

Disturbed valley: a case of protracted armed conflict situation in Northeast India

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Abstract: India's northeastern region has been experiencing the least known but one of the longest-lasting armed conflict situation in South Asia. New Delhi government has been trying to control the situation through some restrictive or economic incentives such as the Armed Forces Special Power Act-1958 (AFSPA) or the Look East Policy (LEP) and others. However, these policies have been contested by many of the human rights activists, civil societies for their disruptive character, who have unmasked the disruptive substance of human rights violation and the militaristic developmentalism. The proposed paper will rather be a *tour d' horizon* of India's political dispensation at its northeastern frontier in general and Manipur in particular, that shapes the political affairs of this region since India's Independence.

Keywords: Armed conflict, Northeast India, AFSPA-1958, LEP, militaristic developmentalism, Human Rights, Manipur.

Resumen: La región nororiental de la India ha estado experimentando una de las situaciones de conflicto armado menos conocidas, pero de mayor duración, en el Sur de Asia. El gobierno de Nueva Delhi ha estado tratando de controlar la situación a través de algunos incentivos o restricciones económicas, como la Ley de Poderes Especiales de las Fuerzas Armadas-1958 (AFSPA) o la Política de Mirada al Este (LEP) y otras. Sin embargo, estas políticas han sido contestadas por muchos de los activistas de derechos humanos y la sociedad civil por su carácter disruptivo, y que han desenmascarado la sustancia perjudicial en materia de violación de derechos humanos y el desarrollo militar. Este trabajo pretende ofrecer una panorámica general de la administración política de la India en su frontera nororiental, y de Manipur en particular, y de cómo da forma a los asuntos políticos en esta región desde la independencia de la India.

Palabras clave: Conflicto armado, India nororiental, AFSPA-1958, LEP, desarrollo militar, Derechos humanos, Manipur.

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1. Introduction

Since the late 1940s, a number of 'armed' movements has been smoldering in India's northeastern region. These armed movements (generally low intensity conflicts) are largely related to the national liberation or sovereignty restoration or demand for autonomous homelands. In addition, there are conflicts between the natives and the migrants, particularly in Assam and Tripura.¹ Yet, these issues of this (northeast) region has been one of the least known and relatively little studied, within India as well as outside India.² There are numerous reports on local (and few on national) medias upon the issues of this region including the violation of constitutional (human) rights by security forces or by the armed opposing groups from time to time. However, these reports apparently do not capture New Delhi's serious attention to evoke a significant debate at the parliament.³ Rather, the issue of armed conflict in this region is viewed as a matter of development-under-development, responding with some economic incentives, such as, setting up of a separate development ministry exclusively for this region that I will discuss it in the later part of this paper.

Northeast India is a region commonly used to describe one of India's 'region' of the post colonial Indian state that is sandwiched between Bangladesh on the south, China on the north, Burma to the east, Bhutan and Nepal to the northwest. It comprises of seven states, also casually called 'seven sisters', namely: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura. The state of Sikkim has officially included into the Northeastern council recently, i.e. from 2003. A narrow strip of land at the northern part of West Bengal, informally called – 'the chicken neck' connects the region with the mainland India (see figure 1).

The linguistic heritage of the native communities of this region including the 'tribal'⁴ communities can be traced to Mon-Khmer and Tibeto-Burman peoples of Southeast Asia and Southwest China. Hinduism (21.9 million), Islam (8.8 million) and Christian (6.3 million) are the major religion followed by the people of this region (see table 1). Christianity is the major

¹ Native-migrants tension has become a recent trend in other northeastern states too.

² J. Harriss, *The State, Tradition and Conflict in the North Eastern States of India* (London: DESTIN, LSE, 2002), p. 1.

³ *The Times of India*, *Terrorism in India's northeast not govt priority: US cable*, 15 december 2010. Retrieved may 28, 2013 from *The Times of India*: http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2010-12-18/india/28260602_1_terrorism-civilian-deaths-cable

⁴ S.K. Das, *Conflict and Peace in India's Northeast: Role of Civil Society* (Washington: East-West Center, 2007), pp. 6-7.

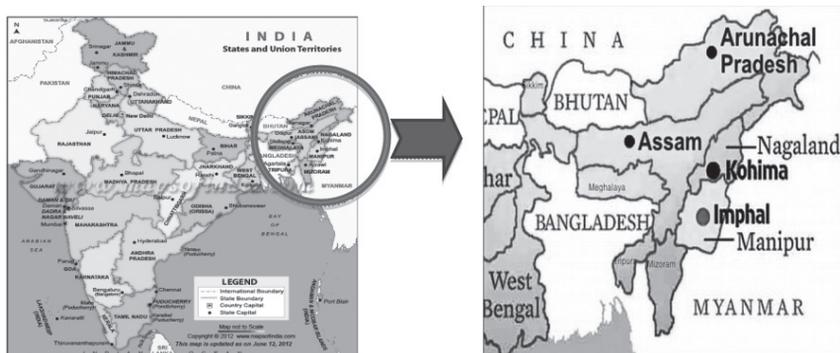


Figure 1

Map of India showing the northeastern region

Table 1

Religious composition of northeast Indian states as per the 2001 census (in millions)

Regions/ States	Arunachal Pradesh	Assam	Manipur	Mizoram	Meghalaya	Nagaland	Tripura	Total
Hindus	0.380	17.30	1.050	0.032	0.308	0.153	2.739	21.962
Muslims	0.021	8.20	0.191	0.010	0.099	0.035	0.254	8.810
Christians	0.210	0.99	0.856	0.773	1.629	1.790	0.102	6.350
Buddhists	0.140	0.05	—	0.070	—	—	0.099	0.359
OPRs*	0.340	0.02	0.236	—	0.267	—	—	0.863
Others**	0.010	0.06	0.006	0.004	0.016	0.012	0.004	0.112
Total	1.101	26.62	2.339	0.889	2.319	1.990	3.198	Grand Total 38.456

Source: Centre for Policy Studies⁵ *OPRs-Other Religions and Persuasions (mainly tribal religion). **Others-include Sikhs, Jains and RNS (Religion not stated)⁶.

⁵ J. Bajaj, «Religious Demography of the Northeastern States of India: Trends to look for in the Census 2011». *Dialogue*, 12(3) (2011): XX-XX.

⁶ For further details see, J. Bajaj, *Scheduled Tribes of India: Religious Demography and Representation* (11 november 2011.)Retrieved october 28, 2013 from Centre for Policy Studies. Also see Ministry of Tribal Affairs, *Annual Report 2006-07* (New Delhi: Government of India, 2006-07), p. 23.

religion amongst the tribal communities⁷ with smaller communities of Buddhists and animists, while the ethnic communities (including the natives and non-natives) settles in the valleys particularly in the valleys of Assam, Manipur and Tripura, practice Hinduism and Islam.⁸

2. The political impasse of India's Northeastern region

It was in the valley of Manipur that Shri. *Hijam Irabot*, a strong adherent of communist ideology, a former social activist from Manipur, started the 'armed' insurgency or 'independentist' movement during the late 1940s. He had already started his non-armed revolutionary (social) movement in Manipur as early as the early 1930s.

Then it was in the Naga Hills, where the armed insurgency movement centering on self-determinist/independentist demands started during the early 1950s,⁹ followed by the Mizo armed rebellion in and around Mizo Hills, the armed insurgency movements in the valleys of Manipur and Tripura during the mid of 1960s. The armed rebellion become intense (particularly in Assam, Manipur, Nagaland and Tripura) and began to spread to the entire northeastern states since the late 1970s. Today, there are roughly more than sixty armed groups operating in this region. Some of the groups are as small as fifty to hundred members that are formed along the ethnic lines.

In most of the cases, the instability in this region is centered on the grievance narrative. The fact that some of the armed opposing groups in this region, particularly the valley based armed opposing groups of Manipur have been articulating the (forceful) integration of their erstwhile princely kingdom into the Union of Indian as the mother of impasse in this province.

To cite a case on Manipur's political impasse, there appear two competing arguments on the root cause of the prolonged armed conflict situ-

⁷ India has 84 million tribal population as per the 2001 census. Around 75 millions of the total tribal population, they either follows Hinduism or Bhuddhism or other traditional religions (animism) such as Sarna Dharma, Sari Dharma, Doni Polo, Sanamahi, etc. However, out of India's 8 million Christian Scheduled Tribes population, 5.5 million are in Northeastern State. i.e. 0.3 million are in Assam and Tripura, and 5.2 million in the remaining five North-eastern States. For further details see J. Bajaj, *Scheduled Tribes of India: Religious Demography and Representation*, 11 (november 2011). Retrieved october 28, 2013 from Centre for Policy Studies.

⁸ D. McDuie-Ra, "Being a tribal man from the North-East: migration, morality, and masculinity", *South Asian History and Culture*, 4(2), 250-265 (2013): p. 252.

⁹ For further details see J. Parrat, *Wounded Land: Political and Identity in Modern Manipur* (New Delhi: Mittal Publication, 2005), p. 83.

ation. One argument, particularly from the state actor's side argues that Manipur's problematic 'law and order' situation as well as the underdevelopment and backwardness, provided the unemployed or 'misguided' youths of this state led to exacerbate the problem of this region.

Another argument, particularly from the armed opposing groups of Manipur tried to relate the protracted armed conflict situation of Manipur from the controversial merger (some would say annexation) point of view that the erstwhile two millennium old sovereign kingdom of Manipur was annexed to the Union of India without the native people's consent.¹⁰

Thus the 'conflicts' or the political impasse in Manipur or India's north-east region in general as Akoijam argues that it 'involved identities that are rendered as "oppressed" or "subjugated" "nation", and a reciprocal identity of an "oppressor", the "colonial" Indian State'¹¹. Thus, the conflict in this region is largely expressed as a conflict between "'freedom fighters", "revolutionaries" and "national workers" on the one hand, and on the other, the "colonial army" or the "occupation forces" and the "puppets" of the hegemonic "colonial" or "neo-colonial" India'¹².

Accordingly, the roots of the conflict ranges from secessionist call to the demand for state or sub-state within the India Union, regional autonomy for ethnic areas within the states, or protection of ethnic areas within the states, or protection of ethnic and cultural identities.¹³ The narratives of the people in this region usually highlights:

... the cultural differences between people in the region and those from 'mainland India', these accounts point to the domineering tendencies of the Central state. Scholars have questioned the 'unequal' and 'forced' integration of the northeast region into the Indian 'mainstream' and the subsequent development of a master – subject relationship between the two. Behind that reading is the awareness of the cultural difference between the Indian 'mainland' and the collective entity called the Northeast and the region's significantly higher

¹⁰ The merger agreement is yet to be rectified. For further details, see H.T. Hanjabam, "Armed Conflict, Human Rights and Peace Building in Manipur", in H.T. Sukhdeba Sharma Hanjabam & H.T. Sukhdeba Shrama Hanjabam, ed., *United Nations and Human Rights in Manipur: Representation to the United Nations System & Concluding Observations/Communications/Remarks 1991-2012* (New Delhi: Forward Books, 2013), pp. 1-20.

¹¹ A.B. Akoijam, «Ghosts of Colonial Modernity: Identity and Conflict in the Eastern Frontier of South Asia», in P.B. Thomas & C.J. Prasenjit Biswas, ed., *Peace in India's Northeast: Meaning, Metaphor and Method* (New Delhi: Regency publications, 2006), pp. 113-132, p. 116.

¹² Akoijam, *ibid*.

¹³ J. Bhattacharjee, *Roots of Insurgency in Northeast India* (New Delhi: Akansha Publishing, 2007).

levels of ethnic and linguistic fractionalization compared to the rest of India¹⁴.

3. State Responses

From time to time, the Delhi government has been controlling the armed conflict issues of this region by means of political reconciliation or restrictive measures (some would say repressive or coercive approach – the Armed Forces Special Power Act-1958 (hereafter referred as the Act or AFSPA-1958), as well as with the economic incentives such as construction of mega dams, building transnational highways, or by splitting the armed insurgent groups. This particular strategy to control armed conflict issues that is followed by central government is argued or allegedly claim as the typical legacy of *Kautilya* (also known as Chanakya), who was the traditional Hindu realpolitik statecraft who teach the king Chandragupta Maurya the significant four principles for political expansion – *Sham* (political reconciliation), *Dam* (monetary inducement), *Danda* (force) and *Bhed* (split) for the expansion of empire to form a trans-regional kingdom.¹⁵

It can be said that the conflict situation of northeast India in general has scaled down slightly, albeit it is unlikely to end easily. The settlement of Mizo armed rebellion during the late 1980s and the Naga (sic National Socialist Council of Nagaland – Isaac-Muivah factional group) peace talk since the late 1990s are the significant sign of improvement from the center. More dialogues are also anticipated with the other armed opposing groups. However, these negotiations/dialogues are not without controversy. There was a case that the Indian Army (sic. central government) signed a deal with one rebel group of Manipur to attack other rebel groups that ultimately soured the relation between the two-rebel/ethnic groups. Thus exacerbate the situation.¹⁶

¹⁴ M.S. Hassan, «Secessionism in Northeast India», in S. Baruah, *Ethnonationalism in India: A Reader* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 291-315, p. 292.

¹⁵ S. Bhaumik, *Troubled Periphery* (New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd., 2009), p. 90.

¹⁶ The '*Suspension of Operation (SoO)*' was signed between the conglomeration of eight *Kuki* tribal ethnic armed rebel groups and Indian Army on 1st august 2005 without the consultation of the government of Manipur. Later on, when government of Manipur did not acknowledge that very treaty; the central government let to involved the government of Manipur and signed a trilateral SoO agreement on 22nd august 2008. See S.S. Aheibam Koireng Singh, *Removing the Veil Issues in North-East Conflict* (New Delhi: Essential Books, 2012).

4. AFSPA-1958 and the issues of Human Rights violation

It is an irony that the Indian Armed Forces, who are specially trained to defend the country's territory against a foreign aggressions are let to engaged in combating internal law and order problem with extraordinary power of impunity. There have been number of counter-insurgency operations that resulted into rampant human rights violation ranging from disappearance to mass rape, torture, murder of many civilians.

Unavailability of authentic official data on human casualty is an obstacle to study the intensity of the conflict in this region. Nevertheless, most of scholars so far have been referring the data from South Asian Terrorism Portal (SATP) or data from Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) (see table no. 2). Some human rights organization claims that there are more than 50,000 deaths since the late 1970s due to armed conflict in this region.¹⁷ However, neither the figures of death and casualties appears on the report released by government¹⁸ do not give a complete and accurate picture of the extend of violence. Many abuses are not even reported especially physical or sexual assault either, because of intimidation, lack of understanding of the official procedure, or simply because the victims have no confidences upon the administration of the state. The information that gathered are only of high profile cases that arouse enough public outcry (see figure/illustration 2).¹⁹

Worth mentioning counter insurgency operations that provokes human rights activist as well as the entire people of this region for the harsh conduct of Indian Army are – Operation Blue Bird (Manipur, 1987), Operation Bajrang (Assam, 1990), Operation Rhino (Assam, 1991-92), Operation All Clear (Bhutan India border areas, 2003), Operation Dragnet (Manipur, 2006), etc.²⁰ These operations were remembered by the most of the people and human rights activist because of the rampant human rights vi-

¹⁷ Ranvijay, *Violent Conflict in India: Issues of Contention* (1 July 2010). Retrieved May 24, 2013 from Peace & Conflict Monitor: http://www.monitor.upeace.org/archive.cfm?id_article=685#_ftn7. Also see, PRIO's datasheet: <http://www.prio.no/Data/Armed-Conflict/UCDP-PRIO/Armed-Conflicts-Version-X-2009/>; South Asia Terrorism portal: <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/database/indiafatalities.htm>.

¹⁸ See Supreme Court order on Writ Petition (Civil) No.445 of 2012.

¹⁹ J. Parrat, *Wounded Land: Political and Identity in Modern Manipur* (New Delhi: Mittal Publication, 2005), p. 166.

²⁰ For further details see H.T. Hanjabam, "Armed Conflict, Human Rights and Peace Building in Manipur", in H.T. Sukhdeba Sharma Hanjabam & H.T. Sukhdeba Shrama Hanjabam, ed., *United Nations and Human Rights in Manipur: Representation to the United Nations System & Concluding Observations/Communiqués/Remarks 1991-2012* (New Delhi: Forward Books, 2013), pp. 1-20.



Figure 2

People of Manipur protesting against the Act as well as against the conduct of Indian armed military personnel

olations-especially using villagers as human shield to prevent possible ambushes from the rebel groups.²¹ The armed personnel who were involved in the crime of murdering, raping, and torturing civilian during these counter insurgency operations are never tried, because the provision of the Act prevents them, that I will describe in the following paragraphs.

5. **Armed Forces Special Power Act-1958: a mechanism to control the law and order situation of Northeast India?**

How far the Act that was imposed to control the law and order situation or armed insurgency in this region serves the purpose? The escalation of violence (by state actors as well as non-state actors) in this region including fake encountered death, rape, torture and disappearance of many civilian would give the perfect answer. Except the settlement of Mizo rebellion in the mid 1980s, nothing significant result have comes up from this fifty five year long imposition of the Act in this region. Despite the report of heavy human casualty, the Act is unlikely to be repealed from this region.²² Rather, the central government wants to give more teeth to the armed force personnel.

²¹ S.S. Hanjabam, "The Youth Panorama in Northeast India", *Asia-Europe*, 5(4) (2008): 50-62, p. 166.

²² See S. Joshi, *Army's stand makes it hard to amend AFSPA: Chidambaram* (7 february 2013). Retrieved february 7, 2013 from The Hindu: <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/armys-stand-makes-it-hard-to-amend-afspa-chidambaram/article4386754.ece>

The fact that the Act was made an amendment in 1972 make more heinous with dehumanizing manifestation of the obsession with the power in the name of the state security, to the complete indifference about human security²³. As mention above, it gives armed forces the legal impunity for their actions. There can be no prosecution, suit or any other legal proceeding against anyone acting under that law. Nor is the government's judgment on why an area is found to be "disturbed" subject to judicial review.

Thus, Delhi's guiding principle of enacting coercive/repressive policies to deal with ethnic dissent in this region apparently loses its credibility, and hence legitimacy. Delhi's strategy of adopting restrictive or coercive actions (the controversial law AFSPA-1958) reveals the state's key weakness. In fact, the violence committed by armed military against the civilian itself delegitimizes the credibility of the state that has been claiming as the biggest democratic country in the world. In addition, the protracted armed conflict situation in this region has ultimately give way to created a peculiar emotional depth of the 'us'-'them' dimension between the people of northeastern India and the mainlanders.

To speak about this harsh law – the AFSPA-1958 in short, it is against certain basic normative and institutional norms and practices of the civilized democratic and republic ethos. Not only against basic normative norms but it implies some underlying racist and or paranoid and jingoistic nationalism. The AFSPA-1958 has done a huge damage to soul and mind of the people of northeast India in general and Manipur in particular. It is to be remembered that a lady from Manipur named *Irom Sharmila Chanu*, who is a strong believer of Gandhian philosophy of non-violence, has been fasting since 2001 to revoke the discriminatory/controversial Act from Manipur.²⁴ The Act itself is a discriminatory one, as it has been imposing exclusively in Northeastern region (recently Jammu and Kashmir since 1990s), though the law and order on the other regions of India such as eastern corridor (CPI moist issues) are equally the same.

Ironically, when the Act was imposed in this region, there were very few armed rebel groups but today, more than sixty major rebel groups are operating in this region. Among the seven states, Manipur lead the list in

²³ B.K. Roy Burman, cited in S.S. Hanjabam, «The Youth Panorama in Northeast India», *Asia-Europe*, 5(4) (2008): pp. 50-62.

²⁴ In the year 2000, november, at Imphal valley, Indian Army had murdered ten civilian including a boy who was a National Child Bravery Award winner and a sixty two year old women on the spot in retaliation of the insurgency attack. Since then, Ms. Irom has been under hunger strike till date. She was accused for attempting suicide and has been behind the bar since then.

terms of higher number of militias²⁵. There are now almost forty groups operating in Manipur²⁶. Various Members of Parliament and even the cur-

Table 2
Insurgency related violence in Northeast India

Year	Arunachal Pradesh	Assam	Manipur	Meghalaya	Mizoram	Nagaland	Tripura
1992	0	161	165	0	0	96	98
1993	3	131	423	0	0	173	183
1994	3	271	350	4	0	192	238
1995	3	270	321	7	0	213	257
1996	5	451	275	7	4	304	189
1997	10	537	495	4	0	360	274
1998	7	783	244	20	0	112	265
1999	2	503	231	22	7	148	303
2000	34	758	246	36	9	101	514
2001	63	606	256	40	0	103	312
2002	32	559	239	66	—	90	386
2003	39	401	205	79	1	86	296
2004	43	315	212	47	4	97	164
2005	NA	242	331	29	—	40	73
2006	NA	158	261	24	2	84	59
2007	NA	437	408	18	NA	108	36
2008	NA	373	492	12	3	147	27
2009	9	392	416	5	1	18	11
2010	0	158	138	20	0	3	3
2011	41	94	65	29	1	15	1
2012	4	91	111	48	0	61	2
2013*	1	23	22	16	0	11	0
Total	299	7.651	5.906	533	32	2.562	3.691

Grand Total: 20.674.

Source: Government of India, *Economic Survey*, 2004-2005 (New Delhi: Ministry of Finance, 2005); and Institute of Conflict Management (IMC), Data sheet. www.satp.org (2009), cited in Hassan, *Secessionism in Northeast India*, 2010:293). The author added the data from 2001 to 2013 with reference to the South Asian Terrorism Portal.²⁷ *Data available until May 19 2013 on South Asian Terrorism Portal.

²⁵ S. Baruah, *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 5; also see South Asian Terrorism portal: <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/terroristoutfits/index.html>. Retrieved on may 24, 2013.

²⁶ Baruah, *ibid*.

²⁷ See A. Sahni, *Survey of Conflicts & Resolution in India's Northeast* (2013). Retrieved may 27, 2013 from South Asia Terrorism Portal: <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/publication/faultlines/volume12/Article3.htm>

rent honorable Prime Minister of India – Sri Dr. Manmohan Singh had voiced that the Act is “inhuman”. Unfortunately, this inhuman law (AFSPA) is still gladly imposing against the will of the people or undermined the constitutional provision – the article no. 21 (the right to protection of life and personal liberty). Retired supreme court Justice Mr. Jeevan Reddy, on its Committee Report submitted on 2005²⁸ recommended to repeal the Act altogether but, the central government is yet to react on the recommendations.

It is evident from the above table that the Act, which was imposed in this region since the 1958 that was supposed to control armed conflict situation or the so called ‘law and order’ does not really serve the purpose. Neither brings any significant solution.²⁹ Rather, it turns out to be a discriminatory-problematic law that allows armed personnel to kill, rape or torture any civilian (northeastern people) at a mere suspicion of insurgency.

No doubt, in the recent two-three years from now, the violence has scaled down considerably. Yet, the violence in this region particularly in Manipur is continuing to remain high. The economic rejoinder vis-à-vis showering of enormous economic largesse in this region seems to be a staple response of the central government. These policies have been contested by many of the civil societies for their disruptive character, who have unmasked the disruptive substance of militaristic developmentalism. The problem existing in this region is apparently not only a problem of underdevelopment, but also a problem of recognition and acceptance from the center. For instance, the entire history and culture of the India’s northeastern region is practically missing from the books of the schools/college curriculum. With all due respect, even the India’s National Anthem fails completely to mention a single word about northeast region when it (the Anthem) carefully describes the socio-cultural and political landscape of *Bharat* (i.e. India).

Thus it is apparent that it is the pure *mentalist* definition of nation building or nationalism that India has been pushing since the independence. In fact, it is no longer accepted commonly, as India’s ideology of nationalism fails to encompass “a variety of current pre-reflexive manifestations, including behavior, attitudes and patterns of consumption”.³⁰ This ideological failure from the center (Delhi) thus laid a fertile ground for the

²⁸ See: <http://www.hinduonnet.com/nc/afa/>. The report that was submitted on 6th of June 2005 to the Indian Govt. was not made public after even one year. The Hindu fortunately published it on 8th of October 2006 (Hanjabam 2008).

²⁹ The state of Mizoram become an exceptional case.

³⁰ D. Conversi, “Modernism and nationalism”, *Journal of Political ideologies*, 17(1) (2012): 13-34, p. 24.

development of an (un)conscious emotional gap of 'otherness'³¹ that ultimately widen the sentimental gap between New Delhi government and the people of northeast region in general.

No doubt, Delhi's political dispensation in this region that engages its people in terms of nationhood is not necessarily bad in itself. But, when the notions of nation building project often lacks the legitimacy and credibility, it can be, (or it is) a factor of setback to its robust and zealous groundings of nation building project.

Well, of course, acknowledging the political space of the people of northeast, its histories, its people etc. however, does not mean that the people of this region will find a readymade solution to its durable armed conflict or ethnic issues. Nonetheless, the prolonged phase of refusal and avoidance to recognize the people of this region, its identity, culture, etc. at the cost of India's nation building project needs to be discussed seriously, if at all New Delhi government want to bring peace in this region. For instance, taking the issue seriously would certainly have some significant implications – some important outcomes³².

To offer a case of Manipur, the narrative of the majority of the Manipuri people aggrieved the controversial merger of their two millenniums old kingdom into the union of India without much recognition and representation of their identity.³³ Manipur, albeit considered to be the first state that conducts the first ever democratic election at the annals of India's democratic history³⁴ has been encountering ever lasting armed conflict situation since the midst of 1960s, because the province has not been given enough chances to practice democracy since the inception of India as the republic union of states.³⁵

Thus, the nation building path that the Delhi government embarked, which greatly rely on coercive and economic rejoinders is unlikely to bring a long lasting solution in this region, as it largely lacks the space for settle-

³¹ C.P. Scherrer, *Structural Prevention of Ethnic Violence* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

³² Baruah, op. cit., p. 79.

³³ S.S. Aheibam Koireng Singh, *Removing the Veil Issues in North-East Conflict* (New Delhi: Essential Books, 2012), p. 11. Also see J. Parrat, *Wounded Land: Political and Identity in Modern Manipur* (New Delhi: Mittal Publication, 2005), pp. 115-120.

³⁴ Manipur is the first ever province of the present India, which conducts the democratic election under Universal Adult Franchise in July 1948, with M.K. Priyobrata being the first Prime Minister of Manipur. However the government formed with this democratic election was short-lived when Government of India annexed the province in 1949 completely bypassed and neglecting the interest of Manipur.

³⁵ N. Chandhoke, *A State of One's Own: Secessionism and Federalism in India* (London: LSE, 2006).

ment through democratic dialogues. In fact, the strategy, which Delhi embarked, is just a tranquilizer not a vaccine to resolve or to kill the germs of armed conflict of this region.

6. Developmentalism: a device for nation building or to control armed conflict?

Before the Chinese incursion³⁶ into Indian Territory during the early 1960s, India's northeast region, as a matter of fact, was a neglected or hardly a known region to many, if not to all the mainland people.³⁷ To most of the mainland Indians, this region was just an untamed wild frontier, settled by 'wild tribes'³⁸ that may be true to some extent.³⁹

Once perceived as a cultural museum for wild tribes during Mr. Nehru regime, the new elites find it difficult to keep this region aloof from India's political dispensation. This region, due to the political and economic expansion of China, suddenly became a significant strategic location, together with a looming threat to national security from neighboring countries.⁴⁰ This is particularly the case as New Delhi slowly began to consider the geo-strategic importance of this region, provided a real or imagined threat from the neighboring countries.

As a matter of fact, India, to cope with the political economic expansion of China, the Delhi government has been engaging its troubled north-eastern region with restrictive or coercive or repressive policies. Certain incentives-based policy through India's 'Look East Policy' (LEP) that focuses

³⁶ The Chinese Army had advanced upto the Brahmaputra valley of Assam during the Sino-India, 1962. For further details, see S. Bhaumik, *Troubled Periphery* (New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd., 2009), p. 16.

³⁷ See J. Narayan, *Nation Building in India* (Varanasi: Brahmanand Navachetna Prakashan, Brahmanand, Ed., 2003), p. 326.

³⁸ See the explanation of tribe in D. McDuie-Ra, "Being a tribal man from the North-East: migration, morality, and masculinity", *South Asian History and Culture*, 4(2) (2013): 250-265.

³⁹ See J. Narayan, *Nation Building in India* (Varanasi: Brahmanand Navachetna Prakashan, Brahmanand, Ed., 2003), p. 326. Also see, S. Baruah, *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007); S. Bhaumik, *Troubled Periphery* (New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd., 2009); B. Guyot-Réchar, "Nation-building or state-making? India's North-East Frontier and the ambiguities of Nehruvian developmentalism, 1950-1959", *Contemporary South Asia*, 21(1) (2013): 22-37; N. Chandhoke, *A State of One's Own: Secessionism and Federalism in India* (London: LSE, 2006).

⁴⁰ Myanmar Bangladesh (Burma) and China are allegedly helping the armed opposing groups of Northeast India. See S. Bhaumik, *Troubled Periphery* (New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd., 2009), pp. 153-181.

on the line of 'modernism' and 'developmentalism', has also gradually been gaining momentum since the early 1990s.

Arguing that the problem of armed insurgency in this region is the outcome of economic backwardness and lack of development, the central government has been pumping in huge amount of money, funds, etc. with the vision of sustaining economy of this region.

The Northeast India Vision 2020 blueprint prepared by the Development of North Eastern Region (DONER) in collaboration with the North East Council reads as:

At independence North Eastern Region was among the most prosperous region of India. Sixty years on, the Region as a whole, and the States that comprise it, are lagging the rest of the country in most important parameters of growth. The purpose of this Vision document is to return the North Eastern Region to the position of national economic eminence it held till a few decades ago; to so fashion the development process that growth springs from and spreads out to the grassroots; and to ensure that the Region plays the arrow-head role it must play in the vanguard of the country's Look East Policy⁴¹.

To fulfill the objective of Northeast India Vision 2020, the region is christen to a *special category* region and has been receiving a huge amount of lapsable as well as non-lapsable monetary assistance from the center. The northeastern council 'receives 90 per cent of the plan assistance as a grant and 10 per cent as a loan, while other Indian states receive only 30 per cent as a grant and 70 per cent as loan'⁴².

Despite all this assistance from the centre, this region or the DONER has largely failed to reap the best result. The economic niche, which has created from this developmental strategy, rather attracted large-scale immigrants into the region that gave way to migrant-native conflict.⁴³ Then again, in order to nationalized and control over the northeastern territory/population, the Delhi government has to stick to the 'nation building' that largely rely on the logic of developmentalism provided with the heavy militarization process. (It is not uncommon to see the heavy presence of military personnel in government buildings, hospitals, banks, dams, con-

⁴¹ Doner in S. Bhaumik, *Troubled Periphery* (New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd., 2009), p. 231

⁴² Bhaumik, op. cit., p. 232.

⁴³ Most of the conflicts in Assam and Tripura are centered around migrant-native issue. For details, see M. Weiner, "The Political Demography of Assam's Anti-Immigrant Movement", *Population and Development Review*, 9(2) (1983): 279-292.

struction site, etc. Even the schools and colleges are not spared. Manipur University is the only university in the country, which has Army cantonment within the University campus.)⁴⁴

In fact, Delhi's strategy of developmentalism is rooted in the institution of the Indian state that has been put in place in pursuit of the goal of nationalizing space⁴⁵. The demographic alteration that has been experiencing in this region due to the heavy influx of economic migrants (particularly Bangladeshi migrants) that has resulted from the infrastructural development, such as, constructions of roads, mega-dams, railways, etc has made the central government an effective mechanism to control this wild frontier.

Interestingly, the construction of highways in this region has been under the Department/Ministry of Defense (instead of civil engineering department) hitherto. Thus, it is somewhat oblique whether the central government is working for the development of the people on this region or it has other significant motive behind. It may be remember that the construction of roads are made not only to gain access to natural resources such as timber, hydroelectric power and minerals, but also to facilitate the posting and movement of troops that has long been a normative phenomena of colonization⁴⁶.

Geiger further argues that the state's policy program of resettlement of its expanding population at national fringes not necessarily, but usually underpinned multiple implicit intentions. To him, states fills up their frontiers with migrants not only to seek relief from demographic and social pressure at the center, but also to nationalize the frontier space that has not borne the full signature of the national community before⁴⁷.

In fact, the discourse on development or under-development of India's northeast region suddenly became an inevitable business for the New Delhi government only after the humiliating defeat against the Chinese army in Indo-China war during the early 1960s. The discourse of India's nation building or the project of nationalizing northeastern frontier peripheries however, has created an unprecedented twist on the demographical structure of the native population that eventually created an atmosphere of overwhelming ethnic tension. For New Delhi, demographic twist or ethnic dilution in its northeast region or Manipur in particular, will lead to an eventual effective control of the durable problem of this region⁴⁸.

⁴⁴ S.S. Hanjabam, op. cit., p. 166.

⁴⁵ Baruah, op. cit., p. 35.

⁴⁶ D. Geiger, *Frontier Encounter: Indigenous Communities and Settlers in Asia and Latin America* (Copenhagen: IWGIA, D. Geiger, Ed., 2008), p. 8.

⁴⁷ Geiger, *ibid.*, Baruah, op. cit., p. 35.

⁴⁸ Baruah, *ibid.*

The Look East Policy, which aimed for special regional dispensation like northeast India however, is far from satisfactory, as the policy apparently would not benefit much to the native population of the northeast. The policy that was initiated in early 1990s is not merely an external economic policy but also a strategic shift of India's foreign policy that place India in the evolving global economy. The policy however, is at the significant cost of social, environmental and political affairs of the northeast region. As a result, there are lots of questions lingered around from almost all section of the civil societies; scholars; environmentalist, etc., arguing the credibility and sustainability of the developmental programs that New Delhi Government has been embarked in the name of development for the people of northeast India, where the region is likely to be merely a transit point or the bridge to be ferried of the finished goods from the big cities of India to the cities of Southeast Asian countries or vice versa.

Thus, the LEP apparently failed to provide a fitting answer to the problem of this region. The people of the region began to argue like, what development or sustainability is going to be brought out from this policy when the government does not have vision to promote or enhance the economy of this region,⁴⁹ what does it mean when the Indian military deployed in this region whose purpose is to defend the external aggression led to involve in this developmental (civil) projects (see figure/illustration no. 3)? And where does the subject of indigenous people's rights stands within these developmentalist approaches?⁵⁰ Well, these are the hard realities occurring in this region.

Apparently, one can sense that there is a deficit of harmony between the state and the people of this region in the process of India's nation building vis-à-vis (LEP) developmental projects. This lack of consensus on the structure of the programs ultimately causes general lack of trust, because an important component of legitimacy is apparently not derived from the process by which the institution was created, either formally and informally such as – 'wide community consultation; and popular final acceptance'⁵¹.

⁴⁹ T. Haokip, *India's Look East Policy: Prospects And Challenges For North-East India* (12 september 2010). Retrieved may 30, 2013 from Manipur Online: <http://manipuronline.com/research-papers/india%E2%80%99s-look-east-policy-prospects-and-challenges-for-north-east-india/2010/09/12>

⁵⁰ See J. Yumnam, *Oil Exploration: Boon or Bane for Manipur* (27 august 2012). Retrieved August 30, 2012 from Hueiyen Lanpao: <http://www.hueiyenlanpao.com/articles/item/4004-oil-exploration-boon-or-bane-for-manipur>.

⁵¹ H.C. Murphy, *Sub-State Nationalism: A comparative analysis of institutional design* (London: Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group, 2002), p. 140.



Source: *The Sangai Express News Agency*, June 28th 2011. http://e-pao.net/epPageExtractor.asp?src=features.Impact_of_road_development_on_rural_economy_of_NE_India.html

Figure 3

A file picture of National Highway no. 39 (recently renamed it as No. 2) under construction, Manipur, India⁵²

It is therefore necessary to reconsider the meaning of ‘development’ in India’s northeast region or Manipur in particular. Development does not mean the construction of tall skyscraper or laying six-lane transnational highways without considering the basic human rights and living standard

⁵² The department of Border Road Organization (BRO), which is under Ministry of Defense (MOD) has been constructing/maintaining this highways since the colonial British period. The condition of the road —National Highway— however, has been in pathetic condition since then. The underlying gist for assigning BRO who is under MOD and not to the Manipur state’s Public Works Department (PDW) is not known.

of the people. (It will be taken by surprise to learn that Manipur receives maximum three to four hours of electricity a day despite the fact that New Delhi has made a strenuous effort to construct numerous hydel-power projects in this eco-sensitive zone.

Therefore, '*developmentalism*' or the '*modernist*'⁵³ path that India's northeastern states has embarked, " is neither the result of a choice made by policy makers about what is best for the well-being of the people of northeast, nor is it evidence of the inevitability of 'progress' and 'civilization'. Rather, it is the intended and unintended consequence of the Indian state's efforts to assert control over this frontier space and to make it a 'normal' part of India's national space"⁵⁴.

7. National Security and the Developmentalist Path

No doubt, there is a looming threat on India's national security from its enemy (external as well as internal), and of course it is the state's obligation that security of the nation be the prime concern. In fact, New Delhi government is completely aware of its external and internal enemy since the Chinese invasion during the early 1960s. It is also reported that there is a foreign hand behind the durable turmoil of this region⁵⁵. With all this fact, India's northeast region has been given a special treatment, pumping in huge amount of money for the wholesale development of the region.⁵⁶ The developmentalist path however, appears to be an implicit strategy of nationalizing space: *filling lands with a 'population representing the national-bearing population'*⁵⁷.

The 'oblique' nation building strategy – 'assisting or sponsoring immigrants'⁵⁸ into the frontier region, or 'by building roads to hitherto remote frontier location, or by crafting legislation that provides outsiders with land or use rights on easy term', or 'by not enforcing legislation that excludes outsiders from the rights to trade, settle, or have access to land etc.'⁵⁹ are

⁵³ D. Conversi, op. cit., pp. 13-34. Also see A.D. Smith, "Dating the Nation", in D. Conversi, *Ethnonationalism in the Contemporary World: Walker Connor and the study of nationalism* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 53-71.

⁵⁴ Baruah, op. cit., pp. 35-36.

⁵⁵ S. Bhaumik, *Troubled Periphery* (New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd., 2009).

⁵⁶ India's Northeastern region is the only region which has separate Ministry for regional development – the Ministry for Development of Northeastern Region (DONER) that was launched during september 2001.

⁵⁷ Fearon & Laitin cited in Baruah, op. cit., p. 45.

⁵⁸ Geiger, op. cit., p. 7.

⁵⁹ Lynch and Talbott cited in Geiger, op. cit., p. 8.

in fact, are not uncommon in this frontier region too. To mention one case that there was an incident in which some political group of the members of parliament proposed for the state sponsor 'or' state facilitates migration towards the remote region like Northeast region (particularly Arunachal Pradesh) after India's humiliating defeat against the China in Sino-Indian war of 1962⁶⁰.

As a matter of fact, there is a looming threat from the neighboring India's countries and New Delhi should not take any chances for that matter. It is reported that some rebel groups of this region are linked with some radical groups of Pakistan or Bangladesh, where many of the armed groups of this region has base camps at India's neighboring countries.⁶¹ Regrettably, the New Delhi government, to deal with the situation, has been largely relying on coercive action, in which Baruah argues that:

The imperative to nationalize space dictated by the 'high politics' of national security has determined the choices made in every other policy area. The interests of the people of the area, or of the unique environment, the potential choices between alternative development strategies, the respect for the autonomy of sub-national governments enshrined in India's federal constitution, the rights of indigenous peoples, and even considerations of political stability – all have had to play second fiddle to the imperative of nationalizing space⁶².

8. Conclusion

Despite the attempts of the state and civil societies, many of the violent movements in India's northeastern region have continued to occur hitherto with serious implications. Besides separatist violence, intergroup ethnic clashes have been frequent and have taken a heavy toll of life and property. Separatist violence exists alongside interethnic contestations over resources and opportunities, in which the state finds itself pulled in different directions, with little ability to provide solution.⁶³

In any case, the justification for such laws, the real cost of the way India chose to engage with the challenge of so called misguided groups (the term used by the state) otherwise independentist is the erosion of the prin-

⁶⁰ R. Guha, cited in Baruah, op. cit., p. 37.

⁶¹ S. Bhaumik, op. cit., p. 153.

⁶² Baruah, op. cit., p. 40.

⁶³ M.S. Hassan, "Secessionism in Northeast India", in S. Baruah, *Ethnonationalism in India: A Reader* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 291-315, p. 291.

principles of rule of law, accountability, and transparency. To handle a complex situation like the India's northeast region or Manipur in particular, the new elites need sheer understanding of its ground realities along with the acceptance and respect of their grievances. In handling a fragile relationship effectively, the first step is to acknowledge the history of the underlying conflict. It is this history that often explains why people feel as they do end which can give hints about possible remedies for the current situation. A history of past events must be taken seriously, then assess not only their impact on development of an ongoing conflict, but also on possible approaches for conflict management.⁶⁴

The problem lies when the initiatives towards conflict resolution are hindered by the refusal to recognize the legitimacy and rights of the groups that have been marginalized by discriminatory social structures and norms. In addition, a lack of agreement on suitable process for resolution has been an obstacle to discussion about substantive issues.⁶⁵

Had New Delhi dealt the root cause of the violent conflict of this region at the very beginning, the situation today this region is battling would have been different and sure a better one. The forced militarization and counter insurgency indirectly shows the bias attitude of the Indian Union towards the people of northeast in general. It shows the inhuman and worthless treatment to the people of this region by the New Delhi government when massive militarization was imposed in the state, completely neglecting the hue and cry of the people and knowing the fact that militarization would eventually cause gross and systematic human rights violations.

The Act, which in de facto is non-discriminatory and non-distinctive between insurgents and the civilians, reflects the distrust towards the whole of population by the Indian government and equally amounting everyone to life threat. It is apparent that there is no political will from state actor's side to put into serious dialogues. Instead, both the opposing parties (separatist groups and the state) apparently stuck on the frustrating short term treaties, making the situation more destructive and hostile.

The annoying situation that has been created in this region aroused the feeling of insecurity, anger and provocation amongst the general mass. In long run such feeling could obviously generate hostile and conflicting behavior. Besides, the legal rights in which the Indian armies exercise under the provision of AFSPA-1958 (who have legal impunity from deten-

⁶⁴ H.-W. Jeong, *Understanding Conflict and Conflict Analysis* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008), 43-63.

⁶⁵ H.-W. Jeong, op. cit., p. 16.

tion, torture to murder of any suspect) aggravate the relation between the center and the people of Manipur. It is not surprising to see the increasing hostile attitude and conflicting behavior amongst the people of Manipur. The militarization process in no case solves neither conflict nor attempt to bring peace rather it becomes a viscous cycle of legitimization of force-violence-and hatred.

Ironically, New Delhi's process of maintaining law and order situation in this region rather led to the emergence of many secondary problems. Extortion, kidnapping, smuggling, drug, tension between migrants and native etc. became more prominent. The conflict between different ethnic groups that the state has never witnessed before the merger is now witnessing. Women's organizations and associations are voicing against high prevalence of sexual assault/violence with impunity by Indian army. The massive expenditure on the military has impacted on the expenditure over welfare for the people. Leave aside the large-scale industries, there is hardly any small-scale industry in the state to provide job to the jobless 'frustrated' educated youths of this region. The underdeveloped financial system still haunts the state economy and the sign of improvement is apparently a distant dream. There is also high rate of corruption in the state. There are many cases of siphoning New Delhi's grants or development fund toward the separatist armed opposing groups. The major service sector or job prospect is only in military or state police service. Due to the limited job prospect other than military jobs there is hardly any scope for an average educated candidate to get any job. Even if they are qualified, the corrupted state system will not allow them to get the job without a heavy bribe.

Therefore, it is imperative for New Delhi to do some groundwork to gain the trust and integrity from the people of northeast, showing a strong commitment – the commitment of pure and explicit development, the development that the people of this region greatly benefit, and the development that respects the rights of the people.

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