

**STRATEGY, COMMERCE AND CULTURE:
DIPLOMATIC INTERACTIONS FOCUSING
ON THE NORTHEAST**

*Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the award of the degree of*

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

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2004**



07 April 2004

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled, “**Strategy, Commerce and Culture: Diplomatic Interactions Focussing on the Northeast**” submitted by **PRADIP SAIKIA** in partial fulfillment of the award of the degree of **MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY (M.Phil)** is his original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of this university or of any other university.

We, therefore recommend that this dissertation may be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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***Dedicated
to
the people of
North East***

SIKKIM, WEST BENGAL, NORTH EASTERN STATES,* BHUTAN AND BANGLADESH



Source: Orient Longman School Atlas (Hyderabad: Sangam Books, 1998)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am grateful to all those persons and institutions who have helped me to understand my Northeast. First and foremost my guide, Prof. Pushpesh Pant for suggesting me this topic. I am indebted to him for his guidance. I am thankful to Mr. Sanjoy Hazarika, Mr. Sanjib Baruah, the Library-in-charge (Northeast section, Dibrugarh University), Mr. B.G. Verghese, Prof. Jambholkar and Biswa da for encouraging me to explore the subject. Thanks also to my wonderful classmates, seniors and friends in Delhi and in Assam (Rontu, Dhon, Munna and Bul). I owe my respect and love to my parents, sisters (Papu and Thumki) and well-wishers for believing in me.

I am indeed overwhelmed and obliged to all the libraries for stocking study-material on the Northeast. Materials on the region are very difficult to find out and therefore these institutions are doing a fantastic job for research scholars. A deep sense of gratitude to them- in New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru University Library, Centre for Policy Research Library, Ministry of External Affairs Library, IDSA Library, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Centre for Northeast Studies and Policy Research, American Information Resource Center Library; in Assam: Libraries of Dibrugarh University and Gauhati University and Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development (Guwahati).

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION: STRATEGY, COMMERCE AND CULTURE

My area of interest and the focus of this study is Northeast India comprising the states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Sikkim. The international dimension of the region can be gauged from the fact that just 70 km of it touches the mainland whereas rest of it shares an international boundary with China, Bhutan, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Nepal. This small stretch of land is called the Siliguri corridor lying between Bhutan and Bangladesh. It is along this corridor the region's communication and transportation network is connected. Therefore it is of immense strategic significance. The region is no paradise having wide range of problems from insurgency, cross-border migration, drug-trafficking, national security and economic stagnation among others. Till recently, India did not have healthy relationship with its neighbours and the region was seen in isolation. Indian diplomacy was concerned with the region only on security issues of border management or countering cross-border insurgency. This strategy got a fresh outlook after the end of the Cold war and rise of the Southeast Asian economy just next to the Northeast. Presently the region is getting a new role to serve as a bridge to Southeast Asia with emphasis on trade and commerce. Also, the cultural similarity with neighbouring countries is giving way to reestablishment of trade ties particularly border trade with them.

Taking the above discussion as the starting point, this study would like to explore the various diplomatic interactions with respect to the region. The centre-state negotiations on insurgency as well as the

bilateral discussions on it with neighbouring countries; negotiations on refugee crisis, drug-trafficking, boundary demarcation; and finally the various bilateral and multilateral negotiations on trade. These negotiations will be examined to find out the diplomacy within - How it is going to change the lives of its people? How opening of borders will result in better trade facilities for the region? Whether the profits made, be distributed evenly to each state of the region? How its cultural diversity be accommodated, which has direct linkages to peace talks with the insurgents? What is the role of third countries in insurgent related talks? How economic upliftment could be an answer to the refugee crisis? And how instability could be checked to make way for economic progress?

The most important character, which marks the region, is its diverse ethnic heterogeneity. There is no problem with this diversity but sub-regionalism based on ethnic cleavages grows due to discrimination, exploitation and uneven resource distribution. It then becomes political with demands for secession and rekindling of historical past to calls for ghettoisation. As the Northeast is situated in the transition of East, Southeast and South Asia it has seen migration from ages from these regions and hence this diversity. Nagas have subtribes in Myanmar; the Singphos of Arunachal have their counterparts in Myanmar, Yunnan (China) and Laos under the name Jingpho; the Sherdukpens and the Monpas of West Arunachal have come from Tibet; Zomi and Chins in Manipur and Mizoram migrated from Myanmar; Tai Ahom of Assam from Thailand etc. All such groups stayed together in harmony and practised cross-border trade. The "Southern Silk Route" used to pass through the Northeast having two routes. The northern route aligned through Myitkina, the Hukwang

valley and over the Patkai and Naga hills into Assam and the southern route, passed through Ruili on the Shweli river into Burma and then across the Chin hills and Chindwin river into Manipur.¹ The ethnic consciousness was not there till the British took over the region in 1826. In the pre-colonial period all religious and cultural groups ranging from tribal to orthodox Hindus existed amicably. The British by their divide and rule policy jumbled together the ethnic and religious ideas and divided them along communal lines. One important aspect was the Christianity factor as most hill tribes were Christians whereas valley people were overwhelmingly Hindus and so felt that they should not mix with the latter. It imposed a system of government called 'non-regulated' system over the area to maintain the exclusive identity of the tribes. The Inner Line Permit introduced under the Bengali Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873 restricted the entry of outsiders to the area; Regulation I of 1945 declared that civil and criminal disputes were to be decided according to the customary codes, rights and practices of the people.² The colonial state pitted the communities against one another and the task for the nationalists during the freedom struggle was to show the people the real face of the colonial masters who were indirectly exploiting them by creating differences. According to Prasenjit Biswas, so far as resisting the colonial politics of culture was concerned, the nationalist line of action was effective, but in their attempt to reconstruct a united civil society they had to go along the already constituted markers of differences existing within the civil society.³ The post-colonial state

¹ B.G. Verghese, *India's Northeast Resurgent*, (New Delhi: Konark Publishers, 1996), and p.368.

² Sanjukta Banerji Bhattacharya and Rochona Das, ed., *Perspectives on India's Northeast*, (Calcutta: Bibhasa, 1998), p.iii.

³ Prasenjit Biswas, "Nation from Below and Rebel Consciousness" in Ranju D. Dhamala and Sukalpa Bhattachargee, ed., *Human Rights and Insurgency: The Northeast India*, (New Delhi: Sipra Publications, 2002), p.141.

reinforced the barriers set by the colonial rulers by not making any changes to the excluded areas. Since security was a concern all the blocks were kept under a single unit of Assam except Manipur and Tripura. But hegemonic tendencies of the dominant group led to the balkanization of the region. To satisfy the ethnic aspirations the following states were carved out from Assam-Meghalaya along with Manipur and Tripura in 1972; Nagaland in 1963; Mizoram in 1966; and Arunachal Pradesh in 1987. Independence of Burma in 1937 and partition of India in 1947 posed another dilemma to the people of Northeast. The trade channels were no longer available as political boundaries were drawn which made the region landlocked. India's differences with neighbouring countries sealed any hope of reopening trade ties. Only means of transportation and economic outlet was now through the Siliguri corridor, which increased the costs of production. There was no outlet to the sea, as Chittagong port became part of the erstwhile East Pakistan. The Indian government became occupied more with the western front with Kashmir and so public resentment became both intense and extensive. The centre gave grants, which it thought would energize the region economically but it never happened. In the mid-1950s when the central government planned to set up a refinery in Bihar and not in Assam people were agitated. The government argued that security was the reason but people shot back by asking that whether human security was more important than state security. In 1962 after suffering humiliating reverses in Arunachal in the war with China, Nehru delivered a speech which seemed to suggest that the Government of India was going to abandon Assam without a determined fight with the Chinese. This was taken

as another act of apathy towards the region and people questioned whether India really cared for them.⁴

Carpet bombing during the Mizo insurgency and human rights violations during counter-insurgency operations further widened the gap. People felt no inclination to call themselves Indians. It is common for people of some parts of the Northeast to say that they are going to India when they come to Delhi. No wonder that rest of India hardly knows anything about the Northeast.

Insurgency movements exist almost in each state. In Meghalaya Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC) and Achik Matgrik Liberation Army (AMLA) representing two dominant tribes wants to split the state into two. After series of killings and violent activities the Bodos in Assam has been granted greater autonomy following ceasefire and peace talks. That political parties create problems if two different parties are there in centre and the state becomes evident in the Bodo issue. It was widely assumed in Assam that the Rajiv Gandhi government at the centre patronised the Bodo movement in order to trouble the AGP government of the state which was already frustrated with ULFA's demonstratively overground activities.⁵

The Mizo insurgency was successfully put down when the then Rajiv Gandhi government signed an accord with Laldenga of the Mizo National Front on 30 June 1986. The state has been peaceful but voices from minority groups like Zomi, Hmar, Pavis, Lakhers and Brus (Reang) have been raised. Following oppression many Brus are

⁴ B.K. Roy Burman, "For overcoming the Schizophrenic Alienation of the NorthEast: Outline of a Comprehensive Approach", *Mainstream*, 27 October 2001, p.13.

⁵ Monirul Hussain, "State Identity Movements and Internal Displacement in the Northeast", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 16 December 2000, p. 4519.

internally displaced and forced to take shelter in neighbouring Tripura. In Manipur, the divide is between valley people (Meitei) and hills (Naga, Kuki). The insurgent groups include United National Liberation Front (UNLF), People's Liberation Army (PLA), People's Revolutionary Army of Kangleipak (PREPAK), Kuki National Front and NSCN (IM). Concessions given to the tribals have antagonised the Meiteis resulting in revivalism of old Meitei religion and fanning anti-outsider (anti-Mayang) feeling.⁶ Nagaland boasts the region's oldest insurgency that served as a role model for others. It is today led by NSCN (IM) and NSCN (K). The Government of India is in talks particularly with the IM-group at the prime-ministerial level. The Nagas have never accepted themselves to be a part of India. But analysts have argued that they had never been a unified identity. This line of thought has come up in recent times from within them. Dr. Aosemba says, "In the context of the Nagas, their early society was characterized by practice of head-hunting between and within the tribes. The Nagas were neither in a position to be united nor did they reach or felt the need to organise themselves under one banner... But the advent of the British and their administrative system created the sense of ethnic consciousness and separate identity amongst the Nagas".⁷ In the peace talks the NSCN (IM) group is demanding the inclusion of all the Naga inhabited areas of Manipur; some districts of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh; parts of Myanmar apart from Nagaland which they have termed it as "Greater Nagaland" (Nagalim). It is obvious that other states are not willing to be a party to it and so the conflict is getting spread at the state vs. state level.

⁶ R.S. Grewal, "Ethno Nationalism in Northeastern India", *Journal of the United Service Institution of India*, Vol. CXXXIII, No. 552, April-June 2003, pp. 262-276.

⁷ Dr. Aosemba, *The Naga Resistance Movement: Prospects of Peace and Armed Conflict* (New Delhi: Regency Publications, 2001), p. 104.

Another aspect of these movements other than the ethnic issue is the issue of encroachment of lands. In Assam and in Tripura the movements have sprung up to resist the flow of cross-border migration from Bangladesh. In the census reports of India this flow becomes evident. In Assam the 1971-1991 growth in population was 27.46% which was greater than the national average of 23.85% wherein the Muslim growth was 77.42% in comparison to the Hindu of 41.89%.⁸ Although there was a successful student movement that ended with an accord, the AGP government formed by the same leaders was unable to check the problems succumbing to realpolitik. Some of the leaders being opposed took up arms and formed the organisation – United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) demanding secession from India. The ULFA's concept of Assamese community was different. Their ideological premises were related to more comprehensive socioeconomic structural and developmental issues and the notion of Assam to be more territorial than ethnolinguistically exclusive.⁹

In Tripura the local tribal population has been reduced to 30.95% in 2001 from 52.81% in 1901.¹⁰ At present the struggle is led by two rival groups – the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) and All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTFF). Another new outfit has come up in the North Bengal region including Assam, which has been carrying aggressive militant activities – the Kamtapur Liberation Organistaion. It represents the Rajbanshi group who claims to be ethnoculturally

⁸ *Census of India: 1991*, Series 4, Assam, Part IV-BV (ii) Region (Table C-9), Directorate of Census Operations, Assam.

⁹ Jyotrindra Dasgupta, "Community, Authenticity, and Autonomy: Insurgence and Institutional Development in India's Northeast", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 56, No.2, May 1997, pp. 3454-369.

¹⁰ Anindita Dasputa, "Tripura's Brutal cul-de - sac", <http://www.himalmag.com/december2001/essay.htm>

different and has been socio-economically deprived despite being the “sons of the soil”¹¹. At present they are getting trained in various camps in Bhutan along with other groups of the Northeast. Insurgency in the Northeast would not have survived without the support given by the neighbouring countries. As relations were soured between them and India, the militants got help easily. Porous borders added to their advantage. India helped Shanti-Bahini rebels from Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh and Bangladesh in return supported the Northeastern rebels. Even now it denies presence of any militants despite Indian intelligence reports which suggest otherwise. NSCN (IM) has used adjoining Myanmar Naga areas as base establishing links with Karen, Mon, Arakan and Chin insurgents there and has maintained office in Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, Singapore, Sweden and Thailand.¹² In Bhutan the ULFA, NDFB and KLO groups had set up several camps in the thick-forested areas of southern Bhutan. Pakistan is the constant factor who is providing material support to the militants till now from its base in Bangladesh. China provided training to Naga, Mizo and Meitei rebels. The Nagas turned to China in the sixties for two reasons – (a) it was the inspiration for revolutionary struggles in many parts of the world (b) surveillance in the Indo-Pak border increased and so was difficult to cross clandestinely through that border and so needed an alternative route.¹³ Another factor that has fuelled insurgency is drug trafficking. Golden Triangle, one of the world’s largest drugs producing area is located adjacent to the Northeast and so drug-money is diverted to

¹¹ Bharti Mukherjee, “Ethnicity and Ethnocentrism: Some Reflections on Kamtapur Movement” in K.M. Deka and K.N. Phukan, ed., *Ethnicity on Assam* (Dibrugarh: Centre for NE Studies, 2001), p.106.

¹² Kanti P. Bajpai, *Roots of Terrorism*, (New Delhi, Penguin, 2001), p.100.

¹³ Brig. S.P. Sinha, “Insurgency in Northeast India: The External Dimension”, *Journal of the United Service Institution of India*, vol. CXXXVIII, No. 533, July-September, 1998, pp. 438-447.

buy arms for the rebels. The rebels in Myanmar who include Kachin Independent Army, Burmese Communist Party and Arakan Liberation Party bring drugs upto Tamu from where it reaches Manipur and then to other parts of the Northeast.¹⁴ Unguarded borders and corruption among the officials are other factors that make it easy to move the narcotics to Bangladesh from where it reaches the other parts of the world. One kilo of these drugs can yield a profit of over 50,000 dollars in just two weeks, which shows the magnitude of the trade.¹⁵

Being surrounded by countries, which are economically weak and have ethnic problems of their own, there is a flow of people from these regions to the Northeast in search of better opportunities and to escape discrimination back home. The Chakma refugee issue in Tripura (of Bangladesh) was resolved in 1997. Another Chakma group along with the Hajongs from Bangladesh was settled in Arunachal Pradesh in 1964. And according to Indira-Mujib Agreement of 1972, India is supposed to give them citizenship.¹⁶ Similarly there are refugees from Myanmar (Chins, Arakanese), Nepal and Bhutan (Lhotshampas). The rising numbers of these groups has created a conflictual situation with the natives, as competition for resources have become intense. In an economically backward region where the locals are finding difficult to survive, the added burden of the refugees is eating out the budget of the state governments.

The end of Cold war and rise of new affluent economy of Southeast Asia was a turning point that compelled the Indian experts to

¹⁴ Prakash Singh, "Management of India's Northeastern Borders", *Dialogue*, Vol. 3, No. 3, January-March 2003, pp. 57-70.

¹⁵ Dr. Archana Upadhyay, "Dynamics of smuggling in Southeast Asia", *Dialogue*, vol.5, No.1, July-September 2003, pp.171-181.

¹⁶ Deepak K. Singh, "The Chakma and Hajong Question in Arunachal Pradesh", <http://revolutionarydemocracy.org/rdv2nl/chakma.htm>.

reevaluate their diplomatic agenda and discard the policy of isolation for integration. "Gujral Doctrine" was launched to improve relations with its neighbours. The Awami League Government (which is committed to democratic principles) was pro-India and so the long existing disputes of water sharing and Chakma refugee were resolved. India is keen to access the Chittagong port and open a rail route to Agartala (Tripura) via inland port Chandpur (Bangladesh) as well as to conclude a transshipment agreement with Bangladesh to send Indian goods from one part of India's territory to the eastern states through Bangladesh and vice versa.¹⁷

India's relations improved with Myanmar with visits by political leaders from both sides and an agreement on border-trade (1994). Apart from checking cross-border insurgency Myanmar wanted to balance China with India. Moreover China's dominating presence in Myanmar was a matter of concern for India. China was involved in upgrading and expanding cargo-handling facilities at Myanmar's five major ports and building a major naval base on Hainaggyi Island and a major surveillance base on the Coco Island.¹⁸ Although it was a concern for India, at the other level relations with China were also improving. In his visit to Delhi in 1996 President, Jiang Zemin openly stated that India and Pakistan should settle their differences bilaterally through talks, which showed that China had distanced itself from an overtly pro-Pakistani position on the Kashmir issue.¹⁹ China wanted to improve its economically backward regions of

¹⁷ Harum Ur Rashid, *Indo-Bangladesh Relations: An Insider's View*, (New Delhi: Har Anand Publications, 2002), p.110.

¹⁸ Swaran Singh, "Myanmar: The Strategic Hub of the 21st century Asia", *Journal of the United Service Institution of India*, Vol. CXXVIII, No. 532, April-June 1998, pp. 244-258.

¹⁹ John Cherian, "Commemorating Sino-India Ties", *Frontline*, 14 April 2000, p. 55.

Yunnan, Sichuan, Guishou and Guangxi for which it wanted an outlet to the sea through Northeastern India. Southeast Asia, particularly Thailand was keen to trade with India via the Northeast. In order to channelize such desires, India launched its "Look East Policy" in the early 1990s with the emphasis on trade. India became a dialogue partner of ASEAN in 1995 and most recently the relationship has been upgraded to summit level. It enables India not only to integrate itself further with ASEAN but also play an active role in strengthening the initiative for ASEAN Integration which aims at helping the four new members – Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam to catch up in development with the rest of the region.²⁰ Other than bilateral trade relationship, India has become member of several sub-regional initiatives. On 6 June 1997 India became member of BIMST-EC comprising of India, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Thailand which has identified trade, investment and industry, tourism, fisheries, energy, infrastructure and transportation as the areas of cooperation.²¹ At the track II level India is part of the Kunming Initiative along with China, Myanmar and Bangladesh that came up in 1999. It is also a part of Mekong-Ganga Cooperation that uses cultural commonness as the binding force in the areas of tourism, culture, education and transport and communication.²² The opening of border trade in Nathula in Sikkim with China has given the much-needed Chinese recognition to the Indian State of Sikkim. India also signed agreements on legal, educational, phyto-sanitary, issue of visas, renewable energy, ocean science, science and technology and

²⁰ A. Lakshmana Chetty, "Evolving India – South East Asia Partnership in the Post Cold War Era", *Dialogue*, vol. 5, No. 1, July-September 2003, pp. 119-135.

²¹ *Declaration on the Establishment of the Bangladesh-India-Sri Lanka-Thailand Economic Cooperation*, BIST-EC, Bangkok, 6 June 1997.

²² *Vientiane Declaration*, <http://www.geocities.com/mekong-ganga 2000/inaugural.html>.

cultural exchanges with China.²³ There are plans to open up the Northeast and connect it to Kunming (China), Mae Sot (Thailand) and Sittwe (Myanmar).

This study looks into these developments, which provides a fresh approach to the Northeast with the trade angle. The focus is on the diplomatic undertakings and negotiations at the multilateral and bilateral level as well as on centre to state level. It is divided into three chapters on the three issues of insurgency, refugee and trade. On the chapter of insurgency, state-wise status of the insurgency movements are given explaining the actors, issues and negotiations involved with the Government of India. In the next chapter the refugee crisis is detailed along with the bilateral negotiations of India with its neighbours. Finally the chapter on trade deals with the diplomacy behind the "Look East Policy", BIMST-EC, MGC, Kunming Initiative and others along with the border trade. The chapters on insurgency and refugees are important in the sense it shows how the government is trying to solve them and the progress made till now, on which depends the eventual success of trade and commerce. Otherwise this changed strategy of Indian government vis-à-vis the Northeast, emphasizing trade, will not reach its intended end.

23 C.V. Ranganathan, "India and China: Learning to Learn", *China Report*, vol. 39, No. 4, October-December 2003, pp. 545-552.

Chapter II

TALKS TO RESOLVE INSURGENCY

Northeastern India is characterized by the presence of a multiplicity of tribal and sub-tribal groups with as many languages, which creates problems in the process of nation building. Since independence, the politics of domination and identity assertion on claims of ancestral homelands has given rise to insurgent armed struggles in the entire region. The ethnic groups are using insurgency as a pressure-tactic, to meet their demands of greater autonomy, statehood or even secession. The latest trends show that more and more groups are becoming conscious of their ethnic status, which indicate that one day the whole of Northeast might get engulfed in ethnic-cleansing. There are feelings of alienation and neglect due to step-motherly treatment by the centre. Moreover the insurgents get easy sanctuary in neighbouring countries owing to the porous international border. From there they conduct training and get engaged in smuggling of arms and narcotics to keep their struggle alive. So the Indian government's strategy with respect to the Northeast has focused on security matters and maintaining the territorial integrity of the nation.

In the 1990's, this strategy got a fresh approach. As relations with neighbouring countries improved, Northeast was no longer seen in isolation but as a potential growth region. Recent developments show that Indian diplomacy is at various levels of discussions to use the Northeast as a bridge to Southeast Asia with emphasis on trade. So keeping this in the picture, this chapter tries to find out the various dimensions of insurgency and how the government is trying to respond to it.

Theoretical discourse on ethnicity

Post-Cold war world has been marked by conflicts of a peculiar kind, which are of low intensity involving one or two but not more than two nation states, filled with cries of "us" versus "them" and above all, threatens the sovereignty and territorial integrity of a nation state. This is what is referred to as ethnic conflict. Be it the Irish problem, the Cyprus issue, the Kurdish

problem in Iraq, the Eritrean-Ethiopian conflict, Muslims in Philippines or Indonesia, East Timor, Tamils in Sri Lanka, racism in the US etc., no continent is untouched with the outbreak of ethnic violence.

The definition of ethnicity in a narrow context would mean the ability to identify commonness among groups. The word 'ethnic' is derived from a Greek word 'ethnos' meaning nation, which refers to the unity of people of common blood.¹ According to Paul Brass, ethnicity or ethnic identity involves –i) subject self-consciousness ii) a claim to status and recognition either as a superior group or as an equal group iii) objective cultural markers such as kinship, descent, birth, endogamy and exogamy religion or race, language, customs etc.² In his book, *Ethnic Insurgency and National Integration*, Mahfuzul Haque shows three approaches to define an ethnic group- 1) objective- it stresses on cultural features like language, territory, religion, colour etc to distinguish between groups. 2) Subjective- Along with cultural markers what distinguishes groups is the belief of groups on their common descent or memories of colonization or migration. 3) Syncretistic- this approach states that an ethnic group has five characteristics-

a) A subjective belief in real or assumed historical antecedents b) a symbolic or real geographical centre c) shared cultural emblems such as race, language, religion, dress and diet d) self-ascribed awareness of distinctiveness and belonging to the group e) recognition by others of the group differentiation.³ Out of these three, the last one is more comprehensible and therefore appropriately defines an ethnic group. In the first one boundaries of cultural features overlap and in the second case subjective definitions make it impossible to answer the basic question of how a group arrives at subjective self-consciousness in the first place.

¹ Abu Nasar Saied Ahmed, "Ethnicity: Source of Division or Strength" in K.M. Deka and K.N. Phukan, ed., *Ethnicity in Assam* (Dibrugarh University: Centre for Northeast Studies, 2001), p.22.

² Quoted in Madhumita Srivastava's, *International Dimensions of Ethnic Conflict: A Case Study of Kashmir and Northern Ireland*, (New Delhi: Bhavana Books and Prints, 2001), p.35.

³ Mahfuzul Haque, *Ethnic insurgency and National Integration* (New Delhi: Lancers Books, 1997).

Existence of ethnic groups, does not give rise to violence. There are causes which flare up ethnic tensions ending in conflicts. The first and the most basic cause is the realization of one's ethnic identity. Factors which lead to ethnic consciousness are- a history of suppression by the dominant group; religious or linguistic dominance; failure of the modernization process to create an equilibrium between different regions or communities either due to developmental constraints or political considerations; growth of majoritarian democracies where there is no space for minorities; support from international and regional linkages of ethnic groups.⁴ According to David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild, ethnic conflicts are caused by the "fear of the future, lived through the past".⁵ There is a fear among ethnic groups of getting assimilated in a dominant culture and losing their identity. Also considering the scarcity of resources, there is the fear of losing their own resources to others. With modernization and rise of nation-states, the greater emphasis has been on nation building (homogenization of the society). The ethnic groups see this as violation of their individual character and perceive "the state" as the enemy. At the same time, politicization of the issue by political entrepreneurs have mobilized members, polarized society and magnified intergroup dilemmas further worsening the delicate situation.

The rise of ethnic violence is more common in post-colonial societies of Asia and Africa than the Western countries because the former are multi-ethnic and the latter is not. The leaders of Asian or African states by blindly copying the Western model of administration/development failed to accommodate the pluralist features of their society. Cold war era acted as a controlling agent of the issue, as any element of regression was seen from the superpower angle and nations were busy bandwagoning with one or the other group. Its end has unleashed the suppressed aspirations of these groups. With no outside control, "self-determination" has become the "mantra" of their existence.

⁴ B.C. Upreti, "Ethnic Identity Consciousness and Nation-Building in Plural Societies", in Gurnam Singh, ed., *Ethno-Nationalism and Emerging World (Dis) Order* (New Delhi: Kanishka Publishers, 2002), p.5.

⁵ David A Lake and Donald Rothchild,(ed.), *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict: Fear Diffusion and Escalation* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998) p.7.

State wise insurgency movements: Actors, issues, and negotiations –

Following is an analysis of the state-wise distribution of insurgent movements; about their various dimensions-Who are the actors? What are the issues? Whether negotiations have taken place? What has been discussed and what is the present status of them? The militant struggles of United Liberation Front of Asom in Assam and those in Tripura have their origin in the refugee issue. Therefore, they will be discussed in the next chapter on refugees.

Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim: status of insurgency in these relatively peaceful states

Arunachal Pradesh is the most peaceful state in the Northeast other than Sikkim. But spillover effects from Nagaland are disturbing its peace. Its Tirap and Changlong districts have significant Naga population and the NSCN (Khaplang) dominates here. They use it to cross to Myanmar. Bhutan's crackdown on ULFA bases is feared to raise an inflow of these rebels to Arunachal.

Indigenous groups exist- United Liberation Volunteers of Arunachal Pradesh (ULVA), the Arunachal Dragon Force (ADF) formed in 2001 rechristened as East India Liberation Front (EILF) is active in the Lohit district, widely believed to be created by NSCN (IM) and ULFA to expand their influence, its declared goal is the protection of the ethnic identity of the indigenous Arunachalis from outsiders and the struggle for an independent homeland for the Khamti tribe in the state.⁶ The Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi expressed his concern over the sanctuaries enjoyed by insurgent outfits in Tirap and Changlang districts of Arunachal Pradesh particularly ULFA and NSCN (IM) and has called upon the centre, which is engaged in peace process with the Naga rebel outfit, to compel it to strictly adhere to ceasefire ground rules.⁷ Apart from this, another source of ethnic violence is getting directed

⁶ Ajai Sahni, "Survey of Conflict resolution in India's Northeast", [http://www.satp.org/publication/faultlines/vol.12/Article 3.htm](http://www.satp.org/publication/faultlines/vol.12/Article%203.htm)

⁷ Bijay Sankar Bora, "ULFA finding dens in Arunachal: CM", *The Assam Tribune*, (Guwahati), 20 October 2003, p.1.

towards the Chakma and Hajong refugees from Bangladesh, which will be elaborated in the next chapter.

Sikkim is the quietest of the lot. But neighbouring Maoist insurgency in Nepal has raised the alarm for similar outbreak in Sikkim.

Meghalaya: Demands to split the state along ethnic lines

Recently, Meghalaya has been engulfed with insurgency, the reason being common acrimony against “dkhars” or outsiders and inter-tribal rivalry (major tribes-Garo, Khasi and Jaintia). It was in 1978-80, during the time of All Assam Students Union agitation that the Khasi students Union, launched a movement to detect and delete the name of foreigners from the electoral rolls and deport them, with 1951 being the cut off year. In Shillong, which is 40% non-tribal, occasional riots occur in October which students staying in boarding houses/hostels during that time call it the “October festival”.⁸

The first militant tribal council in the state was the Hynniewtrep Achik Liberation Council wherein Hynniewtreps represented Khasis and Jaintias whereas Achiks to Garos in a common fight against outsiders. It split in 1992 forming Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC) and Achik Matgrik Liberation Army (AMLA). AMLA surrendered on 25 October 1994 at Tura. But its remnants have formed the Achik National Volunteer Council (ANVC) in December 1995, which demands the establishment of an ‘Achik Land’ in the areas of Garo hills comprising the present districts of Garo hills in Meghalaya and a large chunk of Kamrup and Goalpara districts of Assam. Of late the entire Garo hills have become the hiding grounds of various outfits of neighbouring states providing training facilities and weaponry. Both the groups have been banned since 16 November 2000. Although a peace process has started with ANVC, launched by the Congress led Meghalaya Democratic Alliance in the state by roping in the Garo Baptist Convention as a negotiator; it has faced a setback. Following the killing of eight ANVC cadres on 26

⁸ Binalakshmi Nepram, “The Origin and Impact of Small Wars and Insurgencies in the Northeast”, *Himalayan and Central Asian Studies*, vol.5, no. 3-4, July –December 2001, p.63.

September 2003 by Meghalaya police the outfit has rejected the peace initiative, which is politically opposed by the NCP.⁹

Assam: Bodo talks for greater autonomy

The Bodos are the largest plains tribe of Assam and their quest is to safeguard indigenous tribal rights, reclaim tribal lands from Bengali and Assamese settlers and establish the identity of Bodo language and culture. Their area of domain includes Kokrajhar and parts of Goalpara district of Assam. This is strategic area, as the rail and road that connects the entire Northeast to rest of India passes through it.

The Bodos were historically the earliest settlers to the Northeast and were spread across the region. The coming of Ahoms and their defeat in their hands pushed them to remote areas. The Bodos were first politically organized under the umbrella of the Tribal League in 1933 with the emergence of an embryonic middle class under the guidance of Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma. But it failed to realize their aspirations. The struggle was then taken up by Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA), formed in 1967. Along with the *Bodo Sahitya Sabha*, it fought relentlessly against the imposition of Assamese language as a medium of instruction in schools.¹⁰ It demanded an autonomous region, which was upgraded in 1973 to the demand for Udayachal, a Union Territory.¹¹ But PTCA also failed with shifting allegiance from one party to another. It was then in 1986 the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) took up the initiative. In 1987, the demand for union territory was upgraded to full-fledged statehood-Bodoland. Having seen the failure of “the memorandum route” they

⁹ “ANVC rejects peace move, setback for Meghalaya Govt”, *The Sentinel* (Guwahati), 14 October 2003.

¹⁰ Chandan Kr. Sharma, “The Bodo Movement: A Preliminary Enquiry into the role of the Middle Class and the State” in Girin Phukan, ed., *Political Dynamics of Northeast India* (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 200), p. 128.

¹¹ Chandana, Bhattacharjee, “Bodoland Movement: Issues and Lessons” in P.S. Datta, ed., *The Northeast and the Indian State: Paradoxes of a Periphery*, (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1995), p.196.

decided to take up arms thus ushering a militant struggle under the ABSU President Upendra Nath Brahma.¹²

The Bodo Security Force (BSF) later renamed as National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) under Ranjan Daimari was formed on 3 October 1986 for an independent Bodo Nation. But the monolithic character of Bodos was shattered when another group, Bodo Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF) under Prem Singh Brahma split from NDFB in June 1996.¹³ It demanded a separate state of Bodoland. Considering the close proximity of the region to the borders, the Bodos were initially trained in handling arms and explosives by the Special Security Bureau (SSB) as a second line of defence against any invading forces, which has been criticized as paving the ground for the spread of Bodo insurgent activities.¹⁴

Following the rise of militancy, the state government called the ABSU for talks in 1989. Even after eight rounds of talks there was no agreement with the contentious issue of the inclusion of number of villages.¹⁵ The government was not inclined to include 1035 more villages with no tribal population as per the government record in the proposed Bodo area. Finally on 20 February 1993 an accord was signed between the centre (Rajesh Pilot, then Minister of State - Internal Security), state government (Hiteswar Saikia, the then Chief Minister of Assam and KIS Rao, then Addl. Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam), the ABSU (SK Bwiswamutiary) and the Bodo People's Action Committee (Rabi Ram Brahma).¹⁶ According to it, a Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) was to be formed in an area of 2300 sq.km covering lower Assam districts of Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Barpeta, Nalbari, Darrang, Mangaldai and Sonitpur.

¹² Deepangshu Dev Sharma, "Accord for Settlement", *Northeast Sun*, 15-28 February 2003.

¹³ M.S. Prabhakara, "The Bodo Question", *Frontline*, 2 August 2002, p.45.

¹⁴ Ved Marwah, *Uncivil Wars*, (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 1995), p.312.

¹⁵ Chandana Bhattacharjee, *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Memorandum of Settlement, (Bodo Accord), Guwahati, 20 February 1993 Annexure VI in Subir Ghosh, Frontier Travails : Northeast- the politics of a mess* (New Delhi: Macmillan India Ltd, 2001).

Even after its creation, the Bodo issue did not settle down peacefully. Many factors contributed to the dissatisfaction. The BAC did not have enough powers to function efficiently- no powers over law and order, security and local administration. Polls to the council were never held. The reason behind was the main contention regarding demarcation of borders. The Bodo leaders demanded the inclusion of 515 additional villages in the council. When they latter realized that these villages were located in the international border and the government was reluctant to include due to security reasons, they were disillusioned with the distrust shown towards them. Also, the accord was done hastily, which was why to avoid any pitfalls Hiteswar Saikia wanted to clearly demarcate the boundaries. Another difficulty was the opposition by the non-tribal population in the region supported by the AGP government.

These were the reasons why extremist groups like NDFB and Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) resurfaced. Since then ethnic cleansing by the groups have been continuing against the Bengali settlers from erstwhile East Pakistan, Muslim minorities, Koch-Rajbongshi and Santhal communities.

The BLT came to a ceasefire agreement with the centre on 29 March 2000.¹⁷ There were contacts made between both sides prior to it. Also, the centre was closely monitoring the group after it declared suspension of its activities during the Kargil war. The ceasefire has been opposed by NDFB and is targeting members of BLT, ABSU, BPAC, *Bodo Sahitya Sabha* (BSS) and All Bodo Women's Welfare Association.

The ground rules were laid down in a tripartite meeting on 28 and 29 March 2000. According to it, the BLT would abjure the path of violence; it would not engage in violent or unlawful activities; would agree to abide by the Constitution and the laws of the land and would set up a joint monitoring group on the lines of the one in Nagaland.¹⁸ After a series of talks between Government of India, Government of Assam and BLT, an accord was signed to create a self-governing body for the Bodo areas in Assam called Bodoland

¹⁷ K. Chaudhuri, "Turning to Peace", *Frontline*, 14 March 2003, p. 48.

¹⁸ Kalyan Choudhuri, "Turning to Peace", *Frontline*, 14 March 2003, pp.47-49.

Territorial Council (BTC) under Constitutional protection of the Sixth Schedule. It would have more powers than BAC. It was signed by Hagrama Basumatary (BLT), P.K. Dutta (Chief Secretary, Government of Assam) and R.C. A. Jain (Secretary, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India) under the presence of Tarun Gogoi (Chief Minister, Assam) and L.K. Advani (Dy. Prime Minister of India).¹⁹ The number of villages included was 3082, more than earlier 2,500 in BAC. But dispute over 91 still exists. The boundary demarcation is still to be carried. Another issue in the accord is the ST (Hills) status to the Bodos living in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam, which is vehemently opposed by Karbi Anglong District Council, and also equal status to all tribals in three autonomous councils (Tiwa, Rabha and Mising), which the latter opposes. So, for proper implementation these issues should have been settled before the signing of the accord, which shows lack of serious attitude of the government. It says it will "sympathetically consider the demand of Bodo Kacharis".²⁰

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An important point in the accord is the safeguard of the rights of non-tribals because although Sixth Schedule applies to Karbi Anglong in Assam there is no provision for participation in the political process or land rights for non-tribals, which is there in BTC.²¹ But the non-tribals are not pleased, Brajen Mahanta, Convenor of the *Sanmilita Janagosthiya Sangram Samiti* (SJSS) an umbrella group of non-Bodo tribals said, "The accord has been drafted without taking into consideration the genuine fears of non-Bodos, whose population is more than the Bodos, even within the proposed council".²² Even within the Bodos, opposition has come from an erstwhile BAC chairman, Kanakeswar Narzary who said that the accord was signed in a hurried manner.²³

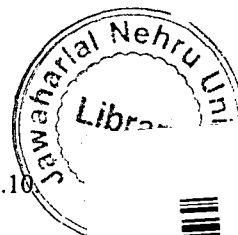
¹⁹ *Memorandum of Settlement, 10 Feb. 2003, Northeast Sun, 1-14 March 2003, p.10.*

²⁰ "Bodoland- Territorial Council to be set up", *The Hindu*, 11 February 2003.

²¹ "Balm for the scared", *The Statesman*, 15 February 2003.

²² "Non-Bodos call bandh to protest accord", *Indian Express*, 12 February 2003.

²³ "Supreme Court Admits plea against Bodo Pact", *Indian Express*, 19 April 2003.



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The BTC has started to function as its members were sworn in on 7 December 2003.

Mizoram: Successful implementation of a peace accord

Among all the accords the centre has signed with groups in the Northeast, the Mizo accord has been the most successful one, ending a 20 years old insurgency when a settlement was reached with Laldenga, leader of the militant Mizo National Front in 1986. Since then the state has been more or less peaceful.

The Mizos in the Lushai Hills have always nourished a grievance against the plain people-Assam; the imposition of Assamese language and the “step motherly treatment” of the Government of Assam towards the tribal areas. This was why it protested to the States Reorganization Commission in 1954 against the alleged discrimination by the Assam government. This was further aggravated with the events that followed. In 1959 Mizo Hills suffered one of the worst famines in history- “Mautam”, flowering of bamboo once in sixty years. It results in high fertility among rodents on a diet of bamboo seeds devouring crops and stored grains. What complicated matters was the inadequate relief by the Government of Assam. The Mizo Cultural Society, formed to provide relief to its people transformed into Mizo Famine Front in 1960.²⁴ As seeds of alienation developed roots it took the shape of the militant Mizo National Front (MNF) with Laldenga as President in 1962.

In 1963, New Delhi proposed a formula “the Scottish pattern” to solve the problem of hill areas in Assam, according to which a committee will be set up peopled from the hill areas to decide their administration. But it was rejected, meanwhile militancy had started to engulf the region and on 1 March 1966 MNF made a formal announcement declaring independence from the Indian union. The governments were taken by complete surprise and were undecided how to react even after two days of the announcement. But the

²⁴ Subir Ghosh, *Frontier Travails: Northeast- the politics of a mess* (New Delhi: Macmillan India Ltd, 2001), p.235.

reaction that followed was sheer terror as IAF bombers were requisitioned to strafe the MNF positions. The people of Aizawl have still not forgiven "India" for "bombarding" the whole population, as if they were all enemies.²⁵ Another draconian anti-insurgency measure was the "grouping of villages"- the Indian Army would move and surround the notified villages before dawn, issue quick notices to the villagers to take their bedding etc. and move to a new site causing acute human trauma. The idea was to isolate them from the insurgents. It was not successful due to the alleged support of the villagers to the latter.²⁶

Even after giving union territory status to Mizoram in 1971, insurgency did not stop. The counter- insurgency operations intensified. The rebels were getting tired and Laldenga who was in Pakistan got disillusioned with the latter. So when a peace advisory committee was set up under the Mizoram Pradesh Congress Committee President Lalthanwala he grabbed the initiative for talks in August 1975. An agreement was signed with Indira Gandhi to stop all hostilities in February 1976. The peace was short-lived as many underground rebels were against. With the coming of a new government in 1977 under Morarji Desai the talks did not proceed further as the latter was insensitive to the Northeast as a whole. Coming back of Indira Gandhi resumed the talks between G. Parthasarthy, Mrs. Gandhi's emissary and Laldenga. The list of 23 demands- full statehood for Mizoram, special Constitutional provision guaranteeing the state complete autonomy, dismissal of the Sailo government (then Mizoram government), dissolution of the Mizoram Legislative Assembly; appointment of a council of advisors to the Lieutenant Governor headed by Laldenga himself, pending fresh elections; inclusion of all the areas inhabited by the Mizos even those in other states/countries (Burma, Bangladesh); separate flag for Mizoram, membership for Mizoram in the UN; a separate university.²⁷ The government agreed on the first and last ones. Suspicion over Laldenga's attitudes ended the talks in 1982.

²⁵ Ved Marwah, *Uncivil Wars*, p.237.

²⁶ Sajal Nag, *Contesting Marginality: Ethnicity, Insurgency and Subnationalism in Northeast India*, (New Delhi: Manohar, 2002), p.246.

²⁷ Sajal Nag, *Ibid*, p.,264.

With the coming up of a popular government of Rajiv Gandhi, talks resumed in 1985 between Union Home Secretary, R.D. Pradhan and Laldenga facilitated by then Mizoram Chief Minister Lalthanwala. R.D. Pradhan, a 1962 batch IAS officer, also worked on political accords on Punjab and Assam, and later was appointed Governor of Arunachal Pradesh. In his memoirs, Pradhan has mentioned that there were four issues during his talks with Laldenga. They are- (i) Laldenga's demand to be made the Chief Minister (ii) to withdraw prosecution against MNF members and grant them pardon (iii) that similar to Nagaland, no Act of Parliament in respect of resources under the land in Mizoram should apply to the state unless the State Assembly agreed (iv) grant for statehood to Mizoram.²⁸ After discussions, Government of India accepted all his demands and the MNF cadres agreed to lay down their arms and came overground. Lalthanwala, gladly relinquished his stable seat as Chief Minister to Laldenga by stating that this was "to bring about lasting peace and reconciliation in Mizoram, and also for national unity and emotional integrity."²⁹ Mizoram was given statehood in 1986 following the signing of the accord on 30 June 1986. The state has since remained peaceful but economic backwardness persists. There has been growth of other tribal organizations- Zomi, Hmar, Pavis, Lakhers and Brus(Reang) who allege the domination and oppression of the majority Mizo community.

Manipur: Confrontation with the Nagas

Manipur is the only state, which has seen no accords although a number of insurgent outfits exist. It has been complicated recently by the ceasefire agreement with NSCN (IM) and its concept of Nagalim (greater Nagaland) which asks for a greater chunk of Manipur. The only peace initiative was during the Chief Minister R.K. Jaichandra Singh towards the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in 1988. But it ended after the arrest of its leader Manikanta by Assam Rifles. Therefore, herein a very brief description of the main insurgency outfits is shown and the issues they are fighting for. Manipur

²⁸ R.D. Pradhan, *Working with Rajiv Gandhi* (New Delhi: Harper collins, 1995), p.120.

²⁹ Chittaranjan Nag, *Post-Colonial Mizo Politics (1947-1998)* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1999), p.103.

is 90% hills and 10% plain (the Imphal valley where majority of the population resides). The valley comprises of the Vaishnavite Meities and Muslim Meitei-Pangals. In the hills the chief tribes are Kukis and Nagas. The main strands of militancy are the Meitei insurgency- United National Liberation Front (UNLF), People's Liberation Army (PLA) and Peoples Revolutionary Army of Kangleipak (PREPAK) which asserts Meitei identity, propagates anti-“Mayang” (outsider) and pan-mongoloid sentiments and opposes the concept of ‘Greater Nagaland’; hill insurgency-Kuki (Kuki National Front, to safeguard their identity against Nagas, Hmars, Paites, Vaipheis and Gangtes) and Naga (NSCN (IM)). The Kuki-Naga rivalry has raised major concern in recent times with loss of lives on both sides. The Kukis are fighting for a separate state within the Indian Union whereas the NSCN (IM) is for ‘Greater Nagaland’, which is supported by Tangkhul Nagas in Manipur. Historically the British used the Kukis against the Nagas. Also both of them want to control the lucrative border trade in Moreh (Manipur) and there are differences of opinion in the creation of a separate district for Sadar hills with its headquarters at Kangpokpi.³⁰

Nagaland: Peace process in progress, raising hopes for the region

The Nagas have never considered being a part of India and so had demanded secession much before 1947. There have been three landmark agreements with the Nagas prior to the latest peace talks with NSCN (IM)- the Naga Akbar Hydari Accord (1947), Sixteen Point Agreement (1960) and Shillong Accord (1975).

In April 1946 was born the Naga National council (NNC), which demanded the safeguard of Naga identity. To accommodate their demands the Governor of Assam, Sir Akbari Hydari signed a nine-point agreement with the Nagas in June 1947. But its last point became a bone of contention, which could have any interpretation. It said- “the Governor of Assam as the agent of

³⁰ N.C. Asthana and Anjali Nirmal, *Terrorism, Insurgencies and Counter insurgency Operations*, (Jaipur: Pointer Publications, 2001), p.107.

the Government of Indian Union will have a special responsibility for a period of 10 years to ensure the due observance of this agreement; at the end of the this period the Naga council will be asked, whether they require the above agreement to be extended for a further period or a new agreement regarding the future of Naga period at".³¹ Being dissatisfied with the accord some Naga leaders, which included A.Z. Phizo and Khugato Sukhai went to Mahatma Gandhi who was compassionate to them and said, "... if you do not wish to join the Indian Union' no one will force you to do that. The Congress will not do that".³² But Jawaharlal Nehru was clearly opposed and made it clear that no part of India including Nagaland can be separated from India. When the NNC held a plebiscite on 16 May 1951 almost 99% Nagas voted for secession and when it was presented before Nehru he vehemently denied any independence. This resulted in the creation of Naga Federal Government (NFG) and Naga Federal Army (NFA) in 1956 by Phizo and a militant struggle started. Phizo propagated that Nagaland was never part of India but conquered by the British and that therefore when the British suzerainty lapsed, the Nagas *ipso facto* became independent once again.³³

Another agreement was signed in 1960 –Sixteen Point agreement, which only satisfied the moderates – in 1963, Nagaland, was conferred the status of state. The first successful elections in Nagaland in 1964 showed the Naga people's resolve to be a part of the Indian Union. This also marked the gradual marginalisation of the NNC. A peace mission was constituted in April 1964 with Jayaprakash Narayan (noted Sarvodaya leader), Bimala Prasad Chaliha(then Chief Minister of Assam) and Rev. Michael Scott(a British citizen) which was able to conduct a ceasefire. But doubts arose over the choice of certain words. Six rounds of 'ministerial' talks were held between the Indian government and the rebels led by Kughato Sukhai, Ato Kilonser, Chishi

³¹ *The Naga-Akbar Hydari Accord, 1947 Annexure III* in Subir Ghosh, *Ibid*.

³² M. Gairangmei R. Naga, *Naga Insurgency as a Challenge to Indian Diplomacy*, Dissertation, (New Delhi: CSDILE/SIS, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 1997), p.41. See also Kanti P. Bajpai, *Roots of Terrorism* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2002), p.65.

³³ Prakash Singh, *Kohima to Kashmir* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2001), p.70.

Swu and Zimik Ramyo between February 1966 and October 1967.³⁴ But the talks failed and hostilities broke out again. Various reasons were cited for the failure of the talks- the Government of India suspected M.Scott of having a dubious role; the rebels contacted the Chinese violating the ceasefire; lastly the Church, which is intricately involved with Mizo life, was apprehensive about the mission.³⁵ In 1972, the centre banned NNC, the NFG and the NFA. Massive counter insurgency operations forced the rebels to negotiate culminating in the Shillong accord in 1975 signed by L.P. Singh on behalf of the Government of India and T Temjunba, S. Dehru, Z Ramyo, M Assa and Kevi Allay on behalf of the representatives of the underground organizations. But its final point proved controversial which said, "It was agreed that the representatives of the underground organization should have reasonable time to formulate other issues for discussions for final settlement".³⁶ There was no mention for the solution of the Naga problem other than lying down of arms and accepting the Constitution of India.

The accord also resulted in the division of the Naga leaders and the subsequent split in the underground organization. A group of NNC disapproved it and formed the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN) under Thungaleng Muivah, Isak Chisi Swu and S. S. Khaplang on Burmese soil in 1980. But inter-clan divisions resulted in a split in 1988- one group led by Isak Muivah-NSCN (IM) and another by Khaplang-NSCN (K).

Following the Shillong Accord, peace process of any kind did not take place. People desired for peace in this period of intense violence. With the split in NSCN, the situation deteriorated further. Rajiv Gandhi tried to make efforts but without success.

But in the mid-1990s things started to change. The then Prime Minister Narasimha Rao met the NSCN (IM) leaders Isak and Muivah in Paris in 1995

³⁴ Subir Ghosh, *Frontier Travails*, p.213. See also Aosemba, *The Naga Resistance Movement : Prospects of Peace and Armed Conflict* (New Delhi : Regency Publications, 2001)

³⁵ Omprakash Mishra and Sucheta Ghosh, ed., *Terrorism and Low Intensity Conflict in South Asian Region* (New Delhi: Manak Publication, 2003).

³⁶ *Shillong Accord: 1975*, Annexure III in Subir Ghosh, *Ibid*.

and on 23 February 1996, he offered to hold unconditional talks with them. In its response the NSCN (IM) set three conditions –

1. Negotiations should focus on sovereignty
2. Talks would be held in a third country.
3. A third party mediator would be included.³⁷

Rao's Successor Deve Gowda, continued the talks by sending his emissary Rajesh Pilot (Member of Parliament and former Minister of State, Internal Security) to Bangkok secretly in November 1996 and himself met the leaders on 3 February 1997 in Zurich.³⁸ Observing such development the Naga people took the initiative and tried to reconcile the differences of the underground. Thus the Naga Hoho (an apex body of all Naga tribals council comprising of 52 Naga tribes) along with prominent NGOs like the Naga Peoples Movement for Human Rights, Naga Mother's Association, Naga Student Federation and Church leaders held discussion to start the peace process and put pressure on the rebel groups. But the talks did not move smoothly and Home Minister Inderjit Gupta told the Rajya Sabha that their insistence on secession from India was unacceptable. Despite this the first round of talks between NSCN (IM) and Indian officials were held in Bangkok in July 1997 following which a ceasefire agreement was signed under Inder K. Gujral to create congenial atmosphere for negotiations.³⁹ The ceasefire was received with skepticism, about a political dialogue with a group which wanted nothing short of secession and wondered that it would be equally disappointing like the earlier ceasefire of 1964-67 which had generated immense hopes. From the NSCN (IM) side Isac Swu made the agreement public in the Unrecognized Nation's People's Organization (UNPO) in Geneva with their conditions:

- i) Talks between them to be held without either side stipulating any preconditions.

³⁷ • Ajai Sahni, Ibid.

³⁸ K. Chaudhuri, "Truce and Violence", *Frontline*, 20 July 2001. p.26.

³⁹ A. Lunungsang Ao., *From Phizo to Muivah: The Naga National Question in Northeastern India* (New Delhi: Mittal publications, 2002).

- ii) That the talks be held at the highest level (prime ministerial).
- iii) At a venue anywhere outside India or in Nagaland.⁴⁰

The other group NSCN (K) kept out of the negotiations. The second round of talks took place in Geneva. At this stage the talks were not moving at a faster pace because contentious issues were avoided so as not to end the talks prematurely. Also the outside venue with prime ministerial level took its own time. The government also had a long-term strategy. By building the talks with the longest serving insurgent groups could further facilitate talks with other groups in the Northeast if it would be successfully achieved.

The Atal Bihari Vajpayee government carried the talks by appointing Swaraj Kaushal (former Mizoram Governor and a Supreme Court lawyer, husband of BJP leader Sushma Swaraj who had brokered the Mizo accord) as its emissary. He held talks with the leaders in Zurich (27 July 1998) and in Amsterdam (September 1998) to extend the ceasefire.⁴¹ Later, over differences of opinion with the centre, Swaraj Kaushal resigned. He was replaced by a former Home Secretary, K. Padmanabhaiah, who brokered an extension of ceasefire on 4 August 1999, and again on September 2000 till 31 July 2001.⁴² Kantipudi Padmanabhaiah, a 1961 batch IAS officer of Maharashtra cadre, was made the principal negotiator because of his experience as an able administrator although he had no experience with the Northeast (he had studied Geology and Financial Management).⁴³

On 26 August 2000, Isak Swu wrote to the Prime Minister that NSCN (IM) would be severing the talks if the government did not extend the ceasefire to Naga-inhabited areas of other states.⁴⁴ It argued that observing ceasefire only in Nagaland and fighting with the army in other states did not prove meaningful.

⁴⁰ Sajal Nag, Ibid.

⁴¹ Sukumar Murulidharan, "Arrested Peace", *Frontline*, 18 August 2000, p. 44.

⁴² Ajai Sahni, Ibid.

⁴³ Bhavna Vij Aurora, "Talking Peace, looking over their shoulders", *Indian Express*, 10 January 2003.

⁴⁴ A. Lunungsang Ao, Ibid, p.197.

The extension of the ceasefire agreement beyond the present state of Nagaland has always been considered to be a springboard to the realization of the concept of 'Greater Nagaland'. In Manipur various Naga tribes inhabit the four of the five hill districts and therefore consolidation of Naga inhabited areas into one unit would imply Manipur surrendering at least 70% of the area (Muivah is a Tangkhul Naga from Manipur). Besides Manipur, 'Greater Nagaland' includes districts of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills and parts of Sibsagar, Jorhat and Golaghat of Assam; Tirap and Changlang districts of Arunachal Pradesh; and parts of Myanmar. Hence all these states were dead against extending the ceasefire beyond Nagaland. At this juncture when Radhagovind Kojiam (then Samata party Chief Minister of Manipur) called for a month long unilateral ceasefire with all outfits in the state; he received favourable response from the outfits. He asked the centre to reaffirm his proposal but was put down allegedly because the Manipur BJP unit did not want him to secure any significant success.⁴⁵ This shows how political parties are insensitive towards leaving aside their own partisan interests in favour of an early settlement of the issue. Also, Kojiam was strongly opposed to the 'Nagalim' issue due to which the central government feared that his involvement might jeopardize the peace process.

Therefore, when on 14 June 2001, it was decided to extend the ceasefire in all the Naga-inhabited areas, it was received with widespread protests. The government stated that the ceasefire would have "no territorial limit in terms of its implementation".⁴⁶ In order to gain acceptance, the Prime Minister, Vajpayee, on 28 September 2000 called the then Chief Ministers of Assam (Prafulla Kumar Mahanta), Arunachal Pradesh (Mukut Mithi), Manipur (W. Nipamacha Singh) and Meghalaya (E K. Mawlong). He persuaded them by assuring that the territorial integrity will be intact or probably pressured to an extent that none of them emphatically expressed their opposition after the

⁴⁵ Shantanu Nandan Sharma, "The Naga Question," *Frontline*, vol. 10, January 2002, pp. 87-105.

⁴⁶ "A Ceasefire and Protest", *Frontline*, 6 July 2001, p.30.

meeting.⁴⁷ Largest protest came from Manipur with thousands of people taking to the streets in Imphal and setting fire to the Assembly building, legislator's houses and offices of all politicians as they failed to articulate their demands. It was argued that as the militant groups had not yet given to the government, details of its camps outside Nagaland in accordance with the ground rules, the question of extending the ceasefire beyond Nagaland did not arise at this stage.⁴⁸ The Naga groups tried to force the government through the Congress party, which had an agreement in 1972 with them for not opposing Naga integration. The Union government was, however, forced to roll back and deleted the words "without territorial limits".

Still the Naga Hoho tried to put pressure not to derail the talks, which were later held in Amsterdam in September 2001.⁴⁹ NSCN (IM) decided not to back out, as it would mean losing their legitimacy. The cadres had undergone battle fatigue and many of them have settled for a city life. Vajpayee met the leaders on 8 December 2001 in Osaka.⁵⁰ The tribal leaders set up a "reconciliation campaign" to persuade Muivah not to derail the peace process. Advani called for the talks to be held in Delhi by deciding to lift the ban on the NSCN (IM). It was then, Zoramthanga, Chief Minister of Mizoram who was acting as the mediator said that the rebel leaders were willing to arrive in Delhi for talks.

The Nagaland and Manipur government withdrew the arrest warrants against Isak and Muivah, as they were apprehensive about safe passage (In 1978, eight leaders of Mizoram National Front including Zoramthanga were detained for nine months after failure of talks). In Delhi (January 2003), they reiterated their demand to integrate the Naga inhabited areas. They said it was the British, which divided them, and later the Indian Union incorporated the colonial administration without changes, thereby hurting the Nagas.

⁴⁷ Shantanu Nandan Sharma, *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ "Truce and Violence", *Frontline*, 20 July 2001, p.6.

⁴⁹ Ajai Sahni, *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Deepak Diwan, "A Journey for Peace", *Northeast Sun*, 1-14 January 2003.

They agreed to offer talks to the Meiteis, the Assamese and Arunachalis and released a statement before their departure, titled "Journey for Peace" and signed by the collective leadership of the NSCN (IM), which stated that "realistic boundaries" be drawn.⁵¹

In the present context, rivalry with the Khaplang group continues. The latter has also accepted a ceasefire on 16 April 2000, initiated by then Nagaland Chief Minister S.C. Jamir.⁵² The first meeting with the Union government, was led by Lt. Gen (Retd.) Ramesh V. Kulkarni. On 3 September 2001, both sides agreed to stick to the ground rules.⁵³ The Muivah group does not welcome their involvement as they see it as Union Government's plan to split the Naga secessionist movement. The Khaplang group does not recognize the word "Nagalim" (Greater Nagaland). Kughalu Mulatonu, a senior leader of it, said that Muivah's insistence to move away of the talks if they were included, was sufficient evidence that he was "neither willing to unite the Nagas or represent the Nagas".⁵⁴ (It has to be mentioned that Khaplang is a Hemi Naga from Myanmar).

Inter tribal conflicts still persists. There have been reports of the alleged nexus of the Naga politicians with the insurgents. Insurgency has been an excuse to demand more relief from the centre. The NSCN (IM) in order to expand its influence in other states have been encouraging other outfits by providing material support with the hidden agenda to realize "Nagalim" At the same time, one important aspect of NSCN (IM) has to be exposed i.e., its communal character. In its manifesto it calls to create a Christian state and equates India with Hinduism asking the Nagas to fight against the "effete Indian and Burmese culture and their faiths".⁵⁵

Meanwhile the groups, with extortion unabated under the guises for the Republic of Nagaland, have violated the ceasefire rules. Collection of taxes

⁵¹ "Territory Tussels", *Frontline*, 28 February 2003, p.47.

⁵² A. Lunungsang Ao, *Ibid*, p. 195.

⁵³ Ajai Sahni, *Ibid*.

⁵⁴ Kanchan L., "Negotiating Insurgencies", *Faultline*, vol. II, April 2002, p. 148.

⁵⁵ Udayaon Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation State in Assam and Nagaland* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2000, p.51).

from government employees and trading community is a done thing. Many have argued that with 87% of the state being Scheduled Tribes it has enough autonomy to surge for an insurgent struggle. Some say that it is now more a question of consolidation of and extension of their identity. But Naga society has seen another development, the resurgence of tribalism, which many fears might disintegrate them. Conflicts with Manipur persist, when recently its government arrested 13 NSCN (IM) cadres on security interests arguing that the ceasefire does not cover Manipur.⁵⁶

Support provided by the neighbouring countries to the Northeastern insurgents

Insurgency in the Northeast could not have sustained itself without the help of international actors. Almost 98% of the Northeastern part of India has an international boundary with Nepal to the West, Bhutan and China to the North and Myanmar and Bangladesh to the East and South. In spite of this strategic location, the borders of Northeast India is not well guarded with mountains and heavily forested. This porosity has helped the Northeastern militants to slip across the borders and evade arrest when counter insurgency operations became intensive. During such periods they used the territory of such countries for training and planning their future action. A factor, which helped them, was that India did not have friendly relations with her neighbours. India's "big brother policy" offended Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh, with China, recalling 1962 war could give the impression and the Myanmarese military regime since 1960s had nothing to do with India. Although Pakistan is a perennial concern in the Western front, it is the same in the Northeast. However things have started to change in the 1990s. Another reason for their survival is the alleged money being diverted to them through drug trafficking. Being in the vicinity of the "Golden Triangle" along with porous borders, drug trafficking becomes easier. Therefore, it would be interesting to see how the Indian government has diplomatically tried to resolve the above issues.

⁵⁶ "Manipur to hand over NSCN (IM) cadre to Centre," *The Indian Express*, 8 October, 2003)

In Manipur, the PLA is guided by Maoist ideology that war is the highest form of struggle and eliminates war. Its leader Namierakpani Bisheswar went to Lhasa in 1975 to get training. Among the Nagas the first group to reach China was the 353 strong guerilla detachment led by TM Keyho and T Muivah that started from Nagaland's Mon district in early October and reached China's Yunnan province in January 1967 after an arduous 97 day trek.⁵⁷ An ULFA leader, Lohit Deury told that the organization led two missions – operation Chilarai and Lachit to the province of Yunnan in 1986 where they were trained by an arms agency of China called 'Black House'.⁵⁸ But by end of 1980s the renewal of diplomatic relations between China and India put an end of Chinese help to the insurgent. Also, the new guard of China led by Deng Xiao Ping no longer believed in exporting Communism.

Pakistan's support to the Northeast militants started in the 1950s when Pakistan began to provide Naga insurgents with sanctuary, assistance and training in what was then East Pakistan. In December 1956, A.Z.Phizo, the president of Naga National Council stepped out to East Pakistan to deliberately internationalize the Naga issue and seek international support for the cause.⁵⁹ The Mizo insurgency couldn't have taken its violent character without Pakistan's help. Laldenga, the Mizo leader, crossed the border in December 1963 and brought with him arms from Chittagong via the Dohazari railhead to Mizoram by January 1965.⁶⁰ Post 1971, the ISI of Pakistan has been active in the Bangladesh border providing support to ULFA, NSCN (IM), PLA, NDFB etc. collectively under the title of United Liberation Front of Seven Sisters (ULFOSS). Its strategy is called "Internal Encirclement of India" to Islamise the

⁵⁷ Binalakshmi Nepram, "The Origin and impact of Small Wars and Insurgencies in the Northeast", p.68.

⁵⁸ Jaideep Saikia, "Changing contours of Separatism", *Aakrosh*, no. 18, vol. 6, January 2003, pp. 52-74.

⁵⁹ Aosenba, *Ibid*, p.90.

⁶⁰ Brig S P Sinha, "Insurgency in Northeast India: The External Dimension", *Journal of the United Service Institution of India*, vol. CXXVIII, NO. 533, July-September 1998, pp. 438-447.

border with India to facilitate the influx of terrorists into interior parts of India.⁶¹

After 1975, Bangladesh-India relationship deteriorated. India helped Shanti-Bahini rebels from Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh and Bangladesh did to the Northeastern rebels of India. Coming of Sheikh Hasina's government helped to solve bilateral issues. In February 1997 it launched a crackdown in the ultra camps, froze their bank accounts and asked to leave Bangla territory by 15 April 1997.⁶² But the change in government in Bangladesh changed the policy of Bangladesh towards India. It has been alleged by India that Bangladesh has become an important sanctuary for the rebels, and with ISI active, Cox Bazar has become an important transit route for weapons. The present government of Khaleda Zia is diametrically opposite to its earlier incumbent and perceives the rebels as freedom fighters. A senior member of the ATTF (Tripura based outfit), Sanjib Deb Barman, was arrested by Hasina in 1998. But Khaleda Zia in January 2002 released him and granted political asylum inspite of the extradition request by India.⁶³ Likewise was the case with Anup Chetia, Secretary of ULFA. When Border Security Force of India submitted a list of 78 NE Ultra Camps in Bangladesh, Bangladesh Rifles denied their presence.⁶⁴

A Myanmarese connection dates back to Angami Zapu Phizo having begun his tryst with separatism as a 'Stevedore in Rangoon'.⁶⁵ Myanmar (erstwhile Burma) has a number of ethnic groups demanding seperation. Such groups found common ground by setting up Indo-Burma Revolutionary Front (IBRF) with Kachins, Shans, Arakanese from the Myanmarese side. After pro-democracy crackdown in 1988, a group of officials in the Indian foreign policy establishment led by army chief General Shankar Roy Choudhuri and military

⁶¹ Orkareshwar Pandey, "ISI and New Wave of Islamic Military in the NE", *Dialogue*, no.3, vol. 3, January-March 2003, pp. 83-98.

⁶² Sajal Nag, *Contesting Marginality*, p.305.

⁶³ Sreeradha Datta, "Indo-Bangladesh Relations: An Overview of Limitations and Constraints", *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 26, no.3, July-September 2002, pp. 427-437.

⁶⁴ "BSF hands list to BDR", *Assam Tribune*, 23 October 2003.

⁶⁵ Jaideep Saikia, "Changing Contours of Separation", p.58.

intelligence chief Lt. General Ravi Sawhney, considering strategic location of Myanmar (overpresence of China in Myanmar), argued that engagement should be the preferred policy of India towards the latter.⁶⁶ Following improvement in relations, both sides conducted joint military operations – ‘Operation Goldenbird’(May 1995), ‘Operation Leech’ (1996). The Indian side has not allowed pro-democracy protests from its soil. But despite this when 198 insurgents were arrested in December 2000 from the camps in Myanmar, India requested their extradition, which was denied and released them.⁶⁷

In Bhutan, the main groups are ULFA and NDFB, ULFA’s General Headquarters, its Council Headquarters, security-cum-training camps and a well concealed Enigma Base with its A and B factions – are situated there. Around 116 cadres of an ULFA aided organization in Northern West Bengal, Kamtapur Liberation Organization, are being trained in Bhutan.⁶⁸ Bilateral talks were held between India and Bhutan in December 1998 and January 1999, but the latter felt India was infringing on its sovereignty. But in 2000 agreed for joint operations, which has still not been undertaken. The National Assembly of Bhutan in its 77th session in July 1999 unveiled a three pronged approach – cutting off supply routes to the militants, initiate firm action against collaborators and conduct talks.⁶⁹ But four rounds of talks with ULFA as informed by Home Ministers Lyonpo Thinley Gyamatso and another led by Zhung Kalyon with KLO (25 March 2003) have ended in failure.⁷⁰ The National Assembly has directed military action. On 17 May 2003, the Bhutanese king has asked people to form a “militia force” to counter Indian insurgents who are alleged to be cooperating with Southern Nepalese (Bhutan

⁶⁶ Subir Bhaumik, “Burma policy and its impact on its Northeastern Region,” Paper presented in Seminar, *Partnership for Development: Holistic Approach to the NorthEast*, 8-9 May 2002).

⁶⁷ Swaranalatha Laithangbam, “Indo-Myanmar Border Trade”, *North East Sun*, 15-31 July 2003, p.8.

⁶⁸ Tapash Ganguly, “Do or Die”, *The Week*, 16 November 2003, pp. 24-26.

⁶⁹ “ULFA Bodo Militants”, *Annual Report: 2000-2001*, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India.

⁷⁰ “Government make last attempt at peaceful negotiations”, *Kuensel (Thimpu)*, 19 July 2003.

has problem with Nepalese migrants). With respect to Nepal, the crackdown on the Maoist insurgents could have spillover effects on Sikkim as barring the Chia-Bhanjyang post the rest of the border is unguarded. It is reported to be close to NDBF and ULFA and would exchange arms across the porous Northern borders that hug Tibet known as 'Drum region'.

Drug-Trafficking: Income source for the militants to sustain their struggle

A senior intelligence officer of the intelligence organization of Border Security Force has stated, "closely linked with insurgency and gun-running, is the serious problem of narcotics, emerging from the *Golden Triangle*⁷¹". He added that most of the militants including NSCM (IM) utilize the money earned through the narcotics trade to purchase arms and also pay for training of their cadres in camps run by other outfits.⁷²

The above has become a fact and the main point of transit takes place in Moreh (Manipur). But certain groups in Manipur have fought against drug traffickers. Like Kanglei Yawol Kunna Lup has attempted to cleanse Manipuri society of drugs – AIDS complex.⁷³ The NSCN (IM) and NSCN (K) reportedly tax and extort money from traffickers in return for protection or the right to conduct traffic in drugs.⁷⁴ There is a fight between Kuki and Naga groups to control the National Highway no. 39 connecting to Moreh due to the lucrative border trade.

Earlier, drugs reached the West through Thailand and Singapore. With stringent laws this has been diverted to the Northeast believed to be the easiest with soft law and rampant corruption among law enforcement officials. Myanmar produces 60% of world's opium, which crosses through the Northeast. The Indian narcotics control bureau has identified five routes, which starts from Kalemmyo and proceeds as

1) Tamu-Moreh-New Somtal-Molcham-Imphal

⁷¹ Drug producing regions of Laos, Thailand and Myanmar.

⁷² Kanchan L., "Negotiating Insurgencies", *Faultlines*, vol. 11, April 2002.

⁷³ "Borderlines", *Outlook*, 2000 October 2003, p. 56.

⁷⁴ "Drug Intelligence Brief – India", <http://www.DEA.gov>, May 2002.

- 2) Tiddim-Chikha-Churachandpur-Imphal
- 3) Tiddim-Champai (Mizoram)
- 4) Kalemryo-Flam-Several points in Mizoram
- 5) Kalemryo-Hamolin-Somra-Manipur or Nagaland.⁷⁵

The inability to check the growth of drugs by the military regime of Myanmar lies in three factors – firstly, the armed insurgency going on in Myanmar has not been put down and is being sustained by drug trade. The government has lost control of these regions. Secondly, the failure to resolve the ethnic aspirations has led many to intensify drug trade and continue their struggle. Thirdly, for Myanmar, it is the most profitable cash crop.⁷⁶

India in order to check such trafficking has signed an agreement with Myanmar to reduce demand and prevent illicit trafficking in narcotics drugs and psychotropic substances and related matters on 30 March 1993. Preliminary negotiation took place between Indian ambassador to Myanmar Mr. Malik and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. U. Ohn Gyaw on 25 November 1991 and signed by Ngwe Soe Tun for Myanmar and D.V. Kumar, Director, Indian Narcotics Control Bureau.⁷⁷ The SAARC Convention on Narcotics Drugs and Psychotropic substances, 1990, governs and monitors the cooperation on the issue between Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and India. But the problem still persists. On 20 October 2003 the customs department seized “ganja” worth Rs. 3.2 crore near Seling in Mizoram said to be the biggest narcotics haul in the Northeast in a decade.⁷⁸ In Nepal on 1 February 1999, 5 persons with 42 kgs of Hashish were arrested in Pokhra, which was to be exported to India. In fact, the traffickers now use cows and buffaloes to defect arrest. A custom official in the unfenced border with Myanmar has said, “The trend is really disturbing with drug peddlers force feeding cows and buffaloes

⁷⁵ Tapas Ray, “Across the borders in the NE”, *Frontline*, 13 June 1997, p.38.

⁷⁶ Richard M. Gibson and John B. Haseman, “Prospects for Controlling Narcotics Production and Trafficking in Myanmar”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 25, no. 1, April 2003, pp. 1-19.

⁷⁷ http://www.myanmar_narcotic.net/eradiction/coop5/htm

⁷⁸ “Decade’s biggest drug haul by Customs in Mizoram”, *The Telegraph* (Guwahati) 21 October 2003.

plastic bags filled with heroin and other synthetic drugs like menthamphetamine ... later retrieved from dung or slaughtering the animals”.⁷⁹ How deep its roots have reached in the Northeast could be seen from the politician-drug cartel nexus. A former minister of Manipur, Minam Lokham Singh, was caught among three, smuggling heroin by sleuth from the control Bureau of Narcotics and Customs.⁸⁰

Thus we see how the entire Northeast has become a breeding ground for insurgency questioning the sovereign character of the Indian nation-state. It is a heavily pluralist society with not only various tribal identities but also sub-tribal nationalist identities. The ethos of nation building has not touched upon the region, as was the case, during India’s freedom struggle. Apart from the Brahmaputra valley there was no significant role from other parts during that period. Therefore loyalty resides with clan or tribal identities. The Northeast was never part of the Mughal Empire. It was the British colonial period when it came under the Indian milieu. Even then, the Inner Line restrictions separated the hill regions from developing any Indian characteristics. After Independence the diversity was not universally represented or answered upon with one group (read Assamese) trying to throw its hegemonic identity over others.

The centre (New Delhi) was more involved with the Western front (relatively of no significance other than emotional) to worry about them. One of the reasons was its distinct character with different customs and traditions, a way of life that was not able to adjust with the loud and aggressiveness of the “North Indian” politics.

Inspite of repeated reminders of the miseries of the various groups it has been seen that the centre initially does not pay any heed. It is when the situation goes out of control, instead of a political settlement; military operations are launched, which play their own role in violating human rights. The cycle is

⁷⁹ “Cows, buffaloes as drug couriers in NE”, *The Sentinel*, 15 October 2003.

⁸⁰ “Manipur Politicians held, drug cartel exposed”, *The Sentinel*, 23 October 2003.

repetitive for all the states. The accords that are reached upon have vague clauses and do not involve all the parties concerned. This shows the lack of knowledge of the government of its own people. But at the same time another question gets directed to the rebel negotiators, why do they fail to read between the lines? Is there some hidden political game behind a decision so hastily arrived at?

Political parties create dead blocks before reaching any agreement as has been seen who do not want their opponent to clinch the deal. State governments get elected; the rebels continue their struggle. This raises another question, whom do the people actually support, as both claim a popular mandate? The Mizo accord has shown, it depends on its people to make it a success. But the numerical monolithic majority of the Mizos (85%) in Mizoram do play a role. This has given rise to occasional rift with the minorities in the state with allegations of domination.

The peace talks in the early 1990's with Bodo groups and then with the Nagas has a similarity with the "Look East Policy". Both were started by then Prime Minister Narasimha Rao. Thus, it can be attributed that the Northeast is getting a new direction with central efforts to facilitate trade for which the government is trying to remove the roots of insurgency and make way for progress even though the centre's understanding in dealing with the Northeast's problems have a long way to go as has been seen in the discussion. The half-hearted attempts will not hasten but delay the process of peace and widen the gap of alienation.

Chapter III

NEGOTIATIONS PERTAINING TO REFUGEES

The Northeast faces refugee influxes from the neighbouring countries due to various reasons ranging from political disorder, ethnic violation, economic stagnation etc. There are Chakma and Hajong refugees from Bangladesh, illegal Bangladeshi 'migrants' (economic refugees, denied by Bangladesh), Lhotshampas from Bhutan, Hindu refugee groups from Bangladesh (dominating the local population in Tripura) and Myanmarese refugees and activists (Chins, Arakanese, student leaders) spread out in almost all the states of Northeast. As their number increases, resentment of the local population against them has grown. Lack of political will from the refugee host country (India) as well as the generating country (neighbouring countries) to address the issue has further aggravated the situation.

Who are refugees?

According to the 1951 United Nations Convention on Refugees, the term 'refugee' would apply to any person who, "as a result of events occurring before 1 January 1951 and owing to well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country, or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual resident as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it".¹

As the definition itself shows, it was confined to a particular period responding to those in Europe. This was rectified in its 1967 protocol that omitted the words 'before 1 January 1951' and included 'without any geographical limitation'.² But it did not redefine the term 'refugee' and left it as its predecessor,

¹ *UN Convention on Refugees, 1951, in Year Book of the UN, 1951, p.520.*

² "Protocol to the UN Convention on Refugees 1967", in *Human Rights: A Consolation of International Instruments vol.1, part 2*, (New York:UN, 1994), p.655.

without any reference to socio-economic conditions, a major cause for refugee generation in the third world. Nevertheless, some regional conventions have come up with a comprehensive definition of refugees- the 1969 Organization of African Unity Convention on Refugees and the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees by the Latin American Countries.

There are 'push' and 'pull' factors that cause refugee flow. The former is negative-conflict, political instability, social inequalities, poor economic opportunities, while the latter includes higher standards of living, jobs, freer communities in the country of destination and presence of co-nationals who had migrated earlier.³ Myron Weiner explains the conditions of conflict due to refugee influx-

- 1) when the ethnic division of labour between migrants (and their descendants) and non-migrants parallels class relationship that ordinarily have a high conflictual potential as between industrial managers and workers, landlords and peasants, grain merchants and agri-producers, the police and the public, shopkeepers and consumers etc. competition may occur.
- 2) When the local population seeks access to occupation that they previously did not or from which they were once excluded, conflict may ensue.
- 3) Conflict may occur when a change in the power structure stimulated competition by giving one group the political resources for modifying or transforming the ethnic divisions of labour.⁴

India's response to refugees

India has not ratified the UN conventions on refugees. It does not have specific domestic laws on refugees, who are dealt under the 1946 Foreigners Act and 1967 Passport Act, which do not recognize the humanitarian plight of

³ Gil Loescher, *Beyond Charity: International Cooperation and the global refugee Crisis* (Oxford University Press, 1993),p.11.

⁴ Myron Weiner, *Sons of the Soil: Migration and Ethnic conflict in India*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978),p.4.

refugees.⁵ The Constitution of India contains a few provisions on the obligations towards international law, Article 51(c) being one of them that asks the state to respect the international law. But being under the Directive Principles of State Policy, it is not enforceable.⁶ It must be, further added that India is a member of the Executive Committee of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees since 1995. Still it denies UNHCR access to many groups. India says it faces trouble over settlement, local integration and repatriation process. By ratifying the convention further influx will continue and argues that the conventions are discriminatory, as the host country is made responsible to share their burden rather than the international community. In May 1997, an Eminent Persons Group of a panel of jurists under former Chief Justice of India, P.N. Bhagwati, drafted a model national law on refugees, defining them. The international principle of “non-refoulement” (forced return) and an adequate quasi-judicial mechanism for the determination of refugee status is one of its important components. Many feel that such a law will help India, deal with the refugee issue effectively. But the bill is still pending.⁷

In South Asia, none of the states are members to the UN Conventions. The general agreement among them on refugees is that it is related to security, which is why an element of national interest guides their refugee policy. Acceptance either is due to being politically correct (Tibetans) or presence of kin (Sri Lankan Tamils).

Following is the status of affairs on refugees in Northeast India and the diplomatic steps taken by India to respond the issue-

FLOW OF ILLEGAL MIGRANTS (Economic refugees) TO ASSAM

The issue of illegal migrants of Bangladeshi origin in India has become controversial not only between India and Bangladesh but also within India.

⁵ T.N. Giri, *Refugee Problems in Asia and Africa: Role of the UNHCR*, (New Delhi: Manak Publications, 2003).

⁶ V.T. Patil, *Human Rights Developments in South Asia*, (New Delhi: Authorspress, 2002),p.29.

⁷ Naunidhi Kaur, “No real refuge”, *Frontline*, 16 August 2002,p.73.

Bangladesh has been continuously maintaining the stand that there are no Bangladeshi's in India. The Indian officials have ended in failure in the negotiations trying to urge Bangladesh to accede to its demand. Porous, unguarded borders and with ethnic kin next to the borders has helped to migrate and evade detection. Political parties in India have used them to satisfy their selfish ends as vote-banks without realizing the fact how it could boomerang their own plans. Assam has been most severely affected by such migrations, which have produced one mass agitation and an insurgent movement to drive the foreigners out and foiling the sectarian interests of the political parties. While the Congress party maintains there are no illegal migrants under the hidden game of Muslim vote politics, the Bharatiya Janata Party considers Muslims as illegal not the 'Hindu' Bangladeshis coming from Bangladesh and the regional party Assam Gana Parisad which was born to identify and deport such foreigners has to compromise its earlier standpoint.

There have been several analysts who have done empirical research on the number of illegal Bangladeshis to draw the attention of the policy makers. Even a section of independent Bangladeshi scholars have admitted that migrations have taken place. According to a report prepared by the then Governor of Assam, S.K. Sinha, in 1998, there were 5.4 million Bangladeshi migrants in West Bengal, 4 million in Assam, 0.8 million in Tripura, 0.5 million in Bihar, 0.5 million in Maharashtra, 0.5 million in Rajasthan and 0.3 million in Delhi.⁸ The Godbole Report on Border Management that was submitted to the Government of India in 2001 has not been made public, speaks of a figure of 15 million Bangladeshis.⁹ According to a Home Ministry survey of India, about 1000 Bangladeshis enter

⁸ Sreeradha Dutta, "Indo-Bangladesh Relations: An Overview of Limitations and Constratins", *Strategic Analysis*, vol.26,no.3, July-Sept 2002,pp.427-440.

⁹ Sanjoy Hazarika, "Fractured Polity, Ethnic Identity: India and the Northeast", in Suman Gupta, Tapan Basu and Subarna Chatterji, ed., *India in the Age of Globalization: Contemporary Discourses and Texts* (New Delhi: Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, 2003),p.253.

India illegally every day. The number of such people in Assam is estimated to be between 1.2 and 1.5 crore.¹⁰

On the basis of Indian and Bangladesh documents one estimate holds that not less than one third of Assam's 22.38 million population are immigrants and their descendants and that 10-14 million Bangladeshi migrants were settled in India. In the census reports of India the 1971-1991 growth in population for Assam was 27.46% greater than the national average of 23.85%. Many have attributed this to migration from Bangladesh. Another factor was that the Muslim growth in the same period was 77.42% more than the Hindu (41.89%) in Assam.¹¹ It states that there are four Muslim majority districts- Dhubri, Goalpara, Barpeta, Hailakandi, all bordering Bangladesh. Analyst Myron Weiner pointed out that had Assam's population increased at the rate of 130%, the net population would be 7.6 million rather than 15 million in 1971 and consequently the share of migrants and their descendants amounted to 7.4 million.¹² In the 2001 census, the decadal growth for 1991-2001 for Assam has come down to 18.85% with respect to the national average of 21.34 %, but is still high.¹³

During the revision of electoral rolls prior to the 1996 elections, out of the 15 lakh complaints received from 40 of the 126 assembly constituencies, as many as 9 lakhs were deleted from the rolls as foreign nationals which reflects the real state of affairs.¹⁴ Their presence have deprived the native Muslims of Assam who are living here from centuries, as the former have started playing an active role in the state politics. In order to articulate their demands, the native Muslims have launched an organization called Upper Assam Minority Organization in 1995.

¹⁰ Subir Ghosh, *Frontier Travails: Northeast the Politics of a Mess* (New Delhi: Macmillan, 2001),p.131.

¹¹ *Census of India 1991*, Series 4, Assam, Part IV-BV(ii) Religion (Table C-9), Directorate of Census Operations, Assam.

¹² Anup Saikia, "Global Processes and Local concerns: Bangladeshi migrants in Assam", *Dialogue*, vol.3, no.3, January-March 2003,pp.99-125.

¹³ <http://www.censusindia.net/result/provindhia1.html/resultsmain.html>.

¹⁴ Udayan Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation-State in Assam and Nagaland*, (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2000),p.167.

According to a eminent Muslim in Assam, Monirul Hussain, "The Muslims of Assam, like other Muslims in India... contrary to popular belief, although belong to the same religious faith, reflect significant sociological variations in terms of caste, class, language, occupation, education, geographical distribution, political ideology and culture".¹⁵ Recently Mr. Indramoni Bora, MP and President of BJP unit of Assam, told in a press conference that there were more than 70 lakh Bangladeshis illegally resident in Assam, dominating 12 districts. The Chief Minister of Assam, Tarun Gogoi, shot back by terming the former's claim to be as "wild".¹⁶

Sanjoy Hazarika, a Northeast expert, after analyzing the census data says that the reports do not say whether people were born in Bangladesh and crossed over illegally, or whether they were born in pre-independent Bangladesh or acquired citizenship later. But he adds that there are data, which reveal a part of the story. According to the 1991 census, those who gave their last place of residence as Bangladesh and who had lived in Assam for over twenty years were 1,98,460 persons; those who had stayed for less than 10 years- 12,000. The maximum number belonged to the high Muslim density districts of Nagaon, Cachar, Karimganj, Kamrup, Bongaigaon and Barpeta.¹⁷ Bangladeshi scholars like Sharifa Begum and Shapan Adnan have accepted this flow.

Factors contributing to the flow from Bangladesh

Most of the migrants have been termed as environmental refugees arising out of lack of food and land scarcity. The hazard of arsenic contamination of ground water has also added to it. In demographic terms, the "push factors" are the persecution of the religious and ethnic minorities and pauperization of the landless rural masses. The "pull factors" to India are better opportunities, access to public

¹⁵ Abu Nasar Saied Ahmed, "The Muslim Question in Assam", in Girin Phukon, ed., *Political Dynamics of Northeast India* (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 2000), p. 145.

¹⁶ Editorial, *The Sentinel*, 23 October 2003.

¹⁷ Sanjoy Hazarika, *Rites of Passage* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2000), p. 233.

distribution system, easy acquisition of immovable property, presence of relatives, enlistment as voters etc. Bangladeshi population has been increasing at a phenomenal rate. Its 1991 census puts the figure at 112 million people with a density of 755 persons per sq. km and so pressure on land is acute.¹⁸

In order to accommodate this population, Bangladesh is cultivating the concept of "lebensraum" i.e. living space for its millions. Sadeq Khan, a former Bangladeshi diplomat defends emigration to neighbouring countries. He said in 1991, "The natural trend of population overflow from Bangladesh is towards the sparsely populated lands in the South-East, in the Arakan side and of the Northeast in the seven sisters' side of the Indian sub-continent".¹⁹ This is further substantiated to be a part of state policy by the statement given by the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Begum Khaleda Zia that she has persuaded several governments to import Bangladeshi labour and legalize the illegal entrants. She said that 10,000 expatriate Bangladeshis each in Italy and Greece has been given legal status. Further negotiations are on with South Korea, Germany, Australia, Japan and Malaysia. Infested with illegal Bangladeshi migrants, South Korean Parliament passed an act for permit system of foreign workers.²⁰ An incisive analysis of 1991 census statistics by Sarifa Begum, a Bangladesh Demographer, showed that the estimated 104.7 million population of Bangladesh had excluded 9-10 million from the computation. The census figure was at odds with the Bangladesh government's own projection of 112-114 million and the UNDP estimate of 116-117 million. She rightly attributed the missing million to unregistered out-migration.²¹ Moreover in each succeeding census the percentage of Hindus has been decreasing. It is estimated that Bangladeshis have moved beyond Assam to other Northeastern states of Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram,

¹⁸ Sanjoy Hazarika, *Rites of Passage*, p.210.

¹⁹ Udayan Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back*, p.164.

²⁰ S. Venkatesh, "Exporting Bangladeshi labour", *Assam Tribune*, 23 November 2003.

²¹ Bibhuti Bhusan Nandy, "Space Invaders", *Hindustan Times*, 14 February 2003.

Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh. The last has seen a large increase in its Muslim population.

History of influx into Assam

Assam had seen migration in four forms that have alienated the Assamese from its resources-

- i. Tribal migration in tea plantations.
- ii. Muslim Bengali migration in agriculture.
- iii. Hindu Bengali migration in the service sector.
- iv. Marwari migration in trade, business and industry.²²

Migration from Bangladesh started from the colonial period. In the 19th century, with the approval of private capital penetration, the tea plantation economy in Assam grew into a significant industry. But the problem was lack of labour from the locals who were unwilling to work in the tea gardens. This made the British to import labour from famine stricken tribal areas of India-Chattisgarh, Jharkhand etc. As these areas lacked of secondary sector; traders, bankers, lawyers and clerks were brought from mostly Bengal. Such large-scale movement of people into the plantation sector proved difficult for the agricultural sector to meet their demand. The then Chief Commissioner of Assam Sir Henry Cotton stated that almost four-fifths of the cultivable wastelands remained untilled. This made the British to encourage immigration of East Bengal peasants from Mymensingh, Pubna, Bogra and Ranpur to Assam. These land hungry peasants were successful to increase the agricultural production. In their quest to cultivate more they spread to areas other than the riverine tracts where they were authorized to settle. They even acquired lands from local Assamese people. Gradually their number began to increase resulting into conflicts with the local people.

²² Subir Ghosh, *Frontier Travails*, p.103.

Following protests, the colonial administration devised the line system to restrict this out growth and was first introduced in Nowgong (Nagaon) in 1920.

Villages in such areas were classified into three categories-

- a) Exclusively reserved for the immigrants.
- b) Exclusively reserved for the local people,
- c) Villages available to both immigrants and local people.

Besides, the immigrants were barred from procuring more than 16 'bighas' of land and the Assamese debarred to sub-let their land or employing the former as labourers under the line –system.²³

But this and other administrative measures did not help to stop the influx or conflicts with the Assamese. The *Asamiya Samrakshini Sabha* came into being in 1926 to raise the demands of the Assamese.²⁴ The 1931 census under C.S. Mullan reported immigrants to over half a million and warned that the wave was likely to “alter permanently” the future of Assam and that in another thirty years “Sibsagar district will be the only part of Assam to which an Assamese will find himself at home”.²⁵ This added to the insecurity of the Assamese haunted by the spectre of ‘Bengalization’ by both Bengali Hindus and Muslims.

In 1937 a minority Muslim League government led by Sir Mohammad Sadullah came to power in Assam who followed a policy of encouraging Bengali Muslims. This prompted then viceroy, Lord Wavell to comment,

“The Chief political problem is the desire of the Muslim Ministers to increase this immigration into the uncultivated government lands under the slogan of grow more food but what they are really after is grow more Muslims”.²⁶

The Muslim League tried to mobilize support to include Assam into Pakistan on the eve of partition. It was then an astute Assamese politician and first

²³ Bhupen Sarmah, “Immigration and Politics in Assam”, in Sanjay K. Roy, ed., *Refugees and Human Rights*, (New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2001), p. 365.

²⁴ Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* (New York, OUP, 1999)

²⁵ S. K. Ghosh, *India's Northeast Frontier: Fifty turbulent years*, (North 24 Parganas: Linkman 1997) p.20.

²⁶ Anup Saikia, “Global Processes and Local Concerns”, p.100.

Chief Minister of Assam, Gopinath Bordoloi, who saw through the game plan and opposed it vigorously in the “grouping scheme” issue.²⁷ The central Congress almost agreed the inclusion of Assam. But it was Bordoloi’s earnest efforts by persuading Mahatma Gandhi that Assam got retained in India.

But partition saw a new actor i.e. the Bengali Hindu refugees from the ceded parts of Sylhet. Nehru’s government did not take the matter seriously. Meanwhile the electoral politics in Assam played its own game. With the migrants leaving their own mother tongue accepting for Assamese, they were accepted as “Na-Assamiya” (New Assamese).²⁸ It helped to the enactment of Assamese as the official language in the Official Languages Act, 1960; to the political leaders to encash a new vote bank; to the immigrants to stay under the garb without further insecurity.

The Nehru-Liaquat Pact of 1950 granted citizenship to those between 1947 and 1951. The Indo- Bangladesh Agreement of 1972, made the migrants permanent liability on Assam. In between, illegal migrants continued but the government took no steps to deport the new entrants. As public sentiments soared, a turning point came in April 1979. The death of one Hiralal Patowari necessitated a bye-election to the Mongaldoi Lok Sabha constituency and the voter list so revised found 45,000 foreigners by the courts.²⁹ This paved the way for the Assam Movement.

Agitation led by students in Assam against ‘foreigners’

The movement started by the formation of *All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad* composed of several regional parties, the *Asom Sahitya Sabha* and the All Assam Students’ Union on the initiative of the AASU in August 1979.³⁰ They demanded the entire Muslims that came to Assam at various points of time to be detected,

²⁷ See Sujit Chaudhuri, “A ‘god-sent’ opportunity?” *Seminar*, No.510, February 2002, pp.61-67.

²⁸ Udayan Misra, “Immigration and Identity Transformation in Assam”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 22 May 1999, pp.1264-1271.

²⁹ Subir Ghosh, *Frontier Travails*, p.114.

³⁰ Ajai Sahni, <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/publication/faultlines/volume12/Article13.htm>

deleted and deported. AASU under the leadership of Prafulla Mahanta demanded the cancellation of Assembly elections in 1980s. The students were raising a valid question: who had the right to vote in an Indian election? Indians, of course, so why should Bangladeshi, or people from any other nationality, exercise that right? Accepting this would be sanctioning 'foreign control' of the politics of the state and other parts of the country.³¹

Indira Gandhi called the AASU leaders, for talks in 1980s. The talks resulted in failure even though the government agreed to deport foreigners after 1971. The 1983 election was held inspite of mass opposition. It saw one of the most disturbing mass scale killings of Muslims in Nellie, about 1753, mostly children and women. Actual reasons being land, which was confiscated by the Muslims from the Tiwa tribals by fraud i.e. by getting a 'Chappa' (thumb impression in pieces of paper).

Even though a Congress government of Hiteswar Saikia came to power in Assam, Mrs. Gandhi was not satisfied with the progress. She sent Cabinet Secretary, Krishnaswamy Rao Sahib for talks who negotiated fourteen times with the AASU delegation with considerable headway. Later, Union Home Secretary, R.D. Pradhan took over in May 1985 and an accord was signed on 16 August 1985 with Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi.³² Before Pradhan took charge, the talks were almost proceeding towards failure. It was Pradhan's tactful handling with the student leaders and able use of poetry (rendering of Assamese poet Devakanta Barooah's poem 'My land my People') that the talks culminated in an accord.³³

Prafulla K. Mahanta and Bhirgu Phukan along with the Convenor of All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad, Biraj Sharma, led the AASU delegation.

According to the accord:

³¹ Sanjoy Hazarika, *Rites of Passage*, p. 66.

³² Ved Marwah, *Uncivil Wars* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 1995), p. 304.

³³ R.D. Pradhan, *Working with Rajiv Gandhi* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 1995), p.97.

For the purpose of detection and deletion of foreigners, 1.1.1966 shall be the base date and year. Foreigners who came to Assam after 1.1.1966 (inclusive) and upto 24th March 1971 shall be detected in accordance with the provisions of the Foreigners act, 1946, and the Foreigners (Tribunal) Order 1964. Names of foreigners so detected will be deleted from the electoral rolls in force. Such persons will be required to register themselves before the Registration officers of the respective districts in accordance with the provisions of the Registration of Foreigners Act, 1939 and the Registration of the Foreigners rules, 1939. On the expiry of a period of ten years following the date of detection, the names of all such persons, which have been deleted from the electoral rolls, shall be restored (?). Foreigners who came to Assam on or after 25 March 1971 shall continue to be detected, deleted and expelled in accordance to the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunal) Act, 1985 (IMDT Act).³⁴

It was also agreed to construct physical barriers along the international border (fencing), adequate monitoring by security forces and for proper patrolling, a road be constructed all along the border.

The implementation of the accord has been far from being satisfactory. The AASU formed a political party Assam Gana Parishad and forgot earlier promises once political power came to them. They heaped the onus on the IMDT Act and to the non-cooperation by the Centre (Congress-I Government). IMDT (Act) has been severely criticized for several reasons: a) it is only in Assam where such an act is prevalent to detect illegal migrants, whereas for rest of India the Foreigners Act, 1946, is applicable; b) according to the act the burden of locating and establishing the identity of the illegal migrant lies to private citizens who have to pay for the complaints made, while the migrants is free to move. This was done to safeguard harassment to minorities; thus had a flip side to it (c) the accord hardly mentions about the nodal agency which is likely to be involved in the

³⁴ *Memorandum of Settlement (Assam Accord), New Delhi, 15 August 1985 Annexure VI in Subir Ghosh, Frontier Travails (New Delhi: Macmillan, 2001).*

determination and detection of the foreign nationals (d) it has failed to achieve its objectives.

In 1999, a total of 302,554 inquiries were initiated under the Act. Out of which 31,264 were referred to the tribunals for review and action. Out of half of that, 9625 were declared illegal and only 1461 were physically deported.³⁵ The Supreme Court directed the Parliament in January 2001 to repeal the Act following the filing of Public Interest Litigation by civil society groups. But political calculations saw that nothing happened. Post-agreement negotiations have dragged on. Recently, the chairman, heading tribunals under IM (DT) Act has shown lack of manpower as the reason behind the slow disposal of cases under it.³⁶

The construction of fencing and the road is pending. When the Indian government wanted to construct a fence and a road, the Bangladeshi government viewed it as a violation of the Indo-Bangladesh agreement that no defensive structures be built along the borders, and when construction began, armed clashes started.³⁷

The Bangladesh side has all along denied presence of Bangladeshi citizens. But in 1992, the then and current Bangladesh PM Khaleda Zia had admitted in a joint communiqué that illegal immigration was a problem. Ten years later their officials have admitted that it is an apparent decision not to address the issue.³⁸ India applied the policy of unilateral push-in of such migrants to Bangladesh. Talks between the two agreed to stop unilateral push in of person considered illegal Bangladeshi immigrants by India. This took place between Home Secretary, B.P. Singh (India) and Shafiur Rahman (Bangladesh) on 23 November

³⁵ Sanjoy Hazarika, *Rites of Passage*, p.235.

³⁶ 'Lack of staff hits tribunals', *The Sentinel*, 23 October 2003.

³⁷ Myron Weiner, "Rejected Peoples and Unwanted Migrants in South Asia", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 21 August 1993.

³⁸ "India Hopes Bangladesh will adopt fresh approach", *The Hindu*, 14 February 2003.

1998 in Dhaka.³⁹ Over 5 lakh children of Bangladeshi origin have figured in the voters list although their parents have crossed to Assam after 25 March 1971. They should have been deported. But a section was inserted according to which, children of all immigrants before January 1986 were granted voting rights with effect from July 2000 making it possible for their parents to stay.⁴⁰ A flexible situation has occurred recently on the visit of Bangladesh Foreign Minister, Morshed Khan to India in February 2003. The two countries agreed to move forward on the basis of the 1992 joint communiqué that recognizes that the problem of illegal migration exists. At a meeting the foreign secretaries of both countries met in the first week of April 2003 to carry the talks forward.⁴¹

Militant Protests: the role of ULFA

The United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) was established on 7 April 1979 at Sibsagar, under the leadership of Paresh Barua (Chief of Staff), Arabinda Rajkhowa (Chairman), Anup Chetia (General Secretary) and Pradeep Gogoi (Vice-Chairman) whose goal is secession from India.⁴² The founding members of it belonged to the *Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chatra Parisad* (AJYCP) and had close links with AASU. AJYCP was a semi-militant organization with Marxist and Assamese nationalist views. It termed the Indian Constitution, as a tool in the hands of those who seek to continue a sort of neo-colonial rule in the country, and asserts that, only self rule would give the state control over their natural resources and put an end to their being colonially exploited by the centre.⁴³

In the initial stages it received enormous support from the masses and engaged in social work also. Extortions, kidnappings and killings became the order the day. The AGP government in power was unable to check its growth with allegations of a nexus. It killed mercilessly to those who deviated from its order.

³⁹ Avtar Singh, *India-Bangladesh Relations: Documents (1971-2002)* (New Delhi: Geetika Publishers, 2003).

⁴⁰ "5 Lakh Bangladeshis will get voting rights this time in Assam", *Hindustan Times*, 29 April 2001.

⁴¹ "Neighbours agree on '92 Formula", *The Statesman*, 15 February 2003.

⁴² "Bleeding Assam: the role of ULFA", *Strategic Digest*, Vol.XXIX, No.2, p.196.

⁴³ Udayan Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back*, p. 134.

The tea garden owners- Tata Tea etc were forced to shift their base following demands to pay “protection money”. It was then; the centre took notice of the group. The ULFA levied 0.50 paise per kg of tea produced at the rate of money to be paid by each of the tea companies, which equaled to Rs.90 lakhs for Tata Tea.⁴⁴ The central government under Chandra Sekhar dismissed the AGP government in September 1990 with President’s rule and launched counter-insurgency operation, “Operation Bajrang”.⁴⁵

Things settled down but most ULFA leaders escaped due to an intelligence leak. Fresh elections brought Congress under Hiteswar Saikia to power. But ULFA bounced back and kidnapped some engineers including some with Russian origin in Upper Assam. As the situation started to become tense, army was called back under Lieutenant General Ajai Singh and “Operation Rhino” was launched which became successful.

With indiscriminate killings by ULFA, mass support became to wane. Another reason was the complete turnaround of ULFA on the Bangladeshi issue. In a fifteen-page booklet issued in July 1992, ULFA declared that people from East Bengal had become ‘an inseparable part of toiling people of Assam as they produced as much as 85% of the State’s agricultural produce’. It accepted the migrants of the 1930s and 1940s to be Assamese and termed AASU to be too emotional on the issue.⁴⁶ AASU replied back by stating that it was anti-Assam. The people were too shocked to react. Although considering the fact that ULFA was in hiding in Bangladesh, pressure could also be mounted on them to continue their stay. But the foreigner’s issue was too emotional to be given up so narrowly.

Following arrests of several of its members, General Secretary Gopal Barua alias Anup Chetia and others and shooting of the hardliner and Deputy

⁴⁴ Sajal Nag, “Structure of a Non-State Economy” *Contemporary India*, vol. 1, no. 4, October-December 2002, p.203.

⁴⁵ Lt.Gen S.K.Sinha, “Insurgency in Assam”, *Journal of the United Service Institution of India*, Vol. CXXVIII, No.533, July-September 1998.

⁴⁶ Sanjoy Hazarika, *Strangers of the Mist* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1995), p.232.

Commander in chief, Hiraakjyoti Mahanta, ULFA was shaken and demoralized. Arabinda Rajkhowa, Chairman, wrote secretly to the Prime Minister in December 1991 that the organization would leave violence and accept the Constitution of India.⁴⁷ He also urged to remove the ban on the organization and end army operations. The breakthrough came when Sunil Nath, General Publicity Secretary wrote to the Governor, Devidas Thakur, to create a favourable climate for talks. He declared that “we had been forced to take to path of arms as the only alternative because the democratic approach did not work” and added, “ULFA had always maintained that it was not opposed to seeking a solution to the problems of Assam through discussion and dialogue”.⁴⁸ The talks took place on 12 January 1992, which was attended by the Home Ministry Officials, Assam Chief Minister and ULFA members led by Anup Chetia.⁴⁹ They denounced their leaders in Bangladesh and accepted to work out a solution under the Constitution of India. But Arabinda Rajkhowa, Anup Chetia and Pradip Gogoi (Vice Chairman) could not persuade their hardcore cadres and did not return back from Bangladesh making the talks a failure. The failure was due to the refusal of its chairman Paresh Barua and it was also a matter of ego for him, as others bypassed him.

The disintegration of ULFA was imminent between moderates and extremists. Other ULFA leaders like Menim Nobi, Sunil Nath and Kalpa Jyoti Neog surrendered. This was also part of greater strategy of Hiteswar Saikia to split the organization by doling out sops in the form of money, car and government supplies contracts along with the license to keep arms. This has not abated the instability but has created a new terror in Assam – the SULFA (the surrendered ULFA members). In 2001 the Chairman, Paresh Barua issued a statement to hold talks with the government only with the condition that focus of the talks must be the substantive issue of Assam’s sovereignty. The Centre responded that it was

⁴⁷ H.K.Borpujari, *Northeast India: Problems, Policies and Prospects Since Independence* (New Delhi: Spectrum Publications, 1998), p.86.

⁴⁸ Sanjoy Hazarika, *Strangers of the Mist* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1995), p.220.

⁴⁹ H.K. Borpujari, *Ibid.*

ready to have dialogue with the out-lawed outfit without any preconditions.⁵⁰ The outfit has come into the picture recently by killing Bihari labourers in Assam in 2003.

TRIPURA: transformation of a predominantly tribal population into a non-tribal due to refugee influx

This state of the Northeast has seen the worst case of influx of refugees virtually wiping out the local population of tribals and relegating them to the status of minorities. Tripura is almost entirely surrounded by Bangladesh with an 850 km long border. The most numerous tribal groups in Tripura are the Tripuri's followed by Reang, Lushai, Chakma, Noatia, Jamatia, Halam, Garo, Kuki, Mog, Munda, Oraon, and Santhal and Uchai groups. Although it had a substantial non-tribal Bengali population as early as the 15th century, brought by the Tripuri tribal kings as peasants, the flow continued which increased heavily following India's independence and Bangladesh's war of independence, bringing the refugees from erstwhile East Pakistan. The tribal population decreased, as shown below (census figures)⁵¹. Eventually they were dispossessed of their lands.

Year	Tribal percentage (%)
1901	52.81
1921	56.37
1941	50.91
1951	36.85
1961	31.53
1871	28.95
1981	28.45
1991	30.95

⁵⁰ K. Chodhuri, "Adhesive for Peace", *Frontline*, 16 February 2001, p. 39.

⁵¹ Anindita Dasgupta, "Tripura's brutal cul-de-sac", <http://www.himalmag.com/december2001/essay.htm>.

2001	30.95
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The first form of tribal resentment emerged in 1949. At the time of Tripura's merger with the India Union, an organization called "Senkrak" or "Chengcrak", which wanted merger with Pakistan allegedly with the help of some associates of the palace. After being banned it resurfaced in 1967 under Ananta Reang, which demanded the Bengali settlers' deportation. The uniqueness of 'Sengkrak' with other organizations of that period like 'Mukti Parishad' (1949), 'Paharia Union' (1951), 'Adivasi Sansad' (1954) etc. was its divisive and militant attitude.⁵² As elsewhere in Eastern India, the Communists established a peasant organization, the 'Rajya Mukti Parishad' in 1948 and it has been attributed that they were the initiators of the insurgency movement in their greater goal of liberating India from the ruling classes.⁵³ The movement degenerated with its leader, Dasharath Deb, getting involved into democratic politics, where the fate of elections are determined by the number of votes polled, and wherein without the non-tribals vote, no party in Tripura can ever win elections.

In 1967, a political front, *Tripura Upajati Juba Samiti* (TUJS), was set with the following set of demands –

- 1) Restoration of tribal lands transferred to non-tribals since 1960s.
- 2) Formation of an Autonomous district council for the tribals.
- 3) Reservation of government jobs for them.
- 4) Recognition of "Kokborok" as the state language and a medium of instruction, and introduction of Roman Script of it.
- 5) Extension of inner-line regulations to Tripura.⁵⁴

⁵² Mahadev Chakravarthi, "Insurgency in Tripura", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 23 June 2001, pp. 2229-2231.

⁵³ See Subir Bhaumik, "Disaster in Tripura", *Seminar*, No.510, February 2002, pp.68-71.

⁵⁴ N.C. Asthana, Anjali Nirmal, *Terrorism, Insurgencies and Counter Insurgency Operations* (Jaipur: Pointer Publishers, 2001), p.107.

By 1970, its moderate activism was not giving the results, which was why it raised a force of armed volunteers, the "Tripura Sena" under its 'assistant general secretary,' Bijay Kumar Hrangkhawal. To counter this group, a Bengali communal organization called "Amra Bangla" came up. The TUJS demand for an autonomous council was met, when the Communists came to power in 1978 by the formation of Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTADC). Not satisfied with the developments, Hrangkhawal formed a militant outfit Tripura National Volunteers (TNV) in 1978 with the help of the Mizo National Front. In a letter to the Chief Minister of Tripura in 1983 he wrote,

"Armed insurgency was necessary to reach your heart... Either you deport all foreign nationals who infiltrated into Tripura after 15 October 1947 or settle them anywhere in India other than Tripura. Restore tribal majority interests. It may not matter to you much, but delaying implementation of our demands means the TNV will fight for total self-determination."⁵⁵

Following the Mandai Massacre in 1980 where a thousand non-tribals were killed, Hrangkhawal was arrested and his deputy, Chuni Kholoi formed the All Tripura People's Liberation Organization (ATPLO). But a rift with Binanda Jamatia made Chuni to leave ATPLO and revive TNV. Peace initiative by Nirpen Chakravarty, the then Chief Minister of Tripura, made Jamatia to surrender in 1983 and ATPLO became defunct.⁵⁶ With the signing of the Mizo accord, the Tripura militants were in a disadvantaged position. Hrangkhawal urged the Mizo Chief Minister, Lalthanhawla to secure a 'honourable settlement' to the Union Home Minister, Buta Singh. The latter without mincing any words made it clear that the Communist government had to go, replaced by a Congress government in the state to reach any settlement. It was alleged that TNV's violent activities

⁵⁵ Binalakshmi Nepram, "Small wars and insurgencies in the Northeast", *Himalayan and Central Asian Studies*, vol. 5, Nos. 3-4, July-December 2001, p.62.

⁵⁶ See Ved Marwah, *Ibid*, p.300.

against the non-tribals led to the Congress-TUJS win in the 1988 elections.⁵⁷ This political game became more evident when on 29 January 1988, shortly before moving the security forces in the state, the then Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi said that no dialogue was possible. But he made a complete turnaround after the election and not only negotiated but signed an accord on 12 August 1988 with TNV.⁵⁸

The accord was signed in Delhi under the presence of Governor of Tripura, General KV Krishna Rao and Chief Minister of Tripura, Sudhir Ranjan Majumdar. According to it,

- 1) Stringent measures were to be taken to check fresh infiltration and roads to be constructed along the border for better vigil.
- 2) Effective implementation of the law for restoration of tribal lands under the Tripura Land Revenue and Land Reforms Act, 1960 to be taken.⁵⁹

But lack of its effective implementation resulted in emergence of another outfit, All Tripura Tribal Force, in 1990 allegedly with the support of the Left Parties.⁶⁰ After the Communist govt. came to power, it signed an accord with the outfit. According to the accord led by Lalit Deb Berman (ATTF) the cut-off date for deporting all Bangladeshi foreign nationals was set to be 25th March 1971.⁶¹

At present, the insurgency is led by-

- 1) National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT), a splinter group of TNV. A majority Christian group, led by Bishwamohan Deb Barma, demands establishment of independent Tripura, liberation from neo-colonialism, installing consciousness against exploitation and furtherance of indigenous culture. It has close links with NSCN (IM), NDFB.

⁵⁷ Ajai Sahni, "Survey of conflict and resolution in India's Northeast", <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/publication/faultline/volume12/article3.htm>.

⁵⁸ Suhas Chakma, "Strange Bedfellows", *Pioneer*, 17 November 1994.

⁵⁹ *Memorandum of Settlement, 1988 (Tripura)*, Annexure VIII in Subir Ghosh, *Ibid*.

⁶⁰ Sanjoy Hazarika, *Strangers of the Mist*, p.125.

⁶¹ *Memorandum of Settlement, 1993 (Tripura)*, Annexure VIII in Subir Ghosh, *Ibid*.

- 2) All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF)- A Hindu dominated outfit, demands expulsion of foreigners who entered Tripura after 1956; restoration of land to tribals under Tripura Land Revenue and Land Reforms Act, 1960; and removal of names of migrants who entered Tripura, after 1956 from the electoral rolls. It has links with NSCN (K), PLA, and ULFA.⁶²

Both these groups are antagonist to each other. ATTF spread widespread panic in 1996 when it announced Operation 'Raukhalaya' (Operation Deportation) to non-tribals, quit the state that entered after 1949. But NLFT countered it. In 1996, all the tribal based organizations like TNV, TUJS, Tripura Tribal National Conference, Tripura Hill People's Party, Tripura Tribal Students Federation and *Tripura Upajati Karmachari Samiti* met at Gamcakobra in Western Tripura and formed a new political party-Indigenous Peoples Front of Tripura.⁶³ It won the elections of the autonomous council, first time by a tribal party. It has been demanding the conversion of the council into a separate state and introduction of Inner Line Regulations.

The ruling Communist Party has alleged that the IPFT has support from NLFT and is engaged in ethnic cleansing.⁶⁴ Meanwhile the state government's conflict management involves encouraging surrenders through secret negotiations and rehabilitation packages. Insurgency in Tripura has become confused with the emergence of ethnocentrism, sense of tribalism, revivalism of tribal past. Economic underdevelopment with lack of employment opportunities has become a potent cause for breeding insurgency. Manik Sarkar (Chief Minister), in his visit to Delhi 2003, asked the centre to put "pressure" on Dhaka to dismantle the terrorist camps from its soil. He accused the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan and fundamentalist forces in Bangladesh along with NSCN (IM) and (K)

⁶² "Militancy: Tripura Police", <http://tripurapolice.nic.in/amilitancy.htm>.

⁶³ Utpal Bordoloi, "Tribal Consolidation still a far cry", *Deccan Herald*, 26 June 2000.

⁶⁴ "Striking at will", *Frontline*, 13 September 2002.

of colluding with the militants.⁶⁵ By accusing the centre along with the Congress party, Manik Sarkar in an interview has said, "In order to properly man the border, we need about 18 battalions of the Border Security Force (BSF), but we have got just nine at present. Again the centre withdrew Army from the state arbitrarily. They never consulted the state government".⁶⁶

Bangladeshi Chakmas in Tripura: a successful repatriation of refugees

The Chakmas in Bangladesh constitute one of the 13 tribes that inhabit the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Bangladesh was born in 1971 with a strong Bengali identity, which was enough for concretization of the nation building process. One factor created problems that of the Chakmas and the tribes who had a distinct culture- they are of Sino-Tibetan descent, their neighbours in Northeast India and Burma more akin to those speak their languages; and they are predominantly Buddhists.⁶⁷ During British colonial period, this region was administered under the Inner Line Regulation of 1900 banning the settlement of outsiders and transfer of land to non-indigenous people. The 1935, Government of India Act defined it as a 'Totally excluded Area'. During independence, the Chittagong people even though overwhelmingly non-Muslim were included in Pakistan inspite of the fact that they hoisted the Indian flag which showed their support and inclusion to India. Pakistan government viewed it as an act of betrayal and subsequently abolished their special status, which started the influx of land-craving Bengali peasants to the hills dispossessing the tribals. In 1964, the building of the Kaptai dam, displaced thousands of them and 40% arable land got submerged. They escaped to Northeastern India. Again, during Bangladesh's war of independence, the Chakma king Tridib Roy sided with Pakistan. These factors led to human rights violations of the Chakmas who fled in large numbers to Tripura state of India. The tribal people organized under a political front *Parvattya Chattgram Jana Sanghati Samity* (PCJSS). During the Constitution making process, Manabendra Larma, the Member of Parliament for the Chittagong Hills Tract (CHT) proposed insertion of a new article declaring CHT an

⁶⁵ "Separatist Terror", *Frontline*, 12 September 2003, pp.33-34.

⁶⁶ "Congress is with extremists: Sarkar", *Northeast Sun*, 15-30 April 2002, p.12.

⁶⁷ Myron Weiner, "Rejected Peoples and Unwanted Migrants in South Asia", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 21 August 1993, pp.1737-1746.

autonomous area to safeguard the political, economic, social and religious rights of the different ethnic people who call themselves Jumma. But the speaker ruled out an amendment⁶⁸. It followed an armed struggle in the form of 'Shanti Bahini' getting training in the Indian Territory. The Government of Bangladesh considered it to be a threat to the national security and so ignored accommodating the minorities. The tribals, because of their pattern and style of Jhum cultivation never bothered to secure formal ownership of land. In absence of any formal documentation, they were unable to contest claims for their own land.

International pressure was growing, on aid dependent Bangladesh to settle the issue from its donors. In 1983, the International Labour Organization (ILO) criticized Bangladesh governments with regard to ILO Convention 107 on Indigenous and Tribal populations to which Bangladesh is a signatory. It was also raised in the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations, UN Human Rights Commission and UN Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities⁶⁹. It was the Ershad government, which was successful in starting a meaningful dialogue. He declared CHT as a Special Economic Area in 1985, suspended Bengali settlement and granted asylum to the insurgents to initiate talks. The first dialogue was held on 21st October 1985 and in the sixth (14-15 December 1988) the PCJSS came down from their earlier demand of independence for "regional autonomy."⁷⁰ During 1985-1988, the PCJSS tabled the following demands-

- 1) Autonomy for CHT.
- 2) Restriction to be incorporated in the Constitution on changing the status of the CHT without the consent of the people of the area.

⁶⁸ Adilur Rahman, *Crisis in CHTs*, *Liberal Times*, February 1996.

⁶⁹ Jeneke Arens and Kirti Nishan Chakma, "Bangladesh: Indigenous struggle in the Chittagong Hill Tracts", [http:// ww.euconflict. org/dev/ECCP/ ECCPsurveys vo_10.nsf /0/c46d8289b308a73ac/256c52002e93ct?Open_Document & Click=](http://ww.euconflict.org/dev/ECCP/ECCPsurveys_vo_10.nsf/0/c46d8289b308a73ac/256c52002e93ct?Open_Document&Click=)

⁷⁰ Bushra Hasina Chowdhury, "Building lasting Peace", [http://www. acdis.uiuc.edu/ homepage_docs/ pubs_docs/PDF_Files/Chowdhury OP.Pdf](http://www.acdis.uiuc.edu/homepage_docs/pubs_docs/PDF_Files/Chowdhury_OP.Pdf).

- 3) Withdrawal of the people from the plain lands i.e. other parts of the country, who came to CHT after 14 August 1947.
- 4) Allocation of additional funds for development projects.
- 5) Creation of congenial atmosphere.⁷¹

India received with reluctance, the refugees since 1986, setting makeshift camps in the Amarpur subdivision of Tripura. The Government of India never allowed UN Human Rights Commission for Refugees or Committee of the Red Cross or any national or international NGOs access to them. The Government of India called it to be an internal affair of Bangladesh. It was already conscious of the troubles of Tripura due to refugee issue and so did not want to further complicate it. It started to put pressure by "non-violent" means i.e. reduced the scale of rations since October 1992 with non-existent sanitation and educational facilities.⁷² Several rounds of negotiations continued between India and Bangladesh on repatriation. Both sides were eager to settle it. India had already spent Rs.75 crores in their upkeep⁷³

Things hastened with Bangladesh Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's visit to India in 1992. She formed a Parliamentary Committee under Retd. Col. Oli Ahmed, to solve the issue. A meeting between Chakma refugee leaders and Bangladesh authorities was held at Ramgarh (Bangladesh) on 30 June 1994. At this meeting, it was agreed to schedule the commencement of the second phase of repatriation from 21 July 1994 (first phase in February 1994).⁷⁴ This negotiation resulted in the return of 5198 refugees to Bangladesh, which was strictly voluntary⁷⁵. The Governor of Tripura, Romesh Bhandari, visited CHT and

⁷¹ "Background of the Peace Agreement", http://www.bangladeshgov.org/pmo/agreement/agree_pre.html.

⁷² www.hrdc.net/sahrdc/resources/country_report.html.

⁷³ Tapas Ray, "A step closer to peace", *Frontline*, 18 April, 1997, p.49.

⁷⁴ Question in the Rajya Sabha, "Fresh talks between Bangladesh and India on Chakma refugees." New Delhi, 27 July, 1994.

⁷⁵ *Annual Report: 1994-95*, Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs.

expressed satisfaction of the resettlement. Both he and Col. Oli Ahmed played a key role in the repatriation process.⁷⁶

But the process stopped in 1995 due to political crisis in Bangladesh as well as fresh violations on the returnees. Chakma leaders accused India of forceful repatriation. Subas Chakma called it a bargain by India over transit rights from Bangladesh⁷⁷

In 1996 saw change of governments in both countries- Awami League under Sheikh Hasina came with a popular mandate with her party winning all the three seats in the CHT. India's "Gujral Doctrine" created a favourable environment. Negotiations between the National Committee on CHT and PCJSS continued throughout from 1996 ending with the signing of the historic accord on 2 December 1997, signed by Abul Hasnat Abdullah and Jyotirindra Boddhipriya Larma. Thus, the repatriation of all the refugees from India ended in 1998.⁷⁸

Chakma and Hajong Refugees of Bangladesh in Arunachal Pradesh: conflict at the legal level

Following the construction of Kaptai dam in Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh, large numbers of Chakmas were displaced. Communal violence forced them to seek shelter in India. By July 1964, 1, 40,000 Chakma and Hajong (Hindu tribal minority group from Mymensingh district of Bangladesh) migrated to Assam at Ledu in Dibrugarh district.⁷⁹ Nagaland and Mizoram were unsafe due to insurgency for their resettlement and Assam was not ready to accommodate such large numbers of people. In an understanding between the Governor of Assam, Vishnu Sahay and the Chief Minister of Assam, B.P. Chaliha the NEFA administration settled them in Abhaypur Block of Diyun circle of erstwhile Tirap

⁷⁶ Haroon Habib, "Prospects for repatriation", *Hindu*, 9 May 1994.

⁷⁷ Shikha Bose, "Victims of a Security Dilemma", in Lok Raj Baral and S.D. Muni ed., *Refugees and Regional Security in South Asia* (Delhi: Konark publishers, 1996), p.117.

⁷⁸ Swapna Bhattacharya, "The refugees generating Chittagong Hill Tracts: past, present and future" in Sanjay K. Roy, ed., *Refugees and Human Rights* (New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2001), p.333.

⁷⁹ Sarat K. Chakrabarty, "Chakma and Hajong Refugees of Arunachal Pradesh: Still a 'No where' People", in C. Joshua Thomas, ed., *Dimensions of Displaced People in North east India* (New Delhi: Regency Publications, 2002), p.162.

district, which was thinly populated, of Arunachal Pradesh in 1964.⁸⁰ They were issued valid migration certificates, confirming their legal entry into India, much like migrants from Pakistan after Partition and provided with plots of land. Under the Indira-Mujib Agreement of 1972, it was determined that India would be responsible for the migrants who entered India before 25 March 1971. At present they are in Chowkham (Lohit district); Miao, Bordumsa, Diyun (Changlang district); and Balijan and Kokila (Papumpare district) of Arunachal Pradesh.

But the local indigenous Arunachali people have resented their presence. They have argued that there was no government in Arunachal Pradesh during the time of their settlement and also the administration had assured them that they would not be staying for a long period. Under 1873 Act and The Chin Hills Regulation Act, 1896 no outsiders are allowed to enter without a pass or show any interest on land in Arunachal Pradesh. If their presence is reason enough for violation of peace, the district administration is empowered to take action.⁸¹ After NEFA was upgraded into a full-fledged state in 1987, the local politicians mounted pressure on Delhi to take up the issue. Failing to get a positive response, in 1992, the Arunachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly announced that all Chakmas should be deported and set up a deportation committee. Later, their ration cards were withdrawn.⁸² The Arunchalis fear their fast growing numbers as they are the second largest population group, next only to the Nishing, among the 25 tribes in the State. In the 1991 census their population in the Lohit and Chamlang districts was 74,000 out of a total of 2,05,235 and so if not checked could result in the loss of land and employment, cultural hegemony and political power for the indigenous population.⁸³

⁸⁰ Deepak K. Singh, "The Chakma and Hajong Question in Arunachal Pradesh", <http://revolutionarydemocracy.org/rdv/2n1/chakma.htm>.

⁸¹ "Take Chakmas-Hajongs out of Arunachal -AAPSU," *North East Sun*, 1-14 July 2003, p.12.

⁸² Mammika Chopra, "Chakmas preparing for a fight", *Telegraph* (Calcutta), 22 April, 1994.

⁸³ Deepak K Singh. "The Chakma Question in Arunachal Pradesh", in Omprakash Mishra, Anindyo J. Majumdar, ed., *The Elsewhere People: Cross -border Migration, Refugee Protection and State Responese* (New Delhi: Lancer's Books, 2003), p.95.

The state government published a white paper claiming "a small population of refugees has registered a phenomenal growth of over 400% in three decades."⁸⁴ The All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union launched "Refugee go back" movement giving eviction notices. They received encouragement when the Supreme Court, declaring Chakmas residing in Arunachal Pradesh as 'Foreigners/Aliens', upheld the Guwahati High Court verdict in 1992.

In 1991, the refugees formed a Committee for Citizenship Rights of the Chakmas of Arunachal Pradesh (CCRCAP). On 23 September, 1992 then Union Home Minister of State for Home and Parliamentary Affairs MM Jacob stated, "Being 'new migrants', viz. refugees from erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) who came to India between 1964 and 1971, they are eligible to the grant of citizenship according to the policy of the government on the subject."⁸⁵

But it was received with widespread protests in the state when a Parliamentary Committee was set up in 1995, to look into the matter, the state government did not cooperate. The Convenor of the Core Committee on Deportation of Chakma Refugees (CCDCR), Domin Loya, has stated that "if New Delhi try and impose an arbitrary decision asking the Chakmas to be settled here, we would have to look for help from our lost brothers (meaning China) to fight for our rights" which poses a threat to the national security.⁸⁶

The Committee for Citizenship Right of the Chakmas approached the National Human Rights Commission which then filed a petition in the Supreme Court. The latter in its judgment on 9 January 1996 declared,

"The first respondent, the State of Arunachal Pradesh, shall ensure that the life and personal liberty of each and every Chakma refugee within the state shall

⁸⁴ Omprakash Mishra, "Forced Displacement in India's Northeast", in Sanjukta Banerji Bhattacharya and Rohona Das, ed., *Perspectives on India's Northeast* (Calcutta: Marksman Media Services, 1998), p.122.

⁸⁵ Sarat K. Chakrabarty, "Chakma and Hajong Refugees of Arunachal Pradesh: Still a 'No where' People", in C. Joshua Thomas, ed., *Dimensions of Displaced People in Northeast India* (New Delhi: Regency Publications, 2002), P.165.

⁸⁶ Paolienlal Haokip, <http://www.ipcs.org/ipcs/KashmirLeve/2.jsp?action=showView&value=204&subcatID=1016&mod=b>

be protected and any attempt to forcibly evict or drive them out of the State by organized groups, such as the AAPSU, shall be repelled, if necessary by requisitioning the service of paramilitary or police force." It further added, "application for registration as citizens of India by the Chakma or Chakmas under section 5 of the Citizenship Act, shall be entered by the Collector or DC and forward it to the Central Government"⁸⁷

But the state administration has failed to implement the judgment. The Election Commission of India has asked the Chief Electoral Officer in 27 May 2003 to include the refugees in the electoral list. The Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh, Mukut Mithi, responded to it and said that the rights of the indigenous people as enshrined in the Constitution are safeguarded first. The Cabinet decided it would prepare the list by verifying the inner line permit and permanent resident certificate. Of the 1000 applications received, none qualified.⁸⁸

The authority to register a person as citizen of India rests with the central government and no other body, not even the court itself, could constitutionally interfere (Shamin Bano vs. Union of India).⁸⁹

But as has been discussed, the state government continues to defy the central government, Supreme Court or the rule of law.

Myanmarese refugees in the Northeast: from accommodation to intimidation

Myanmar is a multi-ethnic state with the ethnic Burmans comprising 2/3rd of it while the rest of it includes Karen, Shan, Akha, Chin, Chinese, Danu, Indian, Kachin, Karenni, Kayan, Kokang, Lahu, Mon, Naga, Palaung, Pao, Rakhine, Rohingya, Tavoyan and Wa group. The aspiration to escape Burman domination can be traced to the World War II when these groups joined the British in fighting the Japanese. Having taken their independence with Burma, the Chins undertook

⁸⁷ [http://www.aitpn.org/stateless/ps/citizens by birth.pdf](http://www.aitpn.org/stateless/ps/citizens%20by%20birth.pdf).

⁸⁸ "Rights of Indigenous people must be protected". [http:// www. nenanews. com% 20July^ 207% 20%2021%2003/oh2.htm](http://www.nenanews.com/20July^207%20%2021%2003/oh2.htm).

⁸⁹ Nathan A. Limpert, "People Without a country", *Seminar*, March 1998.

the Panglong agreement, which accorded right of secession. But were later denied. Many groups since then have been relentlessly trying to bring democracy.⁹⁰

The military junta has been carrying out its "non-Burman ethnic cleansing" (Khadawhme) programme. Military campaigns are carried on in states of Chin and Sagaing division. The year 1988 saw the influence of refugees to its neighbouring countries with the military crackdown by State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) of pro-democracy activists and people. Members of organizations like All Burmese Students Union (Ba-ka-Ta) University Students Union (Ta-ka-Tha); Democratic Association of youth students (DAYS) were persecuted. People were subjected to forced labour and human rights were violated. The Rajiv Gandhi government in India at that time was sympathetic to their cause and allowed their stay on humanitarian grounds. At present there are some 50,000 ethnic Chins from Myanmar in Mizoram state.⁹¹

However they are not recognized as refugees by the Indian Government and are engaged in low-paying jobs. They have organized under the Chin Students Union and Chin Refugees Committee. The second group of refugee influx occurred in April 1993, by the Arakanese group from Northern Arakan Hill Tracts as they were subjected to forced labour. These people came again in batches of 15 December 1993; mid- 1994 and 12 February 1995. They have formed the Committee for Arakanese Refugee Relief and Welfare (CARRW), head office in Delhi, to garner attention to their plight⁹². Their difference with the Chins is that they have not attempted to acquire Indian citizenship.

In the initial period, government along with the people welcomed their movement. The Ministry of Home Affairs directed the state government in

⁹⁰ J.H. Mre Mang, *Report on the Chin refugees in Mizoram state of India* (New Delhi: S.M. Graphics, 2000).

⁹¹ "US Committee for refugees", *World Refugee Survey 2002*, [http:// www.refugees.org/world/articles/wrs02-scasia1.cfm](http://www.refugees.org/world/articles/wrs02-scasia1.cfm).

⁹² Lipi Ghosh, "Arakanese refugees in Mizoram: an enquiry into the refugees flows from Myanmar," in Sanjay K. Roy, ed., *Refugees and Human Rights* (New Delhi: Ravat Publication, 2001), p.384.

Manipur in 1988 to provide shelter to the activists and ethnic groups of Myanmar. Camps were set up at Leikhul in Manipur and Champai in Mizoram with government grant-in-aid, although UNHCR or international organizations were denied access to them.⁹³

But their conditions in the camps were pathetic. Some of them who tried to sneak out were caught under the Foreigner's Act and kept in jail. It was a group of Indian lawyers who rescued them and brought to UNHCR, Delhi becoming the first UNHCR recognized refugees.⁹⁴

But not many could enjoy UNHCR status. The UN provides aid of Rs.1400/- for individuals whereas the Manipur government provides an allowance of Rs.5/- per day per head along with 450 grams of rice and dal. When some of them protested at Leikhul, 150 of them were taken to the jungles of Myanmar bordering Chandel District (Manipur) and abandoned.⁹⁵

As their numbers swelled, the local population saw employment opportunities shrinking. In June 1995, when newspapers reported that the President of Young Mizo Association (YMA) of a village unit was shot, tensions flared up with eviction notices served to the refugees.⁹⁶ The relations between Myanmar and India improved from early 1990s with establishment of trade relations. It has been alleged that the trade pact (at Rihkhawdar village, Myanmar) includes an informal understanding calling for the repatriation of Chin refugees as well as counter insurgency operations.⁹⁷ A number of refugee's camps in Mizoram were closed in 1995 reportedly on the complaint of SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council, Myanmar) that members of the Chin National Front (militant

⁹³ C. Joshua Thomas, "Cross Border Human Traffic: A case study of the Burmese Refugees in Northeast India" in C. Joshua Thomas, ed., p.187.

⁹⁴ "Survival, Dignity and Democracy: Burmese refugees in India, 1997", [http:// www. hrdc. net/ sahrdc/resources/ survival_dignity.htm?](http://www.hrdc.net/sahrdc/resources/survival_dignity.htm)

⁹⁵ R.K. Ranjan Singh, "Status of Burmese Refugees in North East India", in C. Joshua Thomas, ed., *Dimensions of Displaced people in Northeast India* (New Delhi: Regency publication, 2002), p.175.

⁹⁶ V.T. Patil, *Human Rights Development in South Asia* (New Delhi: Authors press, 2003), p.19.

⁹⁷ "The situation of Burmese refugees in Asia: special focus on India", [http:// www.hrdc.net/ sahrdc/ resources/burmese-refugee.htm?](http://www.hrdc.net/sahrdc/resources/burmese-refugee.htm?)

outfit of the Chins) were using the camps as base. Again some SLORC soldiers who defected and applied to UNHCR were refouled⁹⁸

The ASEAN countries also, are not over conscious about their plight. They seem to deal it by "engaging" Myanmar. Thailand has already sealed its border with Myanmar.⁹⁹ On March 2002 the members of young Mizo Association threatened the refugees to voluntarily evacuate their camps. Many of them have been forcibly evicted from the Chanmary ward.¹⁰⁰

Bhutanese refugees: the lot of the Lhotshampas

Bhutanese refugees are of the Nepali origin. Bhutan has been in a position like Assam when during the colonial period large number of Nepalese came to Bhutan to work in the plantations and later in the development of infrastructural projects conducted jointly with the Indian government. These Nepalese are known as "Lhotshampas". When their numbers swelled and they asserted on democracy, the ethnic and culturally different Bhutanese (Dukpas) who comprise the ruling groups were taken aback. They could see the political activism of the Nepalese in India (Gorkhaland Movement); of neighbouring Sikkim overpowered by the Nepalese and how it lost its sovereignty; and the case of Assam where Bangladeshi influx has created displacement of the local Assamese. The Bhutanese officials say that they do not want the Nepalese example of destruction of forests, smuggling of antiques and national treasures, the corruption of a venal bureaucracy and political class, sexual promiscuity and total subjugation to foreign donors.¹⁰¹ They took a series of measures - i) passed more stringent Bhutan Citizenship Act, 1985 ii) undertook "Green-Belt Policy" to sanitize Bhutan of the Lhotshampas (ii) implemented Code of conduct - "Driglam Namzha" - that is the

⁹⁸ Sreeradha Datta, "Myanmarese refugees in India: an enquiry into their conditions and status" in Omprakash Mishra and Anindyo J. Majumdar, ed. *The Elsewhere People* (New Delhi: Lancers Books, 2003).

⁹⁹ http://www.burmatoday.net/mizzima2003/mizzima/2003/06/03068_India-mizzima.html.

¹⁰⁰ "Chin refugees being evicted enmass in Northeastern India", [//www.chro.org/chro-HTML/CHRO-resources/Refugees issue-reports/Refugee-reports/chro-Refugee issue 200-report.htm](http://www.chro.org/chro-HTML/CHRO-resources/Refugees%20issue-reports/Refugee-reports/chro-Refugee%20issue%20200-report.htm).

¹⁰¹ Sanjay Hazarika, *Strangers of the Mist* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1994), P.294.

Nepalese had to leave their customs for ethnic Bhutanese (Tibetan Origin).¹⁰² This followed ethnic conflict and exodus to India (Kokrajhar in Assam and West Bengal) and Nepal of the Bhutanese Nepalese in 1990.

Since then, several dialogues between Nepal and Bhutan had ended in failure. Nepal wants India to intervene, but India states it would not as it considers it to be a bilateral problem. The then secretary in the Ministry of External Affairs said on 19 October 1990 that the Indian government would not allow the Nepalese in India to carry out an agitation against Bhutan for they did not have any "political right to agitate against a friendly neighbour."¹⁰³

For those in India, according to the Indo-Nepal Treaty they can move freely whereas the Government of India does not recognize the presence of any Bhutanese refugees.¹⁰⁴

At the same time it has to be mentioned that the Nepalese in the Northeastern states have become target of anti-foreigners movement in almost all the states. Some analysts have argued that India cannot evade responsibility forever. India takes a strong stand in obstructing their reentry into Bhutan via India but it was India only who allowed its territory to the refugees to enter Nepal.

Thus we see how refugee influx has continued to the Northeast from the colonial period. First it was due to the lack of local skills and at present due to vested interests from various quarters.

The resentment from the locals against the outsiders is primarily due to loss of land, which is further complicated by their increasing numbers. The politicians

¹⁰² A.C. Sinha, "Dialogue between Deaf and Dumb: The Lhotshampa Refugees and their predicament", in C. Joshua Thomas, ed., *Dimension of Displaced People in Northeast India* (N. Delhi: Regency Publication, 2002), p.121.

¹⁰³ Sucheta Ghosh, "Crisis in the kingdoms: Refugee question between Bhutan and Nepal" in Omparakash Mishra and Anindyo. J. Mazumdar, ed., *The Else where People* (New Delhi: Lancers Books, 2003), p.169.

¹⁰⁴ Soumitra De, "Bhutanese State and Stateless Bhutanese: politics of identity and stalemate in refugee crisis", in Sanjay K. Roy, ed., *Refugees and Human Rights* (Delhi: Ravat publication, 2001), p.275.

play a major role in making a fool of the democratic set up. Different governments at the centre and the state formed by different parties have led to non-recognition of the "empirical reports" by the respective quarters. Census reports have become controversial. The implementation of accords is ruined once political power comes to engulf the group who had raised the first slogan against the outsiders. In Tripura, it is shocking to learn how mainstream parties have openly sided with militant groups and in turn have split tribals in communal lines.

The successful repatriation of Chakmas was more due to international pressure than any seriousness of Bangladesh because incidents of violation and non-implementation of CHT accord has been reported. The Indian authorities while settling refugees should take into consultation the locals beforehand otherwise another confrontation will be emerging up for the respective governments to tackle to. The presence of ISI links is a threat to the national security and needs to be responded. India should reappraise their treaty with Nepal (open borders), as because the one-way movement of the Nepalese has resulted in attacks against them by the locals. This is a call to the establishment so that it may not face any diplomatic embarrassment. Although trade has taken precedence over refugee problem and subsequent repatriation (allegedly to be forced) with Myanmar, further thought needs to be given to the refugees and a deeper understanding of their plight. With regional economic cooperation at the threshold, the presence of refugee problem might create roadblocks to trade. The various insurgent outfits will be difficult to deal with. Also, this cooperation must try to improve the economic stagnancy of the member countries thereby checking the movement or rather the emergence of refugees.

Chapter IV

DIPLOMACY BEHIND ECONOMIC COOPERATION

Till the late 1980's, the centre saw the Northeast only from the security angle. Any diplomatic interaction therefore focused on that particular aspect. But in the 1990's, several factors led to the change of this strategy. The foremost among them was the end of Cold war, which compelled leaders worldwide (including India) to reach out to regions previously considered to be on the other side of the ideological construct. One of these regions for India was Southeast Asia, which had become remarkably successful in achieving high levels of GDP. The countries therein have been termed as miracle economies. Although India had cultural linkages with the region in the past, a concrete long-term relationship did not take place due to Cold war politics. Therefore, the end of the latter made leaders from both sides to exchange a relationship of mutual advantage. In 1997, Myanmar became part of ASEAN bringing Southeast Asia next door to India (Myanmar sharing border with Northeast India). Hence the "Look East Policy" of India, launched to establish trade relations with Southeast Asia, got much more substance and the added advantage of using the Northeast as a bridge to the region. The Indian diplomatic establishment was therefore moving out of the security paradigm vis-à-vis the Northeast to that of trade and commerce, which in turn might improve the economic conditions of the latter. Meanwhile relations with the neighboring countries improved. Be it with China, Myanmar, Bangladesh or Nepal. There was an increasing level of realization among the policy makers that border region, being land-locked, can at best improve their economy through border trade. Artificial creation of borders breaks this relationship leading to an additional burden on the centre. All these talks would not have been possible without the economic reforms of 1991 and trade liberalization. Economic diplomacy became one of the hallmarks of India's foreign policy. Hence, the diplomatic

interaction with respect to the Northeast now focuses on trade and commerce along with security.

Multilateral Framework

This section analyses the various multilateral diplomatic initiatives having relevance to the Northeast; what are the expectations of other countries from the Northeast? What is the nature of the relationship? What kind of role the centre wants to play the Northeast? What are the benefits that would accrue to the region? Who are the actors that are leading such collaborations? What is the status of such frameworks? Etc.

India's Look East Policy: looking beyond security

India launched its 'Look East Policy' in 1991 under P.V. Narasimha Rao who was quick to recognize that India's extended neighbourhood had to include South East Asia and the Asia-Pacific region.¹ It was meant to gain from the newly emerging opportunities from the miracle economies as well as to counter China's influence in the ASEAN region, which had increased significantly. For long the relationship between India and ASEAN was marred due to bloc politics confined between the Soviet-US paradigm. It further deteriorated due to the Indo-Soviet Treaty, India's ambivalence on Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and recognition of Heng Samrin government in July 1981. But end of the Cold war, removed the barriers between them cemented by ASEAN's 'Look-West Policy', which found common ground with India's 'Look-East Policy'.

India became a sectoral partner of ASEAN in late 1991 in the core sectors-trade, investment and tourism. This was followed by diplomatic visits –Indian Prime Minister's visit to Indonesia (1992); ASEAN delegation led by its Secretary General, Dato Ajit Singh to India in 1993; Indian Prime Minister's visit to Thailand (1993), Vietnam and Singapore (1994) and Malaysia (1995).² It was due to the facilitation of Singapore, India's country

¹ A.N. Ram, "Extended Neighbourhood", *the Pioneer* (New Delhi), 22 April 1999.

² C.S. Kuppuswamy, "India's Policy – Looking Eastward", <http://www.saag.org/notes2/notes2/note123.htm>.

coordinator, that India was elevated to full dialogue partnership in 1995. India joined the security grouping, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in July 1996. The relationship with ARF involves mutual visits of ships, training of personnel, joint naval exercises, the availability of repair facilities for military equipment, provision for the supply of spare parts and the joint development of warfare technologies.³ In January 2001, the Secretary-General of ASEAN, Rudolfo Severino visited New Delhi. Indian Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee carried forward the policy by visiting Vietnam (July 2000), Malaysia (May 2001), Thailand (July 2001), Singapore (April 2002) and Laos and Cambodia (November 2002).⁴ The partnership with ASEAN got a boost, with the upgrading of India's position to "10+1 Summit Level" in 2002. In October 2003 in Bali, Indonesia, India signed or adopted three key documents with ASEAN- (i) Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation that is to include among others a free trade agreement (ii) Treaty of Amity and cooperation (TAC) to maintain peace and stability in the region (iii) the ASEAN-India Joint Declaration for cooperation to Combat International Terrorism.⁵ All, of these suggests, India's 'Look-East Policy' being taken seriously by ASEAN.

The economic opportunities for India are many. While Southeast Asia specializes in electronic equipment, heavy engineering and product development and marketing; India's strength lies in software, light engineering, pharmaceuticals and process development.⁶ According to the Asian Development Bank, a sum of US \$ 1.5 to US\$2.5 trillion is required for infrastructural development in East and South East Asia, which India can explore upon.⁷ The Indian Prime Minister, Vajpayee, pointed out the specific areas of investment in the Bali Summit in 2003 – information,

³ S.S. Mehta, *Launching India into the Twenty-first Century* (New Delhi: Minerva Press, 1999), p.142.

⁴ Fauzal Yahya, "India and Southeast Asia: Revisited", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 25, no. 1, April 2003, pp. 79-103.

⁵ P.S. Suryanarayana, "Emerging Asian Equations", *Frontline*, 7 November 2003, p.45.

⁶ Nagesh Kumar, "India's Approach to Regional Trade Arrangements in East Asia: Trends and Prospects," <http://www.pecc.org/trade/papers/phuket-2003-/kumar.pdf>.

⁷ S.S. Mehta, *Ibid.*

pharmaceutical industry, infrastructure development etc.⁸ Tariff concessions and elimination of tariff has been agreed on a common list of 105 times between India and six ASEAN countries – Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, Malaysia and Philippines,⁹

The ASEAN market is attractive to Indian exporters due to the geographical closeness, which would reduce transportation costs to a lot. Also, the presence of people of Indian origin is another important factor of the existence of a market. For the Northeast India, their importance lies in being next-door neighbours with many groups having traditional trade and cultural ties. For example, the Tai Ahoms in Assam have their counterparts in Southeast Asia who are called Shan in Myanmar, Thai in Thailand, Lao in Laos, Dai and Zhuang in China and Tay-Thai in Vietnam.¹⁰ Most of the Northeastern states do not have an industrial base but has a rich source of biodiversity, which would lead to pharmaceutical innovations; with natural scenic geography tourism could prove to become an important sector for the Southeast Asian tourists. The free trade agreement signed with ASEAN, which shall reduce export duties to zero by 2006, includes petrochemicals, and so Assam can gain in terms of the expansion in petrochemicals marketing.¹¹ There are projects to link the region with Southeast Asia via roadways.

But there is still a long way to go. In fact, the level of two-way India-ASEAN trade stands at \$ 12.5 billion a year, which is meager. The percentage share of India's total exports and imports for 2001-02 with European Union is 22.5 and 20.3, whereas with ASEAN it is 7.9 and 8.5 only.¹² The Singapore corridor in Chennai, a joint venture between the Tatas and the Singapore Airlines, has not taken off due to lack of transparency.

⁸ Shibdas Bhattacharjee, "India's Look East Policy", *The Assam Tribune*, 23 October 2003.

⁹ Editorial, "India and ASEAN", *Assam Tribune*, 13 October 2003.

¹⁰ Sanjib Baruah, "Look East, but via the Northeast",
http://www.indianexpress.com/full_story.php?content_id=37048

¹¹ Devashis Bose, "ASEAN, Indian Economy and Assam", *The Assam Tribune*, 20 October 2003, p.6.

¹² <http://www.tradeportalofindia.com/contentmgmt/desktop52.asp?itemcode=100000537&compid=itpo>.

Nevertheless, the relationship is at an incipient stage, and the Indian diplomacy has to tread carefully. The Southeast Asians are not too excited about recalling the cultural past (which has a racist touch) but are agreed upon to explore the economic future.¹³ At present, the dialogue mechanism with ASEAN includes- (i) ASEAN Post Ministerial Conferences (PMC), in the forms of “ASEAN+10” and “ASEAN+1” (ii) ASEAN India Senior officials meeting (iii) ASEAN Indian Joint Cooperation Committee (JCC) (iv) ASEAN-India Working Group.¹⁴

BIMST-EC: first among the sub-regional co operations

It is a sub-regional economic cooperation between Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand providing integration at a smaller and more manageable level than ASEAN or APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation). At the same time it would provide a link between emerging free trade areas of SAARC and ASEAN. For India, the interest was building a link (via road and through a seaport in Myanmar) from Northeast India through Myanmar with Thailand.¹⁵ The cooperation came up in Bangkok on 6 June 1997 (excepting Myanmar, which joined in December 1997), signed by Bangladesh (Abdul Hasan Choudhury, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs), India (Saleem Iqbal Shervani, Minister of State Foreign Affairs), Sri-Lanka (D.P. Wickremasinghe, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs) and Thailand (Pitak Intrawitayanunt, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs).¹⁶ The aims and purpose of it are economic development through identification and implementation of specific cooperation projects; collaboration and assistance in economic, social, technical and scientific field; improving transportation and communication infrastructure; cooperation with regional and international organizations on common interests projects (it has already

¹³ Sanjaya Baru, “India’s Neighbourhood: Economic and Cultural, not physical”, *Times of India*, 5 February 2000.

¹⁴ [http://www.meadev.nic.in/foreign/asian.ind relations.htm](http://www.meadev.nic.in/foreign/asian.ind%20relations.htm)

¹⁵ “A bridge at the ASEAN”, http://www.hinduonnet.com/the_hindu/biz/2003/01/06/stories/20030106001600200.htm

¹⁶ *Declaration on the Establishment of the Bangladesh India-Sri Lanka-Thailand Economic Cooperation, BIST-EC, Bangkok, 6 June 1997.*

asked the Economic and Social Council for Asia Pacific, ESCAP to explore potential projects). The institutional mechanism to realize its eight areas of cooperation (trade, investment and industry, technology, human resources development, tourism, fisheries, energy, infrastructure and transportation) includes –

- i) Annual Ministerial Meeting (alphabetical rotation).
- ii) Senior official committee.
- iii) A Working Group, under the chairmanship of Thailand and having as its member the accredited ambassadors to Thailand, or their representatives of the other members to carry on the work in between Annual ministerial meeting.
- iv) Specialized task forces and other mechanisms.¹⁷

BIMSTEC was initiated in 1994 by Thailand, which wanted to explore economic cooperation on sub-regional basis involving the Southeast and South Asian countries around the Bay of Bengal.¹⁸ This was part of Thailand's 'Look West Policy', which was discerned in 1989 during the visit of then Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan to India who became the first Thai Prime Minister to visit India.¹⁹ The main objectives of this policy are:

- i) To strengthen the existing bilateral relations with targets states (South Asia, Middle East and Africa).
- ii) To seek potential markets and investment opportunities overseas and to promote foreign investment in Thailand.²⁰

Thailand put the idea to India in January 1996, when India's Foreign Minister, Pranav Mukherjee visited the country. India was reluctant about the inclusion of Bangladesh but Thailand was eager to include the latter. Later 'Gujral Doctrine' improved relations between India and Bangladesh. One person who took an active role and also mooted the idea of regional

¹⁷ BIMSTEC (Bangladesh-India-Myanmar-Sri Lanka-Thailand Economic Cooperation), Division of Economic Relations and Cooperation, September 1999.

¹⁸ <http://www.ris.org.in/dp23.pap.pdf>.

¹⁹ Pitak Intrawityanunt, "A bridge not too far", *Bangkok Post*, 23 June 1997.

²⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Thailand, <http://lmfa.go.th/web/65.php>.

airline was the Thailand's Deputy Foreign Minister, Pitak Intrawityanunt. Having a business-consultancy background he did the groundwork by visiting the member states prior to the launch of BIMSTEC.²¹

But despite this, the concretization of projects under BIMSTEC has not taken place. Thailand got embroiled with the Asian Economic crisis, India with political instability and the unfavourable relation between Bangladesh and India (former denying transit rights to India). But annual meetings at various levels have taken place. The first Ministerial Meeting took place in December 1997, followed by in Dhaka (17-19 December 1998) and New Delhi (July 2000). In the Ministerial Meeting in Yangon in December 2001, the ministers agreed to explore external financing of BIMSTEC projects under Mekong-Ganga Cooperation.²² In the Economic Ministerial retreat held in Bangkok on 7 August 1998, prioritization of various sectors, country-wise, was done. According to it, Bangladesh would be responsible for Trade and investment (textiles and clothing, drugs and pharmaceuticals, gems and jewellery, information technology products, commodities of rubber, tea, coffee, coconut and spices, automotive industries and processed foods); India for Technology; India for Transportation and Communication; Myanmar for Energy; Sri Lanka for Tourism; Sri Lanka again for Fisheries.²³ In 2000 in New Delhi the trade ministers agreed to set up a group to study the idea of moving from a preferential trade area to a free-trade area.²⁴ Although there was a five-year moratorium for inclusion of new members and criteria as Bay of Bengal rim countries as qualification for membership, Nepal and Bhutan has been given observer status considering their importance to the cooperation. Recently, the failure of the ministerial level has led to it being upgraded to summit

²¹ V. Jayantha "A Forum for Cooperation, another sub-regional grouping in Asia", *Frontline*, 11 July 1997, p.57.

²² *Annual Report: 2001-02*, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, New Delhi.

²³ "Bangladesh-India-Myanmar-Sri Lanka-Thailand Economic Cooperation", July 2000 in <http://www.meadev.nic.in/foreign/bimst/htm>.

²⁴ Sanjaya Baru, "A Bridge over River Kwai", *Business Standard*, 5 May 2000.

level wherein heads of government will be meeting in Thailand, February 2004.²⁵

As has been discussed, Thailand is an important part of this relationship with India. A trilateral cooperation between India-Thailand-Myanmar in the construction of a 1400 km long highway starting from Moreh in Manipur via Bagan in Myanmar to Mae Sot in Thailand was agreed upon at Yangon, 5-6 April 2002 during the visit of India's External Affairs Minister, Jaswant Singh.²⁶ This idea came up during the visit of Thai Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra to India in November 2001. The Foreign Minister of Thailand, Surkriat Sathirathai assured that financing would not be a problem despite Myanmar's weak economic conditions. Moreover, parts of the corridor already exist. Apart from this, the ministers agreed to promote a highway from Kanchanaburi in Thailand to Dawei deep seaport in Myanmar and shipping links to India; promote trade and investment along with tourism through people to people contact across borders; and cooperate in human resource development.²⁷ Two task forces have been set up, one on finance chaired by Thailand and the other on technical matters by India. But the project is running behind schedule. Some Indian officials argue that the lack of control by Myanmar authorities on particular regions through which the corridor will pass is a reason for the delay.²⁸ In fact, no one knows the tentative costs for the project, which country will fund how much and the reasons behind the delay. Therefore the ground works need to be worked upon. Meanwhile in the recent visit of the Prime Minister, Vajpayee to Thailand on 9 October 2003, the leaders agreed to speed up the construction of the highway and that India will hold a meeting of the three Foreign Ministers in December 2003. At the same time, India signed five agreements with Thailand, which includes framework

²⁵ "Looking East", *the Hindu*, 7 October 2003.

²⁶ "To South China Sea by Car", *North East Sun*, 15-30 April 2002, p.7

²⁷ <http://www.meadev.nic.in/foreign/ind/thailand.htm>

²⁸ M.R. Narayan Swamy, "Driving from India to Thailand via Myanmar – but when?", *The Sentinel*, 12 October, 2003.

agreement for establishing a bilateral Free Trade Area, MOU on Agricultural Cooperation; Agreement on Tourism Cooperation; Cooperation in the field of Biotechnology. When India suggested a twin-city relationship between Phuket in Thailand and Port Blair in India, the Thai Prime Minister, Dr. Thaksin Shinawatra introduced another landbridge project to link the Andaman Sea and the Gulf of Thailand for gas and oil cooperation.²⁹ The volume of India's trade with Thailand is within one billion and so to increase the volume; India can explore Thailand's competence in infrastructure, including ports, airports, highways and urban amenities.³⁰

Kunming Initiative: initiative at the track II level

It is an attempt at the Track II level to promote a growth quadrangle between India, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh that emerged after the International conference on Regional Economic Cooperation organized by the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences and the Yunnan Provincial Research Centre for Economy and Technology held in Kunming, Yunnan (China) from 14-17 August 1999. Altogether 134 delegates took part (94 from China, twenty-two from India, thirteen from Bangladesh and four from Myanmar) to strengthen regional economic cooperation and cultural exchange among the contiguous regions of Eastern/Northeastern India, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Southwestern China.³¹ This has been put forward first by the Chinese side because the Southwestern part of China (Yunnan province, Sichuan province, Chongqing Municipality and Guizhou province) being landlocked is too far for access to the South China Sea and so relatively backward. The only way to reduce communication difficulty and develop the region is access to Bay of Bengal via India, Myanmar and Bangladesh by land or sea-routes. Southwest China has a good industrial base with metallurgy, chemicals, electrochemical, textiles, tobacco,

²⁹ "Joint Press Statement on Prime Minister's Officials visits to Thailand" *Strategic Digest*, November 2003.

³⁰ "Boosting trade ties", *The Assam Tribune*, 15 October 2003.

³¹ "The Kunming Initiative for a Growth Quadrangle between China, India, Myanmar and Bangladesh, 14-17 August 1999", *China Report*, 36:3(2000).

papermaking and foodstuff.³² Yunnan region is already part of the Mekong Sub Region Cooperation and its key industries include – tobacco, sugar, tea; rubber and spices; phosphorus chemical and nonferrous and ferrous metals industry; tourist industry.³³ In fact, the Chinese side has referred to the historical trade ties with India – the Southern silk route that passed through the region. They called it as ‘Nanfang Sichou Zhilu.’³⁴ The people of Northeast India traded via the route with China and Tibet in the North and Myanmar (erstwhile Burma) in the East. Of the 56 ethnic groups in China, 25 belong to Yunnan. Ancestors of them migrated to the Northeast long time ago.³⁵

The members of the initiative together comprise a huge market and are part of regional organization – ASEAN, Mekong Sub-region, BIMSTEC, SAARC and Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC) Myanmar sees it to be an opportunity to balance China with India and it is the reverse for Bangladesh. Various meetings preceded the Kunming Conference. The groundwork was prepared by the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences (Kunming), the Sichuan Academy of Social Sciences (Chengdu), The Yunnan Institute of International Affairs, the Kunming Municipality, the Centre for Policy Research and the Institute of Chinese Studies, both New Delhi.

The first ever gathering of academics of the neighbouring regions of Northeastern India and Southwestern China took place on the conference titled “Regional Development in India and China” in New Delhi, 19-20 November 1998 and again in the “Sino-India Track II Dialogue” organized by the Centre for Policy Research from 25-28 January, 1999 in New Delhi.³⁶

³² Gulshan Sachdeva and Charan Wadhva, “Indian Perspective on East Asia”, <http://www.asiapacificresearch.ca/caprn/cisp-project/cisp-wadhva.pdf>.

³³ Ingrid d’Hooghe, “Regional Economic Integration in Yunnan” in David S. G. Goodman and Gerald Segal, ed., *China Deconstructs: Politics, trade and regionalism* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.290.

³⁴ Haraprasad Ray, “The Southern Silk Route from China to India – An Approach from India”, *China Report*, 31:2(1995).

³⁵ <http://www.asiasource.org/trade/fifteen.cfm>

³⁶ *Annual Report: 1998-99*, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, New Delhi.

In the Kunming Conference, the topics that were discussed (i) important strategic position of the economic cooperation (ii) Operating Mechanism of the cooperation and development (iii) Promote the government and non-governmental cooperation and friendly exchanges (iv) Enhance the rapid economic development of the region.³⁷ The Centre for Policy Research highlighted the Stillwell road, built during World War II to counter Japanese aggression that starts from Ledo in Assam to Kunming, which can be reopened for trade. The road link exists from Kunming to Ruili to Mandalay – Rangoon and from the Indian side Ledo to Pangsau Pass into Myanmar and so only the intermediate link needs to be constructed. It also showed the ongoing negotiations of India with Myanmar on the Moreh-Tamu-Kalewa highway and the Sittwe port so as to develop an outlet to the Northeast and said that joining the Kalewa road by bridging the Chindwin river, Kunming can get connected reviving the Southern Silk Route.³⁸ Pradyut Bordoloi, Minister of State for Home, Finance and Industry, Government of Assam said that the baseline part of the gigantic three gorges in China, which covers Qinghai and Sichuan region, a US\$37 billion project, would trigger economic growth in the region. He added, “The encouraging aspect is that the multi million dollar expressway connecting Kunming and Guangzhou and the Chinese special economic zone of Shenzhen is located just across the Hong Kong Territory border.”³⁹ Dr. Arun Sarma, a Rajya Sabha Member of Parliament from Assam urged to revive the Stillwell road. Ren Jia, Professor of Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences put forward three routes for economic cooperation – (i) Northwest (Stillwell road): Ruili/Tengchong-Myitkina-Ledo (ii) Southwest: Ruili- Mandalay-Imphal (iii)

³⁷ Che Zheming, Vice Director, Centre for Government of Yunnan Province, “A Good Beginning and a Bright Future”, Summary of the International Symposium (Kunming Conference)

³⁸ “Filling the Gap”, Centre for Policy Research Paper for Kunming Conference on Regional Cooperation, August 14-17, 1999.

³⁹ Pradyut Bordoloi, “Revive Old Route”, Paper presented at the International Conference on *Regional Cooperation Amongst China, India, Burma, Bangladesh* Kunming, 15-17 August 1999).

Southern: Ruili-Mandalay-Yangoon-Calcutta.⁴⁰ M. Dattatreylulu and L.D. Mago showed Chinese inroads in Myanmar, which is building infrastructural projects for free in Myanmar. A motorable road from Kyngok via Muse upto Mandalay; a railway line from Mandalay to the Chinese border, bilateral assistance agreement with Myanmar for construction of basic facilities like building vessels at Yangon port, development of Mandalay international airport etc; following its "Open Door Policy", Myanmar has six border trade point with China.⁴¹

At the end of the conference wide consensus was reached to establish a forum for regional economic cooperation among the countries. It was decided that the delegates would report the outcome to their respective governments, business and trade chambers as well as academic institutions for further policy action. But certain problems still exist. The Myanmarese and the Chinese are not keen to the reopening of the Stillwell road. Myanmar, due to insurgency in the Northeast India and the latter wants a quicker sea route via Sittwe in Myanmar. The Indian side is apprehensive about opening borders for fear of increasing militancy and Chinese dumping. The Stillwell road nevertheless is the shortest route to China and Moreh to Kalewa to Southeast Asia and if Mizoram is linked to Akyab (Sittwe) and Agartala to Chittagong port; the entire Northeast will be opened. Moreover, Yunnan is already importing annually half a million tonnes of iron ore and exporting a million tonnes of phosphate to India. This short route would cut down a 7000-km detour round Hong Kong and Singapore.⁴² By now, four meetings have taken place of the initiative, fourth in Yangon in 2003, elevated to government officials.⁴³ In the third, February 2002, it has been renamed as Forum on Regional Economic Cooperation

⁴⁰ Ren Jia, "Promote regional economic relations", Paper presented at the International Conference on *Regional Cooperation amongst China, India, Burma, Bangladesh* Kunming, 15-17 August 1999.

⁴¹ M. Dattatreylulu and L.D. Mago, "Regional Economic Cooperation among Bangladesh China People's Republic, India and Myanmar through Border Trade", Paper presented at the International Conference in Kunming, 15-17 August 1999.

⁴² P. V. Indiresan, "The Kunming Initiative", *Frontline*, 14 April 2000, p.98

⁴³ <http://english.peopledaily.com in/200312/03 eng 200032203 129168.shtml>

among Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar (BCIM Forum) on the lines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. It got a boost when Bangladesh Prime Minister, Khaleda Zia met the Governor of Yunnan province, Xu Kongkai, to set up the Chittagong-Myanmar-Kunming air route. Moreover the Bangladesh Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources have accepted in principle, a proposal for the construction of a Manipur-Tripura-West Bengal, gas pipeline through Bangladesh.⁴⁴

Mekong Ganga Cooperation: culture specific collaboration

The Mekong-Ganga Cooperation is another attempt by Indian diplomacy to gain from Southeast Asia and use the common cultural link of Northeast India to the region. The inaugural meeting took place on 10 November 2000 in Vientiane, Laos preceded by a preparatory meeting of Senior Officials on 9th November 2000 comprising of the member countries of Cambodia (Veng Seryvuth, Minister of Tourism), India (Jaswant Singh, Minister of External Affairs), Laos (Somsavat Lengsavad, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs), Myanmar (Major General Saw Lwin, Minister of Hotels and Tourism), Thailand (Adisai Bodharamik, Minister to the PMO) and Vietnam (Nguyen Dy Nien, Minister of Foreign Affairs).⁴⁵ The thrust areas-Tourism (tourism policy planning environmental preservation, cross-border tour packages); culture (cultural heritage sites and artifacts); education (seminars on education related issues, translate classics of each MGC country); Transport and communication (cross border facilitation, east-west corridor, Trans Asian Railway and the Asian Highway projects). The funding is to come from each member country along with contribution from donor countries and agencies. The institutional mechanism involves one chairman in the alphabetical order starting with Laos and the MGC ministerial level meeting would take place every year in the ASEAN ministerial meetings and post-ministerial conferences in July

⁴⁴ Ramtanu Maitra, "Prospects brighten for Kunming Initiative", http://www.atimes.com/atimes/south_Asis/EBI2df04.html.

⁴⁵ *Vientiane Declaration*, <http://www.geocities.com/Mekong-ganga2000/inaugural.html>

every year. The ministers have acknowledged the hurdles ahead and so have set no time frame for project implementation as Vietnam Foreign Minister Nguyen Dy Nien pondered over the weak economic situation of the region (apart from Thailand).⁴⁶

The Mekong Ganga cooperation emerged from tourism based initiative, 'Suwarnaphum', comprising the countries sharing the Mekong river- Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam who agreed to promote cultural tourism amongst common cultural traditions.⁴⁷ The Thai Foreign Minister, Dr. S. Pitsuwan during his New Delhi visit in 8-10 July 2000 apprised the External Affairs Minister, Jaswant Singh about MGC. The latter offered to join it in return. For India, particularly the Northeastern states have common practices- religious, social, food-habits etc with the people of Mekong Region and so establishing the links would certainly pave development in trade and commerce and other areas. Some have argued that considering the closeness of the Thai Minister to the United States, the latter had its backing on MGC.⁴⁸ The original name of MGC was 'Ganga-Mekong Suvarnabhumi Project' but Laos objected the inclusion of 'Suvarnabhumi', related to Thailand's historical role, and so was dropped even though Laos' Deputy Prime Minister had agreed to it during the preparatory meetings. Also some countries objected to it being called "Ganga-Mekong" following which Jaswant Singh agreed to the changed term "Mekong-Ganga".⁴⁹ Also some analyst have questioned the non inclusion of China and Bangladesh, which has been answered by MGC, that since Bangladesh is already part of BIMST-EC and China in the Mekong Region Projects, their inclusion would not make MGC homogenous and so were excluded. When recently China wanted to be part of MGC, Myanmar objected to it saying concretization of

⁴⁶ Sishir Gupta, "Mekong-Ganga Project signed, boost", *Hindustan Times*, 11 November 2000.

⁴⁷ <http://www.meadev.nic.in/foreign/ganga-mekong.htm>

⁴⁸ Amit Baruah, "The long haul", *Frontline*, 31 August 2001.

⁴⁹ "Looking East", *Frontline*, 8 December 2000, p.49.

the project has still not taken place and therefore fresh inclusion would dilute the existing efforts.

In the second Ministerial Meeting of MGC held at Hanoi July 2001, a “Hanoi Programme of Action”, was adopted effective from July 2001 to July 2007 to promote cooperation in sectors- Tourism, culture, education and transport and communication. The progress of its implementation is reviewed every two years in coincidence with the MGC Annual Ministerial Meeting.⁵⁰ In a MGC senior level meeting held in New Delhi in January 2001, five expert working groups were established with India leading the HRD sector. Thus the cooperation is at a nascent stage and mostly paperwork is continuing at present.

One of the most important objectives of the MGC is the Asian highway project and the Trans-Asian Railway. The highway is expected to link up Singapore with New Delhi via Kuala Lumpur, Ho Chi Minh City, Phnom Penh, Bangkok, Vientiane, Chiang Mai, Yangon, Mandalay, Kalembo, Tamu, Imphal, Dhaka and Calcutta. Both these were conceived in 1959 by UNDP and at present are under ESCAP. The Economic and Social Council for Asia Pacific (ESCAP) in its 48th session (1992) endorsed the Integrated Asian Land Transport Infrastructure Development (ALTID) comprising the two. Russia, Central Asian Republics, Bhutan, North Korea and Turkey agreed on it, which emphasizes on looking at transport logistics, formalizing proposals through agreements, setting routes, completing missing links and improving operational efficiency of existing networks.⁵¹ For the formulation of the projects, ESCAP wants the member nations to accede to 7 international conventions on Road Traffic (1968), Road Signs and Signals (1968), International Transport of Goods (1975), Temporary Importation of Commercial Road Vehicles (1956), Custom Convention on

⁵⁰ *Hanoi Programme of Action*, Hanoi, July 2001.

⁵¹ V.G. Verghese, *Reorienting India: the New Geopolitics of Asia*, (New Delhi: Konark Publishers, 2001), p.199.

Containers (1972), Harmonisation of Frontier Control of Goods (1982), Contract for the International Carriage of Goods by Road (1956); and two transit Conventions on Freedom of Transit (1921) and Transit Trade of Land Locked States (1965).⁵² But there is delay on its implementation. There are political problems between border countries and also the delay in acceding to the Conventions. India has already made a start with the construction of Moreh-Tamu road. Recently Indian Prime Minister, Vajpayee brought up the idea of a railway line linking Hanoi with New Delhi at the ASEAN meet, 2003. Two routes have been identified- Delhi to Hanoi via Assam-Myanmar and other one via Bengal-Bangladesh-Myanmar.⁵³

Apart from the above, there is another sub regional growth framework related to Northeast India- the South Asian Growth Quadrangle comprising of Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Eastern and Northeastern states of India and Nepal. Following the successful Greater Mekong Sub Region (GMS) cooperation initiated by Asian Development Bank the focus has shifted to SAGQ as a potential area.⁵⁴ Initiated by Nepal, studies are getting conducted by ADB, World Bank and United Nations.⁵⁵ The present thrust is on the cooperation in the energy sector. According to a study, the SAGQ region has an undeveloped hydropower potential of around 50,000 MW compared to its 1992 peak demand of 10,400 MW and an anticipated demand of 26,000 MW by 2010.⁵⁶ Although the idea of cooperation among Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal originated in 1998, yet it did not take shape. The SAGQ concept emerged during a conference organized by the Indian Chamber of Commerce, Kolkata attended by the four countries at

⁵² Sudha Mahalingam, "Roadblocks in Asia", *Frontline*, 5 November 1999.

⁵³ Sujata Dutta Sachdeva, "Delhi to Hanoi? Possible, says Railways", *Times of India*, 21 September 2003.

⁵⁴ http://www.Southasiafoundation.org/saf/safdic/documents/ec_sas.htm

⁵⁵ Rehman Sobhan, *Transforming Eastern South Asia*, (Dhaka: Centre for Policy Dialogue, 1999).

⁵⁶ http://www.adb.org/documents/events/2000/private_Sector_Forum/calcutta_energy.pdf

Kolkata in November 2000.⁵⁷ The concept is at an embryonic state with feasibility studies being conducted by relevant parties.

Diplomacy behind border-trade vis-à-vis the Northeast

Northeast India has linkages of ethnic, cultural, traditional and commerce with its neighbouring countries from centuries. Certain communities of Arunachal, Nagaland and Mizoram had migrated from Myanmar, so did the Tai Ahom group of Assam from Thailand and Laos. Border-trade was an ongoing practice with the regions of Tibet, China, Myanmar, Bangladesh (erstwhile East Bengal) etc prior to India's independence which was brought to a halt after the creation of political boundaries breaking such ties both of trade and emotional, pushing the region into virtual isolation without an outlet.

In the historical books of China, the Southern Silk Route has been described as having two branches, with Guwahati being an important trade centre exchanging silk, tea, sesame from Assam and cowries and myrobalam from China. The two routes (i.) Northern arm was aligned through Myitkina, the Hukwang valley and over the Patkai and Naga hills into Assam (ii) the southern arm passed through Ruili on the Shweli river into Burma (Shan state) and then across the Chin Hills and Chindwin river into Manipur.⁵⁸ The Muga Silk of Assam was in great demand in Bhutan, China and Tibet, and Lac was exported to the Mughal Empire and as far as Japan. As being a landlocked region salt was in scarcity and could not be fully met from indigenous sources like salt wells, banana plant ashes etc. so traded with Tibet, a salt rich area. Trade was carried through passes through the hills called 'dooars'. There was a belief in Bhutan, Tibet and Nepal that Lord Buddha died in Kamrupa near Hayagriva Madhav Temple of Hajo in Assam

⁵⁷ Dr. P.D. Shenoy, Secretary Department of Development of Northeast Region, GOI in a paper titled "Importance of North East Region in India's Look East Policy" presented at the Seminar, *Partners for Development: Holistic Approach to the Northeast* Gangtok, 8-9 May 2002.

⁵⁸ B G. Verghese, *India's Northeast Resurgent: Ethnicity, Insurgency, Governance, Development* (New Delhi: Konark Publishers, 1996), p.368.

near Guwahati.⁵⁹ Therefore, it became a pilgrimage centre for those coming from these countries. In Northern Burma at Bhamo bordering Yunnan province of China, every year between mid-December to end of April a great trade fair was held wherein tribes from Burma, Assam, Manipur etc exchanged goods ranging from spices, chinaware, gongs, vermilion, tea to cotton.⁶⁰ Before 1962, Nathula in Sikkim and Thge Tsona Gonpaste monastery in Arunachal Pradesh acted as centres of border trade with China. During the colonial period Assam-Bengal railway was opened that ran from the seaport of Chittagong (now in Bangladesh) to Silchar in Assam.

At present, border trade with the Northeastern region is conducted through Land Custom Stations (LCS). The LCS with the region involves –32 with Bangladesh, out of which 14 are operational; 3 with Myanmar, with one functional; one with China (Nathu La at a preliminary stage); and 3 with Bhutan.⁶¹

The products exported from the Northeastern region are not always only through border trade. A major chunk of its products are exported from the mainland either with or without value addition, which includes limestone, tea, coal, handloom textiles, handicrafts, and floriculture and horticulture products.⁶²

Following is a countrywise examination of border-trade with the Northeast-

Bangladesh

Border trade is conducted according to the 1972 trade agreement between the Government of India and the Government of Bangladesh. According to this, there are five sectors through which trade is conducted- (I) Mizoram- Chittagong Hill tracts sector, (ii) Khasi, Jaintia and Garo hills-

⁵⁹ Purushottam Bhandari, "Transborder Trade in Northeast India" paper presented at the seminar, *Transborder trade in Northeast India*, 28 July 1999, Guwahati.

⁶⁰ J.B. Ganguly, "Traditional Patterns of Assam's Trans- Himalayan Border Trade" paper presented at the seminar, *Transborder Trade in Northeast India*, Guwahati, 28 July 1999.

⁶¹ Gurudas Das and R.K. Purkayastha, eds., *Border Trade: Northeast India and Neighbouring countries*, (New Delhi: Akansha, 2000).

⁶² "Initiative to boost trade and commerce in the Northeastern region", <http://commin.nic.in/doc/annual/ch-14.pdf>.

Sylhet Mymensigh sector (iii) Cachar-Sylhet sector (iv) Tripura – Bangladesh sector (v) Rangpur (Bangladesh)-Assam sector.⁶³ The export from Northeast mainly consists of mineral and horticultural products. A cement company, Chattak in Bangladesh depends largely on the limestone from Meghalaya. The authorized customs check post are –Dhubri, Sutarkhandi, Gokalganj, Mankacher in Assam; Dowki, Bholagang, Shellabazar, Balat, Borsora, Mahendraganj, Dalu in Meghalaya; and Akhura, Srimanthapur, Rajan in Tripura.⁶⁴ The total export of India with Bangladesh was Rs. 3084.80 crores during 1996-97 out of which the Northeast contributed Rs. 103.67 crores.⁶⁵ There exists a protocol between the two, on inland water transit and trade for commerce signed by Waliul Islam (then Secretary of the Government of Bangladesh, Ministry of Shipping) and C.N. Ramdas (then Secretary, Ministry of Surface Transport, Government of India) in 1995, which gets periodically extended. But this does not respond to the water system (river transport) upstream, as it is limited to only the border ports of Dhubri and Karimganj in Assam.⁶⁶

However, illegal trade far exceeds the returns of legal trade. Sanjoy Hazarika has commented that the largest single illegal export to Bangladesh is smuggling of cattle about 3 million every year. Other products are smuggled via the eastern districts of Bangladesh-Chittagong, Noakhali, Comilla and Sylhet, which include coal, petroleum products, pharmaceuticals, bicycles, wood etc. Even daily labourers cross over Bangladesh to work in the day in India and return back in the evening. This process is made smooth by the cooperation of Bangladeshi as well as Indian

⁶³ *Trade Agreement between the Government of India and the Government of Bangladesh*, New Delhi, 28 March 1972, signed by L.N.Mishra, Minister of Trade and Commerce (India) and M.R. Siddiqui, Minister of Trade and Commerce (Bangladesh) in Avtar Singh, *India Bangladesh Relations: Documents (1971-2002)* (New Delhi: Geetika Publishers, 2003).

⁶⁴ Gulshan Sachdeva, *Economy of the Northeast: Policy, present conditions and future possibilities*, (New Delhi: Konark Publishers, 2000), p.150.

⁶⁵ Gurudas Das, "Trade between Northeastern region and Bangladesh: Nature, trends and implications for development cooperation", *Dialogue*, vol.12, no.4, April-June 2001.

⁶⁶ *Protocol between the Government of the people's Republic of Bangladesh and the Government of Republic of India on Inland water transit and Trade*, Dhaka, 22 August 1995 in Avtar Singh, *Ibid*.

border security forces. In an estimate, volume of such informal trade in 1996 amounted to 42,010 lakh (value of export from Northeast India) and 12,162 lakh (value of import to Northeast India)⁶⁷

According to Pabitra kar, Tripura's Industries Minister, official trade of Tripura with Bangladesh, which started in 1995, is about Rs 1 crore per year but the unofficial figure is ten times the official.⁶⁸ It has been alleged that the medicines supplied to Tripura is being illegally diverted to Bangladesh. Apart from medicines, Rs 20-25 crores value of sugar and fresh fish from the Dumbur Lake in Tripura reaches Bangladesh clandestinely every month.⁶⁹ So, this has to be responded by the respective governments. Although the balance of payment is in India's favour, the government has to check it as the Northeastern states are losing cash revenue by the clandestine dealings.

On the positive side, a protocol has been signed between the two countries on a passenger bus service between Dhaka and Agartala (Tripura) by Pinak R. Chakravarty (Deputy High Commissioner of India), and Md. Asaq-ve-Zaman Bhuiyan (Joint Secy. Road and Railway division, Bangladesh) in 2001.⁷⁰ Now the Meghalaya government also wants a similar bus service from Dhaka to Shillong. Although the Agartala service had started, the number of passengers has been very low due to which, Tripura government has decided to introduce a package tour.⁷¹ In 1998 Bangladesh completed the Jamuna Bridge across Brahmaputra at Sirajgunj and linking it to the Northeast would provide a shorter route to mainland India. India is in talks for access to the Chittagong port. In a secretary level

⁶⁷ Srinath Baruah, "Trade liberalization, transborder informal trade and economic prospects of Northeastern region" paper presented at the seminar, on *Transborder trade in Northeast India*, Guwahati, 28 July 1999.

⁶⁸ Kunalata Chakraborty, "Borders, Trade and Smugglers", *Statesman*, 3 August 2002.

⁶⁹ Sukhendu Debbarma, "Transborder Trade in Tripura, Past and Present: A study", paper presented at the Seminar, on *Transborder trade in Northeast India*, organized by Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development, Guwahati, 28 July 1999.

⁷⁰ *Protocol regarding operation of passenger bus service between Agartala and Dhaka in terms of agreement between the Government of Republic of India and the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh*, Dhaka, and 10 July 2001 in Avtar Singh, *Ibid*.

⁷¹ "Tripura government to offer package for tourists to Bangladesh", *The Sentinel*, 21 October 2003.

trade talks between Dipak Chatterjee (India) and Suhel Ahmed (Bangladesh) at Dhaka between 8 to 10 April 2002, Bangladesh requested India to give duty free access to 25 categories of its products representing 191 tariff lines, out of which India agreed for 40 tariff lines.⁷² In a recent joint secretary level talks at Dhaka, October 2003 both sides discussed on trade expansion. Bangladesh focused on elimination of para and non-para barriers in trade whereas India on transit and transshipment.⁷³

Myanmar

Indian engagement with Myanmar was first drawn by security concerns. Chinese influence in Myanmar was a known fact, but after August 1991 following the visit of General Saw Mung to China, military cooperation increased. With the setting up of the Chinese signals intelligence facilities, on the Great Coco Islands, few miles from Andaman Islands, the Indian establishment decided for 'constructive engagement' with Myanmar.⁷⁴

Later, inclusion of Myanmar in ASEAN and the Myanmar policy to balance China with India led India to cooperate with Myanmar in opening border trade and infrastructural projects on transportation. The visit of two important political leaders has hastened the process. First by Vice Foreign Minister of Myanmar, U Baswe from 11-13 August 1992 and the other the high profile visit of its Vice President Maung Aye from 12-21 November 2000. U Baswe outlined three points that Myanmar would respect India's commitment to democracy and would want the latter to be patient for the revival of democracy in Myanmar; that there existed common security and political problems and would cooperate to deal with them; and lastly,

⁷² <http://www.meadev.nic.in/foreign/bangladesh.htm>.

⁷³ "Indo-Bangla trade talks from today" *The Sentinel*, 20 October 2003.

⁷⁴ Gilles Boquerat, "India's Confrontation with Chinese interests in Myanmar", in Frederic Grare and Amitabh Mattoo, eds, *India and ASEAN: the Politics of India's Look East Policy* (New Delhi: Centre de Sciences Humaines, 2001), p.179.

Myanmar wanted to increase technological and economic cooperation with India.⁷⁵ This laid the ground for the present relationship with Myanmar.

Border trade agreement between the two sides was signed on 21 January 1994, which operationalised during the visit of Myanmar Minister of Commerce, Tum Kyi, to India in April 1995.⁷⁶ The border points decided – (1) Moreh (Manipur) and Tamu (Myanmar) (2) Champai (Mizoram) in India and Hri in Myanmar. Although the second one has not been operational, Lungwa in Nagaland has been identified as another point. There are two gates; first one would trade in all items including products from third country under mutually agreed freely convertible currencies. Second one is on barter trade of about 22 items (12 are currently traded), within a distance of 40kms on either side.⁷⁷ But certain problems have come up, which includes lack of infrastructure, banking facilities, insurgency and too much paper work. The border trade policy ('Open Door') of Myanmar insists 'imports first and exports later'.⁷⁸ This has resulted in balance of trade problem. The Indian businessman has to bribe several agencies upto Moreh leading to hike in prices of the commodities, which therefore, demands transparency.⁷⁹ The formal trade in Moreh is estimated by the Indian Institute of Foreign Trade to be between Rs.50 to Rs.60 crores whereas the informal trade figures are ten times of it.⁸⁰ To improve banking services, UBI is shortly opening one of its branches in Myanmar.⁸¹

The other side of engagement with Myanmar, which is related to trade, is on infrastructure development. India approved the Moreh-Tamu-Kalewa road construction project (\$36 million) in 1996, which was executed

⁷⁵ J.N. Dixit, *India's Foreign Policy and its Neighbours* (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2001), p.326.

⁷⁶ *Annual Report: 1995-96*, Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi.

⁷⁷ M. Dattatreya, "Industrial Development and Export Potential of the Northeastern region" *Foreign Trade Review*, vol. XXXIII, nos. 3 and 4, October 1998 – March 1999.

⁷⁸ Gulshan Sachdeva, *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Swarnalatha Laithangban, "Indo-Myanmar Border Trade: Losing out at Moreh", *Northeast Sun*, 15-31 July 2003, p.8

⁸⁰ M. Goswami and J.K.Gogoi, "Formation of South Asian Free Trade area and its Impact on the Economy of the Northeast India" paper presented at the Seminar on *Border Trade in Northeast India*, 14-15 December 1998, Shillong.

⁸¹ "UBI Branch in Myanmar Soon", *Assam Tribune*, 20 October 2003.

by the Border Road Organization.⁸² The 160 km long road termed 'Indo-Myanmar Friendship Road' was inaugurated by India's External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh during his visit to the country in February 2001 under the presence of Myanmar's Construction Minister, Saw Tun.⁸³ Apart from this, both the governments are in talks on other sectors – hydroelectricity, gas pipeline, river navigation etc. Myanmar is part of the trilateral highway project between Moreh in India to Mae Sot in Thailand. Indian side has agreed to build the Rhi-Tiddim and Rhi-Falam road sections to Mizoram and another from Kaletwa to the border in Mizoram. Myanmar is keen to exploit hydropower to the Northeast and has laid a double circuit of 400 KW, most probably through Tamanth across Nagaland.⁸⁴ India's Oil and Natural Gas Cooperation (Videsh) Ltd., negotiated with South Korea's Daewoo International Corporation for a stake in the latter's gas exploration in the Arakan offshore in Northwestern Burma.⁸⁵ Recently, ONGC (Videsh) Ltd., and GAIL have acquired 20% and 10% participating interest in it.⁸⁶ Meanwhile New Delhi is engaging Myanmar in its efforts to out do China. It extended \$ 15 million credit line to Myanmar for the purchase of industrial and electrical equipment from India.⁸⁷ India has also agreed to import 50,000 tonnes of rice from Myanmar to the rice deficit Northeast so as to cut down transportation cost from Punjab or Haryana.⁸⁸

China

It is well known about Sino-Indian diplomatic relations. The 1962 war and Chinese soldiers' march up to Tezpur in Assam in the Northeast and their subsequent claim over Arunachal Pradesh has always been a reminder to the Indian side while dealing with China. But what is heartening is a

⁸² *Annual Report: 1996-97*, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, New Delhi.

⁸³ "India-East Asia Relations", http://www.ciaonet.org/olj/cpc/cpc_jan03n.pdf

⁸⁴ Swaran Singh, "Myanmar: The "Strategic Hub" of the 21st Century Asia" in *Journal of the United Service Institution of India*, vol. CXXVIII, No. 532, April-June 1998, pp. 244-258.

⁸⁵ <http://www.idea.int/documents/burma/BURMA-beyond-2000-chap4.pdf>.

⁸⁶ <http://www.meadev.nic.in/foreign/myanmar.htm>.

⁸⁷ Tony Allison, "Myanmar Shows India the road to Southeast Asia", <http://www.atimes.com/reports/CB21Aioshtml>.

⁸⁸ "Grain Corridor from Myanmar", *Telegraph*, 21 October 2003.

sudden change from the Chinese side that has come along after the agreement between the two to open border trade at Nathu La in Sikkim. This in turn has given recognition to Sikkim, which it has long denied. The ground for this was laid by the signing of two historic agreements – Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas (1993) and the Agreement on Confidence Building Measures in the Military field along the Line of Actual Control in the Indian China Border Areas (1996).⁸⁹

Prior to 1962, Nathu La was operational, so did trade in the border areas of Arunachal Pradesh. After the war, relations deteriorated. It improved only after Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi's visit to China in 1988. Following this, both sides agreed to resume border trade. Two points were selected- across Lipulekh Pass in Uttaranchal (opened in 1992) and across Shipki La Pass in Himachal Pradesh (opened in 1994).⁹⁰

For centuries Nathu La was part of the Silk Route together with Jelep La (connecting Lhasa to Kalimpong), by which herdsmen would cross to the Chumbi valley in Tibet between Sikkim and Bhutan. Therefore the present opening would not only reinvent the old Silk route (across Nathu La onto Yatung into Lhasa and then to China) but also galvanize the Northeast bringing attention to it (hopefully investment) due to the China factor.⁹¹ According to the Indian embassy in Beijing, it was the Chinese who were eager to open the border. Principal Secretary, Brajesh Mishra was at the heart of the negotiations.⁹² The border trade agreement was signed during Prime Minister, Vajpayee's visit to Beijing, Luoyang and Shanghai from 22-27 June 2003. What brokered the agreement was the Indian stance of recognizing Tibet as part of China and the Indians using the term 'Tibet Autonomous Region' (which is the Chinese formulation) along with Indian

⁸⁹ *Foreign Affairs Record*, External Publicity Division, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, vol.XXVI, no.4, April 2000, New Delhi.

⁹⁰ *Annual Report: 1997-98*, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, New Delhi.

⁹¹ A.C. Shubhanirayasananda, "Nathula opens up," *Prout*, vol.14, no.14, 13-16 July 2003.

⁹² Sara Nazvi Bhaumik, "Smooth Going on Silk Route", *Outlook*, 7 February 2003, p.40.

referral to their use of the term “People’s Republic of China” and not “China”, the former emerging in 1949. The declaration on Principles for Relations and Comprehensive Cooperation between the Republic of India and the People’s Republic of China (signed on 23 June 2003) said on Tibet, “the Indian side recognized that the Tibet Autonomous Region is part of the territory of the People’s Republic of China and reiterates that it does not allow Tibetans to engage in anti-China political activities in India”.⁹³ In the declaration there is also an indirect reference to the Taiwan issue. The Indian side accepted that there is one China. Although China pushed for the word ‘inalienable’ to be used by India on Tibet and Taiwan, India sidetracked it. The actual negotiations took place on 23 June 2003 between Vajpayee and Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao in Beijing and it proved a victory for the Indian diplomacy to be able to get Chinese recognition over Sikkim as being part of India. The Article I of the memorandum read, “The Indian side agrees to designate Changgu of Sikkim State as the venue for border trade market; the Chinese side agrees to designate Renqinggang of the Tibet Autonomous Region as the venue for border trade market”.⁹⁴ The Memorandum on the Resumption of Border Trade (13 December 1991) and Protocol on Entry and Exit Procedures for Border Trade (1 July 1992) signed between the two is also applicable. The opening has been widely appreciated on both sides of the border. Despite poor infrastructure, one sector can gain the most—Tourism. Buddhist tourism can prosper if Japan and East Asian travellers are encouraged to visit Bodhgaya in Bihar, Rumtek in Sikkim and Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh.⁹⁵ But a section of the Indian army is not pleased with the developments. They fear that the ongoing 1,118km railway project (\$27.2billion) to link Gormo in China’s Qinghai province with Lhasa in

⁹³ Amit Baruah, “Taking a New Road”, *Frontline*, 18 July 2003, p.5.

⁹⁴ *Memorandum between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People’s Republic of China on Expanding Border Trade*, 23 June, 2003, in Bilateral Documents, <http://meaindia.nic.in/>

⁹⁵ Subrid Sankar Chattopadhyay, “A Pass to prosperity”, *Frontline*, 19 December 2003, p.54.

Tibet will enhance Chinese intelligence through a network of defence feeder railway lines.⁹⁶

Another aspect of these developments is the border problem with India. On the positive note, both sides have accepted to settle the border dispute at the political level. Border talks had been going on between the two but at a very slow pace. There have been 14 rounds of discussions of the India-China Joint Working Group on the boundary question.⁹⁷ During his landmark visit to China, Vajpayee proposed to appoint special representatives on the issue, which was accepted by his counterpart, Wen Jiabao. On his part Jiabao, was eager to improve relations. He conveyed to Vajpayee that contentious issues needed to be put behind by the two countries.⁹⁸ The first special representative meeting was held in New Delhi, 23 October 2003 led by Principal secretary to Prime Minister and National Security Advisor, Brajesh Mishra from the Indian side and the Chinese side led by Senior Vice Minister of the Foreign Ministry, Dai Bingguo (also included its Ambassador to India, Hua Jundao, Director General from Asia Department, Fu Ying and Director General from the Policy Study Department, Cui Tiantai).⁹⁹

Bhutan, Nepal: comparatively smaller volume of trade

With Bhutan the Indo-Bhutanese treaty of 1949 governs trade relations with India. According to its Article V, "there shall, as hereto fore, be free trade and commerce between the territories of the Government of India and of the Government of Bhutan, and the Government of India agrees to grant the Government of Bhutan every facility for the carriage by land and water, of its produce throughout the territory of the Government of India, including the right to use such forest roads as may be specified by the mutual

⁹⁶ Naunidhi Kaur, "A route of hope", *Frontline*, 15 August 2003, p.52.

⁹⁷ "Crucial India, China border talks today", *Assam Tribune*, 23 October 2003.

⁹⁸ "India, China discuss border tangle", *Assam Tribune*, 24 October 2003.

⁹⁹ "India, China give political push to solve border row", *The Sentinel*, 24 October 2003.

agreement from time to time”.¹⁰⁰ In 1995, an agreement on trade and commerce was renewed between the two to be in force for 10 years. In it, the entry and exit points were decided to be as Jaigaon, Chamurchi, Ultapani, Hathisar, Darranga, Calcutta, Haldia, Dhubri, Ranaul, Panitanki, and Changrabandh.¹⁰¹ But the custom stations at Darranga, Halisar and Ultapani are non-operational.¹⁰² At the same time it has to be mentioned that informal trade continues at two points-Gelephu and Samdrupjankar, both border towns of Bhutan within one kilometer from Assam-Bhutan border. Likewise, the Indian government has agreed for a trade treaty with Nepal, which has been renewed on 2 March 2002 after 6 rounds of bilateral talks. It provides for transit rights to Nepal, the latter being a landlocked country. To avoid their economic interest being adversely affected both the countries have signed an agreement to control unauthorized trade in 1991.¹⁰³ A Joint Technical land boundary Committee (JTC) led by survey general of India (1980) has resolved the India-Nepal border problem in the Sikkim sector.¹⁰⁴ Recently, both Nepal and Bhutan have shown interest to start flight operations from Northeast. The Assam State Industries Minister, Bhubaneswar Kalita has said that both Druk and Nepal Airline are keen to connect to the region’s only international airport in Guwahati.¹⁰⁵

Thus, we see how trade and commerce is acting as a catalyst to bring development and reopen the traditional routes of the Northeastern region to the neighbouring countries. Indian diplomatic efforts have been successful to a large extent with respect to China, which may develop into a subsequent border settlement. The sub-regional multilateral frameworks have just started and coming down to any conclusion will be too premature at this stage. The world over, regional cooperations are being given impetus and

¹⁰⁰ Dr. Nagendra Nath Sarmah, “Few Dynamic trans-border traditional trade along Indo-Bhutanese border land”, paper presented at the seminar, on *Trans-border traditional trade*, Guwahati 28 July 1999.

¹⁰¹ <http://www.saarcnet.org/newsarcnet/govpolicies/bhutan/tradeagreebhut.htm>.

¹⁰² http://www.janmanch.org/norgh_east/north_east.asp?oth_id=24.

¹⁰³ http://www.saarcnet.org/newsarcnet/govpolicies/india/unauthorised_trade.html.

¹⁰⁴ <http://www.meadev.nic.in/foreign/nepal/htm>

¹⁰⁵ “Bhutan, Nepal keen to start flight from NE”, *Assam Tribune*, 21 October 2003.

therefore we can say India is on the right track. One common factor in almost all the groupings is Bangladesh, which is most crucial for the Northeast, as it will provide the shortest access to the sea. But the present government in Bangladesh does not share the same sentiments and is delaying transit rights to India. This is something, which the latter has to respond to. China, Myanmar and Thailand considering the realities have successfully engaged Bangladesh and therefore it depends on India how it will do so. In the case of border trade an irritating factor, which has been seen, is that of informal trade and the corrupt officials on both sides of the border that facilitate the process. This illegal trading eats out valuable revenue to the Northeast and the Centre as a whole. Hence stricter enforcement of the rules has become necessary. There is scope for opening of more border points but insurgency and lack of infrastructure is a concern. Political solution of insurgency should be the priority; otherwise strands of such movements will be very difficult to wipe out. The discussion has followed that Indian security fears, with respect to China is unjustified. China, described by many as a powerhouse is following a pragmatic diplomacy, guided by economic interests. As today's world respects and fears economic might, the present deliberations of India (with respect to the Northeast) can be claimed to be in the right direction, what requires is proper implementation with a comprehensive view of the ground situation.

Chapter V

CONCLUSION: INDIAN DIPLOMACY IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION?

The examination of the negotiations on facilitation of trade via Northeast shows that India is at various levels of talks with neighbouring countries and with Southeast Asia. The Indian government is also engaged in talks with insurgent outfits through ceasefire operations and is dealing with the refugee issues carefully keeping its own interest into consideration. With respect to insurgency, although the government is undergoing talks with the mother of all insurgency- Naga (NSCN-IM), new sparks are emerging in various parts of the Northeast. While Arunachal Pradesh is reeling under spillover effects; Manipur is divided between Meitei, Kuki and Naga insurgency and Meghalaya between the Garos and the Khasis, whereas in Tripura the tribes are getting divided along communal lines. Ceasefires are not having the desired effect because new issues like 'Nagalim' are creeping in. Although the government is trying to adjust by granting autonomy but experiences show, lack of clear-cut demarcation of powers and functions are proving a failure to such autonomy grants (e.g. failure of Bodo Autonomous Council). The Bodoland Territorial Council might not succeed because important issues are yet to be solved. Ethnic divisions are common but what is perplexing is that divisions occur within a tribe. Also, the political parties- both national and regional, due to their narrow interests creates roadblocks by denying any lead in peace initiatives to their opponents. One recent development, which can be claimed to be a success in checking their growth, was the flushing out of ULFA, NDFB and KLO militants from Bhutan. As is known that the Northeast shares an international boundary with several countries, which makes it easier for militants to escape arrest by crossing the porous boundary lines. The Indian government was in talks with Bhutan to conduct joint operations against the militants. The reason behind the delay can be traced to the internal problem of Bhutan between Drukpas and Lhotshampas

as has been already discussed. Initially the Indian militants acted as a buffer between the dominant Drukpas and the Southern Lhotshampas. But latter, it was found that the Nepalese origin people launched a Communist party to overthrow the Bhutanese monarchy allegedly with the help of Indian militants particularly ULFA, which is committed to "Scientific Socialism". The monarchy was threatened and so tried to first carry talks with the militants. Having failed, the Royal Bhutan Army launched a crackdown on anti-India militants, camping on its soil on 15 December 2003 (Operation All Clear). The Bhutan army arrested many of the top leaders including Mithinga Daimary (publicity secretary, ULFA), Bhimkanta Buragohain (ideologue, ULFA), B. Irakdao (publicity secretary, NDFB) and Tom Adhikary and Dalton Barman (top two of KLO). The chief ministers of Assam and West Bengal and other states while welcoming the move declared amnesty to the surrendered militants and urged the Prime Minister, Vajpayee, to crackdown similar camps in Bangladesh and Myanmar. At this juncture, the Myanmar Foreign Minister, U Win Aung, promised to deny entry to militants fleeing from Bhutan. The Nepalese Finance Minister, Prakash Chandra Lohani, also took this stand. He said, "We both must make sure that the open border is not used by undesirable elements to create violence and instability".¹ Later, the ULFA Chief offered for talks with the Indian government on condition that "sovereignty" will be the issue, facilitated by a neutral non-Indian nation state. Rejecting this offer the Minister of State for Home, I.D. Swami said that, "there cannot be talks with pre-conditions".²

The above can be attributed a success but is it really the end to insurgency? Certainly not. The Indian government has always avoided voices of protest till they become full blown cases of insurgency. It then launches counter-insurgency measures ending with accords, which never get implemented. The cycle starts once again. As earlier insurgent movements show that they ended only after creation of new states claiming political power.

¹ "Nepal will not allow anti-India activity", *The Hindu*, 22 December 2003, p.12.

² "Centre rejects ULFA's talks offer", *The Hindu*, 29 December 2003, p.1.

Therefore the issue is political which is about getting social, economic and political empowerment. It is a multiethnic pluralist society and the present situation shows impossibility of further creation of new states. Hence the concern should be how to adjust these heterogonous groups in the Indian democratic set up keeing aside all hegemonic tendencies. Even with respect to the refugees, the neighbouring countries face the same ethnic question and India by finding a solution can help these countries to come in terms of their ethnic status. The chapter on refugees shows that apart from the Chakma and Hajong refugees in Arunachal Pradesh and Bangladeshis in Assam, the Indian government has tried to solve it bilaterally. With Myanmar, which is a crucial partner in trade, the refugee issue is not given prominence. The problem area is mainly with Bangladesh, which has to be responded as early as possible otherwise Bangladesh will be successful to create their "Lebensraum" in the Northeast and particularly in Assam wherein political decisions at present is at their mercy in several constituencies. Moreover, insurgency in some states has been due to the result of these refugee groups, and so if left unsolved they will create unstable situation that might not be fruitful for economic undertakings.

Trade negotiations are encouraging and in a way will give a complete new dimension to the Northeast. All the multilateral and bilateral cooperations have emphasized particularly on trade and transportation infrastructure. The economic projects are not forthcoming at present due to the nascent stage of the trade frameworks (studies going on) but the transportation infrastructure (road construction) is progressing swiftly. In the latest meeting on the trilateral highway project between India, Myanmar and Thailand held on 23 December 2003 both India and Thailand agreed to support financially weaker Myanmar on the project. The governments were represented by Yashwant Sinha (Minister of External Affairs, India), U Win Aung (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Myanmar), and Dr. Surakiart Sathirathai (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Thailand).³ Recently another border trade point was opened at Rih (Mizoram)

³ "Joint Press Statement on India-Myanmar-Thailand Ministerial Meeting on Transport Linkages", *Strategic Digest*, vol. 34, no.1, January 2004, p. 26.

with Myanmar. Insurgency, corruption has to be weeded out otherwise Northeast will be left out from making any gains.

From the above a broad conclusion can be drawn that all the three issues are interlinked. In order to achieve momentum in trade talks, the Indian government (considering the significant location of Northeast that could bring down communication cost in business dealings to a minimum) is trying to eliminate problem areas of insurgency and refugees. As discussed, it is in talks with NSCN (IM) and hoping that success in it could result in similar ceasefires with other outfits (BTC being operational). Similarly sensitive issues on refugees are not raised politically. With Bangladesh, it is trying to deal first economically (as Bangladesh is a member in many regional frameworks) which could then expand in other areas.

For the transformation of the Northeast, the civil society of the region is also trying to contribute of its own to the process. It has been already discussed about the role of the civil society in the Kunming Initiative. Another institution in Bangladesh, Center for policy Dialogue (Dhaka) conducts seminars jointly with Centre for Policy Research (New Delhi) on various issues of the region comprising of people of various professions and even governmental ministries. Certain participants later went to serve on influential positions in their respective countries. For example, Brajesh Mishra the present National Security Adviser to the PM, Vajpayee participated in the dialogues between 1996-97, so did Inder K. Gujral in 1995 and then in 1998. Civil Society in the Northeast is at a dormant stage. Although high level of literacy exists, awareness at this level is low. According to Samir Kumar Das, restoration of civil society is absolutely essential for making peace accords successful to achieve their intended end. In spite of their limited presence the Church, certain women organizations like "Meira Paibis", Naga Mothers Association etc., and the media in a larger context spreads the message of peaceful coexistence. In Tripura, Jamatiya Hoda (Supreme Council of the Jamatiya Tribe), Tripura Adimjati Sevak Sangha, Borok Human Rights Groups etc. opposes violence.

The killing of Sanjoy Ghose (an activist) in Majuli (Assam) by ULFA, intimidates many to step forward.

As the conclusion comes to the fact that trade is given priority, one must look into the preparedness of the Northeastern states or the economic viability of them. It is here, that the scene looks bleak because almost all the states are in a delicate position economically. In terms of administrative, social and economic infrastructure the Northeast is far behind the rest of India. According to Atul Sharma (economist), the industrial base is very narrow which comprises mainly of first stage processing industries like grain mills, wood and wood products; besides the few modern industries which exists like non-metallic mineral products are resource based. These states were created to satisfy ethnic aspirations and their economic sustainability was not given priority. It was believed that central grants would lay the foundation for economic progress. That is why these states are kept under "special category states" according to which they get assistance from the Planning Commission in the form of 90% grant and 10% loan whereas for other states it is 70% loan and 30% grant.⁴ Even under such conditions the states have remained backward mainly due to their failure to attract investments. It then remains on the state governments to generate employment, which is why the departments are overstaffed. Their salaries, wages, pensions, establishment and interest payments eat away 85-90% of the total budget. After the new economic policy, as the public undertakings are declining and market economy is being coming into play, the condition is getting deteriorated further. Leakage also occurs through corruption and extortion by militant groups. Due to insurgency the expenditure on maintenance of law and order has gone up from Rs. 99 crores in 1986-87 to Rs. 724.99 crores in 2001-2002.⁵ Assam has accused the centre of practising discrimination in its insurgency policy. Because when Government of Assam asked the centre for a certain amount it received only one-third of it whereas

⁴ Dr.Jayanta Madhab, "Commentary on the Fiscal Situation of the Northeastern States", *Dialogue*, vol. 4, no. 1, July-September 2002.

⁵ H.N. Das, "The Present Financial Crisis in Assam", *Dialogue*, vol. 4, no.1, July-September 2002, p. 85.

the centre had written off the entire amount taken for security related expenditure by Punjab. There are too many ministers to serve a small set of population. Moreover, when 80% of the population is dependent on agriculture, no emphasis is given for income generation in this sector with vast tracts of land lying idle. The emerging middle class continues to remain dependent upon outside private entrepreneurs. This lack of growth of the commodity-producing sectors has given rise to substantial leakages of income in the form of regional imports of even the essential items like rice, fish and other agricultural commodities. Income tax is levied only on non-tribals and business community (outsiders) in the hill states and hill areas. Agricultural tax is levied only in Assam. With respect to the tea industry in Assam, crores of rupees in income tax is lost by the state as most of the headquarters of the tea companies are situated outside Assam in Kolkata. And also agricultural tax, which is counted at the rate of forty per cent of the total income tax thereby, gets lost. The Supreme Court ban on felling of trees has affected the plywood industry. Thus we see that the scope for revenue generation is limited. But this is not to say that there is no hope for the region. The region has one of the richest biodiversity, wide range of minerals like coal, limestone, uranium, petroleum are available and has potential for further exploration. It has a tremendous potential for hydroelectricity and its unharnessed river system can act as an economic way of transportation. Many analysts have argued that the region can at best serve as a major tourist attraction and with a rich eco-system horticulture and floriculture can flourish. Therefore, these are some of the areas which the respective authorities must look into and pave the road for development. Indian Prime Minister, Vajpayee acknowledging the potential of the region of becoming a bridge head to South-East Asia has asked the states to prepare the ground to participate vigorously with the region particularly in the tourism sector in a Northeast business summit.

Thus the Northeast is at the threshold of a new beginning and the past mistakes have to be avoided for development. In Assam the surrendered outfits of ULFA, SULFA, parts out with government contracts making it difficult for

local entrepreneurs to come up and the latter can't seek redressal as the state comes forward to defend the acts of SULFA. The Indian State's attempts to term the whole cause of ethnic insurgency as something sponsored by foreign mercenaries like ISI to break India into pieces is outrageous. This shows it wants to escape its own responsibility. Even in the case of the Naga talks, there is little appreciation to take responsibility of the Naga cause that they have been wronged. Certain sectarian and fundamentalists group have alleged the involvement of Christian missionaries. This might further complicate the issue. At the same time the Northeast rebels must understand that the Northeast had been historically a shared homeland and therefore creation of isolated pockets of barriers will not be in their interests. Even if they achieve independence, they will be landlocked and be dependent on their neighbours.

Some way or the other the levels of dependency and accommodation will be always there. Hence the ethnic tribes must leave their petty differences and come to a solution because one can change enemies, but neighbours can't be changed. For the Indian diplomatic establishment the linkages of Pakistan, China, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Bhutan with the Northeast insurgents points to their bilateral importance to India. Many migration experts have argued for guest worker programmes / permits to check the flow of migration. But with Bangladesh denying any presence of their citizens, this does not seem feasible. Moreover, with an unguarded borderline, which is marked by heavy forests and rivers, monitoring becomes a difficult task. The issue has to be tackled at various levels both domestically and bilaterally. There is also the need for an international refugee regime, which could relieve the host country from their economic burden and that, could put pressure on the generating country to check the outflow. The construction of highways across borders has raised a concern for security. As the military junta does not control the northern part of Myanmar, the insurgent outfits there might take the advantage of the highway for trafficking of arms and drugs directly instead of a long and difficult route through Cox Bazaar in Bangladesh. Moreover, the PLA and NSCN (IM) have alleged business investments in Thailand and so linking up the economy might

intensify such commercial in-roads. Thus, the opening of borders must be undertaken carefully. With regard to Chinese dumping of goods, India need not be over cautious because after China's accession to WTO such acts can be challenged. Meanwhile the border talks with China progressed smoothly in Beijing on 12-13 January 2004 between National Security Adviser Brajesh Mishra and Executive Vice-Foreign Minister, Dai Bingguo.⁶ The presence of ULFA in Myanmar has led the Assam rifles to raise five new battalions to guard the India-Myanmar border to prevent the free movement of militants. In a first ever attempt to develop the border areas along the international border, states bordering Bhutan and Nepal including Assam has been asked to submit an action plan as well as to mount special drives to detect and deport illegal migrants.

To conclude, the present deliberations of Indian diplomacy focusing on the Northeast can be termed to be in the right direction. The strategy with commerce as priority will certainly accrue to the interests of the region and in the long run economic progress might resolve political issues also thereby removing the seeds of alienation. When opportunity is knocking the doors, it remains on the diplomatic initiative of India to receive cooperation from its neighbours with whom it might not have had the best of relations in the past. There are shortcomings, as has been discussed, which must be addressed by the relevant parties. One of my hypotheses has been proved wrong during the research work. It has been found that negotiations on insurgency, refugee crisis and trade are interlinked. The "Look East Policy" of India gives priority to trade and to facilitate it the establishment is engaged at various levels to remove problem areas. Thus the Northeast must prepare itself towards a new beginning as a major player in the mainstream. For India as a whole, a new chapter particularly with Southeast Asia and China awaits it. With Northeast as a bridge, India could truly emerge as an economic giant and a regional power.

⁶ "Border talks with India making progress: China", *The Assam Tribune*, 17 January 2004, p.1.

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