Armed in Northeast India: Special Powers, Act or No Act

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Abstract

The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act 1958 (AFSPA) forms the core of the Indian Government’s relationship with the Northeast region. Fifty years after its inception violence in the region is increasing rather than decreasing. While the AFSPA is central to the ways the state relates to citizens in the region and has been a major catalyst for increasing violence, this paper will not treat the AFSPA as the sole instance of the Indian state’s skewed security regime in the Northeast region, but will instead argue that the act is only a symptom of a larger malaise characterised by alienation, militarisation, and a dangerous counter-insurgency strategy. The fallout has been not merely a brutalisation of the security forces, but a legitimisation of violence. A vicious cycle has been set in motion punctuated by three main dynamics: violence giving birth to more violence, brutalisation eroding ideologies, and state-sanctioned terror engendering a disregard for peaceful alternatives. It is argued that unless the Indian state bases its approach to the region on a proper understanding of the nationalistic aspirations and indigenous and ethnic identities of the people there, this cycle cannot be stopped.

Flying into the Northeast Indian state of Mizoram, as the aircraft navigates its route above the undulating hills of this highland state – the word ‘Mizo’ means ‘highlander’ or ‘hill-man’ – one is struck by the beauty and serenity of the landscape. However, if one knew the history of insurgency in Mizoram (earlier the Lushai Hills district of Assam) which led to its reorganisation as a state of the Indian Union, one would perhaps recall how in 1966, Indian security forces flew their aircrafts over these same hills and bombed the civilian population in Aizawl, now the capital city of Mizoram, as well as Tualbung and Hnahlan villages in northeast Mizoram (Sinha 2007, Ghosh 2001). Today, Mizoram is touted as the success story of the Indian state in handling insurgency in the northeastern region of the country (Northeast hereafter), comprising of seven other states – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura – almost all of which have experienced long periods of turmoil. However, the tactics employed to achieve peace in Mizoram have not always been peaceful or even lawful, and what is more, to employ such tactics, the Indian state did not need the sanction of special acts like the much-hated Armed Forces Special Powers Act 1958 (AFSPA). The bombings of the civilian population took place a year before the AFSPA became operational in the Mizo Hills (Ropianga 2005).

This paper thus, will not treat the AFSPA as the sole instance of the Indian state’s skewed security regime in the Northeast region, but will argue that the act is only a symptom of a larger malaise – that of alienation, militarisation, and a flawed counter-insurgency strategy practiced in the region. The fallout has not merely been a brutalisation of the security forces, but a legitimisation of violence. This has resulted in the internalisation throughout the Northeast of what Capt. (Retd.) Ashok K. Tipnis, in his memorandum submitted to the Committee to Review the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 (2005) has termed the ‘Freedom [to] Assume Special Powers [with] Arms (FASPA)’. A vicious cycle has been set in motion: of violent response that gives birth to more violence, of brutalisation which erodes ideologies, and of...
state-sanctioned terror, which engenders a disregard for peaceful alternatives. In the midst of it all, civilian life and human rights have suffered as a result of which there has been further loss of confidence in the state machinery, heightened alienation, and an acceleration of the cycle of violence. This article is divided into five sections, the first of which discusses the creation of the Northeast as a troubled frontier with internal dissensions which is also alienated from/by ‘mainland’ India. The second discusses how the approach of the state has kept the sense of alienation alive both between the ‘mainland’ and the periphery, and within the ‘periphery’ itself. The third section discusses the ways insurgent movements have grown around this sense of alienation. The dangerous counter insurgency strategies adopted by the state which only exacerbate internal conflicts, heighten alienation, and legitimise violence are also discussed. The fourth section discusses how state sanctioned violence gives rise to more violence while brutalising not just the armed agencies of the state but also the insurgents and society at large. To end, the last section discusses how certain positive developments are taking place at the level of everyday interactions among people within the Northeast as well as in ‘mainland’ India. These have been contributing somewhat to fostering a better mutual understanding. It is observed, however, that the administrative and policy approaches need to change.

India and the Northeast

Although gradually changing, relations between Northeast India and the rest of the country have been described in terms of the ‘mainland’ and the ‘periphery’ (Misra 2000). Even in everyday parlance, both ‘mainlanders’ and those in the ‘periphery’ have been susceptible to expressing these relations in similar terms that seem to indicate that this particular region is not an integral part of the country, but one that shares a tenuous connection. A narrow strip of land called the ‘chicken’s neck corridor’ or the ‘Siliguri corridor’, which is 21 km at its widest, connects the landmass of the Northeast with the rest of the country. Often, this narrow corridor takes on a symbolic significance, one that stands for a sense of alienation from/by the rest of India among/towards the people of the northeastern frontier.

A ‘frontier’ has been defined as an area that lies in the ‘periphery’ of state territory which is also under comparatively weaker state control (Bodley 1975/1990, Ferguson and Whitehead 1992), where state and private actors ignore indigenous inhabitants’ ownership claims to land and natural resources (Geiger 2002). The Northeast, whether described in parts or in entirety, has often qualified for the ‘frontier’ tag in its geo-political history, perhaps more so in its ‘post’-colonial incarnation. As Scott (1999) argues, frontiers are as characteristic of many present-day developing countries as they were for yesterday’s colonial empires. When the British first spread their empire to this region, nearly a century after the rest of the Indian sub-continent, they referred to it as the ‘Eastern Frontier of Bengal’ (Pemberton 1835), or alternatively, the ‘Northeast Frontier of Bengal’ (Mackenzie 1871), where the geographical extent of the Northeast Frontier tract was described as embracing the hill ranges northeast and south of Assam valley and the western slopes of the mountain system between Bengal and Burma.

As the Assam valley grew in importance economically and administratively, it grew in size to incorporate many of the hill areas[II], and was constituted into a province independent of Bengal (for a detailed discussion see Guha 1977) from where these areas were administered, or purportedly un-administered, if we take into account the demarcations of ‘backward’ tracts (as per the Government of India Act 1919) known subsequently as ‘excluded’ and ‘partially excluded’ areas (as per the Government of India Act 1935). Indeed, the hill-valley divide had been marked out as early as 1873 when the ‘Inner Line’ system was introduced by the Bengal Frontier Regulation Act whereby ‘the people living in the settled districts of Bengal and Assam were prohibited from entering these hills’ (Jafa 1999a), marking the extent of the revenue administration beyond which the tribal people were left more or less to manage their own affairs. This divide was kept alive even up to the last years of the Empire – when long standing proposals for a Crown Colony encompassing the hill areas and populations of the northeast frontier of British India – including those which fall under present day Bangladesh – and upper Burma were revived (Simon Commission Report 1930, Coupland 1944).
Meanwhile in the plains of Assam, a different kind of divide had taken root, and it was the result of stiff competition between the nascent Axamiy?-speaking middle class and the old established Bengali middle class whom the British had brought to Assam to assist in the administration of the region. This competition over jobs and control of resources ended with the ouster of the Bengalis and the accumulation of available political and economic powers at the disposal of the ‘natives’ in the hands of the Axamiy?-speaking middle class. However, having wrested control for themselves, a majority of the Axamiy?-speaking community, which was overwhelmingly Hindu and keen to trace its origins to ‘mainland’ India, was loathe to share it with any of the other communities of the region which had migrated from parts of Southeast Asia and Tibet. This only exacerbated the hill/valley, indigenous/non-indigenous, tribal/non-tribal divides.

When the boundaries of the newly created Indian state were drawn up and Partition had taken its toll, the hilly and indigenous or tribal inhabited areas that now remained as the Northeast frontier of India found themselves landlocked and dependent on the Assam valley and were distant from the rest of the new nation-state of which they had been made a part. The internal instabilities were very much alive when the entire region, including the Assam valley, was left tenuously connected to the Indian ‘mainland’ through the mere 21-km corridor, on one end of which simmered intra regional tensions and on the other, a growing sense of mainland/periphery alienation.

On the ‘mainland’, there has never been much evidence of the Northeast being treated as part of the larger whole. The sense of distance and otherness has often found expression in myths about the region and its peoples and in stereotyped conceptions where categories like the ‘exotic’ and the ‘enigmatic’ on the one hand, and the ‘fearsome’ and the ‘loathsome’ on the other, take shape. In this imagination, the entire northeastern frontier of the Indian state is a homogenous entity, the land of untamed head hunting tribals who are only recently emerging from cannibalism; a place to be shunned or visited at the risk of exposure to savage peoples and animal-like behaviours. We may call these folk beliefs, amusing but outdated. However, what is alarming is that vestiges of this ‘Northeast myth’ – residues of this popular fear of the violent, the untamed, and the unknown – remained in the Indian administrative and policy-making approaches towards the region after the Northeast was made part of the country. In the imagination of the Indian state, the people of the Northeast seem to have remained at either end of the spectrum stretching between the noble savage and the naked brute. The exoticised, enigmatic noble savage can be tamed (read co-opted), but the naked brute understands only the language of violence.

Thus, for instance, the Axamiya-speaking person from the land of tantra and the mother goddess Kamakhya who knows black magic and can turn you into a sheep or a goat and enslave you in her/his land forever, falls nonetheless within the fold of Hinduism and shows signs of Sanskritization owing to her/his cultural commerce and long association with the ‘mainland’. She/he can thus be allowed peripheral membership to the great Indian nation, and co-opted to act as the caretaker of the rest of the Northeast inhabited by intractable naked tribals. However, when she/he demands her/his legitimate rights as a citizen of the country – as during the Assam Movement (1979-85) – her/his needs to be disciplined.

Such a qualified relationship between the ‘mainland’ and the periphery, based on preconditions of membership, has kept the gap between the two regions alive. Because of this gap, an empathetic approach towards the problems of the ‘periphery’ is yet to be adopted. The result has been widespread militancy in the region, most of the time to demand what the members of the ‘periphery’ often feel are rights lost to just another colonial entity – the Indian State. In its turn, due to its lack of understanding and empathy, the Indian State has also hit back with dangerous counter insurgency measures that have only intensified the distance between ‘mainland’ and periphery.

What is more, the gaps between the constituents of the ‘periphery’ themselves have also been kept alive with the continuation of colonial legacies like the Inner Line Permit, among others. These leftovers of colonial administrative instruments accentuate the hill-valley, indigenous-non-indigenous divides, while only symbolically – and hardly ever in reality – safeguarding the rights of the hill people and indigenous communities which is their declared intent. The following section demonstrates how state policies and
approaches have generated, rather than ameliorated, the alienation between communities and regions. It takes a closer look at the particular case of Assam.

Alienation

Three decades after Assam gained membership into the Indian union, a sense of Assam being a ‘Cinderella province’ (Das 1980, 97) began to set in among the people of Assam, who had begun to feel increasingly threatened about their livelihoods and identity owing to unabated population influx – legal and illegal, both from within India and without. The Assam Movement was thus launched as a civil disobedience movement aimed initially at ousting foreigners, mainly illegal Bangladeshi migrants from Assam, but it also subsequently turned on ‘outsiders’ from Assam, including people from the Indian ‘mainland’. The Indian State was perceived as doing little to address the threat posed by migrants and settlers.

At various points in ‘postcolonial’ history, the Indian state has indeed actively settled migrant and refugee populations in the Northeast (Goswami 2007). It has undertaken exercises in ‘nationalizing space’ (Baruah 2003a) by settling ‘mainstream’ populations and complemented them by the settlement of refugee populations from neighbouring countries, populations considered ‘friendly’ to the Indian State. Thus, Chakma-Hajong and Tibetan refugees were officially settled in Arunachal Pradesh in the 1960s. The outcome was that otherwise untroubled by insurgency, Arunachal nonetheless has been periodically rising in ferment over the issue of ousting the refugee populations from the state.

In Assam, even before the British withdrew, Rajendra Prasad, former president of India, was contemplating settling the excess population from Bihar in the province:

I saw extensive waste lands in the Nowgong district as I was touring in the villages there. Assam’s soil being very fertile, good fodder grow [sic] on the lands. I also saw hutments here and there with sparse population. No crops were grown nor any trace of cultivation could be seen. These fallow lands were available… I recalled to my mind then that the population in Bihar, especially in the district of Chapra, was increasing to such an extent and put such a pressure on land that lakhs of people had to go every year to work as labourers. A few thousands of those people should have come to Assam… (Cited in Kakati 1954, 91-92)

Already the British had settled vast numbers of people in Assam– for instance, Adivasi populations like the Santhals and other ‘tea-tribes’ from east, central and western India, and Muslim Bengalis from East Bengal. Although the Adivasis were by and large tolerated – being as they were politically unrepresented and economically marginalised– the East Bengali Muslims with their vocal political leadership and early exposure to commercial agriculture and money economy were greeted with hostility in Assam since the early part of the 20th century (Goswami 2005). When the influx from the region – which became East Pakistan after Partition and Bangladesh after 1971 – did not cease, and instead, Muslims of East Bengali origin were found to constitute a majority in several electoral constituencies in Assam, the Assam Movement was launched to demand measures to stop population influx, safeguard Assamese identity, and ensure the economic rights of the ‘sons-of-the-soil’. Purportedly non-violent in nature, it however turned violent in places with mass genocides also taking place in pockets. The most infamous example of this is the pogrom at Nellie where a large number of Muslims of East Bengali origin were massacred. Varying estimates put the number of casualties between 1,200 (Hussain 2001) and 3300 (Rehman 2006).

Initially drawing participation from almost all communities of Assam, indigenous and non-indigenous alike, the Movement however was soon hijacked by the narrow agenda of self-aggrandizement of the Axamiy?-speaking middle class (Gohain 1982) which led to smaller ethnic and indigenous communities opting out of the hitherto cosmopolitan definition of the ‘Assamese’ nation, and carving out their independent identities and national selfhoods (Baruah 2003b). In this of course, there was not a little help extended by the Indian state which has been known to prop up one community or group against the other and by introducing factionalism, endeavour to weaken and discipline the disgruntled elements, and this
practice has been quite apparent in its dealings with the members of its northeastern periphery. According to Bhaumik (2007), the Indian state has been using the four elements of Kautilyan statecraft: Sham (reconciliation through negotiations), Dam (monetary inducements), Danda (use of force through military operations), and Bhed (split) while dealing with the conflicts in the Northeast. The sudden rise and spread of the Bodo Movement (1987-2003) among the largest plains tribe of Assam, which started barely a couple of years after the Assam Movement officially ended, is indicative of this.

The Assam Movement ended in 1985 with the signing of a tri-partite accord between the leaders of the agitation and the Indian Government at the center as well as the Assam state government. The accord provided for safeguarding the rights of the ‘Assamese’ people while failing to specify whether ‘Assamese’ referred to all communities living in the geographical territory known as Assam, or to the Axamiy?-speaking dominant community alone. This gave rise to more misgivings among the various communities of Assam who had been growing increasingly resentful of the big brother attitude assumed by the dominant community. This resentment and mistrust generated by the Assam Accord was now utilised by the Indian State whose agencies allegedly trained Bodo insurgents in guerilla warfare (Goswami 2006, Hazarika 1995). The insurgency that raged subsequently provided the perfect complement for the mass movement that simultaneously gained ground demanding a separate state for the Bodos within the Indian Union.

Although the Bodos did not get a separate state as demanded, they did get Sixth Schedule status whereby they were granted powers to self-govern. At the time of framing the Indian constitution, Sixth Schedule areas were created to cover most of the ‘excluded’ and ‘partially excluded’ tracts under colonial administration to provide a certain degree of autonomy to the indigenous communities living there and to preserve their ways of life. Another legacy of the colonial administration, the schedule was introduced in the constitution when based on the recommendations of a sub-committee for North East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas headed by a non-indigenous Axamiy?-speaking leader and comprising of four indigenous leaders, and under the influence of various personalities like BR Ambedkar and Verrier Elwin, it was determined that the indigenous populations of Northeast India had not assimilated with the ‘mainstream’ and should be allowed the right to self-determination. While it kept the colonial construction of the hill-valley divide alive, the Sixth Schedule also came under a lot of criticism with regard to the degree and nature of autonomy it granted. However, many of these areas have demanded statehood and been granted the same to increase substantially their powers of self-rule. The schedule itself has been amended to incorporate other areas, and give them greater autonomy.

The most recent amendment of all was in 2003 when for the first time, a plains tribe – the Bodo – was granted Sixth Schedule status, the Bodoland Autonomous Territorial District (BTAD) was created in Assam, and the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) was granted powers almost equivalent to those of the state government. Demands from other plains tribes followed, and having seen that ethnic and indigenous aspirations can be addressed with a simple extension of the Sixth Schedule status, the Assam government conveniently took to doling them out to the various indigenous communities of Assam by signing nearly identical Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) and granting huge cash benefits to the territorial councils (Prabhakara 2005, Goswami 2007). This had the desired effect of co-opting the community leaders who were happy with the power and pelf now made available to them. They saw not the state but the neighbouring community as the inimical force out to grab the political and pecuniary rewards they had been showered with. Thus, in trying to cosmetically bridge the gap alienating the members of the periphery, the state could at best win over a section of the ethnic elite; at worst, it exacerbated ethnic conflicts and rivalries within the periphery. This was the formula it devised to tame what was for it the ‘noble savage’; the ‘naked brutes’ could continue fighting among themselves. Such infighting and ethnic rivalries were after all inherent in most of the insurgency movements in the Northeast. The next section discusses the different dimensions of armed insurgency in the Northeast and the state’s proposed panacea of militarisation for ending these insurgencies.
Insurgency, Counter-Insurgency and Militarisation

While perfecting its ‘noble savage’ approach, the state was also honing the ‘naked brute’ method, mainly through its armed agencies and the imposition of a security regime which is also a measure of the distance between the ‘mainland’ and the ‘periphery’:

The very idea of turning the Northeast into an ‘alien space’ where martial laws like AFSPA operates suggests that people of the region is [sic.] closer to Hannah Arendt’s ‘objective enemies’ whose definition is created by virtue of their existence in a particular position at a historical moment in time, and that they do not fall within the self-definition of a state. (Oinam and Thangjam 2005, 4)

They interpret the prolonged militarisation of the Northeast in these terms:

The agents of the state, rather than approaching the affected people as citizens, treats them as ‘subjects’ adopts strategies applicable in International Relations. Thus, military and paramilitary forces are ‘deployed’ for the maintenance of ‘peace and order’ in the region. This can be read as ‘interventionist policy’ in an alien space. (Oinam and Thangjam 2005, 17)

For others, like Bimol Akoijam (2005, 4), the preoccupation of the Indian state with the question of ‘security’ in the Northeast, as well as its ‘underlying vulnerability and the manifest militaristic posture’, is the legacy of a British empire obsessed with putting in place ‘an effective defensive system’ on its ‘vulnerable North East Frontier’. For the British Empire at the time, as for the Indian state now, the vulnerability of the Northeast frontier arose from its geo-political positioning bound as it is by China, Bangladesh, Burma, Bhutan, and Nepal. The Chinese aggression of 1962 and the near defeat India suffered have not quite been forgotten. Undoubtedly then, a heavy presence of security forces in the region would be encouraged also as deterrence against external aggression.

That the distinction between defending against external aggression and controlling internal conflicts often gets blurred should of course not deflect from the fact that ‘foreign hands’ have indeed often propped up insurgencies in the Northeast by providing training, arms and sanctuary to Northeast rebels. Pakistan or China training Naga rebels, or Bangladesh and Bhutan providing sanctuary to Assam insurgents, are open secrets. On the other hand, changing political equations or India's diplomatic arm twisting have also often led to the collaboration of some of these countries in flush-out operations like the 2003 Bhutan ‘All Clear’ operation against Assam militants sheltering in the country.

The problem however, is not that the Indian armed forces have been fighting their asymmetrical wars with the Northeast insurgents, but that often these wars have not remained confined to the military domain. The major cause of discontent among the people of the Northeast is that these have transgressed into the civilian domain and erased the distinction between civil and military powers, providing an upper hand to the armed forces. Acts like the AFSPA only give these forces carte blanche to continue with such gross transgression and violation of civil rights, to the extent of eroding basic human rights and freedoms.

The history of violation of the people’s rights in the Northeast is almost as old as the history of the Indian state. It began with a disregard for the nationalistic aspirations of the Naga people. When the Nagas declared independence a day before India, their longstanding desire for the right to national self-determination was looked at with suspicion. When other efforts at subjugating their resistance against inclusion in the Indian union failed – including signing a treaty with a section of the leaders which the hardliners denounced, and holding parliamentary elections in 1952 where the turnout was dismal – extreme military repression was sanctioned. The whole of Nagaland was under siege with populations being relocated, villages ‘grouped’, civilians being fined, arrested and killed, and human rights completely disregarded (Bhaumik 2007). Insurgency began to gain ground, militarisation only increased, and Nagaland has been under military rule ever since. The special powers granted to the armed forces in the Northeast began to be thus exercised, and laws were subsequently formulated to give these ‘special powers’ legal sanction.
As insurgency spread to other states of the Northeast, militarisation spread. Mizoram, Manipur, and Tripura followed in the 1960s, Assam in the 1980s and thereafter, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh. To this day newer and newer insurgent groups continue to raise their banners. Subir Bhaumik (2007,7) categorizes the insurgent groups of the Northeast as: those based on ‘a deep-rooted historical ethos of independence that developed into a struggle for secession from India – the Naga insurgency is the best and perhaps the only example in this category’. Others like the Bodo insurgents of Assam were ‘separatist in rhetoric but autonomist in aspiration, thus easy to co-opt into the so-called Indian “mainstream”’. Still others had sharp initial separatist overtones but … were ultimately co-opted by the Indian system through sustained negotiations and concessions’ – the Mizo insurgency for instance. A few other groups have also existed in the northeast which sought to ‘change the Indian system’ and have fraternal allies in ‘mainland’ India – ‘the Manipur PLA before 1990 or communist insurgents of Tripura in 1948-50 would fall in this category’. And then there are the satellite insurgent groups like the Dragon Force or the United Peoples Volunteers of Arunachal (UPVA) that are ‘propped up by more powerful groups’ like the Assamese or Naga insurgent groups.

From a discussion of the nature of these groups, it is evident that not all of them are separatist and/or directed against the Indian state per se. Center-periphery conflicts are only one kind of conflict that the Northeast has seen. Inter-ethnic conflicts or conflicts between the various communities in the Northeast have also taken place – the preceding section has gone into a brief discussion of the creation of animosity between communities – and these also have given rise to insurgent movements that have demanded more autonomy, or more powers of self-rule to counter the hegemony of communities that have traditionally been higher up in the ethnic hierarchy. And in the genesis, development and dénouement (or what passes as ‘resolution’) of these conflicts, the Indian state has played a potent role.

As we have already discussed in the case of the Bodo insurgent movement, to defuse the tension arising out of one volatile situation, and as a measure to control one kind of conflict, the state instigates another, often between neighbouring communities. As in the case of the indigenous Bodo and non-indigenous Axamiy?-speaking community of Assam, in Manipur also a wedge was driven between the indigenous communities of the hills and the Hinduised Meitei of the plains. Thus in order to contain the Meitei insurgent groups of the valley areas, the armed forces initiated a Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement in 2005 – the Manipur and central governments entered the agreement only in 2008 – with the hill militants who mainly belong to the Kuki and Zomi communities that have long been dominated by the dominant Meitei. Reports of how these militant groups under SoO are being used to raid hideouts of the valley insurgents keep surfacing every now and then (Bhaumik 2005b). Thus using traditional ethnic rivalries also, the Indian armed forces have been fighting the more powerful militant groups of the Northeast.

But conflicts between communities are not the only kind kindled by state agencies. To continue with the example of the Bodo community, when an insurgent movement – not patronised by the state and led by the National Democratic Front of Boroland (NDFB) – started gaining ascendancy, demanding aggressively the right of the Bodo nation to sovereignty, the largely co-opted Bodoland Liberation Tigers (BLT) were pitted against the NDFB which shared cordial relations with the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), the oldest insurgent group of Assam. Thus internecine wars are also effectively fomented.

Where co-option is seen as a possibility either through ceasefire agreements and promise of peace talks as well as monetary payment, it has been done. The Dima Halom Daogah (DHD), an insurgent group of the Dimasa community of Assam, has been under ceasefire with the government since 2003. And although from time to time some noise is made about the necessity to hold ‘peace talks’, for the most part the militants are comfortably ensconced in their government designated camps, being supplied with all necessities, called upon once in a while to launch attacks on a rival faction or another militant group, and not lacking monetary rewards. Thus, during the Karbi-Dimasa ethnic clashes in Assam in 2005, militant groups belonging to both communities used their designated camps to launch attacks on each other (BBC
Sahni and Routray (2001, 3) have shown – specifically in the case of Assam – how the government’s ‘surrender policies’ towards insurgents have ‘created a Frankenstein monster, a gigantic organized crime conglomerate that ... abandons its political intent, and that operates substantially under the protection of, and in collusion with, the state and its agents’. This is true also of most of the other militant groups of the Northeast where insurgent armies have turned mercenaries, ideologies have been eroded, and insurgency movements have become criminalised.

And it is not only the smaller insurgent groups that are susceptible to these tactics of the Indian state agencies. Even the two factions of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), the oldest and strongest insurgent group of the Northeast, signed a ceasefire agreement with the government of India in 1997 after 40 long years of fighting against it. Its cadres have been in government designated camps ever since. If the continuous rounds of ‘peace talks’ since then have made any headway, it is to ensure the government of India that the militant cadres will not be able to return to the harsh life of jungle warfare again and that the earlier intractable stand of the leaders has been softened so that they are willing to settle for much less than their original demand for sovereignty.

Meanwhile, as a ceasefire agreement does not entail a surrender of arms, armed cadres often defy ceasefire ground rules to freely roam in civilian areas, and often clash with the security forces or rival factions and militant groups. Thus, on the one hand, the civilians are subjected to atrocities by the armed forces in their search for militants, and on the other, they are also often caught in insurgent crossfire. The state for which these groups now become pseudo-agents to fight rival groups, turn a blind eye. The following section gives specific instances of brutalisation among the armed forces of the state as well as the insurgents. It shows how the cycle of violence unleashed by the state’s military repression of the Northeast has generated more violence.

**Brutalisation and Legitimisation of Violence**

The legitimisation of violence and utter disregard of civilian rights sanctioned for the armed forces seems to have filtered into the insurgent psyche as well, and this was demonstrated most vividly in 2006 when reports surfaced that a Meitei insurgent group went on a rampage and raped about 21 Hmar women (The Hindu 2006). The concerned group of course denied its involvement in the incident, but the high moral ground it hitherto held was nonetheless undermined. As for the Indian armed forces, they have frequently been accused of using sexual violence as a tactic for fighting their wars in the Northeast (MASS 1998), accusations they have often blatantly brushed aside, as in the case of Manorama Devi, whose rape by armed personnel saw Manipur in 2004 erupt in protest against the AFSPA, an act that provides immunity to armed personnel from prosecution (Talukdar 2004).

There is little doubt that the sweeping powers under the AFSPA have led to a brutalisation of the armed forces in India, and ‘brutalised armies’ as former Indian Army Chief General Shankar Roychoudhuri has been quoted as saying, ‘are no good as fighting machines’ (Bhaumik 2007,35). Apart from such a degeneration of the armed forces, other agencies that do not enjoy the license to kill as granted by the AFSPA are also inspired to seek such powers. Thus the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) Deputy Inspector General (DIG) met with the Committee to Review the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act 1958 on 21.2.2005, to request that the force be granted the same special powers as provided to the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) and the Border Security Force (BSF) as Armed Forces of the Union. Among the powers the DIG sought were legal powers and protection against vexatious prosecution for acts done during the discharge of duty (DIG, CISF, Guwahati 2005). The poignancy of this request is underlined by the shooting of Nilikesh Gogoi, businessman and local community leader of a small town called Geleky on the Assam side of the Assam-Nagaland inter-state border, by CISF personnel on 23 January 2007 (The Telegraph 2007). The incident that created much controversy in Assam took place when Gogoi and a companion allegedly refused to stop at a CISF check post near an installation of the public sector Oil and Natural Gas Commission (ONGC) in the town. According to an eyewitness, the armed security personnel fired at them and killed them without provocation. A spokesperson of the CISF later called the incident
‘unfortunate’ and admitted that the force had been deployed in the area to guard the ONGC installment and was not ‘involved in counter-insurgency operations’ (The Telegraph 2007). Thus, AFSPA or no AFSPA, such incidences occur quite regularly in the Northeast and a top police official of Assam explains away the killing of Gogoi as a case of panicked reaction by the CISF personnel in a sensitive border zone, just a few days before Indian Republic Day on 26 January, one of the favourite days for insurgent attacks in the Northeast when calls for boycotting celebrations are given by all major insurgent groups (field interviews 2008).

The police forces have also indulged in excesses and gross violations of human rights, despite the fact that they are not provided the immunity granted by the AFSPA. The ‘secret killings’, or extra-judicial killings of arrested ULFA militants and their kith and kin in Assam between 1998-2001 allegedly by the police force with the help of surrendered militants, and widely acknowledged to have been done under direct state patronage, is perhaps one of the most well organised killing sprees in the Northeast (Barpujari et al)The K. N. Saikia commission instituted to enquire into the killings took ‘two years to produce three voluminous reports on 35 cases involving 50 deaths’ (Hindustan Times 2009). No concrete results in the form of identification of the culprits involved and their convictions have been achieved.

Indeed, instances of state-sanctioned violence are rife in the Northeast, with surrendered militants being used to counter those that have not yet ‘returned to the mainstream’. And with the lucrative rehabilitation packages announced for those who surrender, insurgency has become a career option beyond which lies state patronage and financial rewards. Sahni & Routray (2001) have shown how each surrendered ULFA (SULFA) militant of Assam under surrender schemes devised in 1992 and 1998 were given up to INR 250000 (USD 5000 approx.) in cash and INR 150000 (USD 3000 approx.) in soft loans which they did not have to return. At the time, the annual per capita income of Assam was INR 4281 (USD 87 approx.) (Sahni & Routray 2001,4). In this way also, violence is being made more and more attractive to the youth of a region where employment opportunities and livelihood options remain limited.

Meanwhile, states are also encouraged to enlist youths and raise forces for the Indian Reserve Battalion (IRB), which can then be summoned by the central government for deployment in any part of India. Despite frequent protests by civil society organisations, Mizoram and Nagaland IRB personnel have for a long time been deployed in another troubled state of the Indian ‘mainland’ – Chattisgarh – which has been witnessing Naxalite insurgency (Singh 1999). As Mizoram Home Secretary C Ropianga expressed it:

When we agreed to create the battalions, we signed an agreement with the Centre, whereby it reserves the right to first call. According to it, the Centre can direct any of the battalions in the country to any state if required. Since the Centre has insisted that we send a battalion to Chhatisgarh to fight the Naxalites, we have no choice but to obey. (The Telegraph 2006)

Naxalite insurgency is communist in nature unlike the insurgency movements in the Northeast that are mostly along ethnic lines. The plight of the people under the armed forces, however, is similar in both insurgency affected areas. Ironically, many of the cases of atrocity and molestation recorded by human rights activists in Chattisgarh are perpetrated by IRB personnel from the Northeastern states (AHRC 2007). Indeed, one of the greatest arguments against sending Naga youths to fight insurgents in Chattisgarh was – besides the heavy death toll – their brutalisation along the lines of the other armed forces. Field interviews (2008) have revealed how IRB personnel are as feared by the people of states like Nagaland and Manipur as any other armed force of the Indian Union given their propensity towards anti-social activities like robbing, killing, extortion, and so on.

The Indian state has not remained confined to brutalising the armed forces, and has gone so far as to arm civilians with the express purpose of defending themselves against insurgent violence. Despite an earlier experiment in the form of the Salwa Judum in the Naxalite areas proving disastrous (Sarma 2006), the state proposed raising Special Police Officers (SPOs) in Manipur (The Sangai Express 2007). Although the intervention of human rights activists has slowed down the process, the project is far from abandoned. It
can only be imagined to what scale violence can escalate if the guns and a license to kill are made so easily available to everybody at large. Humanising the armed forces however, can only be the first step in bridging the gap between the mainland and the periphery, given the violent and brutal history of this relationship.

**Bridging the Gap**

Talking of the village regrouping in Mizoram in the wake of insurgency in that state – a measure that has dislodged an entire way of life, not to mention the loss to life and liberty it entailed – VS Jafa (1999b), an Indian bureaucrat, has said it was ‘tantamount to annihilation of reason and sensibility’ to be treating ‘our ethnic minorities’ this way. ‘Annihilation of reason and sensibility’ has usually been the characteristic of India’s policy approach to the Northeast. One instance of this has been the continued imposition of the AFSPA despite an overwhelming regional, national and international agreement that it is inimical to the people of the region. However, as already discussed, there has been very little sense of kinship on the Indian ‘mainland’ towards the people of the Northeast. This was amply manifested by the fact that the North East Frontier Agency, later ‘nationalised’ by being given the Sanskritised nomenclature Arunachal Pradesh, was put in charge of the Ministry of External Affairs as far into ‘post’-colonial Indian history as 1965.

The state has of course tried to reach out to the region through other means and bridge the gap. It has for instance, made large financial allocations either through specific ministries (like the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region), nodal agencies (North East Council), or directly to the states and autonomous bodies. It is not however, enough to simply dole out monetary packages. After all, there is more to insurgency in the Northeast than lack of economic development. Ethnic considerations often take precedence over economy and development here. After all, the very basis of oldest insurgency movement in the region was ethnic and not developmental in outlook. Besides, the prevalence in quite a few of the Northeast states of a parallel system of ‘taxation’ – read extortion – by insurgent groups, while the government looks the other way, means these funds are only leading to a proliferation of arms and militant activities (Chaudhuri 2002). Without tackling these problems, often disproportionate amounts of funds are sanctioned by the various government agencies for the different states of the region, Nagaland being a case in point. Kuldip Nayar (1995) has shown how Nagaland was granted close to INR 300 billion (USD 6.66 billion approx.) as federal funding between 1956 and 1996: and its population is less than a million.

Rather than de-escalate violence, proposed developmental and resource management efforts by the Indian State have quite often contributed to exacerbation of conflicts. These efforts lack an understanding of the peculiar fragility of the inter-ethnic relations of the region. These relations can – and often are – disrupted by ‘development’ projects that are rarely based on any adequate understanding of the social milieu, customary laws, resource ownership (often community- and not individual-ownership), or ethnic hierarchies. The Tipaimukh dam is a case in point:

To be built in a Hmar dominated area, some sections of the Hmar have welcomed the project in the hope of being benefited by it, although others have posed questions about rehabilitation and loss of agricultural lands. But stronger protests are coming from non-Hmar communities. Leaders of the Zeliangrong Naga villages which are expected to be submerged have registered their protest against the government’s policy of developing one community at the cost of another (Goswami 2007,14).

The result is an escalation of ethnic conflicts and violence, to counter which the state sanctions counter-violence, and so the cycle has continued for more than half a century now.

The people in the Northeast are war-weary. The rhetoric of sovereignty and secessionism has long since disappeared from the popular discourse of the Northeast – only a few insurgent groups are keeping it alive and many of these groups have become too splintered or enervated and devoid of ideological moorings to command the kind of mass support they once enjoyed. Experience has shown that many of these groups
have also accepted political settlements that are far below their original demands. Even the NSCN has agreed to a ‘special federal relation’ with India, climbing down from its earlier seemingly intractable position of secession. Meanwhile, the state has resorted to tokenism even in the purportedly empowering instruments of self-governance – like in the autonomous councils granted to various ethnic communities of the Northeast. As it continues to try and co-opt more and more of the ethnic elite, the insurgent groups also seem to be fighting a losing battle against co-option from all quarters.

Amidst such erosion of ideologies, there has been a silent exodus of young people from the region to parts of ‘mainland’ India. Whether it is due to the lack of opportunities in the region, or in order to escape the violence of everyday life, many young brains have left the region and settled in parts of ‘mainland’ India. According to an estimate of the Assam Association, Delhi, the number of permanent residents, employees of various government and private sector organizations and students in the national capital region from Assam alone has gone up to over 75,000 (Assam Association 2008). Often, because of their ‘oriental’ or Mongoloid features, they have to face questions like: ‘Do you need a passport to come to India?’ (Goswami 2008) But this shared fate of facing a common stereotype has contributed more towards annihilating the age old divides implanted by skewed policy decisions amongst the peoples of the region, and brought them together in a way neither institutional or organisational alliances nor impersonal education can. A common ‘Northeast psyche’ is thus being fostered.

On the other hand, the distance between the ‘mainland’ and the ‘periphery’ also seems to be shrinking somewhat. It is true that to some extent, ‘mainland’ Indians also have at times had to face some hostility from the people of the Northeast (Sinha 2007), and instances of mass killings of settlers from ‘mainland’ India by a few insurgent groups only serve to underline this hostility. And a sense of distance has undoubtedly remained, but what has changed is the degree and intensity of personal interactions between people from both ends of the ‘chicken neck’, what with more and more people from the northeast venturing out to the mainland as already discussed. This might well lead to a better understanding and mutual respect. However, whether this understanding and respect filters into the political and policy-making apparatuses remains to be seen.

References


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Footnotes

[1] Tripura and Manipur were not at the time part of Assam as they were independent princely states till their annexation to independent India.

[2] Administratively, to be ‘tribal’ is not a permanent label in the Indian State. Any community ‘scheduled’ as such is a tribe under the Indian constitution, which also means that any community voted as non-scheduled by a majority of the Parliament, can be de-notified from the tribal list. Thus political expediency rather than anthropological considerations determine tribal status in India. The popular perception of the tribal however, has proved to be less flexible.

[3] A similar preconception had led Mahatma Gandhi to paint the Assamese as uncivilized savages in his Hind Swaraj. He made ample amendments to his outlook subsequently. For details see his ‘Lovely Assam’ cited in Kakati (1954).

[4] Field visits since 2005 to designated camps and interviews with insurgent leaders have revealed much of these details.

[5] As the UN Security Council Resolution 1820 (2008) to end sexual violence in conflict on June 19, 2008 notes: ‘women and girls are particularly targeted by the use of sexual violence, including as a tactic of war to humiliate, dominate, instill fear in, disperse and/or forcibly relocate civilian members of a community or ethnic group.’ (United Nations 2008)

About the Author

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