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SLOW ROADS TO PEACE:
FUTURE CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS
FOR INDIA’S NORTH EAST

The Indian government must bring peace to the region by meeting the aspirations of its people. While Tripura and Mizoram have been peaceful, they need greater central assistance to develop. This would only be possible if peace can be brought to Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, Arunachal, and Meghalaya as all these states are closely interlinked. The Indian government must take steps to avoid the conflagration that is in the offing particularly in Assam, Nagaland, and Manipur. It must stop knee-jerk reactions and faulty political decisions being taken in New Delhi.

INDIA’S NORTH-EAST HAS BEEN BESET BY PROBLEMS ARISING FROM lack of economic development and insurgency since the country’s independence in 1947, which are being aggravated by recent regional crises arising out of flawed political decision making. Though the reasons are manifold, they primarily lie within the region’s sociological, geographic, historical, economic, and political spheres, and are outlined in this article.

The North East Region (NER) of India consists of the states of Assam,
Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura, and Arunachal Pradesh (Sikkim, whilst officially part of the region, is not relevant as it is dissimilar to the other NER states and, therefore, is not discussed further). The NER covers an area of about 300,000 square kilometres with a population of about 45 million (according to the 2011 census). It has about 5,100 kilometres of international borders and is connected to the rest of India by a narrow strip of land known as the Siliguri corridor. The NER has a hill and mountain sector forming 70 per cent of the region, which is generally covered with forests and is dissected by a large number of major rivers with deep gorges. These rivers are surrounded by high mountain/hill ranges, which effectively segregate the valleys, making them mutually distinct. It has also ensured that the ethnic groups living in these areas would be naturally isolated from each other. The valleys have provided migration routes into the region. Consequently, the ethnic groups have retained their exclusive identity that has given root to their primordial value system of “my tribe-my land-my autonomy,” which has always given rise to strong inter-ethnic rivalry and feuds.

China claims large areas of Arunachal Pradesh and parts of Bhutan (with whom India has a treaty obligation), and disputes the alignment of the boundary with Sikkim. China has waged a proxy war against India by supporting Indian Insurgent Groups (IIGs) in the NER. Consequently, there is extensive deployment of the Indian armed forces in the NER.

Before its partition, erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), had been targeting the entire NER to amalgamate it so as to obtain a strategic space along with its natural resources. The country had therefore evolved a strategy of “Lebensraum,” that is, silent and slow demographic invasion through illegal migration changing the demography of the NER, thereby

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2 H.M. Bareh, Encyclopedia of North East India (New Delhi: Mittal, 2001).
facilitating the region to ultimately secede to it politically. To this end, Bangladesh had, after the assassination of Sheikh Mujibir Rahman, joined hands with China and Pakistan for many years in waging a proxy war against India by supporting the NER insurgent groups and by the propagation of Islamic fundamentalism, both in Bangladesh and in India’s NER. However, the present Bangladeshi Government, under Sheikh Hasina Wajed, has now taken positive steps to stamp out Islamic fundamentalism and in trying to deny support to the NER IIGs.

While Myanmar now has a reasonable relationship with India, it has little control over its northern areas bordering India and Yunnan. Due to ongoing insurgency and the Han-isation of the area, Myanmar’s northern region is progressively turning into a Chinese colony, which constitutes a threat to India’s security. Myanmar is also being used as a sanctuary by the NER IIGs in concert with the Myanmar’s insurgent groups. Nevertheless, Northern Myanmar offers the NER access to China, Thailand, Southeast Asia and the sea. This access is strategically imperative for development of the NER and spreading Indian influence across Southeast Asia.

The earliest inhabitants of the region were of Austric stock (Mon Khmer akin to the Munds in Bihar and the Andamans), now residing primarily in Meghalaya (Khasis and Jaintias) and Karbi Anglong (Karbis were earlier called Mikirs in Assam), and this was coupled with a limited Dravidian and Negritos presence.

A few thousand years BCE onwards, waves of Mongoloid people migrated and established control over the entire area. They spread across parts of North India, Nepal, and Sikkim (Lepchas), North Bengal (Kamtapuris/Koch), Assam (Bodo-Kachari-Dimasa-Chutiya-Marans-


4 V.P. Malhotra, *Defence Related Treaties of India* (New Delhi: Vij, 2010).

Rajbanshis), Garo Hills (Garos of Meghalaya), Manipur (Meitei tribes), Tripuris of Tripura, Bhutan (Bodo groups), and there were a few tribes of Arunachal including the Akas, Adis, Mishmis, and some present day Naga tribes. Thus the claims of some of the tribes including the Nagas that they were the original inhabitants of the region are not true. These tribes established a great kingdom called Kamrupa, extending over Bihar, Bengal, Orissa, the Assam plains, and some hill areas in the NER.

The plains of the Siliguri corridor and the Brahmaputra valley, being the natural population centres and communication hubs, are the core, while the hill sectors form the fringes of the NER. These valleys, with their fertile

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6 Bhuyan and De, *Political History of Assam*.

soil, abundant natural resources (that include 50 per cent of India’s tea, twenty per cent of its oil, undiscovered shale oil, huge forest wealth, and large coal and mineral reserves) have throughout history been a source of attraction for migrating and invading hordes that came through the mountain passes and the river valleys. Such migration has made this region a melting pot of cultures and ethnic groups, giving it a rich and colourful canvas. Being a transit area between high Asia, Indo-China and the Gangetic-Brahmaputra plains, the NER has acquired a distinct individuality as a home to a multitude of ethnic groups.\(^8\)

The Aryan migrations spilled east into lower western Assam plains, leading to their adoption of Vedic and Hindu culture. There were also further Tibeto-Burman migrations including some Naga tribes, and the Mizo and Kuki-Chin, into Nagaland, upper Assam, Arunachal, Mizoram, south Manipur, Tripura and Sikkim. By this time Manipur and Tripura also became independent kingdoms strongly influenced by Aryan culture. The Turk-Afghan Sultanate’s 12th and 13th century expeditions to conquer Assam from Bengal were repeatedly defeated, however, many of the invading Muslims settled in lower Assam and Cooch Bihar where their descendants live even today.

In the 13th century, the Ahoms, a Shan tribe who were originally from Yunnan in China and who had migrated earlier to Myanmar, invaded upper Assam. They progressively gained control and were perpetually in conflict with the Bodo groups. By the 13th century, the Ahoms gained control of Assam and ruled the region for about 600 years.\(^9\)

In the 16th/17th centuries, Lower Assam was invaded by the Mughals, who gained control over central and lower Assam for about 70 years but, were ultimately pushed back by the Ahoms. By the 17th century, the Ahoms wrested control over most of Assam but still failed to subjugate the hill tribes, who frequently raided Ahom and Bodo areas. They were kept under check

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through punitive expeditions and raids.\textsuperscript{10}

In the 18th century, Ahom rulers persecuted local Vaishnavites who revolted and launched an insurrection, which spread across the Ahom kingdom. The Ahom King appealed to the Burmese King for help. Burmese troops responded promptly and assisted the Ahoms by suppressing the rebels. In the 18th and 19th centuries, due to misrule by the Ahoms, there was civil war and insurgency and the Ahoms again invited the Myanmarese to subdue the rebellion. Consequently, the Myanmarese occupied Ahom dominions for two years, and were simultaneously at war with the Manipuris over possession of territory and payment of tribute.

In the 19th century, the British entered Assam on the invitation of the Ahom rulers to help quell the civil war and insurgency and also to expel the Myanmarese from the kingdom. After helping the Ahoms defeat and remove the Myanmarese, the British, however, progressively took control of the region. Due to the fact that the hill tribes frequently raided their facilities, the British attempted subjugation but found the process too costly. The British therefore gave the tribes partial autonomy and initiated their conversion to Christianity.\textsuperscript{11} To prevent depredations, the British inducted Kuki-Chin tribals from the Chin Hills in Burma and settled them as a buffer between the Naga homelands and British-controlled areas, thereby creating further animosity between the tribes. To isolate the hill tribes from plains’ politics, the British barred the migration of outsiders into the hills, imposed the “Inner Line” along the base of the hills and drew boundaries on the principle of “divide and rule.”\textsuperscript{12}

By the 18th century, the Gurkhas from Nepal were attempting to expand their dominions through the conquest and colonisation of areas controlled by the British. The ensuing Anglo-Gurkha War of 1815/16 ended

\textsuperscript{10} Lakshmi Devi, \textit{Ahom-Tribal Relations: A Political Study} (Guwahati: Lawyer’s Book Stall, 1992).

\textsuperscript{11} Mary Mead Clark, \textit{A Corner in India} (Philadelphia: American Baptist Church Publication Society, 1907); and Frederick Sheldon Downs, \textit{Christianity in North East India: Historical Perspectives} (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; Guwahati: Christian Literature Centre, 1983).

in the defeat of the Gurkhas. The British Army now recruited the Gurkhas and used them to assist in colonising the NER. This involved stationing Gurkha troops all over the region, many of whom settled down permanently and multiplied.

In the 20th century, due to a perceived Russian and Chinese threat, the British adopted a forward policy and subjugated Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, and Sikkim, declaring them protectorates to create a buffer zone in the North. The Naga and Mizo hills were accorded limited autonomy and the Inner Line System was imposed. In the early 20th century, when Bengal was partitioned and Assam included in East Bengal, Muslims from East Bengal migrated to Assam in large numbers. After the grant of provincial autonomy to East Bengal in 1935, and with Saidullah as the Chief Minister, the migration of the Muslims further increased into Assam, North Bengal, and Tripura, raising their numbers to about 30 per cent of the population. After Indian independence, immigration from East Pakistan continued due to internal strife in East Pakistan. The migration reached almost 10 million just prior to the 1971 Indo-Pak war. As a consequence of the Assam agitation in the 1970s, immigration reduced but did not stop.13

The effects of such migration were that Tripura became a tribal minority state, resulting in a long drawn insurgency; Sikkim, which earlier had a Lepcha and Bhutia majority, now has a Nepalese majority; Assam, today has approximately 40 per cent immigrants from Bangladesh, Bengal, Nepal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan. The changing demographic profile of the NER gave birth to the Assam, Bodo, Karbi, and Dimasa insurgencies and other sub-nationalist movements. A minority Islamic fundamentalist movement also now exists in Assam. The migrations gave rise to Naxalite,


Gurkhas, and Kamtapuri movements. In Meghalaya, the Khasi movement and the anti non-Khasi agitations with harsh anti-immigration policies came into being. Unfortunately, both the central and state governments failed to take suitable remedial action, giving rise to widespread insurgency, strife, and discontent.

During the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, road, rail and river communications linking the NER to India were blocked by the creation of a hostile East Pakistan, disrupting the established trading patterns and, consequently, the only link between the NER and India became the Siliguri corridor. Thus, Calcutta’s industry and the NER economy fell into decay. Artificial boundaries created between India and Burma split the Naga, Kuki-Chin-Mizo tribes and the Meiteis (Manipuris). These boundaries, coupled with pitting ethnic groups against each other and the segregation of the hill people from the plainsmen, resulted in the present day problems of Naga, Mizo and Meitei demands, for uniting their homelands across British-imposed borders and sowing seeds of ethnic sub-nationalism.

Politically aware hill tribes were scared of assimilation into either the Hindu or the Muslim homeland, or being overwhelmed, and they thus demanded freedom and resorted to insurgency.

The British Forward Policy in bringing areas of Arunachal (North East Frontier Tracts and later the North Eastern Frontier Agency) under their direct control, and independent India continuing with this policy, brought India into direct confrontation with the Chinese, who claimed these areas as their own. The success of socialist movements in Russia and China drew dissenters from the NER into their fold as Chinese support to them escalated. The late 1950s saw the start of the Naga and Meitei insurgency, and then the Lushai (Mizo) insurgency.14

These insurgencies were sustained for long periods due to external support, public approbation and a subversive environment in Southeast Asia. India’s border dispute with China led to the Indo-China war of 1962,

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and Western support to India only strengthened China’s determination to help the IIGs. India’s dispute with Pakistan, led the latter to support these groups through East Pakistan. Unfortunately, India’s subsequent alliance with Russia, which had fallen out with China during the Cold War, brought the West clandestinely into the fray against India. Today, ground realities indicate that whenever India is in conflict (in any form) with China, there is an upsurge of insurgency in the NER.

Pakistan, and subsequently Bangladesh, after the death of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, have supported insurgencies in the NER. After the Naga, Mizo and Meitei insurgencies, we have seen the birth of insurgency in Tripura, Assam, Arunachal and finally in Meghalaya, all of which have now been largely brought under control. Having taken an overview of the NER, let us now look at the situation related to its states.

**Assam: Centre Needs to Act**

Enclosed on all sides by all the other NER states, Assam’s population according to the 2011 census was 31.20 million with a multitude of ethnic groups demanding autonomy due to socio-economic deprivation. The state is overpopulated as it is swamped by immigrants, and migration continues at a reduced pace. Today, its indigenous ethnic groups (400-500 years old or more) constitute only about 35% to 40% of its population. Whereas Hindus were

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16 Sajal, “Withdrawal Syndrome.”

17 *Census of India*, Government of India, 1901, 2001, 2011. Comprising 67.13% Hindus; 28.48% Muslims, now believed to be 30%; 2.4% Christians; 0.8% Buddhists; 1.8% Sikhs, and the balance undeclared. Assam’s ethnic break-up is broadly: Assamese of Aryan origin 9%; Assamese of Ahom origin 10%; Assamese Muslims (pre-1901) 6%; Mongoloid
predominant earlier, it now has 28% to 30% Muslims.

A large part of the area is flood plains with extensive floods occurring every year. It is marshy, covered with tea gardens, oilfields, mines, and extensive reserved forests. Consequently, there is a high population density in the available areas, leading to food scarcity. The key reason for the shortage is the exploitative colonial-pattern of the economy which primarily exports local products and serves as a market for finished goods from other states. Assam has been repeatedly balkanised to create the neighbouring hill states, with each of whom it has problems. Its people are not welcome in these states for fear of demographic change. While well-endowed with natural resources, the state lacks industry and markets, and has tenuous lines of communication with the rest of India. In spite of being the hub of the region, it is partly embroiled in insurgency and strife due to government neglect and maladministration.

A profusion of large and small insurgencies are active in the state: United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) which has camps in

tribals including Bodos 12%; Manipuris 2%; Nepalese 2%; Tea Tribes (Adivasis) 15%; Bangladeshi Muslims 22% (now unofficially reported to be about 26 to 28%); Bangladeshi Hindus 17% (reportedly reduced by 4 to 5%); and labour class from other parts of India 3%.
Myanmar alongside the National Socialist Council of Nagaland, Khaplang, NSCN (K), and other IIGs. Its operation today is in Upper Assam and in Lower Assam with safe havens in Garo Hills. With Bangladesh and Bhutan clamping down on them, their operations are at a relatively low key. Demographic change due to Bangladeshi migration is the root cause of this insurgency.

The Bodo Movement: The National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) has a few camps reportedly left over in Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Arunachal Pradesh. Its operations are primarily in the Bodo belts north in the Brahmaputra and by the Dimasas (a sub-group of the Bodos) in North Cachar Hills. The causes of discontent lie in migration leading to changed demography, lack of control over resources, and Assamese chauvinism. It has been in the news for trying to drive out the Bangladeshis and other non-Bodo groups through violent attacks. Its operations are otherwise low level.

Ethnic Strife in South Assam: This area has a multitude of small insurgent groups amongst the Karbis, Dimasas, and Nagas, indulging in extortion and kidnapping with their cause being ethnic sub-nationalism.

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20 Nag, “Withdrawal Syndrome.”
South Assam also has large tracts currently inhabited by Nagas, Kukis, Manipuris, Hmars, Karcis, Dimasas, and Bodos, and claimed by the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN) as part of ‘Greater Nagaland.’ These claims, and the attempts by the NSCN to enforce them by forcible occupation, have led to ethnic strife that threatens to escalate out of hand. The government also has to decide how to deal with the Bengali-speaking belt of Cachar, Hailakundi, and Karimganj, which indicate high Bangladeshi and Rohingya immigration patterns.21

Islamic Fundamentalism: Due to the large presence of Bangladeshi migrants, Islamic fundamentalism (including fundamentalists who have fled Bangladesh) is now unfortunately taking root, which will need to be dealt with urgently.22

The Crises in Assam: The strategies to combat the multiple insurgencies have not worked, or have worked partially, or have proven a complete failure. A brief overview:

The policy framework of announcing a ceasefire or suspension of operations and supposedly cantoning and disarming insurgents, and the surrender policy, has simply not worked as almost every major ethnic faction has indulged in insurgency. This entire mode has been a failure which has led to increased lawlessness, extortion, kidnapping for ransom, and greater sub-nationalistic demands by other ethnic groups, who had till then not been given a share of the pie. It is in fact now almost a state of anarchy. The central government’s policy to examine grant of statehood to the Bodos and divide the state is further preparing a recipe for disaster.

Failure to resolve the illegal immigration issue is leading to ever-escalating ethnic strife. The Bodos’ attempts at ethnic cleansing are an example of the failure of this policy.

While the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Constitution provide for grant of some autonomy in managing their affairs, the way in which it has

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21 Ibid.

22 Articles on Islamic Fundamentalism in Pakistan and Bangladesh, ‘Herald,’ Pakistan; Anand Kumar, “The ULFA Business in Bangladesh,” (paper presented at a seminar at the Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses, New Delhi, Feb 2009); and Sareen, The Jihad Factory.
been implemented in Assam is absolutely disastrous. Whilst Assam has over a hundred ethnic groups, it must be realised that it is next to impossible to meet every ethnic group’s demand for autonomy in such an environment. Assam today has six autonomous district councils, and eighteen developmental councils, and more are being considered, even though not one of them is performing properly. In addition, almost every ethnic group is demanding—and getting—scheduled tribe/caste status. It is impossible to manage a state in this fashion. What is, instead, required is consociation politics, village level democracy, and economic development. If this is not done, Assam will implode.

With the Bharatiya Janata Party having come into political power by the help of the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and the Bodos, and with Hindutva taking root, it is only a matter of time before problems escalate.

The result of the central government favouring the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muivah), or NSCN (IM), is that they are taking the boundary dispute to levels of forcibly grabbing the disputed area belt. It is time for Assam to put its foot down and to force the central government to resolve the problem.

**Nagaland and Manipur: The Price of Aloofness**

In light of the August 2015 Accord signed by the government of India with the NSCN (IM), both the states of Nagaland and Manipur need to be treated together because the NSCN (IM) is a mainly Tangkhul insurgent group based out of Manipur, fighting for sovereignty of the so-called Naga tribes of Nagaland and Manipur, and which is creating the most recent crisis in the NER.²³

Nagaland lies astride the Patkai and Naga hill ranges of the eastern hills. It has about twenty resident tribes, fourteen of them major groups, conjointly though incorrectly called Nagas. According to the 2011 census, Nagaland and Manipur: The Price of Aloofness

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the population is 1.97 million. ²⁴

Various studies indicate that some of the tribes migrated from the general area of Yunnan over a long period of time. Each of these tribes settled into separate areas in the Naga Hills around the 11th century and had always been antagonistic to each other. They are ethnically, culturally, and ideologically distinct from each other and have enjoyed tribal autonomy, and any threat to their fierce individuality invited violent reaction. The Bodos, Ahoms, Mughals, Manipuris, Myanmarese, and the British found it expensive to subjugate them, and therefore entered into agreements with them in order to maintain peace by allowing them autonomy, and to conduct punitive operations against them if they did not maintain peace. Headhunting was the order of the day till as late as the mid-20th century.

²⁴ Census of India, Government of India, 1901, 2001, 2011. The approximate but pertinent tribal break-up is: Angami 9%, Ao 15%, Chakesang 8%, Chang 2%, Khiamniungan 2%, Konyak 15%, Lotha 7%, Phom 3%, Rengma 1.5%, Makware 0.5%, Sangtam 4%, Sema 13%, Tikhir 0.5%, Yimchunger 2%, Zeliang 2%, Garos 1%, and Chir/BodoKachari/Kuki/Mikir/others 16%, including Bangladeshis.
Under British rule the ‘Inner Line Policy’ was enunciated in 1873 to prevent their political awakening and to restrict contact with outsiders. This was reiterated in the ‘Home Rule Regime’ by the Government of India Act of 1935, which declared the Naga Hills District an “Excluded Area.” The British tried to control them through conversion to Christianity which partially welded them. Christianity meant literacy and western lifestyles, but it could not change their basic value system. The concept of identity was used to try and get the Naga tribes to band together in order to meet the threat of being swamped by plainsmen.

The tactic did not work as the tribes are still antagonistic to each other, particularly those from Manipur and elsewhere. This is inspite of the fact that the NSCN (IM), primarily a Manipuri Tangkhul militia, controls large parts of Nagaland by force of arms. There are 35
Naga tribes, of which 20 are in Nagaland. The remainder live in Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, and Myanmar. According to the NSCN, Naga territory extends from the River Chindwin in Myanmar, including almost the whole of Manipur, as well as Cachar and North Cachar Hills, Tirap, Changlang, and Lohit districts in Arunachal Pradesh with a population of nearly three million.

There is a total lack of a common language and different Naga tribes, and even clans, speak to each other only through Nagamese (modified Assamese) or English. After independence, the Indian leadership decided to continue with the British policy of administration through autonomy and segregation. This only alienated the tribes even more. Their fears only mounted because of maladministration and lack of development, attempts by the Assam government to enforce Assamese as the state language, and the flood of Bangladeshi migration.25

In 1947, a Nine-Point Agreement was signed between the government of Assam and the Naga National Council (NNC), wherein considerable autonomy was given, but this did not meet the Nagas’ expectations. Angami Zapu Phizo unilaterally declared Naga independence from India in August 1947, as the self- proclaimed representative of the Nagas. In 1951, Phizo organised a controversial plebiscite in Naga Hills District, claiming that the results showed that 99 per cent were in favour of independence. In fact, the so-called plebiscite was held only in Kohima and Mokokchung with limited attendance, and women and other areas of Nagaland had been excluded.26


Hostilities started between the insurgents and the government forces from 1953. This led to insurgency and deployment of Security Forces (SF) in the state. Between 1957 and 1960, three Naga People’s Conventions were held in Nagaland, seeking peaceful resolution of the problem, and these conventions contributed to the government of India agreeing to their Sixteen-Point Proposal, which led to Nagaland’s creation. Notwithstanding these events, insurgency continued with Chinese and Pakistani support. After 1971, insurgency was reduced due to successful counterinsurgency (CI) operations, which forced the hostile bands to flee to Myanmar, as well as reduced Chinese support, the creation of Bangladesh, and non-availability of Pakistani bases. The Shillong Accord of 1975 also helped as the separatist guerrilla army of the National Federal Army (NFG) and the NNC accepted the Indian Constitution and agreed to lay down their arms.

The insurgency stepped up again, however, due to the military coup in Bangladesh, renewed support from Pakistan, China, and Bangladesh, and sanctuary in Myanmar, as well as the birth of the NSCN out of the anti-Shillong Accord factions, and their adoption of a common cause with the Myanmar insurgents. The 1980s witnessed a split in the NSCN on ethnic lines, and a blood feud leading to a power struggle between the two factions of the NSCN to gain control over Nagaland and Naga areas in Manipur, Assam, and Arunachal.

Due to successful counterinsurgency operations and public pressure, NSCN (IM) was forced out of Nagaland to bases in adjoining states as well as in Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Thailand. By the late-1990s, they were forced to ask for a ceasefire, which has been in place since 1997. At that stage NSCN (K) controlled large parts of both Nagaland and Naga inhabited areas in the adjoining states as well. A ceasefire was similarly brokered with the NSCN (K). The ceasefire originally applied to both the NSCN groups,

but was “officially” applicable only to Nagaland, as other state governments refused to agree to demands for ‘Greater Nagaland.’ Talks have been in progress between the government of India and the NSCN (IM) only. The ordinary people are tired of violence and have used the period of the ceasefire to propagate peace. The NSCN groups had used the ceasefire to consolidate their hold over areas, to strengthen themselves, and to eliminate their rivals. Due to the importance given to them by New Delhi, the NSCN (IM) has more or less gained control over the entire state by force, with the exception of north-east Nagaland which remains under NSCN (K) control. The ceasefire has since been abrogated by the NSCN (K) as they felt the government was favouring the IM, leading to resumption of fighting between the Special Forces and the NSCN (K), which is based primarily in Myanmar’s Sagaing district.

The NSCN (K) have formed an alliance with the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), the Kamtapur Liberation Organisation (KLO), and the People’s Liberation Army of Manipur (PLA), and they are involved in the process of trying to ally with many others who are not linked to the IM. Both factions have had further splits due to dissident ethnic movements. These include the NSCN (KK) or Khaplang-Kitovi, NSCN (U) or Unification, NSCN (R) or Reformation, the Zeliangrong United Front (ZUF), and other tribal groups. Notwithstanding the above, due to the abrogation of the ceasefire between the NSCN (K) and the SF, violence levels in Nagaland, Tirap and Changlang districts of Arunachal have escalated, with extortion, kidnapping and inter-factional violence becoming almost routine affairs.

**Manipur: A Raging Cauldron**

The state sits astride the Patkai, Naga, and Manipur hill ranges. About 75 per cent of the state is mountainous, with the hills surrounding the valley on all sides. The valley is about 70 kilometres long and 35 kilometres wide. The hill tribes inhabit the hills and the Meiteis the valley floor.27 The 2011 census showed the following ethnic distribution: Nagas-Ao, Kabui, Angami, Zelang, Khongazai, Mao, Tangkhul 13%; Kuki-Chin-Anal, Chiru, Chothe, Gangte, Koira, Kom, Lamgang, Mizo, Mansang, Paite, Ralte, Sahte, Simte, Thadou, Vaiphei, Zou 14%; Meitei 58%;
The seven main Naga tribes of Manipur are dissimilar and have throughout history been hostile to each other, and are not accepted by the Nagaland tribes. The Aos, Zeliangs and the Angamis spill across the boundary into Nagaland. The Naga tribal residents in Manipur feel neglected and deprived by the Meiteis on issues of economy, jobs, development, culture, and governance, and feel that the Meiteis have wrongfully seized their lands. They similarly believe that forcible settlement of the Kuki-Chin tribes on their lands was wrong.

The majority of Kuki-Chin-Mizo tribes reside in south Manipur in the districts of Chandel and Churachandpur adjacent to Mizoram. There are also two pockets in Senapati district, sandwiched between the Maos, Zeliangs, Tangkhuls and the Meiteis, and some in Imphal. There is a great deal of sub-tribal rivalry between the Kukis, Hmars, Paites, Zous, Zomis, Mizos derived from the fact that Mizos get preferential treatment in Mizoram.

Others (including Muslims) 15%.

Also, that the demand of the non-Mizo, Kuki-Chin tribal group for inclusion in Mizoram and demands for Greater Mizoram have not been met, which is perceived to have been to their detriment. Consequently, they have suffered tremendously at the hands of both the Nagas and the Meiteis. We therefore have a nascent insurgent movement by the non-Mizo, Kuki-Chin groups, which are antagonistic to all other ethnic groups, including the Mizos.

The Meiteis primarily inhabit the valley floor of Manipur extending up to Moreh and along the Bishenpur axis into Cachar district of Assam. They consider themselves superior to all the other ethnic groups in Manipur. They believe they are being oppressed to meet the demands of the tribes inhabiting the hills and are antagonistic towards them. The Meiteis are the most populous ethnic group in the state. Their kingdom reportedly stretched from river Brahmaputra in the north, to river Chindwin (now in Myanmar) in the south, around the period of the birth of Christ. Manipur plains are the core and the surrounding hills are the fringe regions. Hill tribes were permitted local autonomy, subject to their maintaining peace and giving tribute to kings of Manipur. After Aryan migrations into Bengal, the Meiteis were strongly influenced by Hinduism and Vedic culture. In the 16th century, they adopted Vaishnavism and grew powerful in the region, along with the Bodo Cacharis who ruled from Dimapur, the Mughals who ruled Bengal, and the Tripuris and Ahoms. The kings of Myanmar, wishing to expand their territory, then subjected them to repeated invasions. The power struggle with the Bodos, Cacharis and other powers of the region also took its toll. The Manipuri population was decimated and their economy disrupted. Consequently, they were neither able to keep the hill tribes under control, nor the invading Myanmar hordes at bay. In 1824, they appealed to the British for help. The British defeated the Myanmarese, but forced Manipur to cede the rich Kabaw Valley to Myanmar. They also instigated massive migrations of Kuki-Chin-Mizo tribes—to act as a buffer between the Nagas and the British plantations in the Cachar—into south Manipur (Churachandpur and Chandel districts), and parts of central Manipur.

Thus, relations between the British and Manipuris deteriorated, leading to the 1891 Anglo-Manipur war and British annexation of the state.
There was political awakening and participation in India’s freedom struggle. After partition, the Maharaja of Manipur acceded to the Indian union, which sparked insurgency amongst Naga and Meitei groups who wanted independence.

It needs to be recollected at this stage, that the wave of the Chinese Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong’s socialist philosophy was sweeping across East and Southeast Asia. The Manipur Communist Party reached an understanding with Myanmar communists, who, with Chinese backing, had control over the adjoining areas in Myanmar. Myanmar was to cede the Kabaw Valley back to Manipur, in return for creation of an independent socialist state of Manipur that would ally it to the Chinese communists.

In the 1950s-1960s, due to perceived Meitei exploitation, a number of Manipur Naga tribals joined the Naga movement. Shortly thereafter, as the Mizo insurgency in Mizoram had just started, many Kuki-Chin-Mizo tribals joined their counterparts in the Chin and Mizo Hills, and started agitating that the Kuki-Chin-Mizo belts in Manipur be merged with the Mizo Hills. They also engaged in inter-ethnic depredations for control of south Manipur and the lucrative trans-border trade in drugs and other smuggled goods, timber, and precious stones. By the 1960s-1970s, various Meitei insurgent groups had formed, demanding revival of the pre-Vaishnav Meitei culture and secession from India.

When counterinsurgency operations were launched, many groups moved out to the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The situation worsened due to socio-economic deprivation, rising unemployment, and insurgency. Politicians also started aligning themselves with various insurgent groups, seeking their support for elections and protection. Governance became very difficult as political instability shook the region. Some respite was obtained as the 1971 war operations had terminated Pakistani support, and there had been a series of successful counterinsurgency operations. However, there was a revival of insurgency in the 1980s and 1990s due to increasing frustration, corrupt and poor governance, the continuing feud between the groups, and support from China, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Many of the Naga insurgents in Manipur are led by Muivah’s Tangkhuls
in the NSCN (IM)) which emerged from a split in the NSCN in 1987-1988 and who have now gained control of part of the Naga areas in Manipur and adjoining states. Besides secession and sovereignty, their demand is for merger of the Naga tribal areas of Manipur, Assam, Arunachal, Nagaland, and Myanmar, which is one of the reasons for conflict with the Meiteis. Their conflict with the Kukis is for control over drug and other illegal trade with Myanmar, besides the forcible interjection of the Kukis into traditional Naga areas.29

Many of the Naga tribals, particularly those adjoining the Chakesang belt are part of the NFG (a derivative of the NNC), as this is an NFG stronghold opposed to the NSCN (IM). Part of Tamenglong district (a ZUF-Zeliang area) continues to support the NSCN (K).

The Kuki-Chin-Mizo tribes argue that as they were settled into their areas by the British, it was the duty of the Indian Government to protect them. They supported the Mizo insurgency in the 1960s and 1970s as they belonged to the same ethnic group as the Mizos of Mizoram, and they demanded a merger of all Kuki-Chin-Mizo areas in Manipur with Mizoram. In the 1980s and 1990s, the Meiteis and then the Nagas engaged in trying to throw out the Kuki-Chin-Mizo tribals from the areas occupied by them and killed a large number of them. They have now fortified themselves into organised insurgent groups whose role is to strike back at depredations against them by the Nagas and the Meiteis and their own sub-groups, with many now demanding a separate state. All these groups now have a ceasefire status with the government.30

There is now, reportedly, a truce between most of the Kuki-Chin groups and NSCN (IM), a temporary marriage of convenience, and they have joined forces against the Meiteis with the NSCN (IM) who have promised them Greater Mizoram, when Greater Nagaland comes through. As part of this strategy, NSCN (IM) and allied Kuki-Chin groups are trying to strangle

29 “Naga Identity, Meitei Nationalism, and Electoral Politics,” (paper presented at Centre for Conflict & Development in India’s North East, Guwahati); and “Peace in Naga Country,” (paper presented at Centre for Conflict & Development in India’s North East, Guwahati).

30 Sajal, “Withdrawal Syndrome.”
the Meiteis into submission, with hill blockades as part of their strategy, as they jointly control routes through the hills leading into Manipur.

NSCN (IM), the Kukis, and two defunct Meitei groups, now have a ceasefire with the government and it initially applied only to Nagaland. NSCN (IM’s) attempt was to get it extended to cover the entire areas claimed by the NSCN (IM). This included almost the whole of Manipur, major parts of south Assam and Tirap, and Changlang and Lohit districts of Arunachal, so they could gain control of the area during the ceasefire. Delhi initially gave their approval to this proposal of NSCN (IM). This led to extremely widespread agitation and strife by the Meiteis and resentment by neighbouring states. Delhi was then forced to officially retract its earlier decision.

There is now, however, an unofficial ceasefire in the claimed areas of the NSCN (IM), between the NSCN (IM) and their surrogate groups and the SF, apparently out of fear that talks with the authorities will otherwise break down. Consequently, the NSCN (IM) have had a free run in the claimed areas, much to the chagrin of the Meiteis, the Kuki-Chin groups, the NSCN (K), the residents of these areas, and the region’s state governments. The NSCN (K), (KK), ZUF, NFG, most Meitei IIGs, do not currently have a ceasefire with the government. Consequently, operations by the SF against them continue. Meanwhile, extortion, kidnapping, and inter-ethnic violence have become the order of the day. Most of these IIGs have shifted their sanctuaries to Myanmar, Bangladesh, and adjoining states.

Since the counterinsurgency operations are currently only against insurgent groups who are not party to the ceasefire, these groups are aggrieved. The problem is compounded by the actions of the NSCN (IM) in trying to strangle the Meiteis into submission by frequent blockade of all roads leading into Manipur for long periods. With their backs to the wall, the Meiteis feel alienated and betrayed. This is even more so on account of the fact that the Meitei population at large has repeatedly proved their loyalty by fielding maximum people from the north-east in the national sports teams, the bureaucracy, police, armed forces, and other central services.

The recent Naga Accord between the government of India and the NSCN (IM), and the attempts to bring about a settlement to the insurgency
problem, are developing into a major crisis for the region. This is the state of affairs in spite of the promises made by the central government that any settlement with the Naga tribes will not impinge on the territorial integrity and rights of the neighbouring states.

All Naga tribes, whether in Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, Arunachal, and all other ethnic groups in the region, believe that the government of India have stabbed them in the back by doing a deal with the Tangkhuls. They refuse to accept the Tangkhuls being designated by the government to rule over them and take over their tribal rights. There is, therefore, likelihood of much greater violence which will engulf not only the affected states but the entire region.

The NSCN (IM) have reportedly established new training and operational camps recently in the forests of Manipur and are expanding and rearming to prepare for forcible imposition of their dictat on other groups. They are increasingly using the weapons of extortion and kidnapping. All other groups are also, therefore, trying to expand, to be able to confront the conjoint efforts by both the government of India and the NSCN (IM). The NSCN (K) and its surrogates are also trying to co-opt others into their group, as well as to expand. Also in spite of the government’s best efforts, they have failed to get the Myanmar Army to act against the NSCN (K) and its surrogates in Myanmar. The Meiteis had also passed three bills to safeguard themselves, related to citizenship rights, which had led to recent violence by the hill tribes in Manipur. The Kukis and the Meiteis are openly threatening extreme violence if their rights are impinged upon, as are the governments of Assam and Arunachal. The authorities are now hoping that with a BJP government having now come to power in Manipur they would be able to resolve the problem related to the state.

**Meghalaya: Sunshine over Land of Clouds**

Meghalaya is a hill state with Assam to its north and east, and Bangladesh to its south and west. Its population is 2.96 million (2011 census).31

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31 Census of India, Government of India, 1901, 2001, 2011. Its demographic profile is: Khasis/Jaintias/Garos 68%; Dimasa/Hmar/Kuki/Karbi/Lakher/Hajong/Mon/Naga 10%; Mizo 4%; Others (including Bangladeshi and Nepalese migrants) about 18%. The
The British annexed Meghalaya in 1835 and set up their headquarters at Shillong for control of the NER, while allowing limited autonomy. This area was not given an ‘Excluded Area’ status and was amalgamated into Assam. The British set about ‘civilising’ the tribals through conversion to Christianity. As they were not segregated, they progressively accepted their merger with the Indian Union more gracefully, whilst maintaining their culture modified by Christian and Western influence. Demands for a separate state were raised in 1949. In 1952, the Khasis and Mizos led the demand for a separate tribal identity on grounds of neglect. The call for throwing out non-tribals started in 1957. Perceived social deprivation led to frustration and agitation against the Assam government. Seeing the Naga example, the youth began an insurrection to enforce their demands. New Delhi decided to grant them statehood in 1972, thereby partially resolving the problem.

Today, Meghalaya has a nascent Khasi/Jaintia insurgent movement organised into the Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC) and twelve Garo insurgent groups (the most potent being the Garo National

Khasis, Jaintias and the Karbis are of Austric origin whereas the Garos, Dimasa and Hajongs are of Bodo origin.
Liberation Army (GNLA) with ULFA, NSCN (IM), NDFB, with Chinese and Pakistani support), which propagate either secession or statehood and an anti-migrant philosophy. Whereas previously the anti-migrant philosophy was primarily one of targeting the Bengalis and Nepalese, the Khasis have also started targeting all other communities including tribals from other north-eastern states.

There is also growing mutual alienation between the Khasis and the Garos on ethnic grounds amid talk of splitting the state further. In the late 1990s and at the beginning of this century, security had turned extremely volatile with extensive extortion being the order of the day. The police have largely regained control and are now relatively more effective in maintaining law and order. The situation in the Garo Hills has, however, deteriorated considerably. Anti-migrant and politically-sponsored Khasi-Garo agitations continue unabated across Meghalaya with frequent strikes and curfews.

Meghalaya is well-endowed with natural resources, but since it has little industrial development, its economic situation is poor. The socio-economic crisis is worsened by ethnic strife and nascent insurgency, which needs to be resolved by good governance.

**Mizoram: Textbook Transition to Peace**

Towering at a mean altitude ranging between 3,000-4,000 feet above sea-level, Mizoram has Manipur and Assam to its north, Tripura and Bangladesh to its west, Myanmar to its east, and Bangladesh to its south. Its 2011 census population is 1.09 million. Mizoram has a demographic advantage over other north-eastern states: it is relatively homogenous (75% of its people anthropologically belong to the Kuki-Chin-Mizo group of tribes) with adjoining areas of Myanmar (Chin Hills), south Manipur, south-eastern Tripura, and adjacent areas of Assam having similar Kuki-Chin-Mizo ethnic profiles. Distinctive, fierce and warring, the Mizos started migrating from the Chin Hills in Myanmar into the Mizo Hills around the 11th century.

The Bodos, Manipuris, and the British initially permitted them

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Census of India, Government of India, 1901, 2001, 2011. The demographic profile is: Mizos (Lushai) 60%; Paite 5%, Hmar 5%; Riang 5%; Poi 5%; Lakher/Pawi 8%; Chakma 7%; and others including Bangladeshi and Myanmar migrants 5%.
autonomy. It was only after the Mizos repeatedly raided British colonies and plantations in the 19th century that the British subjugated them and colonised the Mizo Hills. Even so, the British allowed them autonomy in all tribal affairs. Even here they were segregated through promulgation of the ‘Inner Line’ and conversion to Christianity. Prior to conversion to Christianity, their religion was animism and beliefs based on the primordial value system of “tribe-village-land-autonomy.” Conversion to Christianity has not changed this system substantially. Animosity towards other tribes of the northeast, therefore, persists. It is due to ethnic considerations that the demand of the Mizos has always been for a Greater Mizoram encompassing all Kuki-Chin-Mizo inhabited areas. It is also due to these considerations that Mizoram still has problems with its minorities and a nascent insurgency led by the Hmars who operate from sanctuaries in Manipur.

Just prior to independence, demands were made initially for autonomy, which changed into secession to form Greater Mizoram. That, after a long period of insurgency, changed to incorporation into the Indian Union, subject to grant of autonomy. Unfortunately, due to faulty policy the Inner Line restriction was continued, and discontent and alienation set in as a

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result of governmental neglect, lack of development, maladministration, and imposition of Assamese as the state language. Under severe famine conditions in Mizoram from 1959 to 1961, the people witnessed mismanagement and lack of assistance from the government. The popular discontent manifested in formation of the Mizo National Front (MNF) in 1961.

The MNF declared Mizoram independent unilaterally in 1966 and commenced insurrection. They received support from Pakistan, Bangladesh, China, and the Kuki-Chin tribes in the neighbouring areas. Counterinsurgency operations were launched immediately and proved particularly successful after Pakistan was defeated in the 1971 war. Mizoram was then declared a Union Territory and elections were held. With a political process having been initiated, the MNF progressively lost popular support. Talks were then initiated with the insurgents. The operations culminated in the Mizo Accord in 1987, with insurgents coming over-ground and surrendering their arms, accepting the Indian Constitution, and forming a government. The grant of statehood brought peace to the Mizo Hills. Since then Mizoram has progressed by leaps and bounds and is amongst the most peaceful states in the northeast.

**Tripura: Good Governance Delivers Peace**

A state with an ancient history, Tripura’s eastern and south-eastern parts are covered in low hills, tapering out into the plains of central and northern Tripura. Its 2011 census population is 3.67 million.\(^3^4\)

Presently tribal people reside primarily in the hill regions, with the plains populated by Bengalis. The predominant tribes were of Bodo origin called Tripuris, who established a kingdom in the middle ages consisting of the Arakan, the Chittagong Hill Tracts, western Bangladesh, south Assam, and present day Tripura. Till the middle ages, they were a power centre in the region. The population till 1921 was predominantly tribal, however consequent to the British policy of encouraging immigration from East Bengal

\(^{34}\) *Census of India*, Government of India, 1901, 2001, 2011. Its demographic profile is:
Tripuri tribes (Bodo origin) 15%; Riangs (Brus) 4%; Jamatias-Garos (Bodo origin)-Chakmas-Mizados-Kukis-Austrics 9%; Bengali Hindus 63%; Bengali Muslims 8%; and others 1%.
to under-populated areas, there was extensive migration which continued till well after the partition, independence, and then again in 1971, due to which tribal numbers were reduced to about 28%. The Chakmas (4% to 5%) and Riangs (4%) are mainly recent immigrants who fled from the Chittagong Hill tracts and Mizoram following agitation and rebellion by them, against the Bangladesh and Mizoram government and the consequent clamp-down on them.35

Tripura: The Noor Mahal summer palace. Photo by the author.

The state was beset by insurgency by tribals against the non-tribals. The key causes for the insurgency were overwhelming demographic change which threatened to wipe out the tribals and their distinctive culture, dislocation of the tribals from their traditional habitats, and socio-economic deprivation. However, insurgency was brought under control and the state is peaceful due to excellent administration in the state and concerted efforts by the present government towards development of tribal areas.

**Arunachal: New Opportunities for Peace**

The largest hill state of the region, Arunachal Pradesh covers the

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mountain ranges of the eastern Himalayas and is located to the north, east and south-east of Assam. Its 2011 census population is 1.38 million. It has well over 100 ethnic groups, of which 20 are considered to be major tribes.

The majority of people are animists with primordial beliefs. The first missionaries into Arunachal were the Rama Krishna Missions, who are well liked for their efforts in the social field. Due to their missionary efforts, Arunachal today has a fair number of followers of the Hindu faith. The tribes of Tibetan origin are uniformly Buddhist. Christianity is also spreading due to the efforts of missionaries. Arunachal is one part of India that still totally


37 The demographic profile of its 20 main tribes is: Adis (Padam, Minyong, Pasi, Pangietc, inhabitants of Siang and Dibang) 27%; Nissi/Dafla (inhabitants of Subansiri and South Kameng) 22%, Wangchoos (inhabitants of Tirap, ethnic lineage akin to Nagas) 8%; Monpa (inhabitants of North Kameng and a few other areas on the Tibetan border) 8%; Mishmi (inhabitants of Lohit lineage, probably a mix of Bodo and Naga) 7%; Nocte (inhabitants of Tirap, lineage somewhat akin to Nagas) 7%; Tagins (inhabitants of South Kameng and parts of Subansiri) 6%; Tangsas (inhabitants of Tirap) 4%; Apatani (inhabitants of Subansiri) 4%; Miris (inhabitants of Northern Foothills of Brahmaputra valley) 2%; Sulungs (inhabitants of the foothills) 1%; Khamptis (inhabitants of Changlang, lineage a mix of Naga and Bodo) 1%; Others (includes migrant Chakmas, Tibetans, Nepalese, Bangladeshis) 3% to 4%. (Tibetan refugees and Chakma migrants have been settled on the plains of Lohit and Changlang. There is a large Nepalese colony in Vijaynagar, bordering Myanmar and near Jairampur where the Assam Rifles had established themselves during British rule. Bangladeshi migrants have settled along the southern fringes of the state in the Brahmaputra valley).
believes in the primordial value system of “tribe-village-land autonomy,” and makes concerted efforts to protect it.

Arunachal is the most recent state to be opened up to administration. It was only in 1882 that exploration by the British began, consequent to the British adopting a forward policy of defending its frontiers, with reference to Russia and China. The Bodos and Ahoms left the Arunachal tribes well alone and allowed them autonomy. The British had named the area the North East Frontier Tracts, and by 1914 attempted to administer it with near total autonomy in all tribal matters. The region was given ‘Excluded Area’ status. As the area was totally segregated and largely unexplored, it remained unaffected by politics. After independence, India continued the British policy. In 1954, the area was renamed North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) and due to the border dispute with China, the Indian Army moved in. In 1957, due to the Naga insurgency, Tuensang Frontier Division, with a primarily Konyak Naga tribal population, was merged with the Naga Hills.

Since the 1962 debacle, the Indian Army has taken adequate measures to ensure that the border is adequately defended. The ‘panchayat system’ was introduced in 1967. In 1972, Arunachal Pradesh became a union territory, and in 1987 it was granted full statehood. Since the 1960s, Tirap, Changlang, and parts of Lohit district of the state have been severely affected by the NSCN insurgency, due to the claims of the NSCN that it is part of Nagalim. The area is witnessing a power struggle between the NSCN factions to gain control over the region. This is all the more so since the NSCN (K) has sanctuary in Myanmar across the border from these districts. Further, the NSCN (K) have given sanctuary to the ULFA, PLA, KLO, NDFB, Maoists and other Meitei insurgent groups who are able to frequently transit through these districts to Assam/Nagaland and North Bengal. As there is no longer a ceasefire with the NSCN (K), violence in this area has escalated. With BJP having wrested power in the state, the central government is hoping that problems in the state will be resolved.

Arunachal has tremendous forest wealth and in all probability extensive mineral deposits, which have not yet been exploited. It also has great potential

in the field of hydroelectric power, again yet to be exploited. Once this is done Arunachal will be able to supplement its income substantially, through sale of power to Assam and the NER.

The Indian government has reiterated its commitment to develop the NER not only by “Looking East” but also by its policy to “Act East.” However, in order to achieve these goals, it would be imperative for the government to bring peace to the region by meeting the aspirations of its people. While Tripura and Mizoram have seen peace for some time now under their respective governments, they need greater central assistance to develop. Unfortunately, this would only be possible if peace can be brought to Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, Arunachal, and Meghalaya as all these states are closely linked to each other. It is therefore imperative that points enumerated above under each state be attended to on the highest priority to avoid the conflagration that is in the offing particularly in Assam, Nagaland, and Manipur. The central government must stop knee-jerk reactions as at present, and salvage the extremely serious situation that is now emerging due to faulty political decisions being taken in New Delhi.