

administrative unit. Stiff resistance in Tripura to any merger with Assam ultimately foiled this initiative. The state had enjoyed several centuries of sovereign princely rule and all political parties and ethnic groups, tribals and Bengalis alike, were opposed to a merger with either Assam or West Bengal. Finally, Tripura and Manipur became Part C states of India, NEFA was retained as a Frontier Agency and the rest of what is India's North East today remained in Assam.

The growing intensity of the armed separatist movement in the Naga Hills, the peaceful but determined mass movement for a hill state below the Brahmaputra Valley and finally, the outbreak of armed rebellion in the Lushai Hills district (renamed Mizo Hills district) led to the ultimate break-up of Assam within 15 years of the linguistic reorganization of India, which had left Assam untouched. The core of Assam was the Brahmaputra Valley. With the Surma Valley lost to East Pakistan, Assam was more Assamese than ever before. But the Bengali-dominated Barak Valley remained in Assam and the ethnic rivalry between the Bengalis and the Assamese continued to disturb peace and stability in the state. The Assamese elite were also seen as insensitive to the aspirations of tribal and hill people.

The worsening of relations with China that led to the border war of 1962 forced leaders in Delhi to turn their attention to the security and stability of India's North Eastern frontier. The Chinese army had advanced to Tezpur before suddenly retreating to their version of the Line of Actual Control (LAC). In far-off Delhi, there were speculations about what would have happened if the Naga guerrillas had worked as the 'fifth column' for the Chinese (which they did not) and if the Chinese had pushed into the Naga Hills from Tirap after overrunning the Walong salient. The Naga rebels had been receiving assistance from Pakistan since 1957, but not from China. It was only in 1965 that the Chinese finally agreed to help the Naga rebels. Nevertheless, the prospect of a Chinese military drive through eastern Arunachal Pradesh and northern Burma into the Naga Hills for a Tibet-style 'liberation' weighed heavily on Nehru and his colleagues when they decided to break away from the 'Greater Assam' model of administration in India's North Eastern frontier and confer full statehood to Nagaland.

Within a few months of granting statehood to the Naga Hills district, Nehru also opened peace talks with the Naga rebels. A

Nagaland Peace Mission was set up with respected popular figures like Jayaprakash Narayan and Assam's chief minister, Bimala Prasad Chaliha. He did not live to see the failure of the Peace Mission and the Naga problem remains unresolved to this day. The worst-case scenario of a Chinese drive into Nagaland and adjoining states has also not materialized. In fact, after supporting several insurgent groups from northeast India for 15 years, Beijing stopped support to these groups in the early 1980s.

Within three years of the 1962 border war with China, India had faced a Pakistani offensive to 'liberate' Kashmir in 1965 through Operation Gibraltar and Operation Grand Slam. By 1966, Naga guerrillas had started reaching China in large numbers for training and Mizo rebels had unleashed Operation Jericho on the last day of February 1966. Manipur and Tripura also experienced the first stirrings of ethnic unrest and underground armed activity. In 1967, as the first batch of Naga rebels were returning from China after several weeks of intensive training in revolutionary guerrilla warfare, the tribal peasants of Naxalbari, on the Siliguri Corridor that the army calls the 'Chicken Neck', unfurled the banners of India's first Maoist rebellion. West Bengal was soon to be engulfed in a perilous escalation of violence that subsequently spread beyond its borders. With Pakistan as hostile as ever and now joined by China intent on teaching India a lesson for 'its collaboration with the American imperialists on Tibet', the worst-case scenario envisioned by Delhi looked like coming true.

Response to this situation called for a right mix of political acumen and military drive. The dull, thudding counter-insurgency campaign by the Indian army could go on in the Naga Hills and in the Mizo Hills but the generals in Delhi could ill afford several divisions locked up there. More troops were needed to man the long and difficult Himalayan frontier with China and the multi-climatic border with Pakistan. For those guarding the borders, there was always a need to look behind the back in the event of a war. The guerrillas might unsettle the supply lines and join up with Chinese or Pakistani special forces to wreak havoc in the rear. Counter-insurgency units also had to look out across the frontier from where the guerrillas were obtaining training, weapons, funds and encouragement.

The creation of Nagaland and the peace talks of the mid-1960s was intended to start a process of political reconciliation that would lead to the territorial reorganization in Assam. The spread of the prairie fires in India's North East forced Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to consider wide-ranging concessions to the battling ethnicities. Assam had been India's delegated overlord in the North East—its upper-caste ruling elite had run the hill regions of the North Eastern frontier for close to a quarter century. Anyone who went to the hills was likely to meet a *Bora* or a *Buragohain*, a *Borthakur* or a *Barpujari* running the local administration as its deputy commissioner or police superintendent, as its chief engineer or chief medical officer. Now, however, there was too much pressure on them to make way for a missionary-educated neo-literate tribal political and professional class. If the Nagas could have a state of their own, the Mizos, the Khasis and the Garos, the Bodos and the Karbis all wanted one for themselves. The ethnic homeland was catching the imagination of the struggling tribal communities in North East. At the forefront of these movements for separate tribal homelands, one could not miss the lead taken by the neo-literate Christian converts. Be it a Phizo or a Muivah, a Laldenga or a Zoramthanga, a Nichols-Roy or a Williamson Sangma, or much later, even a Bijoy Hrangkhawl or a Ranjan Daimary, the cross on their chests could not be missed.

The Naxalite movement in West Bengal and the evolving crisis in East Pakistan occupied much of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's attention as India entered its 'difficult years'. But she made the most of the opportunity. As she prepared for military intervention in East Pakistan after much initial reluctance, Mrs Gandhi used the military build-up on the border to crush the Naxalite movement in Bengal. Deployment of troops against the Maoist guerrillas concealed India's offensive intentions across the border until it was too late in the day for Pakistan. The same troops who combed the jungles of Birbhum during the monsoon of 1971 were, a few months later, marching to Jessore and Dhaka.

By decisively intervening in East Pakistan, Indira Gandhi cut off one of the main trans-border regrouping zones for the ethnic rebels of northeast India. A friendly government in Dhaka, though short-lived, ensured for Delhi that the jungles of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Sylhet and Mymensingh were not available to the guerrillas from

the Alee Command (Foreign Command) of the 'Naga Army' or the Zampuimanga battalion of the Mizo National Front. Despite other irritants in Indo-Burmese relations, Delhi followed up the success in Bangladesh by developing closer military cooperation with the Burmese. Indira Gandhi, however, was far too sagacious to rely exclusively on diplomatic and military options. She soon played the 'statehood' card in the North East to satisfy the aspirations of the battling ethnicities to consolidate the gains of the 1971 Bangladesh military campaign.

Even before the liberation of Bangladesh, Mrs Gandhi's government had taken the initiative for the territorial reorganization of the North East. The North-Eastern Areas (Reorganization) Act of 1971, which sought to 'provide for the establishment of the states of Manipur and Tripura and for the formation of the state of Meghalaya and of the Union Territories of Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh by reorganizing the existing state of Assam', was finally passed in the parliament at almost the same time as the new secular and socialist Republic in Bangladesh was born. The vivisection of Assam and the creation of three new states and two Union Territories (finally upgraded to full states by Mrs Gandhi's son Rajiv in 1987) were intended to satisfy the aspirations of the neo-literate tribal political class so that they could draw away their fellow tribesmen from the path of armed opposition to the Indian state. The North-Eastern Areas (Reorganization) Act finally achieved what the likes of Hutton and Parry, Reid and Mackenzie had failed to carry out—the separation of the plains of Assam from its enchanting hills. Delhi did realize the need for some regional coordination when it set up the North Eastern Council to facilitate coordinated development and security planning. This was described by B.P. Singh, an Assam cadre IAS officer and later India's home secretary, as 'the new twin vision for the region'.¹⁴

In Indian—and South Asian—political-administrative discourse, Assam was finally replaced by 'the North East'. After the reorganization, Assam became just another state in the region east of the Siliguri Corridor, controlling a much smaller piece of territory made up of the Brahmaputra and Barak Valleys and the Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills. The other hill regions that had been added to Assam by the British were all gone. It is debatable whether India gained

anything by creating so many small—and some say, economically non-viable—states in the North East. The region's leading historian, H.K. Barpujari, argued that breaking up Assam was a disaster. In his last book, he lamented: 'The policy-makers in Delhi utterly failed to realize that in a multi-racial and multi-lingual country, erection of linguistic states would unlock the Pandora's Box and open up the floodgates of racism, linguism and parochialism. This has happened elsewhere in India and is now happening in the North East'.¹⁵ As time has shown, there is much truth in the last written words of Assam's greatest historian.

Although the North East has emerged as a distinct region in India, with clearly demarcated geographical contours, states within the region rarely betray any awareness of this. All the states carved out of Assam have border disputes with the mother state. Police forces of these states, particularly those of Nagaland and Assam, have fought pitched battles—the worst such clash occurring in 1985 at Merapani—to settle border disputes, the fighting sometimes resembling a border clash between separate countries. Furthermore, the region's many insurgent armies, as well as the state governments who try to combat them, have failed to work out any meaningful degree of cooperation among themselves.

Joint revolutionary fronts have been non-starters, unlike in neighbouring Burma, because even the Delhi-baiting rebels often find they are as different from their regional cousins as from the rest of India. Differences of ethnicity, religion and ideology have often blurred the tactical wisdom of joining hands against the common enemy. Some agitators, such as those leading the anti-foreigner agitation in Assam in the early 1980s, discovered, after initial hostility, that the Indian federal government was their only real safeguard against rampant illegal migration from Bangladesh that threatened to undermine the demographic character of Assam. The agenda of the Assam agitation is now considered a policy priority for the whole nation and Delhi, especially when ruled by a Hindu revivalist government appeared to be more enthusiastic than the Prafulla Mahantas and Bhrigu Phukans to identify and throw out illegal infiltrators from states bordering Bangladesh.

Despite its heterogeneity, the 'North East' as a constituent region of India has come to stay as a distinct entity. If India's south, made

up of the four states of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka, is seen as India's 'Dravidian under-belly', very different from the country's northern cow-belt, the North East is considered racially distinct from the heartland. That clubbing together of hugely diverse identities into a post-colonial region may be the cause of many a policy failure but there's no denying that Delhi is now beginning to see the North East as a possible bridge with the tiger economies of South East Asia. That's why, in 2001, a cabinet-level Department for Development of the North Eastern Region (DONER) was launched to fast track the region's economic and infrastructure development. That makes the North East the only region whose development is the specific mandate of a stand-alone department of the federal government. There is an industrial policy for the region to attract private capital that's been sparse to come to the North East since the British left.

In fact, the government of India's Vision 2020 document for North East envisages the region as 'a prosperous part of India contributing, in some measure, to the growth of the national economy with the geo-economical disadvantages converted into productive opportunities'. The document says it wants to create 'a contented rural North East with developed primary sector impacting growth in the secondary sector, with minimum connectivity established and health and education for all ensured'. It further says that it aims at converting the North East into

an important hub of trade and commerce in relation to South East Asia with border trade developed and firmly rooted, an empowered and informed people through skill development and technology intervention, a community participating and involving in socio-economic planning, projectizing, implementing and monitoring and a peaceful society with level of unemployment drastically brought down.¹⁶

In fact, India's Look East foreign policy—a special effort to develop close ties with largely Mongoloid South East Asia, China, Japan and Korea—sees the North East not as a periphery anymore, but as the centre of a thriving and integrated economic space linking two dynamic regions (South East and South Asia) with a network of highways, railways, pipelines, transmission lines criss-crossing the region.

The mainland Indian perception of the North East has also changed, albeit rather slowly. Assam's former governor, Lieutenant-General S.K. Sinha, proposed installing the statue of the great Ahom hero Lachit Barphukan in the National Defense Academy at Khadakvasla. The logic is not difficult to see: if Shivaji can be a national hero for fighting the Mughals, why cannot Lachit be one for his great victory against the Mughal army at the Battle of Saraighat. The historical legitimacy of regional 'Indian' heroes for their resistance to foreign invaders like the Mughals has been growing in a climate of Hindu revivalism. And in this changing Indian milieu, the exploits of the soldiers of the Naga and the Assam regiments of the Indian army in the far-off battlefields of Kargil has found a place in the nation's television-engineered collective memory. The country's soccer team has, at any time now, a 50 to 60 per cent representation from North East, especially Manipur—something that prompted young Calcutta-based sports historian Kaushik Bandyopadhyay to explore soccer's potential to draw away potential insurgent recruits in Manipur.

Times have changed in the North East as well. Thousands of Nagas lined up to pay homage at the funeral of Lieutenant Kengruse, the Naga officer of the Indian army martyred in Kargil, as they did during the cremation of the great 'Naga Army' General Mowu Angami, who led the several groups of Naga rebels to East Pakistan and China in a saga of bravery and grit recollected in Nirmal Nibedon's *Night of the Guerrillas*. Scores of Nagas and Mizos, Khasis and Garos join the central services, the Indian army and the paramilitary forces and other national organizations every year. The national parliament has had a president and a speaker from the North East. There has been even a Congress president from the region.

Since the missionary-educated tribals of northeast India have a lead in English education over most other tribals from the Indian heartland, they are beginning to secure more and more positions in the central services by taking advantage of the Scheduled Tribes quota. Those who join these services and other federal organizations end up as part of the 'mobile Indian middle class', the strongest cement of India's post-colonial nationhood. Their influence on local society is not inconsiderable and they provide a direction for new aspirants in the region. At last, the university campuses in Delhi, Bombay and Pune are beginning to be as attractive for the educated youth in the North East as the guerrilla camps in the troubled region.

The creation of the new states and autonomous councils in the North East have indeed opened a Pandora's Box. The Bodos, the Karbis, the Dimasas, the Hmars and even the Garos, who have produced more chief ministers in Meghalaya than the Khasis, have militant groups fighting for new states, autonomous regions and even independent homelands. If the Nagas and the Mizos can have states of their own, the argument goes, why cannot the Bodos or the Garos have likewise? But, none of the new states of northeast India can be called ethnically compact. They were formed by joining up the homelands of three, four or more important tribes. Meghalaya has three leading tribes, namely, the Khasis, the Jaintias and the Garos. Mizoram has the dominant Lushais but has to reckon with the aspirations of the Hmars, the Lais, the Maras, the Chakmas and the Reangs. Pure ethnic homelands have proved to be a costly mirage and North East's battling ethnicities, in their relentless pursuit of the same, could reduce the region to a Bosnia or a Kosovo.

Since the North East has emerged as a distinct geo-political region, its inhabitants have a good reason to make a common ground on a host of issues to achieve the best possible deal with India. It is time for all separatist groups in North East to explore the limits of the 'special federal relationship' that Delhi is prepared to offer to the NSCN. As India's relations with China and the countries of South East Asia begin to improve, the importance of the country's 'Mongoloid' fringe has not been lost on Delhi or her neighbours. In years to come, if regional cooperation in the eastern part of South Asia increases, as it did in the ASEAN region, India's North East can emerge as the country's bridge to several growth quadrants across its borders, a land of opportunity for outsiders and natives alike. At last, a disadvantageous geographic location could give way to great eco-strategic advantage for India. But before Delhi could exploit that, it will have to overcome two of North East's perpetual deficits: the deficit of democracy and development. Festering—and multiplying—low-intensity conflicts in the North East are clearly inconsistent with India's image as a rising power and Delhi would do well to resolve these conflicts even as it pushes ahead with the Look East policy to turn the 'arc of instability' (the rebellious Indo-Burma frontier region) into a shared economic space with great promise for growth and prosperity.