

# Conflicts in the North East

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## 1 Introduction

1.1 At the commencement of the Constitution, the present States of Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram constituted a district each of Assam, whereas Arunachal Pradesh, (then NEFA), consisted of several 'frontier tracts' administered by the Governor of Assam and was, therefore, deemed to be a part of that State. The States of Manipur and Tripura were princely States which, after merger with India in 1948, became part C States, the earlier name for Union Territories. The Constitution-makers, recognising the significant difference in the way of life and administrative set up of the North Eastern region from the rest of the country, provided for special institutional arrangements for the tribal areas in the region, giving them a high degree of self-governance through autonomous District Councils under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. Even critics agree that the Sixth Schedule has to some extent satisfied tribal aspirations and has thus prevented many conflicts. Similarly, the gradual administrative reorganisation of the region with the formation of the States of Nagaland (1963), Meghalaya (1972), conferring first, status of Union territory (1972) and subsequently Statehood (1987) to Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram and elevation of Manipur and Tripura from Union Territories to States in 1972 attest to the considerable attention given to reduce conflicts in the region through increased empowerment. Following the large-scale reorganisation of the region in 1972, a regional body, the North Eastern Council (NEC) was set up to provide a forum for inter-State coordination, regional planning and integrated development of the region to avoid intra-regional disparities. The "look-east" policy announced by the Government of India envisages the North Eastern region as the centre of a thriving and integrated economic space linked to the neighbouring countries such as Myanmar and Thailand by a network of rail, road and communication links criss-crossing the river. The policy tries to leverage the strategic geographical location of the region, with past historical links with South East Asia and its rich natural resources (hydel, gas, power etc.) to transform this region vast potential into reality. However, this requires not only massive efforts towards infrastructure links but also a major improvement in the security situation.

### **1.2 Nonetheless, for more than half-a-century, the North East has seen an unending**

cycle of violent conflicts dominated by insurgencies with demands ranging from outright sovereignty to greater political autonomy. Indirectly, insurgent movements have spawned a variety of related conflicts which are referred to later in this Chapter. Insurgency has taken a toll of thousands of lives, both of security forces and citizens, as is clear from the statistics below:

Table 12.1: Incidence of Violence in the North East						
Head	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Incidents of violence	1,335	1,312	1,332	1,234	1,332	1,366
Extremists killed	572	571	523	404	405	395
Security personnel killed	175	147	90	110	70	76
Civilians killed	660	454	494	414	393	309
<i>Source: Annual Report of Ministry of Home Affairs, 2006-07</i>						

1.3 Roots of Insurgency: The roots of insurgency in the North Eastern region are embedded in its geography, history and a host of socio-economic factors. Ninety-eight per cent of the borders of the region are international borders, pointing to the region's tenuous geographical connectivity with the rest of India. While the population share of the region at around 3.90 crores is a mere 3 per cent of the national population, its rate of growth has exceeded two hundred per cent between 1951-2001, generating great stress on livelihoods and adding to land fragmentation. While, nominally tribals constitute 27 per cent of the population of the entire region minus Assam. it increases to 58 per cent for the remaining States. Percentages, however, do not adequately reflect the extensive diversity in the tribal population of the region which has more than 125 distinct tribal groups – a diversity not to be seen in States like Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh where tribal populations predominate.

## 2. Typology of Conflicts

2.1 Conflicts in the region range from insurgency for secession to insurgency for autonomy; from 'sponsored terrorism' to ethnic clashes, to conflicts generated as a result of continuous inflow of migrants from across the borders as well as from other States. Conflicts in the region can be broadly grouped under the following categories:

- a. 'National' conflicts: Involving concept of a distinct 'homeland' as a separate nation and pursuit of the realisation of that goal by its votaries.
- b. Ethnic conflicts: Involving assertion of numerically smaller and less dominant tribal groups against the political and cultural hold of the dominant tribal group. In Assam this also takes the form of tension between local and migrant communities.
- c. Sub-regional conflicts: Involving movements which ask for recognition of sub-regional aspirations and often come in direct conflict with the State Governments or even the autonomous Councils.

2.2. Besides, criminal enterprise aimed at expanding and consolidating control over critical economic resources have, of late, acquired the characteristics of a distinct species of conflict.

It has been aptly observed that: The conflicts in the North East have some peculiar characteristics: they are asymmetrical; they are ambiguous, making it difficult to differentiate a friend from an enemy; they are fought in unconventional modes, deploying political and psychological means and methods; and the conflicts eventually tend to escalate into prolonged wars of attrition. Violence in the region is also caused by the failure of the State administration to provide security. This has led to the creation of alternative forces of ethnic militia for

provision of security. From the perspective of its ethnic constituency, a private ethnic militia is considered a more reliable provider of security when it is threatened by another ethnic group that is armed with its own militia. This is usually the context in an ethnically polarised situation in which the State administration fails to provide security and the actions of the Army are seen as partisan.

### 3 State Specific Conflict Profiles

3.1 While the region as a whole displays a variety of conflicts, it needs to be noted that in its acute form the problem is endemic in certain well-defined areas the 'variety' of conflicts besetting the region will be evident from the short 'conflict profiles of the region'.

**3.2 Arunachal Pradesh:** The State has remained peaceful after the cease-fire with NSCN which was active in Tirap District. The policies initiated under the guidance of Verrier Elwin (a noted anthropologist) in the 1950s have resulted in considerable cohesion in the area with Hindi emerging as its lingua franca. There was some disquiet with the settlement of relatively more enterprising Chakma refugees from Bangladesh in the State in large numbers which appears to have subsided. Growing income disparities and constriction of employment opportunities could be a potential source of conflicts.

**3.3 Assam :** A wide variety of ethnic conflicts prevail in the State e.g. agitations against 'influx of foreigners', perceived inability of the Government to deport them; occasional tensions between religious/linguistic groups and escalating conflicts involving tribal communities who seek local autonomy etc.

12.3.3.1 *National/Extremist Conflicts:* Undivided Assam had the longest history of insurgency.

Naga and Mizo insurgencies were the earliest to flare up. The affected areas formed two districts of the State. Even in the present truncated Assam, there are a number of extremist outfits led by the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). It has also been argued that there have been several contributing factors for the youth to join the cadres of ULFA such as unemployment, corruption in Government machinery, influx of illegal migrants, dominance of non-Assamese in the business sector, perception of exploitation of Assam's natural resources by the Centre and alleged human right violation by the Security Forces. It became active from the 1980s and till the late 1990s, enjoyed considerable public support due to a perception that 'insurgency is causing secessions' from Assam and that if only the Assamese had launched a violent counter-agitation, the situation would have been different. The average Assamese also regarded the six years of largely non-violent agitation for 'expulsion of foreigners' as having achieved very little 'success'. With large scale criminalisation of ULFA cadres in the 1990s there was a rapid loss of public support particularly among the urban middle classes. Another factor for its decline was ULFA's known links with the 'agencies' of certain foreign countries with interest in subverting the distinctive culture of the State and in causing unrest in the country. It also appears that repeated volte-face by ULFA during several abortive negotiations with the Government, affected its credibility. After the crackdown by the Bhutanese Army, ULFA has not recovered its past strength though the organisation tries to make its presence felt through kidnappings, bomb blasts and selective murder of migrant workers. In addition, almost all tribal communities have some armed outfits purportedly safeguarding their interests.

**3.2 Ethnic Conflict:** The major ethnic conflict in the State is the grievance against the perceived influx of ‘foreigners’ i.e. people with a language and culture substantially different from the Assamese from across the border (i.e. Bangladesh). The ‘foreigners’ agitation’ of 1979-85 brought Assam to the centre stage of attention. The problem can be traced to the early years of the last century when the landless from the neighbouring overpopulated districts of East Bengal started arriving in the fertile and then substantially fallow Brahmaputra valley. Following communal rioting in East Pakistan in the 1950s and 1960s there were further waves of migration from the minority community of that country. Still later, growing unemployment, fragmentation of land and the war for the liberation of Bangladesh encouraged a renewed influx even from the majority community. With the fear of being culturally and politically ‘swamped’, resentment built up among the Assamese and escalated into one of independent India’s most prolonged and vigorous agitations. While both the Union and State Governments have accorded priority to the process of detection and deportation of illegal migrants (foreigners), the issue continues to simmer with the ‘original’ inhabitants claiming that for reasons of ‘vote bank politics’ effective steps are not being taken to deport the ‘trespassers’ while people sharing the religious-linguistic profile of the ‘foreigners’ claim that they are harassed and unreasonably forced to “prove” their Indian citizenship.

**3.4 Manipur:** Currently, it is the ‘most insurgency ridden’ State with about fifteen violent outfits representing different tribes/communities active in the State and has become a self-financing extortion activity particularly in the Valley. The Commission, during its visit to the State, was told of several instances where development funds were siphoned off to finance various unlawful and disruptive activities.

3. 4.1 One fourth of Manipur (which is the valley), is home to more than seventy per cent of its population which predominantly consists of the culturally distinct Meitei community. The State was ruled as a monarchy (later princely state) by Meitei rulers. The Meitei influence declined in the socio-economic spheres after Independence with the tribals coming into the forefront largely because of reservations. There was also resentment in a section of the Meitei society about the merger of the State with the Indian Union – a resentment which led to the Meitei insurgency from the 1960s. Tribals account for around thirty per cent of the State’s population and broadly belong to Naga, Kuki-Chin and Mizo groups. Insurgency in Nagaland and Mizoram also spilled over to the State. The ‘cultural distance’ of tribals from the Meiteis widened with almost all the tribes coming under the Christian fold by the 1930s. There is considerable tension among the tribes over land and boundaries and violence between Nagas and Kukis took a toll of more than 2000 lives during the 1990s.

3.4.2 The cease-fire between the Union Government and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) has reduced violence in Naga areas but has given rise to fresh tensions as the NSCN insists on a greater ‘Nagalim’ which would include four Districts of Manipur. This is stoutly resisted by the Meiteis and had caused a very violent agitation in 2001. The assurance to safeguard the ‘territorial integrity of Manipur’ has resulted in comparative peace on this score. In the southern parts of the state Hmars, Paite and other tribes have been waging violent struggles partly for local hegemony and partly for their own enclave in the form of a Union Territory called “Zomi”. District Councils in the Hill areas are non-functional since 1985 as

most of the tribal communities want these Councils to be brought under the Sixth Schedule. This demand is vociferously opposed by those in the Valley. In short, Manipur continues to be an active arena for a multiplicity of violent conflicts.

3.4.3 It is reported that today militant organisations are virtually running a parallel government in many districts of Manipur and they are able to influence the decision of the State Government in awarding contracts, supply orders and appointments in government service. It is also reported that militant organisations indulge in widespread extortion and hold ‘courts’ and dispense justice in their areas of influence. Such a situation results in erosion of faith of the people in the constitutional governance machinery.

3.4.4 Since there has not been any significant industrial development in the State, there are no major industries or manufacturing units which could provide employment for the educated youth. The biggest employer continues to be the State not only in Manipur but the entire region. The educated youth has, therefore, to look for employment in far off places like Delhi, Mumbai, Pune and Bengaluru, etc.

**12.3.5 Meghalaya:** The State is fortunately free from violence of the intensity that prevails in many other parts of the region. Except violence against ‘outsiders’ particularly the Bengali speaking linguistic minority, there have been no major problems in the State. The following are some future areas of concern:

- a. Increasing clash of interest between the State Government and the Sixth Schedule District Councils – the entire State is under that Schedule.
- b. Increasing inter-tribal rivalry.
- c. Emerging tensions about infiltration from Bangladesh particularly in the Garo Hills.

**3.6 Mizoram:** The State with its history of violent insurgency and its subsequent return to peace is an example to all other violence affected States. Following an ‘accord’ between the Union Government and the Mizo National Front in 1986 and conferment of statehood the next year, complete peace and harmony prevails in Mizoram. The State is recognised as having done a commendable job in the implementation of development programmes and making agriculture remunerative. The only potential areas of conflict are the growing income and assets disparities in a largely egalitarian society and the dissatisfaction of the three small non-Mizo District Councils with the State Government, on account of issues pertaining to identity and reservation as STs.

**3.7 Nagaland:** Following the cease-fire with the dominant Muivah-Swu of the NSCN, the State is virtually free from overt violent unrest although as already noted, it is the original ‘hot spot’ of insurgency. The minority Khaplang faction which does not approve of the cease-fire has also, on the whole, remained peaceful. Certain areas of concern with regard to the future are:

- (a) The lingering issue of a final political settlement including the demand for ‘greater Nagaland’ or ‘Nagalim’ which as already noted is causing disquiet in the neighbouring areas, particularly Manipur.
- (b) Growing competition over the limited resources of the State and the problem of unemployment of the educated youth.

12.3.8 **Sikkim:** The State has not only done well in the sphere of development through

decentralised planning but the constitutional mandate of striking a balance between the various ethnic groups (mainly the Lepchas, Bhutiyas and Nepalis) has also prevented emergence of major conflicts.

**3.9 Tripura:** The State's demographic profile was altered since 1947 when mass migrations from the newly emerged East Pakistan converted it from a largely tribal area to one with a majority of Bengali speaking plainsmen. Tribals were deprived of their agricultural lands at throw-away prices and driven to the forests. The resultant tensions caused major violence and widespread terror with the tribal dominated Tripura National Volunteers (TNV) emerging as one of the most violent extremist outfits in the North East. Proximity to Mizoram exposed the State to the 'side effects' of that insurgency. However, effective decentralisation in the 'non-scheduled areas', bringing tribal areas within the purview of an autonomous 'Sixth Schedule' Council, successful land reforms and systematic promotion of agriculture have contributed to considerable conflict reduction. The changing religious composition of tribal groups (particularly, the Jamatiyas) is giving rise to newer tensions with apprehension of increased inter-tribal conflicts. While the tribal non-tribal clashes are on the decline, there is growing resentment among the tribals due to the restrictions on their 'freedom to use' the forests and their nominal participation in district development.

3.9.1 Despite impressive strides made by the State in the last decade, the fact remains that the virtual embargo on trans-border movement of goods, and services to Bangladesh from Tripura have impeded the tempo of economic growth of the State. The Ministry of External Affairs should take up this Tripura specific issue during bilateral negotiations for increased economic cooperation with Bangladesh.

#### **4. Modes of Conflict Resolution**

4.1 The modes of conflict resolution in the North East have been through; (i) security forces/ 'police action'; (ii) more local autonomy through mechanisms such as conferment of Statehood, the Sixth Schedule, Article 371 C of the Constitution in case of Manipur and through 'tribe specific accords' in Assam etc; (iii) negotiations with insurgent outfits; and (iv) development activities including special economic packages. Many of these methods have proved successful in the short-term. However, some of these interventions have had unintended, deleterious consequences as well. The manner of 'resolution' of conflicts in certain areas has led to fresh ones in others and to a continuous demand cycle. There is, however, no doubt that conflict prevention and resolution in the North East would require a judicious mix of various approaches strengthened by the experience of successes and failures of the past.

#### **5. Capacity Building for Conflict Resolution**

The complexities in the region and the successes and failures of past efforts at conflict resolution call for urgent and innovative efforts to build capacity in different wings and levels of governance. Against the background given in the preceding paragraphs, the specific areas needing capacity building in the region for conflict resolution are examined as under: -

- (i) Capacity Building in Administration
- (ii) Capacity Building in Police
- (iii) Capacity Building in Local Governance Institutions



(iv) Capacity Building in Regional Institutions

(v) Capacity Building in other Institutions

### 6.1. Capacity Building – Miscellaneous Issues

12.6.7.1 There are a number of matters concerning development administration and related aspects which could if properly addressed and resolved minimise future conflicts. Attention may be briefly invited to the following:

(a) With the primary sector accounting for 55-60 per cent of the income and the secondary sector for 55-60 per cent of the income, it is the country's most backward region industrially largely due to woefully weak infrastructure. In pursuance of the Prime Minister's announcement of 'New Initiatives for the North Eastern Region' at Guwahati in 1996, a High Level Commission was appointed under the Chairmanship of Shri S.P. Shukla, then Member, Planning Commission to identify gaps in infrastructure in the North Eastern region and recommend measures for filling them. The Planning Commission recommended an amount of Rs.1,03,014 crore for bridging the identified gaps – a recommendation that remains unimplemented. This recommendation along with the report of the Task Force of the NEC on Development Initiatives may be taken into account and should form the basis for assessing the requirement of funds for bridging the infrastructural gaps in the North East.

(b) To promote industrialisation, a comprehensive policy framework needs to be evolved and put in place to promote the region as a preferred investment destination. A major awareness campaign for marketing the strengths of the region to potential investors as an attractive destination should be launched. For improving the limited entrepreneurial base, a major capacity building exercise for local entrepreneurs should be taken up. As a necessary first step, governments in the region should allow free movement and employment of professional/skilled workers from within the region and outside to provide managerial and technological leadership. The North East Industrial Policy, 1997 should be extended for 10 years after suitable modification. Tourism should be identified as a thrust area for industrial development of the region. Skills upgradation and skill creation will have to be given top priority through promotion of vocational education, setting up of ITIs and polytechnics, and hotel management institutes. Export of services such as medical and health care workers, and education (English teachers in particular) could play an important role.

(c) There is need to have a systematic approach to road construction in the region. A region-specific Transport Development Fund should be set up to which funds from all windows should flow and the fund could be utilised to finance construction of all-important corridors. The study commissioned by the North Eastern Council for preparing a Perspective Transport Plan for Development of North Eastern Region has recommended certain road corridors for providing connectivity to neighbouring countries. The recommended corridors need to be examined critically, priorities taken into account and preparation of feasibility reports undertaken. Road construction and management practices in the region are different from those followed in other parts of the country due to its unique climate, topography, geology and administration. A separate unit for road research, under the Central Road Research Institute, should be established in the region in order to provide technological support to road and bridge construction activities.

(d) The rate of unemployment in the region is almost double the all-India figure. In the urban sector, male youth unemployment is phenomenally high at over 77 per cent compared to the national average of nearly 40 per cent. This calls for the preparation of an action plan for the region for generating employment opportunities which should cover industries and allied sectors. Special emphasis needs to be given to mass capacity building in order to enable the educated unemployed youth to find jobs in the private sector particularly in the service industry sector. For the purpose, special programmes need to be evolved by associating various reputed capacity building institutions throughout the country in the training of the youth of the region to enable them to find jobs in the private sector. Special opportunities may have to be provided to trained nurses to meet the huge international demand for nurses. ITIs need to be modernised, and upgraded, and new courses adopted in keeping with the requirement of the times.

(e) The need to adequately exploit the hydroelectric potential, undertaking large scale flood control and soil conservation measures and development of natural resources has been briefly discussed in the context of strengthening NEC as a regional planning body. These measures will ensure much needed resources to enable sustainable development of the region while increasing the absorptive capacity of the local economies. Royalties received by exploiting the hydroelectric potential and the additional incomes will be possible once such initiatives succeed. These considerations need to be kept in view not only for regional planning purposes but also while formulating major investment projects (central sector or internationally funded) for development of infrastructure and appropriate economic activities in the region.

(f) While geo-political factors and the imperatives of an increasingly integrated economy dictate that India as a country should engage itself more actively with countries on its east in trade, commerce and finance, reasons of geography present particularly promising opportunities to the States in the North East which abut areas that have begun to enjoy the fruits of regional economic development. Long term economic growth of the region is, therefore, intimately connected with implementation of sound strategies to make the 'look east policy' happen. Synergies of the economies of nations on the east of this region can have a catalysing effect on the economy of the North East if proper preparations are in place and local society is readied to deal with all the implications – economic, social, political, cultural and security, of such transnational engagements. There is need for a concrete agenda in order to achieve the relevant objectives – an agenda which must be prepared by actively associating the State Governments of the region. The recent resumption of trans-border trade between Sikkim and the Tibetan autonomous region of the Peoples' Republic of China, even though small, should offer the right lessons on how to go about this task. Within the Union Government, appropriate apportionment of responsibilities for effectuating the policy is also necessary, with the Ministry of External Affairs and other nodal Ministries playing a mutually complementary role with well-defined common objectives.

(g) While some progress has been achieved in bringing all the States of the region within the rail map of the country, this exercise should be made more meaningful by providing broad-gauge connectivity and early completion of the projects.

(h) In the absence of institutional finance mechanisms, the bane of money lenders continues. Under-banked areas display a larger deficit of unexploited potential. Much greater efforts are needed to establish bank branches and other credit disbursement outlets through further relaxation and incentivisation in policies of the Reserve Bank and other financial institutions.



Similarly, the newly established economic activities require significant degree of risk coverage; while some progress has been made in the expansion of bank branches, the situation remains highly unsatisfactory in the insurance sector.

(i) Nagaland has a system of village guards for guarding border villages adjoining Myanmar. There are approximately 5,000 village guards who cover Mon and Tuensang districts and Meluri sub-division. They are paid a monthly salary of Rs.500 only and are issued a uniform once in a lifetime and are equipped with a firearm. The institution of village guard is said to have played an important role in protecting villages from militant attacks and providing security to their villages. It is felt that their effectiveness would be enhanced if their monthly remuneration is increased and they are equipped with better weapons.

(j) Due to lack of higher educational infrastructure in the North East, a very large number of students migrate to other parts of the country for education leading to a drain of both manpower and financial resources. Thus, it is estimated that as many as ten thousand students from Nagaland have to go to other parts of the country for their education. This re-emphasises the need for setting up of centres of excellence for professional and higher education in the North East.

(k) In many of the tribal villages of the North Eastern States, disputes particularly those relating to land are settled by the village Councils under customary laws. There is a need to make an in-depth study of the customary judicial system in order to achieve better understanding and dissemination of the prevailing norms and practices.

(l) The system of maintenance of formal land records in the North East is weak and practically absent in tribal areas. This prevents the land-holders from approaching the banks and financial institutions for securing loans as also leading to a large number of land related disputes. It is necessary to evolve a credible system of maintenance of land records.