

1 India's North East: Frontier to Region

India's North East is a region rooted more in the accident of geography than in the shared bonds of history, culture and tradition. It is a directional category right out of colonial geographical usage—like the Middle East or the Far East. A young Assamese scholar describes it as a 'politically convenient shorthand to gloss over complicated historical formations and dense loci of social unrest'.¹ The region has, over the centuries, seen an extraordinary mixing of different races, cultures, languages and religions, leading to a diversity rarely seen elsewhere in India. With an area of about 2.6 lakh square kilometre and a population of a little over 39 million, the seven states of North East and Sikkim (which is now part of the North East Council) is a conglomeration of around 475 ethnic groups and sub-groups, speaking over 400 languages/dialects.

The region accounts for just less than 8 per cent of the country's total geographical area and little less than 4 per cent of India's total population. It is hugely diverse within itself, an India in miniature. Of the 635 communities in India listed as tribal, more than 200 are found in the North East. Of the 325 languages listed by the 'People of India' project, 175 belonging to the Tibeto-Burman group are spoken in the North East. While bigger communities like the Assamese and the Bengalis number several million each, the tribes that render the North East so diverse rarely number more than one or two million and many, like the Mates of Manipur, are less than 10,000 people in all.

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In recent decades, groups of tribes emerged into generic identities like the Nagas and the Mizos. As they challenged their incorporation into India and launched vigorous separatist campaigns, they began to evolve into nationalities. The presence of a common enemy—India—often generated a degree of cohesiveness and a sense of shared destiny within these generic identities. For instance, the Naga's self-perception of a national identity was manifested in the emergence of the Naga National Council (NNC) as the spearhead of the separatist movement and Nagas continue to describe their guerrillas as 'national workers'.

The fact that most of the prominent Naga tribes continue to use names given to them by outsiders also contributed to the formation of generic identities. For example, the traditional names of the Angamis are Tengima or Tenyimia, the Kalyo Kengnyu are actually Khamniungams, and the Kacha Nagas were variously called Kabui and Rongmai until they merged with the Zemei and Lingmai tribes to form a new tribal identity—the Zeliangrong.² These constructed identities often provided a platform around which tribal identities could group and grow into generic ones.

But the absence of a common language and the long history of tribal warfare in the Naga Hills served to reinforce tribal identities that weakened the emerging 'national' identity of the Nagas. Thus, China-trained Naga rebel leader Thuingaleng Muivah labelled all Angamis as 'reactionary traitors' and described all Tangkhuls (his own tribe) as 'revolutionary patriots' when he lashed out at the 'betrayal' of the Angami-dominated NNC for signing the Shillong Accord with India in 1975.³ Muivah later formed the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) to continue the fight for Naga independence against India and there were hardly any Angami Naga in the NSCN.

Twenty-two years later, Muivah himself started negotiations with India in 1997. After more than a decade of painstakingly slow negotiations, there are clear indications now that the NSCN is prepared to accept a 'special federal relationship with India'. In effect, he has given up the cause of Naga independence. Muivah, however, insists that India should agree to create a larger Naga state to include all Naga-inhabited areas in the North East. As a Tangkhul Naga from Manipur, 'Greater Nagaland' is more important for his

political future than 'sovereign Nagaland'. But the Burmese Nagas, who provided sanctuary to the Indian Naga rebels for 40 years, are clearly beyond the scope of these negotiations with India and are quietly forgotten. Which is why India, despite its ceasefire with the NSCN's Khaplang faction, has only started negotiations with the Muivah faction. Khaplang is a Hemi Naga from Burma—so how can India possibly negotiate with him! A ceasefire is the maximum India could offer to his faction.

The Naga rebel movement has unwittingly accepted 'Indian boundaries' to determine their territoriality—and Muivah's rivalry with Khaplang has also influenced the decision. But despite all these fissures that limit the evolution of a Naga nationality, the NSCN or any other rebel groups are unlikely to give up the label 'national' even if they were to settle for a special status within the Indian constitution. Former Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari, by accepting the 'unique history of the Nagas', has strengthened their case.

The Mizo National Front (MNF), which was to the Mizos what the NNC was for the Nagas, continues to retain the marker 'national' nearly two decades after it gave up armed struggle and signed an agreement to return to the Indian constitutional system as a legitimate political party recognized by the Election Commission. Indeed, the MNF's journey has been unique. Started as a relief front to support Mizo farmers devastated by the rat famine, it later became a political party and contested elections in undivided Assam. Then it went underground to fight against India for 20 years before it returned to constitutional politics in 1986.

Mizoram also illustrates the inherent weakness of 'constructed' generic identities. The assertiveness of a major tribe and sense of marginalization among smaller ones often weaken an evolving generic identity, a 'Naga' or a 'Mizo' construct. The Hmars, the Lais, the Maras and even the Reangs in the MNF fought the Indian army shoulder-to-shoulder with the Lushais, the major tribe of the Mizo Hills. After 1986, all these tribes demanded their own acre of green grass. The Hmars and the Reangs wanted autonomous councils and took up arms to achieve their objective. On the other hand, the Lai, Mara and Chakma autonomous tribal district councils now complain of neglect by a Lushai-dominated government that, they say, has 'hijacked' the Mizo identity. Retribalization has followed—Hmars,

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Reangs (or Brus as they are called in Mizoram), Lais, Maras and Chakmas have all chosen to assert their distinct tribal identities and are demanding a separate Union Territory in southern Mizoram. The tensions within the generic identities have often led to mayhem and violence in North East. India's federal government has often played on the tribal-ethnic faultlines to control the turbulent region.

THE NORTH EAST: A BRITISH CONSTRUCT

India's North East is a British imperial construct subsequently accepted by the post-colonial nation-state. It emerged in British colonial discourse as a frontier region, initially connoting the long swathe of mountains, jungles and riverine, tropical marshy flatlands located between the eastern limits of British-ruled Bengal and the western borders of the Kingdom of Ava (Burma). As the British consolidated their position in Bengal, they came into contact with the principalities and tribes further east. For purposes of expansion, commercial gain and border management, the British decided to explore the area immediately after the historic Treaty of Yandabo in 1826, which ended the First Anglo-Burmese War. A senior official, R.B. Pemberton, was asked to write a report on the races and tribes of Bengal's eastern frontier.

In 1835, Pemberton wrote a general survey of the area, titled *The Eastern Frontier of Bengal*. In 1866, Alexander Mackenzie took charge of political correspondence in the government of British Bengal. On the request of the lieutenant-governor, Sir William Grey, Mackenzie wrote a comprehensive account of the relations between the British government and the hill tribes on the eastern frontier of Bengal. When he completed his report in 1871, Mackenzie called it *Memorandum on the North Eastern Frontier of Bengal*. A revised and updated version of this report was published in 1882 as the *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North Eastern Frontier of Bengal*. It had taken more than 30 years for the 'East' to become 'North East' in British administrative discourse. To Mackenzie, however, it must not have been entirely clear why the 'East' had become 'North East', though he tried to delineate its geographical extent:

The North East Frontier is a term used sometimes to denote a boundary line and sometimes more generally to describe a tract. In the latter sense, it embraces the whole of the hill ranges North East and south of Assam valley as well the western slopes of the great mountain system lying between Bengal and independent Burma, with its outlying spurs and ridges. It will be convenient to proceed in regular order, first traversing from west to east the sub-Himalayan ranges north of Brahmaputra, then turning westward along the course of the ranges that bound the Assam valley in the south, and finally, exploring the highlands interposed between Cachar and Chittagong and the hills that separate the maritime district of Chittagong from the Empire of Ava.⁴

As the British became firmly entrenched in Assam and their commercial interests expanded, they began to feel the need for a stable frontier. The hill tribes, particularly the Nagas and the Lushais (now known as Mizos), mounted several attacks on the tea plantations during which some British officials were kidnapped and killed. Further expansion of commercial interests and opening of trade routes to lands beyond Bengal and Assam necessitated control over the frontier region. J.C. Arbuthnott, the British commissioner of the hill districts, strongly advocated extension of control over areas 'where prevalence of head-hunting and atrocious barbarities on the immediate frontier retard pacification and exercise a prejudicial effect on the progress of civilization amongst our own subjects'.⁵ Mackenzie also made it clear that 'there can be no rest for the English in India till they stand forth as governors and advisers of each tribe or people in the land'. Historical evidence now suggests that the British overplayed the threat of tribal raids to justify their incursions into the hill country east of undivided Bengal,⁶ a bit of a nineteenth-century Blair-type 'sexing up of dossiers'.

The British were also desperate to check Burmese expansion. The First Anglo-Burmese War led to the expulsion of the Burmese armies from Assam and Manipur. The British promptly annexed Lower Assam to the empire. The occupation of the Brahmaputra, the Surma and the Barak Valleys opened the way for further British expansion into the region. Upper Assam was briefly restored to Ahom rule but the arrangement failed and the whole province was made part of the British Empire in 1838. The Treaty of Yandabo in 1826 restored the kingdom of Manipur to its Maharaja, and the Burmese

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were eased out of that province. The Ahoms, who had ruled Assam for six centuries after subjugating the Dimasa and Koch kingdoms and had fought back the Bengal sultans and the Mughals, were finally conquered.

The British, however, did not stop after taking over Assam. The Mutock kingdom around Sadiya (now on the Assam–Arunachal Pradesh border) was taken over immediately after the conquest of Upper Assam. The kingdom of Cachar was taken over in stages until it was completely incorporated into Assam in 1850. The Khasi Hills were annexed in 1833 and two years later, the Jaintia Raja was dispossessed of his domains. The Garo Hills, nominally part of Assam's Goalpara district, were taken over in 1869 and made into a district with its headquarters at Tura. The Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills now make up the present state of Meghalaya after having been a part of Assam until 1972. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the British sent military expeditions into the Naga and Lushai hills and both areas were subjugated after fierce fighting. They became separate districts of Assam and remained such until Nagaland emerged as a state of the Indian Union in 1963 and Mizoram became first a Union Territory in 1972 and then a full state in 1987.

The Daflas, the Abors, the Akas, the Mishmis and other tribes occupying what is now Arunachal Pradesh all attracted British reprisals, some for obstructing trade, others for cultivating poppy and some for disturbing the Great Trigonometrical Survey in 1876–77. A series of expeditions were conducted into the Sadiya, Balipara and Lakhimpur frontier divisions to bring these turbulent tribal areas under control. Apart from exploring trade routes, these expeditions were also aimed at securing a clear and stable frontier with China. But while these hill regions west of Burma and south of Tibet were steadily being brought into the empire, the British realized the futility of administering them directly.

In 1873, the Inner Line Regulations were promulgated, marking the extent of the revenue administration beyond which the tribal people were left to manage their own affairs subject to good behaviour. No British subject or foreigner was permitted to cross the Inner Line without permission and rules were laid down for trade and acquisition of lands beyond.

The Inner Line was given the difficult task of providing a territorial frame to capital ... it was also a temporal outside of the historical pace of development and progress ... the communities staying beyond the Line were seen as belonging to a different time regime – where slavery, headhunting and nomadism could be allowed to exist. The Inner Line was expected to enact a sharp split between what were understood as the contending worlds of capital and pre-capital, of the modern and the primitive.⁷

Although the British started large commercial ventures in Assam in tea, oil and coal and invested heavily in the province's infrastructure, they remained satisfied with token acceptance of suzerainty from the tribes living beyond the Inner Line and did little to develop their economies. The kingdoms of Manipur and Tripura were also left alone, as long as they paid tributes. A British political resident was stationed in both the princely states to ensure suzerainty and monitor any political activity considered detrimental to British interests. British money and development targeted only areas that yielded large returns on investment. The Assam plains were seen as the only part of the North East where investment would bring forth adequate returns.

The foothills of the Brahmaputra and the Barak Valleys marked the limits of regular administration—the hills beyond and the tribespeople living there were largely left alone. 'The Inner Line became a frontier within a frontier adding to the seclusion of the hills and enhancing the cultural and political distance between them and the plains.'⁸ Assam, however, continued to grow as a province, both in size and population, and its demographic diversity increased. Under the British, its boundaries were extended steadily to include most areas of what is now India's North East. Initially, Assam's administration was placed under the lieutenant-governor of Bengal and the Assamese were forced to accept Bengali as the official language of their province. In 1874, however, a year after the promulgation of the Inner Line Regulations for the hill areas, Assam was reconstituted as a province. The Bengali-dominated Sylhet and Cachar districts, the Garo and the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, the Naga Hills and the district of Goalpara were all brought within Assam. Between 1895 and 1898, the north and south Lushai Hills and a portion of the Chittagong Hill Tracts were detached from Bengal and added to Assam. With