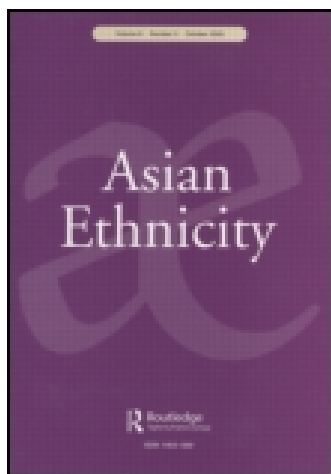


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George T. Haokip^a

^a Manipur University (A Central University), Imphal, Manipur, India

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On ethnicity and development imperative: a case study of North-East India

George T. Haokip*

Manipur University (A Central University), Imphal, Manipur, India

'North East India' composed of different ethnicity is plagued with ethnic assertions and regionalism with that of centuries of alienation. Development is one big issue that need to be address in the region. The North East India after decades of independence is still lagging behind in term of socio, economic, education, political, cultural and social development. A deeper study reveals that movement for separate homeland, regionalism, tribalism, ethnic clash, crime, mass poverty, etc in the region are caused by backwardness of the region. The distinct geo-ethnic and socio-historical characters of North-East India constitute the hotbed of ethnic strife and extreme radicalism. The solution lies partly in resolving the conflict between primordial ethnic loyalties or 'ethno-nationalism' and the 'nationalism of the nation state', and partly a conscious and voluntary effort to resist corruption and unholy alliance between the militants and the politicians in the region. In any case, ethnic reconciliation would result in the reduction of ethnic violence of all kinds and would eventually restore law and order in the region. When the civil governance in the region will be spared from combating militancy or appeasing the militants, the whole energy of the government would be for strengthening the institutions of local self-government, which act as potential agents of development in the conflict-ridden states of the North-East India.

Keywords: North East; Insurgency; Conflict; Tribal; Identity; Ethnic; Development

Introduction

The general perception that North-East India is still reeling under poverty and lack of 'development' is not uncommon among people from all walks of life in India, including the academics and development administrators. In common parlance, the region has remained an area of neglect for more than five decades since Independence. Many reasons are attributed to the state of 'underdevelopment' of the seven (now eight) sisters in North-East India, ranging from socio-cultural through historical, economic, political, jural, and even moral. Since the value-loaded concepts like development and underdevelopment have become buzz words these days, it is plausible to assume that these concepts are only understood with reference to the material conditions of existence of a group or a community from solely an etic perspective, the reason for which from politicians to pedestrians use these concepts indiscriminately. Although the scope of this paper does not permit us much to define

*Email: georgehaokip@rocketmail.com

the concept of development, suffice it to say that anthropologists understand development as the capacity of a society to organize itself for its own objectives and to carry out its programmes more effectively.¹ This obviously implies that development is an organized activity for the common goal of improving the quality of life and human well-being,² as conceived by the people of the community themselves. I am reminded of similar sentiments expressed by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru towards the close of the 1950s in his outlines of tribal policy, popularly known as *panchsheel*, wherein he had emphasized, 'People should develop along the lines of their own genius and we should avoid imposing anything on them. We should try to encourage in every way their own traditional arts and culture'.³

If organization is to come from within the community and development is an organized activity, by the same logic, disorganization of activities unpretentiously deters the process of development, and ethnic divisiveness is one of the important factors that make development a daunting task. However hard we may strive to pursue the agenda of Indian nationalism, an undivided and ethnically composite Indian nation-state, and the nationalism of the Indian nation-state, history reminds us of a different reality. Historically, North-East India has been a land of immense ethnic confluences for centuries and eventually leading to inter- and intra-regional ethnic divide. It is an undeniable fact that North-East India has nurtured diverse ethnic groups with their much varied social structures, religious affiliations, political aspirations and world views. It is but natural that the primordial sentiments or ethno-nationalisms still shape the political and development agenda of these ethnic groups, while remaining under the garb of an Indian nationalism that is imposed on them. With this background, I attempt in this paper to bring to the fore the issues of geo-ethnic variability nurturing conflicting primordial ethnic loyalties in North-East India causing ethnic strife and its bearing on the processes of development in the region. Since I am conscious of an enormous number of ethnic groups and sub-groups that inhabit the region, my examples will be limited to some of these groups with whom I have some amount of familiarity as a researcher on North-East India. Furthermore, I will examine the 'economy of terrorism' to examine how the non-development expenditure outweighs the development expenditure, and how a large chunk of investment goes for policing. I will also show how even the development expenditure is channelized for patronizing militancy in the region due to an unholy alliance between the politicians, bureaucrats and the militants. Finally, I will recount the ways out for ethnic reconciliation in the region and carrying forward the agenda of development in future by strengthening the institutions of local self-government that the Indian Constitution guarantees to the people of this region.

Geo-ethnic character of North-East India

North-East India possesses a distinct regional geo-political character because of its location, diverse physiographic composition with enormous ethnic diversity, economic backwardness with wide disparity in levels of development.⁴ The region is of strategic importance for the country on account of the fact that nearly 90% of

¹Belshaw, *Traditional Exchange and Modern Markets*.

²Epstein, *Economic Development and Social Change*.

³Nehru, Foreword.

⁴Hazarika, *Geo-Politics of North East India*.

its borders form India's international boundaries. It is flanked by four foreign countries, *viz.* China, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Bhutan. The Macmahon line separates North-East India from Tibet. This region is connected with the rest of India only through a narrow corridor in North Bengal, having an approximate width of 33 km on the eastern side and 21 km on the western side. This narrow corridor is popularly known as the 'Siliguri neck' or the 'Chicken's neck'. The region comprised eight states, *viz.* Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. Geographically, North-East India is located between 21°57' N and 29°30' N latitudes, and 88° E and 97°30' E longitudes, covering an area of 262,185 Km² of uneven surface. The region accounts for 7.9% of the total land space of the country. Hill ranges forming part of the Himalayas guard the northern side of the region. The area is made up of mountains above the snow line, and plains a little higher than the sea level. About 70% of the region is hilly, and the topography varies within each state. Mountains and hills cover most of Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya, and about half of Tripura, one-fifth of Assam and nine-tenth of Manipur. The topography of the hills is generally rugged and vast areas are inaccessible. According to 2001 Census, North-East India has a population of 39 million, which constitutes 3.75% of the total population of the country (<http://databank.nedfi.com>).

The terrain conditions of North-East India also make it an isolated region. The Himalayas on the North, the Patkai-Barail range on the North-East and East, the Meghalaya and Karbi plateaus in the West and Central regions, the Naga, Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura hills with dense monsoon forests have immense bearing on the development of separatist tendencies among the inhabitants. This is further accentuated by poor levels of transport and communication facilities in the region.⁵

As it is evident from the topography, about three quarters of the region is covered by hilly terrain and only one quarter is made up of the four plain areas, *viz.* Assam's Brahmaputra and Barak valleys, The Tripura plains, and the Manipur plateau. As in other regions of India, the majority of non-tribal people live in the fertile plains and plateaus, while the tribal populations live in the hilly areas of the region.⁶ Therefore, the geography of the region itself has groomed considerable ethnic and cultural differences between the plains and the hills in the region since historical times.

Hazarika notes further that the historical moorings of the North-East region in India are charged with much cultural diversity.⁷ The *Mahabharata*, for example, mentions about the powerful kingdom of Pragjyotisha with its capital at Pragjyotishpur, where the present Guwahati lies.⁸ During the epic period some non-Aryan kings ruled the region, and the region was renamed as Kamarupa in later times, as referenced in the Kalika Purana and the Yogini Tantra.⁹ The region has been occupied by different streams of Mongoloid people who came from the north and the east at different periods well before the onset of the colonial rule in India. It is generally agreed that the Mongoloids, referred to as *kirata* in the ancient Sanskrit texts, once occupied the whole of this region. In course of time these Mongoloid groups settled in different ecological settings crystallized into distinct tribal groups

⁵Ibid.

⁶Bhagabati, *Emergent Tribal Identity*.

⁷Hazarika, *Geo-Politics of North East India*.

⁸Hopkins, *The Hindu Religious Traditions*.

⁹Parampanthi, 'Aryanisation and Assimilation of Assam'.

that we witness today. While the hills and mountains of the North-East India remained outside the orbit of Hindu influence and caste-based social formation, the history of Assam plains shows that by the twelfth century, the local kings of Mongoloid origin were initiated into Hinduism.

During the medieval period, the region entered into a new phase of unrest and hostilities with the invasion of the kingdom of Kamarupa by the Muslims between 1205 and 1206 A.D. It was subsequently invaded by the Ahoms in 1228 A.D. and other smaller but powerful tribal groups. This resulted in the emergence of many smaller kingdoms of the Koches, Bhuyans, Kacharis, Chutiyas, along with the Ahoms from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries.¹⁰ Repeated mention of Kamarupa-Pragjyotisha in many texts leads some to believe that probably the process of sanskritization or 'indianization' in the four plains areas indicated above began since the second-century B.C.¹¹ This has been testified by the fact that the Cachari-Bodos of Assam and the Tripuris (the indigenous population of Tripura) were affiliated to Hinduism from a very long time. The large-scale spread of Vaishnavism of the Shri Chaitanya School towards the end of the seventeenth century converted the Raja of Manipur to Hinduism, who eventually adopted the religion as the state religion.¹² For the Meiti-Hindus the religious conversion was perhaps not sweeping, but with the retention of many indigenous religious practices by rejecting many other traditional Hindu practices *viz.* child marriage, the inhibitions of divorce and widow re-marriage, and the supremacy of Brahman as well as caste hierarchy.¹³ While historically speaking the plains of the North-East was under the firm grip of Hinduism, the tribal inhabited hilly and forested pockets in the region were by and large free from the dominant influence of Hinduism with the result that animism and nature worship becoming the dominant religion. One can notice different levels of assimilation of the people into the Hindu religion varying from people to people and tribe to tribe. Whereas the Hindu Assamese were relatively acculturated Hindus with some indigenous festivals and practices of their own became sanskritized or Indianized to the level where the people gave up their native language and adopted many imported practices, the Meiti-Hindus retained many more indigenous practices and traditions within their adopted religion. This religious divide with its deep-seated root in the region is undeniably a definite deterrent in the process of consolidation of a pan-regional identity in North-East India. The pre-colonial social formation in North-East India, however, was different from that of the colonial period, as the former was more fluid and flexible due to constant inter-mingling and inter-marriage between the ethnic groups, resulting in biological admixture and production of diverse social alignments and group identities. In the plains of Assam, tribal groups *viz.* the Bodo-Kachari, Rebha, Nech, Karbi and Deuri-Chutiya, etc. represented the substantial presence of Hindu population through a process of conversion and subsequent sanskritization.

The British, who entered into the region to emancipate the people from the plight it faced due to political instability and intermittent Burmese invasions, became a political as well as a military force to reckon with, through the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826. Since then the British administration took up the reins of development in this

¹⁰Hazarika, *Geo-Politics of North East India*.

¹¹Mosahary, 'Aryanisation and Hinduisation of the Bodos'.

¹²Parratt, *The Religion of Manipur*.

¹³Hodson, 'Manipuris'.

region and began exploiting the natural resources. The British adopted different strategies of administering the plains and hills of the region, thus resulting in distinct political formations in both the sub-regions. The political division was an addition to the topographic, ethnic and religious divisions delineated earlier.

As a general policy of British administration in India, a number of communities were recognized as backward and the ethnic boundaries and were sought to be demarcated to provide them with a measure of protection not only against the non-ethnics, but also the easily penetrable market forces. In order to execute this policy, the Inner Line Regulation and Scheduled Districts Act, 1874 were devised and implemented. The Government of India Act of 1919 identified backward areas and sought to exclude them from the jurisdiction of the constitutional reforms and administration of the provincial governments. Under the Government of India Act of 1935, these backward areas were further classified into 'excluded areas' and 'partially excluded areas'. While the 'excluded areas' were placed under the personal rule of the Governor acting in his discretion, the 'partially excluded areas' lying mainly in the mainland provinces came within the field of the responsibility of the provincial governments, though the Governor exercised a special responsibility in respect of their administration. In North-East India this territorial exclusion prevented the tribal sub-regions to be sanskritized or Indianized unlike the plains, where the process of acculturation continued unabated.

Ironically the Government of India Act of 1935 was inherited by the Indian Constitution, of course, with modifications here and there. The provisions of the Fifth Schedule while covered the 'partially excluded areas', the Sixth Schedule dealt with the administration of what was called the 'excluded areas' in the tribal areas of undivided Assam. Therefore, if we analyze the post-independence historical development of the tribal regions in the country, it is amply clear that in North-East India, the concept of 'exclusion' and 'autonomy' of local institutions enshrined in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution have developed further with the formation of new states in the 1960s and early 1970s in accordance with the principle of ethnicity.¹⁴ This created relentless rupture in the region and became an impediment to ethnic consolidation. More recent demand by sections of the tribal people in North-East to include their districts under the Sixth Schedule is an indication of a deep political divide along ethnic lines.

The inter-regional civilizational divide of North-East India is equally important as the intra-regional religious, ethnic and socio-political divisions. Interestingly, the region of North-East India is situated between two great and ancient traditions of 'India Asia' and 'Mongoloid Asia'. This geographical and cultural 'in-between-ness' is an important factor in the history of the crisis of ethnic identity and ethnic rivalry in the region. It was only since the British occupation that the entire region came to be integrated with India politically. In fact, prior to the annexation of the region by the British the regional ecology and the bounty of nature enabled to emerge a 'cellular' society of different cultural, linguistic, ethnic and economic communities, each one of them living their separate existence in distinct identifiable pockets marked by known physiographic limits.¹⁵ Each one of them had its own indigenous political formation. Therefore, the colonial effort of political integration was forcibly imposed and obviously without the mandate of the people of the region. A recent

¹⁴Singh, *Ethnicity, Identity and Development*.

¹⁵Hazarika, *Geo-Politics of North East India*.

survey indicates that Assam has as many as 26, Arunachal Pradesh has 49, Meghalaya has 11, Manipur has 24, Mizoram has 9, Nagaland has 17, and Tripura has 3 distinct ethnic groups making a total of 139 identified ethnic groups in the region, minus Sikkim. In such an ethnically diverse region, it is but natural that the lack of cultural relatedness has weakened new political associations and the racial and cultural differences play a vital role in defining and maintaining separate ethnic identity. There is a pervasive dilemma that to answer the question 'who are we?' the people in the region are caught between the racial-cultural definition and the politico-administrative definition of their identity. Whereas they are politically Indian, ethnically and culturally they differ from the Indians of other regions, which are overtly expressed by many in the region. Perhaps a personal anecdote will serve here as an example. Educated people in Delhi or Kolkata used to confuse about their nationality of the North-East people and frequently asked if they hailed from China or Japan or Korea because of their Mongolian features. But these youth reported if they were in Burma or China or Mongolia, nobody there had any question about their nationality. This has led many of them to address me as 'you Indian' as different from 'them'. But among themselves, they speak different variants of Tibeto-Burman languages, are divided with regard to the rules of descent (*viz.* patrilineal and matrilineal), and have a wide range of social structural differences, the detail discussion of which is beyond the scope of this paper.

Self-identity and the problem of insurgency

It is aptly observed that the inward-looking self definition of identity is the foundation of insurgency and ethnic conflict in North-East India, which has rocked five of the eight states at one time or another, while the remaining states are highly poised for a similar or more aggressive form of ethno-political upsurge. Insurgency began in North-East immediately after Independence and continues with different permutations and combinations till the present time. Chronologically stating, 'Insurgency took roots in Nagaland and Manipur in the early fifties, immediately after the establishment of the Republic [of India], those in Mizoram, in the sixties, in Tripura in the seventies, while in the case of Assam it has arrived in the eighties. Meghalaya and Arunachal are just now menacingly militant, not yet insurgent though, Karbi Anglong too is equally poised'. Now the region faces insurgencies or separatist movements from over 50 groups. Although each conflict has its own roots and history, they revolve round language and ethnicity, tribal rivalry, migration, control over local resources, access to water, and more significantly, a widespread feeling of exploitation and alienation from the Indian state.

Since ethnic conflicts and insurgencies are and have been the rule of the day in the region for quite sometime, it is appropriate to divide them in terms of three basic 'faultlines':

- Tribals vs. the State,
- Tribals vs. non-tribals, and
- Tribals vs. other tribals.

It may be quickly added here that the preceding categorization is not as neat in the ground as it appears to be. In fact, in any single conflict, more than one of these elements tend to overlap, giving rise to complications both of analysis and

resolution. The multiplicity of tribal and sub-tribal groupings in each of the states in the region and continuous realignments between some of these create further difficulties. It is observed that “Within such a context, mobilization of populations along issues relating to exclusionary and conflicting tribal identities has become a basic feature, both of electoral politics and of more extreme movements, across the Northeast region”.¹⁶

Reverting back to the three conflict situations outlined above, the one between the tribals and the state (or the Indian union) has been largely restorative in nature. The Naga and Mizo movements are appropriate cases in point. Both these movements emphasized on reverting to their pre-colonial political status after the British withdrawal from the hills of the North-East. In both Nagaland and Mizoram the separatist movements were spearheaded by the old tribal autocracy due to an imminent threat perception that under a republican government, the tribal chiefs were to lose their power, prestige and status that the society bestowed on the traditional elite, along with the associated pecuniary privileges hitherto enjoyed by them like land rights and rights over other natural resources under their jurisdiction. It may be recalled that the institution of chieftaincy in North-East India was endemically hereditary, fiercely patriarchal, and notoriously autocratic, while the society was highly stratified.¹⁷ This, of course, is not to deny the fact that both in Nagaland and Mizoram the educated, modern, and enlightened elite groups were rather eager to merge with Indian union than to restore the old political order championed by the traditional hereditary chiefs. The emergences of Naga National Council by Aliba Imti and T.Sakhrrie in Nagaland and Mizo Commoners’ Union (subsequently called Mizo Union) in Mizoram were precisely to mobilize public opinion against the restoration of chieftaincy.¹⁸

The conflict between the tribals and the non-tribals resulted in the displacement of Bengali citizens and immigrants from Bangladesh particularly from the Bodo areas in Assam. In Meghalaya and Tripura also the Bengalis were displaced due to the resistance by the local tribal population.

What has been perhaps more turbulent and violent is the inter-tribal conflicts in North-East India during the post-independence period. Interestingly, the processes of ethnic fusion and fission have been the hallmark of North-East India. The crystallization of ethnic identity on an expanded level cutting across the traditional boundaries is usually termed as ethnic or ethno-cultural fusion.¹⁹ This process can be found in cases of Naga constellation, Mizo, Zeliangrong and Adi ethnic crystallizations, and is intimately connected with the wider political aspirations of the people concerned. We can find this in the case of Zeliangrong, which is formed by the merger of three tribes, *viz.* the Zemeis, the Liangmeis and the Rongmeis, all of whom claim a common mythical ancestry.²⁰ Similarly the present Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh consists of the Padam, the Miniyongs, the Gallongs, the Pasi and other groups who have similarities in their dress, hair style, material culture, and a language that is mutually intelligible.²¹ We all know that while various groups of

¹⁶Sahni, ‘Survey of Conflicts and Resolution’.

¹⁷Elwin, *A Philosophy of NEFA: Misra, Tribal Elite and Social Transformation*; Misra, ‘The Emerging Pattern of Stratification’.

¹⁸Nag, ‘North East’.

¹⁹Bhagabati, *Emergent Tribal Identity*.

²⁰Kabui, ‘The Zelianrong Movements’.

²¹Das, *Ethnic Identity, Ethnicity and Social Stratification*.

Naga tribes have been generically called as Nagas, the Lushai and other allied tribes of the Mizo hill areas call themselves by a common name, Mizo. It is not only ethnic fusion, but also ethnic fission in North-East India, which is of great historical importance in creating a situation of ethnic rivalry for political and economic dominance. One important example of fission is the gradual separation of many 'clans' of general Kuki group of people over decades into distinct segments or tribes.²²

The trend of ethnic and ethno-cultural fusion did not, however, rule out the primordial ethnic self identity among the tribes; on the contrary, sometimes it led to violent struggle among the tribes themselves. An analysis of the history of the Naga movement suggests that a number of Naga tribes struggled to establish their hegemony over the movement at different times. Initially it was the Angami, Sema and then the Tangkhuls. Therefore, right from the beginning the Naga movement was plagued by acute factionalism.²³ History also reveals that as early as June 1947 the Naga separatist leadership (Phizo and Sakhrie) visited the Mizo hills to ensure the support of the Mizo in their movement. Phizo, it seems, proposed to the Mizo leadership for a joint Naga-Mizo struggle against India, and even agreed to accept Lushai as the state language. However, the Mizo leadership promptly rejected this proposal. Similarly, the NSCN-IM's (National Socialist Council of Nagaland – Isak-Muivah) insistence on a 'Greater Nagaland' has created considerable hostility between the Nagas on the one hand and the Meities, Kukis and Assamese on the other, which has recently precipitated into a violent struggle in Manipur.²⁴ The PLA (People's Liberation Army) vehemently opposed to surrendering the Naga and Mizo inhabited areas to Nagaland and Mizoram to allow forming a state covering the whole of these population. Many a times there has been acute inter-tribal hostility with the tribal leaders being hostile to the opposition and minorities within their own areas of influence. Although our aim is not to analyze ethnic conflicts as such, we may remark in passing that ethnic movements and insurgencies have been rampant in North-East India due to geographical, historical, religious, political and cultural reasons, which have their bearing on the process of development in the region, as societies have encountered a situation of extreme helplessness in organizing themselves in carrying forward the agenda of development.

Ethnic conflict and development in North-East India

It is pointed out earlier in this paper that from time to time the Government of India has been offering various concessions to the North-Eastern states to speed up the process of development in the region. All these states are ascribed a 'special category' status by the Government of India and the National Development Council (NDC), which is the apex body for the approval of plan funding. Because of their inclusion in the special category, the NDC sets aside 30% of total plan allocations for these states as central assistance for state plans. The states in the North-East receive 90% of plan assistance as grant and only 10% as loan, as against 30% grant and 70% loan to states without a special category status.²⁵ Therefore, if there is a perception of

²²Ibid.

²³Nag, 'North East'.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Sahni and George, 'Security and Development'.

underdevelopment of these states, it is certainly not due to resource crunch, as there is substantial flow of plan assistance from the Government of India.

If we examine other socio-economic indicators, it can be stated without any ambiguity that many states in this region fare better than the national average. For example, literacy rate in the region is significantly higher than the national average. While the national average of literacy stands at, North-East states have 52.21% literacy with male literacy at 64.13% and female literacy at 39.29%. Similarly, the population density in the region is 274 per km², which is lower than the national average of The rate of morbidity in the region stands at 3067 per one lakh population against the national average of 4578 per one lakh. The per capita income in the region is Rs. 5070 per annum against the national average of Rs. 4485 per annum. The population below poverty line in the North-East region is about 33% against the national average of 39% in this category. The availability of medical facility within a distance of 5 km from the village is enjoyed by 47% of the villages in the North-East against the national average of 41.2%.²⁶ Of course, there are other weak areas that the North-East India suffers from. For example, while access to piped water is available for 25% in the whole of India, only a meager 9% in the region has this facility. Moreover, villages connected by pucca road are only 21.2% in North-East region against the national average of 36.8%.²⁷ The status of women in North-East India is relatively higher than their counterparts in other regions in India, given the matrilineal descent among some tribal groups. These and other such indicators refrain us from sweepingly generalizing endemic nature of social and economic backwardness in North-East region, notwithstanding relative deprivation in some quarters.

However, what worries us is the sad state of public finance in the North-East region, which is well articulated by Sahni and George.²⁸ Going by their estimation, the ratio of development to non-development expenditure is declining, and the non-development expenditure as a percentage of total revenue expenditure is rising sharply in the region. An analysis of budget papers from 1991–92 to 1998–99 by Sahni and George clearly demonstrates that although the development to non-development ratio remains more than 1, the gap is diminishing rapidly, as may be seen in Table 1.²⁹

In states like Nagaland and Tripura, it may be seen from the Table, the Non-development expenditure (NDE) in 1998–99 is close to half from about one third of the total revenue expenditure in 1991–92. Arunachal Pradesh, however, is an exception to this trend, where the percentage of NDE to the total revenue expenditure in 1998–99 is slightly less than what it was in 1991–92. But what constitutes the NDE? The main sources of NDE are administrative services and interest payments, the former constituting between 38% and 63% of the total by 1998–99. The administrative services cost 63% of the NDE in Tripura, while in Nagaland it is 56.52% of the NDE. Of this administrative services expenditure, policing consumes between 50% and 70% of the total, and it would not be unreasonable to assume that cost of policing is high in the states with high rate of unrest, including terrorist activities.

²⁶Shariff, *India Human Development Report*.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Sahni and George, 'Security and Development'.

²⁹Ibid.

Table 1. Revenue account derivatives in the North-East.³⁰

State	Dev/NDE		NDE as % of TR Exp.	
	1991–92	1998–99	1991–92	1998–99
Arunachal Pradesh	2.92	2.53	29.25	28.31
Assam	3.00	1.78	25.00	35.92
Manipur	2.00	1.86	33.33	34.91
Meghalaya	2.56	2.11	28.11	32.19
Mizoram	3.13	1.91	24.19	34.42
Nagaland	1.76	1.21	36.27	45.16
Tripura	2.51	1.19	28.45	45.67

Even with substantial development packages granted to the states in the region, it is clear that

... its impact on target populations has been negligible because of the corruption and violence of the prevailing politics. Much of this investment, moreover, has indirectly ended up financing militancy through the enveloping economy of extortion and collusion.³⁰

The nexus between the politicians and the militants is sometimes conscious and voluntary, while at some other times forced and imposed for the sake of safety and security of the former. Sometimes the bureaucracy has to serve the interest of the militants by extending government benefits either to them or to the people identified by them. The collapse of Public Distribution System in the region may be cited as one of the examples in this context.

Besides the macro-economic indicators outlined above, the common people in the remote villages in the region are worst hit due to the ethnic strife. They are forced to extend shelter to the militants as and when demanded, extortion by these groups has become common even in the villages, and the impoverished people are scared to move out in search of employment because of growing insecurity. There are also complaints about the excesses committed by the police and the military deployed in the region in the name of curbing militancy. The villagers are targeted by the police and military with the suspicion of providing shelter to the militants, which sometimes they have to do for the sake of their own security.³¹ It is still fresh in our memory that how the people of Manipur were on the streets against the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (1958), a draconian law that has spelt repression in Kashmir and several areas of the North East for almost 50 years. The current wave of protest in Manipur was sparked off by the gruesome custodial rape and killing of Manorama Devi in July 2004. A student leader Pebam Chittaranjan, who immolated himself, is another martyr of this movement, whose death only fanned the flames of protest higher. Even there was a unique naked protest march in Imphal by the women against the murder of Manorama Devi. It is an undeniable truth that the government's authority and legitimacy has been eroded to such an extent that the militants have acquired the courage to literally run parallel governments in different parts of the region. What development can take place in a situation where common citizens feel perpetually unsafe and deprived of the development packages that hardly percolate down to the common people? Whatever

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Singh, 'Problems of Tribal Development'.

political agreements and negotiations between the government and the militants take place from time to time temporarily halt the momentum to be rejuvenated in a more aggressive form after a short spell, keeping everybody guessing.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the distinct geo-ethnic and socio-historical characters of North-East India that constitute the hotbed of ethnic strife and extreme radicalism, the question still remains, could there be a possible solution to redress the problem of ethnic strife and effectively channelize the development efforts to the special category status states of the North-East India without arguing for secessionism? The solution lies partly in resolving the conflict between primordial ethnic loyalties or 'ethno-nationalism' and the 'nationalism of the nation state', in the terminology of Tambiah,³² and partly a conscious and voluntary effort to resist corruption and unholy alliance between the militants and the politicians in the region. In any case, ethnic reconciliation would result in the reduction of ethnic violence of all kinds and would eventually restore law and order in the region. When the civil governance in the region will be spared from combating militancy or appeasing the militants, the whole energy of the government would be for strengthening the institutions of local self-government, which act as potential agents of development in the conflict-ridden states of the North-East India. The societies, then, would be able to organize their own activities and carry out their programmes effectively to usher in development in the region.

Notes on contributor

George T. Haokip is a Senior Research Fellow at Manipur University (A Central University) Imphal, Manipur, India.

Author's postal address: Government Degree College Quarter, PO Kamalpur, Dhalai District, Tripura, India.

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³²Tambiah, 'The Nation-State in Crisis'.

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