mizo Union demanded a separate State comprising Mizo-inhabited areas of Mizo hills district. The States Reorganisation Commission⁸ turned down their demand. Based on the Commission's recommendations, 14 States and six union territories were constituted in India in 1956. Accordingly, Northeast India constituted the State of Assam and Union Territories of Manipur and Tripura. Sikkim was not included in this context as it was clubbed to NER fabric in 2003.

The Mizos protested when the Assam Government declared Assamese as the official language for official communication in the State in 1960. Around this time, a severe famine, known as *Mautam*, occurred in the Mizo hills due to the exponential increase in rat population during bamboo flowering season. This damaged crops on a large scale. Relief works carried out by the government agencies was inadequate causing widespread discontent among the Mizo people. Several voluntary organisations came forward to help the famine affected people. Among them, the Mizo National Famine Front did exceptionally well in providing food to the affected people. Consequently, it dropped the word 'Famine' and became a political party in 1961, seeking an independent homeland of the Mizos. The party later transformed into an armed group, the Mizo National Front (MNF). On 28 February 1966, they carried out simultaneous attacks on various places of the district. Subsequently, the group declared independence from India on 1 March 1966. As a result, the Central Government deployed armed forces to control the situation. The district was declared 'disturbed area' under the Assam Disturbed Areas Act of 1955 and eventually led to the imposition of the

Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act of 1958. Consequently, as a measure to contain conflict, the government initiated negotiation with the MNF. Around this time, the Mizo District Council, an elected legislative body of the district, revived the demand for a separate State. The Central Government also partially accepted their demand by elevating the district into a Union Territory⁹ of Mizoram in 1972 and also promised to upgrade Mizoram into a State. After the signing of the peace accord between the MNF and the Central Government in June 1986, Mizoram became a state in 1987. This also led to the transformation of the MNF into a political party and the armed conflict came to an end. Mizoram is now considered peaceful (Ray, 1993).

First Bodo Accord, 1993

In the late 1960s, the Bodos, one of the largest ethnic groups in Assam, began their agitation for inclusion of Bodo language as a medium of instruction, followed by the demand for the introduction of Bodo script in education in the 1970s. Their persistent movement compelled the Assam Government to grant Bodo language the status of an associate official language from 1984.¹⁰ Thereafter, a movement for a separate State was spearheaded by the All Bodo Students' Union, a student organisation of Bodos. It mobilised tens of thousands of supporters against what they claimed 'Assamese chauvinism', which they considered to be the root cause of their alienation. It eventually formed the Bodo People's Action Committee as its political wing.

The movement came to an end after signing a peace accord in 1993 popularly known as First Bodo Accord between the government (Central and Assam Governments) and leaders of the movement to constitute an autonomous region within Assam to grant extensive home rule powers through a 40-member Bodoland Autonomous Council. The council consisted of a general council, comprising both elected and nominated members and an executive council who were elected from the members of the general council to carry out its executive functions. The council was entrusted with a certain amount of legislative, executive and financial powers on various issues – cottage industries, forests, cultural affairs, irrigation and so on. The council's annual budget was allocated by the Central Government in consultation with the Assam Government. An interim executive council was constituted in May 1993 which led to several Bodo Volunteer Force militants to lay down arms. The leaders of the movement floated the Bodoland People's Party, a political party. Unfortunately, failure to demarcate the exact boundary of the

autonomous region coupled with an intense infighting among the leaders derailed all the efforts and hence led to the revival of another phase of the movement once again.

Second Bodo Accord, 2003

The resumption of the statehood movement was also resurrected armed conflict led by the Bodo Liberation Tigers, constituted by former Bodo Volunteer Force militants in 1996. It denounced the first accord and demanded a separate State. Subsequently, it also started negotiation with the government and agreed to give up the demand for a separate State and accepted limited autonomy with extensive home rule powers. Thus, another peace accord popularly known as Second Bodo Accord was signed in 2003 with limited autonomy within Assam under the Sixth Schedule of the constitution. The region is now technically known as the Bodoland Territorial Areas District (BTAD) comprising four contiguous districts of Kokrajhar, Baska, Udalguri and Chirang. The purpose is to fulfil economic, educational and linguistic aspirations and the preservation of land rights, sociocultural and ethnic identity of the Bodos and to speed up the infrastructure development.¹¹ The region is governed by a 40-member Bodoland Territorial Council, headquartered at Kokrajhar, an important town of the region. The council has a general council with 40 elected and six nominated members, and a 12-member executive council. The council has legislative, executive and financial powers in respect of over 40 subjects (Nath, 2003). Although the Bodo Liberation Tigers-led armed conflict had ended a decade ago, the ethnic conflict has not completely subsided due to ethno-religious tensions between the Bodos and the Muslims in the proposed area.

Argument and findings of the study

If we borrow the concept of negative peace introduced by Johan Galtung, peace accords constitute a significant move towards conflict resolution and restoration of 'negative peace' in Northeast India. If the government is unable to fully resolve the root cause of armed conflict in the region, it can nevertheless keep the activities of its opponents to a sufficiently low level through political reconciliation and use of military force. So far, the government has been successful in convincing its adversaries to accept its terms and conditions and more or less came forward for dialogue within the framework of the law of the country. Therefore, peace accords are the instruments through which the State

imposes its will on the body of politics while trying to work out compromise on contentious political issues (Rupensinghe, 1996). Despite a number of peace accords, barring Mizoram (considered as one of the successful accords), not much respite of conflict is visible in the region. What is wrong in it?

In the case of Mizoram, the peace accord turned out to be successful at least in bringing 'negative peace' as noted by Johan Galtung. The MNF was the sole armed group and Laldenga was the most acceptable leader among the Mizos at that time. When the negotiation temporarily broke down in 1982, the religious leaders asked the militants to desist from violence which encouraged the resumption of the dialogue (Das, 2007). In the words of Zoramthanga, a former rebel leader, 'NGOs, Church leaders, political parties and groups of society asked the underground MNF to have peace talks with the government. We did accordingly and the peace accord was signed' (Malsawami, 2003: 144). Since the militant group was united under Laldenga, the peace accord was welcomed by a large section of the population. Due to his able leadership, 'the huge numbers that gathered to participate in Laldenga's funeral in Aizawl in 1990, it was a tribute to his charisma and the courage and statesmanship he deployed in the end in bringing back his followers to the constitutional fold' (Verghese, 1996). Though the Mizo Accord – 1986 was often described as one of the success stories in the country, but, in reality, it was settled by oppressive manner, following the Indian Air Force bombed Mizoram (Ngaihte, 2013). Besides, thousands of Brus and Chakmas have been expelled into Tripura in 1997, and militant groups within both minority communities have been crushed, in part by Mizo Youth Organizations acting as an extra-legal police force (Lacina, 2009).

In the case of the Bodos, after the formation of the Bodoland Autonomous Council in 1993, their leadership was marred by intense factional struggles. The situation was exploited further by the Assam Government by using one faction against the other. For instance Bwismutiary, the first Chairman of the council, could not discharge his duties due to indifferent attitude of the Assam Government. As a result, the administrative boundary of the council could not be demarcated. The Assam Government had agreed to include altogether 2,570 villages instead of the 3,085 villages demanded by Bwismutiary, who in protest, resigned from the chairmanship. The government appointed another factional leader, Prem Singh Brahma, since the latter agreed to accept the government's conditions (Hazarika, 1995) and his appointment further divided the Bodoland People's Party, the political party. Consequently,

a faction of the Bodoland People's Front led by Bwismutiary started a movement for a separate State alleging failure on the part of the government to implement the provisions of the peace accord of 1993. Since the council's territorial boundary remained unresolved, the routine elections could not be held. This led to the feeling among the people that only a separate State would serve their purpose. From this, a greater question arises is that had the territorial boundary of the autonomous region been fixed before concluding the accord and had the Bodo Volunteers Force militants have been rehabilitated, the Bodo Liberation Tigers would not have been formed. Thus, one of the starkest features of this accord was that both the government and the Bodo leaders failed to convince hard-core militants to surrender (Hazarika, 1995).

Contrastingly, the second accord of 2003 offered a larger autonomous region with extensive home rule power. This peace accord has not fully satisfied them but the conflict spearheaded by the Bodo Liberation Tigers has ended. The accord of 2003 opened up series of violence, rather than taking care of the non-Bodos' fear including the violent conflict between Bodos and Muslims. The Bodos who believed themselves as the earliest inhabitants in Assam have been apprehensive of immigration of numerically dominant ethnic groups. They alleged that a large number of illegal immigrants have settled in lands belonging to them leading to land alienation from them. The violent conflict between Bodos and Muslims in 2012 had claimed over eighty people and displaced over four lakh. The Bodoland People's Party, the ruling party in the BTAD, alleged that it was a conspiracy to destabilise the region. The party had alleged that it was incited by 'foreigners' and accused illegal migration as the root cause. On the other hand, the All India United Democratic Front, another political party, accused the Bodoland Territorial Council of promoting violence against the Muslims. It alleged that the violence was aimed at driving out non-Bodos from the BTAD. The party also alleged that the Bodos constitute about 29 per cent of the total population of BTAD. In the May 2014 Lok Sabha elections, the consolidation of non-Bodo votes ensured Naba Kumar Sarania's win by the biggest margin from Kokrajhar, the heart of Bodo politics. Sarania defeated his nearest independent candidate UG Brahma by a margin of over three lakh votes. Sarania was an independent candidate backed by Janagostiya Aikhya Manch, an organisation of the non-Bodos. Since the autonomous councils are named after the majority tribe residing there (e.g. Bodo), on the basis of their historical origin, assert their identity through coercive ways, and constantly resort to ethnic cleansing to demonstrate their control and authority over the region (Deori, 2013).

The largest issue remains – the peace accords with the Nagas. After the failure of the 9-Point Agreement in 1947, the 16-Point Agreement was concluded with the NPC without the involvement of any armed group. It was possible since the government believed that the armed groups would lose relevance once a State came into existence. But, the militants rejected the agreement (Nag, 2002). The formation of Nagaland was strategically planned to divide the Nagas (Ao, 2002; Nuh, 2006). The agreement divided the Naga political class and hence led to the emergence of an alternative political platform, from which the secessionist campaign could be politically challenged by the Nagas loyal to India (Bhaumik, 2007). In this context, Iralu (2003) said the agreement is the greatest betrayal in Naga history. Again, in 1975, the government succeeded in convincing six Naga leaders believed to be close to some militants of the NNC to sign another peace accord, popularly known as the Shillong Accord, with ‘expected confusion’ (Chaube, 1999) in which they agreed to abide by the Constitution of India and surrendered arms. In reality, in these processes, the government gave nothing to them. Subsequent to the signing of the accord, the NNC divided into two, in which the breakaway faction founded the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN). It got further bifurcated in 1980 into Khaplang-led group (NSCN-K) and Isak and Muivah-led group (NSCN-IM). Soon, the two factions used violence means to liquidate each other. Both groups have also engaged in a war of words, especially through the local media. Nonetheless, the Isak–Muivah-led group has emerged as the more powerful force, but others too have their share of influence.

In nutshell, the 16-Point Agreement and the Mizo Accord led to the formation of two new States of Nagaland and Mizoram, respectively, carved out from Assam. The two peace accords with the Bodos have led to the formation of an administrative region with Assam with limited autonomy, now known as BTAD. In the Shillong Accord, the government merely promised that its adversaries ‘should have reasonable time to formulate other issues for discussion for final settlement’.¹²

The three ethnic groups, the Mizos, the Nagas and the Bodos, have not achieved their goals fully by the peace accords. The Mizos, who fought for independence from India, got a State. The Bodos, who waged armed struggle for a separate State, got only a limited political and financial autonomy. The Nagas, whose original demand was independence from India, had to compromise with the State of Nagaland (Ravi, 2012). It has thus underscored the fact that the government would not entertain the demand for secession. Once the militant

groups and other leaders realised that the secession is impossible, they worked out for an alternative or second best settlement, which is the creation of a new State or an autonomous region. This was because the leaders of the ethnic groups viewed the State Government as an instrument by which to extend, consolidate or transform their position in the economy and social system (Weiner, 1983). It is because ethnic groups compete intensely to control State/political power and exert significant cultural influence. In this process, the numerically smaller ethnic groups have united for political purposes in their competition with a numerically dominant ethnic group so as to make them advantage politically and culturally. Such identity is termed as manufactured ethnic identity (Prabhakara, 2005).

As the government makes different commitments to different militant groups, it is unlikely to reach the situation of Zartman's Mutually Hurting Stalemate in the region. New armed group may be formed when the effort was made to control the older ones, probably due to the indecisive and the divisive policies of the ruling class (Ravi, 2012). For instance, the Naga militants were excluded when the Central Government negotiated with the NPC which led to the formation of Nagaland in 1963 (Fernandes, 1999).

Concluding remarks

Several decades of armed conflicts in Northeast India have compelled the conflict parties to realise the importance of negotiated settlements. Of the five peace accords discussed, only one was seemingly fruitful (as perceived by general public), that is Mizo Accord. In the case of other accords, instead of leading towards the resolution of conflict, most of them have worsened the situation of conflicts. Ignorance of the government officials and 'take it easy' approach of the state caused conflicts in the region, and non-inclusion of major stakeholders/parties is identified as an important factor for the failure of these peace accords. It is also evident from the facts that the strategies suitable in one conflict environment may not work in another environment. Strategies should be worked out on a case-to-case basis. The successful peace accord depends on the availability of popular leaders, but most armed groups and ethnic leaders are factional ridden. As a result, peace accord arrived at with one faction is often opposed by other factions. In this regard, the role of the government is crucial. If the government succeeds in working with all the factions together, the outcome will be positive. Thus, it is important to make dialogue with all factions rather than one or two. If not, the

government must be willing to negotiate with major groups/factions which enjoy popular support, and can influence community. Otherwise, the outcome of signed treaties will be counterproductive. Rushing for peace accords without proper ground work must be avoided. In the hush-hush accords, the substantial issues are not properly discussed.

Past experiences have shown that the government was always opened to negotiate with any 'willing' groups without assessing their relevance. This gives the impression that government is interested only in making peace accords, one after another, without assessing their long-term impact. Monitoring of the implementation of peace accords also requires special attention. It however seems to be neglected in the past. Further, once a peace accord is signed, the particular armed group shall be encouraged to join in electoral politics. Finally, Northeast India has vocal civil societies working on human rights and other societal issues. Beyond that, it is the right time now to nurture them in a way that it will facilitate to fill the gap that has been created between government and armed groups.

Notes

- 1 India is a federal union and its constituent units are known as 'States'. The NER comprises Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura.
- 2 They are Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Nepal.
- 3 This is the definition adopted by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, Uppsala University, Uppsala.
- 4 This is the definition adopted by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, Uppsala University, Uppsala.
- 5 It provides for autonomous district and autonomous regions within those districts with elected councils which enjoy powers to levy taxes, to constitute courts for the administration of justice involving tribes and law-making powers on land allotment, occupation or use of land, regulation of '*jhum*' or other forms of shifting cultivation, establishment and administration of village and town committees and the like. See, for example, Singh, M. Amarjeet (2007). 'Challenges before Tribal Autonomy in Assam', *Eastern Quarterly* 4(1): 27-35.
- 6 Detail of this section can be seen from Singh (2012).
- 7 They were I. Temjenba, Dahru, Veeniyil Rhakhu, Z Ramyo, M Assa and Kevi Yallay.
- 8 It was appointed by the Central Government in 1953 to examine any proposal for states reorganisation in the country.
- 9 Union Territories are administered by the President of India acting to such extent, as she/he thinks fit, through an administrator appointed by her/him.
- 10 Each state in India can enact its official language. The Bodo language has been an associate official language of Assam for specific purposes. It has also been recognised as the official language of the BTAD.

- 11 See, The Memorandum of Settlement between the Government of India and the Bodo Liberation Tigers of 2003.
- 12 See, the full text of the Shillong Accord.

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