



## Journal of North East India Studies

ISSN: 2278-1455 (Print) 2277-6869 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.jneis.com>

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**Sarup Sinha**

**To cite this article:** Sarup Sinha (2016): North East India: A Region in an Endless Ordeal, *Journal of North East India Studies*, 6(2): 80-87.

**Published online:** 1 December 2016.

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## **North East India: A Region in an Endless Ordeal**

Sarup Sinha

15<sup>th</sup> August 1947; a date that transcends beyond a mere entry in history books, it is a meaning that resonates with every Indian as the day of Independence, as an event of freedom, and above all birth of the largest democracy in the world. Independence was however not an overnight process nor was the formation of the Indian landscape as we visualize today. British left India with more than 500 princely states and the herculean task of integrating those princely states lay on the capable shoulders of Sardar Vallabhai Patel and V.P Menon. One such event that leaves behind a legacy of varied tastes is that of North East India. It is a potent case to examine the nature of nation making and its consequences. The northeastern region is the hub of multiple tribes and communities each having their distinct identities with their own historical past. Today, the region is lagging behind other parts of the country in terms of infrastructure and economic development due to myriad reasons. In addition, we encounter many separatist and militant movements from different quarters of the region such as Nagaland, Assam, Manipur beginning with Naga Insurgency in 1950s. The methods adopted by the Indian state to tackle such situation of unrest is marred with stories of widespread human rights violations coupled with militant violence. Armed Force Special Powers Act remains as an instrument of military force asserted by the State which persists up to the present.

**Keywords:** Northeast India, Integration, Development, Ethnicity, Human Right Violations

### **I. Political Integration**

We begin this paper with a brief account of the political integration of the Northeastern States. At the time of Independence, the northeastern region consisted of Assam and princely states of Manipur and Tripura. North East India in itself is a hugely diverse and multicultural land comprising of more than 200 tribes. Whole of North east India was part of Bengal till 1874 with its first contact with East India Company dating back to 1792 during Maomari Rebellion when the King of Ahom Kingdom

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Sarup Sinha is Master of Development Studies from Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati. [Email: sarup.sinha@iitg.ernet.in]

(established early 13<sup>th</sup> century) sought assistance from the Company who possessed greater military muscle. However, it was only after the First Anglo-Burmese War that ended with Treaty of Yandaboo which culminated in North east India coming under the British Administration. However, the imperialist ambitions of British were commercial and many of the hill areas which did not serve commercial interests enjoyed relative autonomy under British Rule. Hence, a large section of indigenous population was not actively involved in the independence struggle nor did they share common sentiments of nationalism with the rest of India. Therefore, when the wind of integration began to blow across India, north eastern region found itself in a quagmire as we see emergence of new tribal bodies and associations starting with the formation of Hill Leaders Union in 1945 at Shillong expressing their discourse on the future.

Arunachal Pradesh formerly known as North East Frontier Province (NEFA) is an exception as it became a part of India without any resistance. Sikkim which is also included among Northeastern States became a part of India in 1975 under different circumstances amid riots and monarchy abolishment. Therefore, the scope of this paper (portion of political integration) is restricted to the formation of other North eastern states.

Manipur expressed its opposition of the merger even before the Indian independence. At that time, H.Irabot; a communist leader also one of the founders of CPI from Manipur and L. Bimal formed a party called Praja Singh Political Party in 1946 promulgating ideas of an independent Manipur away from monarchy and embracing socialism, independent administration, constitution and parliament. However, they faced opposition from another party Manipur Congress not in favour of their propositions. As a matter of fact, Manipur framed their Constitution in 1947 and respecting the provisions of this act, India's first adult suffrage found its beginning in Manipur without a majority and hence a formation of a coalition government sans Congress. Manipur Congress began advocating the idea of merger with India which the Maharaja of Manipur and Irabot strongly opposed along with other proposals from Patel of Purbanchal. In the absence of any positive result, Maharaja was subsequently invited for talk on integration in 1949 at Shillong by Akbar Hydari, governor of Assam who had earlier assessed the situation in Manipur. A Merger agreement had been prepared and put forth in front of Maharaja which he declined forthright leading to his house arrest with prohibition on any sort of outside communication. The Maharaja finally yielded and signed on 'Merger Agreement' with India on September 21, 1949. This led to widespread protest especially among Kukis who saw it as a threat to their territorial autonomy. The tactics employed to integrate Manipur is topic of much debate putting serious questions on the legitimacy of this integration. Amid great political developments, intellectuals began to feel an increasing need to represent Mizos of Lushai Hills as it was known back then. As a result, a political party known as Mizo Common People's Union was formed in 1946 with an aim to initiate social reforms and stand against Tribal Chiefs akin to Feudal Lords. Party was later renamed as Mizo Union followed by its acceptance as a representative of Lushai Hills by Bordoloi Committee. Mizo leadership at that point was divided into two

camps. Left Wing was in favour of merger with India and Right wing on the other hand stood against it. Finally, a resolution was adopted stating Lushai Hills would be part of Assam Province upon independence. However, soon after a new party called United Mizo Freedom Organisation was formed in 1947 propogating the idea of Mizoram being merged with Burma. However, they soon lost support and turned unpopular among amid disappointment of people with larger issues of famine and Assam majoritarian policies such as Assamese being the official language of the state. A new party Mizo National Front under the presidentship of Laldenga came into force demanding independence which was denied by the state but instead an offer to make the Lushai Hills into a Union Territory which after a series of negotiation between state and mizo leaders culminated in creation of Mizoram as a State in 1972.

Tripura was another princely state in northeast India since British Rule. After the death of its king in 1947, queen of Tripura seeked help from Indian Government amid rumors that East Pakistan could possibly attempt to merge Tripura with the help of Muslim refugees. India agreed to help on condition of merger and hence queen signed on Tripura Merger Agreement in September 1947 and remained as Union Territory until 1972 when it upgraded to the satus of State.

Much of Meghalaya enjoyed an autonomous semi independent staus under British Rule. Amid the rise of political consciousness among tribals, Khasi, Garo and Jaintia tribes began to actively make their presence felt. Khasi states amid much acceptance and refusals finally agreed to sign on the accession after Akbar Hydari met the Khasi chiefs armed by an order of accession on Dec 1947.

It was in Nagaland that one of the loudest outcry for independence originated. With an emerging educated middle class Naga consciousness was reaching its heights with the first step in political arena with formation of Naga Club in 1918 followed by a series of lows as Naga Club, and subsequently Naga Hills District Tribal Council failed to make a significant impact. In 1946 the council was rebranded as Naga National Council (NNC) at Wokha. Initally NNC with its leader T Sakhire were mostly demanding for autonomy separate from Assam Province which the Indian state was not in favour as a 'unifying' policy was more promoted. NNC after the seconf Wokha meeting demanded a 10 year Interim Government for Nagas (Aborginal Tribes). Hydari Agreement reignited a spark amid a total stagnant situation of negotiations with no outcome. However, one point in the agreement related to issue of autonomy was especially met with dissatisfaction as the Nagas wanted their right to decide whether their future lied with India or at independent state. A.Z Phizo attended meetings with Gandhi and Nehru. Phizo became the president of NNC in 1949 and aggressively push for Nagland's independence and sovereignty. The situation of Nagaland was not reaching a common ground with India and the situation kept tangling in a worse fashion amid boycott of elections, meeting and violence. In 1953, the Indian State resorted to use military and police action to bring the situation under its control with raids and subsequent full closure of NNC. The situation of Nagaland has not yet been fully solved and emergence of militant groups such as NSCN (K) and NSCN (IM) stemming from NNC continue to operate with an agenda of Naga

Independence and has made the Nagaland debate a neverending quest for statehood and violence.

## **II. Ethnic and Anti Migration Conflicts**

The process of political integration highlights some of the underlying issues with the Centre (State) which starts post independence. Indian State has maintained a strict stance post independence of not condoning any form secessionist attempts. The mindset of the Political leaders was determined by their unbending will to unify India and stop it from further disintegration into pieces after partition as they feared it would be a serious blow to the very idea, existence and future of India. However amid growing portests and unrest Indian State came up with 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Schedule granting greater autonomy and reorganizations.

As mentioned previously, the heterogeneous nature of North East reflects in the multicultural and multiethnic society. Although North east has political differences and issues with the state but the the heterogeneity and diversity in the region is also marred with stories of violence and conflicts among different ethnic groups within the region. There exists both an inter state and intra state ethnic conflicts and insurgency spread across northeastern states. These conflicts are associated with differences in culture, language, political participation and most importantly territory as well as anti-migration from neighboring states like Bangladesh. In Manipur, there is a general dissatisfaction and conflict between the Kukis, Nagas and Meiteis. Meiteis are mostly Hindu Vaishnavites and possess a dominant position in the political and social arena of the state including the language being the official language of the state while the Kukis and Nagas are either Christians or Non- Hindus. Nagas in Manipur backed by NSCN (I M) demand for integration of districts having Naga population with Nagaland. Nagas and Kuki in Manipur were in violent conflict in 1990s killing hundereds. While Meities militant groups emerged such as UNLF, PLA, PREPAK aiming to make Manipur independent. Kukis also began asserting their identity with militant organizations such as KNA AND UKLF demanding for a Kuki State or Kukiland. These conflicts and insurgency have made the situation in Manipur unstable both politically and socially.

In Nagaland, NSCN demanding for an Independent Nagaland broke into two groups namely NSCN (IM) and NSCN (K) due to internal ideological differences. The former draws support from Naga tribes of Manipur and allegedly assisted with arms and ammunition by China and Pakistan and the latter comprising of mostly Konya Nagas operating from bases in Burma fighting for Nagas (all naga tribes) Independence demanding a separate Nagalim or Greater Nagaland. Amid such difference Indian State has taken drastic measures to bring the situation under Control using AFSPA and Disturbed areas act leading to large scale human right violations which will be discussed in the later section.

Assam had been facing the wrath of violent clashes due to majoritarian policies starting from 1960s with the Bengali Language movement in the Barak Valley Region(Bengali majority area) against the imposition of Assamese as the only official language in Assam. The situation turned bloody as violence by Police led to

deaths of people and the movement died down once Bengali was given the status of official language in the Cachar District.

In 1979, militant outfits like ULFA emerged fighting for an independent socialist Assam amid growing disturbance and anxiety in Assam regarding questionable increase in population released in electoral list of 1979. This increase in population was attributed to illegal migrants which met with huge outcry in the state leading to reelection of 1979 elections. There were also attacks against Muslims infamously known as Nellie Massacre in 1983 with death toll close to 3000. On the other hand, there's a growing demand of a separate state for Bodos (as Bodoland) since late 1980s by militant outfits like ULFA and NDFB with bases in Bhutan. In addition, there are also conflicts between Bodos and Bengali Muslims which touched its peak in 2012 violence.

These ethnic conflicts not only result in instability in region but an overall atmosphere of insecurity and fear along with lower economic development due to lower investment and lower production. It also leads to widespread human displacement. Further, ensuring the rights of an ethnic majority segregates other ethnic minorities in the region from active participation in representative democracy.

### **III. Human Right Violations**

Indian parliament introduced Disturbed Areas Act and Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act in 1958 which functions as an instrument of military force in order to control the rising insurgency and conflicts in the North East states and bring order to the unrest and instability in the region. The Act endows the armed personnel (officers precisely) with great authority and power over the affected areas. People of North eastern states especially those from Manipur and Nagaland have paid a heavy price for this act as the region has been a victim of number of atrocities and human rights violations of Rape, murder, killing, torture, molestation by the personnel of BSF, CRPF, Assam Rifles since the inception and implementation of the act especially after 1960s.

To give a clear idea it is befitting to mention the barbaric acts described in Section III of the book *Nagaland File*, where the authors have listed the rape of 5 girls, torture of villagers and using prisoners as target practice during 1955. Another incident known as Ngapuram incident of 1974 is mentioned where the Captain of 95 BSF raped a class VIII girl at gunpoint. These acts are inhumane to say the least. Apart with this on any event of attack on defence personnel, it initiates an endless chain of trouble for the ordinary villagers and people through raids, fear and intimidation, and torture.

Acts like AFSPA have met with widespread criticisms from activists, people, scholars etc who have made numerous appeals to repeal the act but no action on that front has been executed till now. Irom Sharmilla is a well known figure from Manipur who has been on a hunger strike from the year 2000 onwards for the total abolishment of AFSPA after the incidents of human rights abuses especially after the killing of 10 people by Assam Rifles personnel known as Malom Massacre.

Such acts make one disturbed not just at the nature of human abuse but the

extent to which people of this region have to suffer. Nobody can measure the amount of misery those affected by such violations have to go through. But even after such revelations, no strict action let alone repeal of the act have taken place. The government should immediately evaluate the consequences of the acts and adopt measure to monitor the activities of and make provisions to punish the guilty. It is absolutely mandatory to make strict provisions to make the personnel more responsible for their act and stop the heinous phenomena happening in the name of peace making.

#### **IV. Development**

Northeast India is a region blessed with natural magnanimity with rich biodiversity and raw materials. It even has the potential to be an economic powerhouse with the presence of raw materials, minerals, estimated 60,000 mw of hydropower, petroleum etc but the development of Northeast has never taken a step further and the region is miles behind in infrastructure and economic development compared to other parts of India. It is often attributed to its geographical location, poor connectivity, closed borders, and the insurgency makes matters worse. The northeastern states have enough resources but it's a periphery in the country creating a case of resource curse where despite having enough resources the region is stagnant and unable to develop. The potential of North east has never been fully tapped, despite the northeastern area sharing more than 98% of its borders with other countries. The region can develop if the communication and trade relations are given a boost with border trade. The Government of India has refocused its attention on Look East Policy, but what is missing till now is the propensity to use the northeast to look east, the government should consider authorizing border trade which could positively benefit the region's economy. North East could be stationed as the gateway to South Asia and East Asia which would bring long term benefits not only to the region but the whole economy.

#### **Conclusion**

To conclude with the central issue of this paper, North Eastern region since the Indian independence have been caught in a series of conflicts and state of unrest with a rising insurgency. Acts like AFSPA have acted as instruments of domination but at the cost of human rights and freedom of people. The issue of Northeast is sensitive and needs to be handled with patience but not too late that it prolongs the ordeal of people and creates obstacle for permanent resolution of the problem. State should further reevaluate its strategies and policies pertaining to northeast as the agenda of establishment of peace and order have instead seen with rising number of insurgent groups operating from their safe haven. A place as alluring as North East has never been fully known for its beauty as much for the disturbance and underdevelopment in the region. Hence it remains to be seen how the state deals with the existing problems of insurgency along with the task of bringing stability and peace in the region while ushering a new era of development in the region

It's time the region gets on a stable boat to cross the ocean of turbulence and reach its Island of Peace.

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