

A BREIF SURVEY OF ETHNIC VIOLENCE OR CONFLICTS IN THE NORTH EAST INDIA

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Abstract

This paper is mainly an attempt to present briefly the historical facts and the nature of ethnic violence in the region and not an attempt to interpret them or provide solutions for them as such but to trigger a meaningful time of collective interaction from the pro-peace activists and participants present here. This paper uses a historical survey method. The result of this paper is that ethnic violence in the Northeast region can be attributed to various factors - land alienation, large and continuous influx of immigrants, struggle for space, homeland and struggle for natural resources in the same geographical space, problems of majority and minority populations, insurgency conflicts, and others. Thus, it becomes clear that peace can be restored in the region only through the restoration of people's land and cultural identity, socio-political autonomy, poverty alleviation, education, and development, especially in rural areas.

Keywords: Survey; Ethnic violence; Ethnic conflict; North East India; Historical.

INTRODUCTION

Northeast India comprises of eight states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim. The term, 'Northeast' was formalized through the British colonial administration as a frontier region. It is linked with Indian heartland through the 21 km. wide Siliguri Corridor, which is commonly known as the Chicken Neck, created by the Radcliff line, the boundary drawn by the British colonial administration before their departure from India in 1947. The corridor is bordered by Bhutan, Bangladesh and Nepal, and the whole of Northeast is surrounded by four countries, namely, China and Bhutan on its North; Myanmar on its East; and Bangladesh on its South and West. It has an area of 2.6 lakh sq. km. (7.6% of India's land area) while its population is 39 million plus (3.6% of India's population). It has more than 475 ethnic groups and more than 400 languages/dialects are spoken here.¹

The extensive racial differences between India and the region and the tenuous geographical link (the chicken neck Siliguri Corridor) contributed to a sense of

¹Cf. A. K. Deka, "Understanding Conflict in BTAD Assam" Vol. 50/37 (September, 2013), 4.

alienation, a feeling of being the 'other' that consequently gave rise to a political culture of violent separatism. Furthermore, Northeast India is home to more than 50 ethnic revolutionary groups – a few demanding complete secession from India, others fighting for ethnic identities and homelands and some running the insurgency as an industry to spin easy money without proper political ideology. The setting to several of the Northeast's ethnic violence is *immigration* from rest of the sub-continent and the resultant fear of being minoritized by many of the region's indigenous ethnic groups. The inflow of population from the densely-populated East Bengal began in the 1920s. This steady population flow from mainland India particularly from Bengal into the plains of Assam and Tripura heightened the ethnic and religious diversity and introduced a native-outsider dichotomy to the simmering conflict. The Partition of India intensified the migration pressure on Assam and Tripura since Hindu refugees now joined the flow. Tripura's demography changed within two decades as Bengalis became a powerful majority. The fear that other Northeastern states would go the Tripura way weighed heavily on indigenous people and early settlers throughout the Northeast and provoked more militants to take up arms. After the Partition, Assam was pressurized to accept more than six lakhs refugees by 1961. When the Assam Chief Minister, Gopinath Bordoloi opposed, Nehru threatened him with denial of development funds unless refugees were allowed to settle in Assam.² Sardar Patel, the then Indian Home Minister even wanted the Assam government to distribute reclaimable land evenly between landless Assamese peasants and Bengali Hindu refugees. That hurt the Assamese people very seriously. Assam's middle class and rural masses were very resentful of the state's changing demography and land lost to Bengali migrants and colonial exploitation by the Indian state. Besides, Assam also felt slighted by the economic exploitation of the state by the Indian state. The oil refinery agitation raised this issue. From the initial 0.1 million tones in 1947 Assam's annual crude oil output touched a peak of 5 million tones in the 1970s. Before the anti-foreigner agitation Assam received only Rs. 42 per tone of crude oil as royalty. Assam would get only Rs. 54 as sale tax on a tone of crude oil while Government of India collected Rs. 991 on the same quantity. For plywood extracted from North East the states received only Rs. 35 – 40 lakhs a year while Government of India got Rs. 80 crores. Assam sale tax collections from tea hovered around Rs. 20 – 30

²Cf. R. D. Chaudhury, "BTAD Violence, Mumbai Clashes, Exodus Interlinked," *Assam Tribune* 12 September 2012, 12.

crores per year until the outbreak of anti – foreigner agitation in 1979 whereas West Bengal made 60–70 percent more because the head offices of the tea companies were located there.³ These unequal treatments meted out to the North Eastern states also added more fuel to the existing ethnic violence in the regions.

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RESULT AND DISCUSSION

What is Ethnic Violence?

Ethnic violence refers to violence expressly motivated by ethnic hatred and ethnic conflicts. It is commonly related to political violence, and often the terms are used interchangeably, or one is used as a pretext for the other. Violence between different groups of people, differentiated by ethnicity, culture, religion or language is a serious problem and has tragically claimed, and continues to claim the lives of many thousands of people every year.⁴

Probable Causes of Ethnic Violence

There is no single cause of violence. Rather, ethnic violence is context-specific, multi-causal and multi-dimensional and can result from any one or from a combination of the following factors:

1. Political and institutional factors: weak state institutions, elite power struggles and political exclusion, breakdown in social contract and corruption, identity politics⁵

³Cf. S. Baruah, *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 20.

⁴ Gonzalez Casanova, "Internal Colonialism and National Development" ed., Urmila Phadnis, *Ethnicity and Nation-building in South Asia* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1989), 27.

⁵State weakness can create the conditions for violent conflict. Political institutions that are unable to manage differing group interests peacefully, to provide adequate guarantees of group protection, or to accommodate growing demands for political participation, can fracture societies. There is a degree of consensus that there is a U-shaped relationship between levels of democracy and likelihood of violent conflict. While mature democracies are able to manage tensions peacefully through democratic inclusion, stark autocracies are able to repress violence and manage conflict through force. The most vulnerable states are those in political transition. Uncertainty and collective fears of the future, stemming from state weakness, clientelism and indiscriminate repression may result in the emergence of armed responses by

2. Socio-economic factors: inequality, exclusion and marginalisation, absence or weakening of social cohesion, poverty⁶
3. Resource and environmental factors: greed, scarcity of national resources often due to population growth leading to environmental insecurity, unjust resource exploitation
4. Due to demand of ethnic homeland: almost all the ethnic groups in the region demand their separate homeland, resulting in inter-state boundary disputes, clashes between different groups,⁷
5. Due to takeover of land by migrating communities conflicts have regularly caused considerable internal displacement of population in most of the northeastern states. Displacement of population is caused by violent conflicts between security forces and insurgent groups, different dissident armed groups and counter-insurgency operations of security forces. Northeast India accounts for almost half of India's conflict-induced internally displaced persons. (Bhaumik,

marginalised groups and nationalist, ethnic or other populist ideologies. Colonialism and independent struggles in India, has left various legacies, including divisive and militarised politics and fierce struggles for power and land. Post-Independent leaders in India has sustained these dynamics, retaining power through neo-patrimonial networks, state capture, militarisation and coercion. Studies have shown that in some cases, they have promoted ideologies of "Us versus Them", excluding and marginalising other groups. The domination of access to state structures and resources by any one leader, group or political party to the exclusion of others exacerbates social divisions. It may provide incentives for excluded leaders to mobilise groups to protest and engage in violent rebellion. In contrast, inclusive elite bargains that seek to address social fragmentation and integrate a broad coalition of key elites can reduce the chances of ethnic violence.

⁶A social contract is a framework of rules that governs state-society relations and the distribution of resources, rights and responsibilities in an organised society. How a government spends public revenue, regardless of whether it comes from taxes or from natural resources, is significant. If it spends it equitably on social welfare and satisfying basic needs, conflict is less likely than if it appropriates revenues for corrupt or fractional purposes. Corruption undermines public trust in government, deters domestic and foreign investment, exacerbates inequalities in wealth and increases socioeconomic grievances. Equally, the inability of states to provide basic services, including justice and security, to all its citizens reduces state legitimacy and trust in state institutions, weakening or breaking the social contract. In some cases, ruling groups may resort to violence to prolong their rule and maintain opportunities for corruption. This can in turn provoke violent rebellion by marginalised groups. In other situations, research has found that "buying off" opposition groups and belligerents may facilitate transitions to peace.

⁷ There has been an ongoing debate about the role of identity in violent conflicts. The 'primordialists' (or 'ancient hatreds') and their argument that ethnic, religious or cultural differences inevitably result in conflict has been discredited in much of the literature. In contrast, 'instrumentalist' theorists have asserted that identity is simply constructed and exploited as a means of mobilisation. Most recent authors argue for a middle ground: ethnic, religious or cultural identities do not condemn people to fight against each other and are usually not the main issues and reasons for conflict; however, when introduced and mobilised, religion, ethnicity and culture provide a system of beliefs and practices that can unite adherents in a community, alter their perception of others and encourage them to take collective action in the name of their group. In situations of exclusion and discrimination, the salience of group identity can be a deciding factor in whether groups can be mobilised to violence.

2005). The region has witnessed a number of major causes of conflict-induced displacement in recent years.

6. Displacement of Bengali Hindus and Muslims from and within Assam;
7. Displacement of Adivasis and Bodos within and from western Assam
8. Displacement of Bengalis from Meghalaya, particularly from Shillong, the capital city of Meghalaya;
9. Displacement of the Bengalis from and within Tripura;
10. Displacement of Nagas, Kukis and Paites in Manipur;
11. Displacement of Reangs from Mizoram;
12. Displacement of Chakmas from Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram

Each of these factors constitutes a cause of ethnic violence in the region. New issues are/will arise during violence which perpetuate the increase of conflicts. Identifying and understanding the interactions between various causes, dimensions, correlations and dynamics of violence/conflict - and the particular contexts in which violence is taking place, is essential in determining potential areas of intervention and designing appropriate approaches and methods for conflict prevention, resolution and peacebuilding.

Basis of Ethnic Violence in the Region

The historical-racial connections among the traditional tribes in the Northeast are largely of Tibeto-Burman/Mongoloid stock and closer to Southeast Asia than to South Asia. People of the region are ethnically, linguistically and culturally very distinct from the rests of Indian population. Though cultural and ethnic diversity per say are not the main causes for conflict, one of the major areas of problem is that the Northeast is territorially organized in such a manner that ethnic and cultural specificities were ignored during the process of delineation of state boundaries in the 1950s, giving rise to discontentment and assertion of one's identity.⁸ Whereas, the colonial rulers took nearly a century to annex the entire region, and administered the hills as a loose 'frontier area', with the result that large parts of the northeastern hill areas never came in touch with the principle of a central administration before.

⁸Cf. Vernon Marston Hewitt, *The International Politics of South Asia* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1992), 142-143.

Hence, their allegiance to the newly formed Indian nation-state was lacking from the beginning – accentuated by the creation of East Pakistan (today's Bangladesh) – which meant the loss of a major chunk of the physical connection between mainland India and Northeast India. Interestingly, 99 percent of the Northeast's boundaries is international and only one percent is domestic boundary.

Land

Land is a major factor in the ongoing conflicts in the Northeast. It is the struggle for land as territory that each emerging ethnic nation claims to own as a right. For example, the assertion of Naga identity and its nationhood seeks to assert claims to the Naga inhabited areas of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Manipur and even in Myanmar. Karbis in Assam, Bodos in Assam, Kukis in Manipur, Garos in Meghalaya, Rhabas in Assam and Meghalayas, Muslim migrants in Assam and even other parts of North East states Muslim migrants are becoming a very serious concern, Chakmas in Mizoram, native tribals in Tripura and Arunachal and so on. As such, many ethnic groups are demanding homelands and resort to armed militancy to achieve their goals. These armed groups often attack settler communities or rival tribes as part of a strategy of ethnic cleansing to achieve ethnically compact homelands. It has become a common trend for almost all of the ethnic communities in the Northeast to claim their nationhood.⁹

In fact, the territorial claims of most of the communities lead to non-negotiable contestations and serious ethnic violence in the region.¹⁰ Today ethnic violence continues to be the most common form of violence in our region. In the recent past for example, there have been numerous instances of ethnic violence including ethnic war in between Nagas and kukis, Garos-Rabhas, Bodos and non-Bodos, Karbis-Rengma Nagas and so on, all struggling for their own autonomy in the region. However, it is apparent that certain places and states are more prone to ethnic violence, while others experience essentially none. Thus, the question that comes to our region is, what makes ethnic violence a constant threat and reality within a nation-state?

⁹Cf. Jaideep, Saikia, "Prolegomena: Quest for a Proximate Frontier", *Frontier in Flames: North East India in Turmoil*, ed., Jaideep Sakia (New Delhi: Penguin Group, 2007), xx.

¹⁰Sundeep Waslekar, *South Asian Drama: Travails of Misgovernance* (New Delhi: Konark Publishers, 1996), 228-230.

Ethnic Violence/Conflicts in Different States of North East India

Ethnic Violence in Assam

Ethnic violence in Assam is the result of number of socio-economic factors operating right from the advent of British rule. Human migration is an ongoing phenomenon in the Brahmaputra valley for centuries. Various immigrant groups belonging to Mongoloid group had entered Assam from neighbouring South-East Asian countries.

When the British took over the administration of Assam in the year 1826, it changed the traditional social culture of Assam. After taking over Assam, British established tea and oil industry in Assam and brought educated Bengali Hindus to work in important positions in the colonial administration and other important professions like teachers, doctors, lawyers and magistrates. The local people were reluctant to work in tea gardens which resulted in lack of labour force in colonial Assam. As a result the colonial rulers encouraged migration of tribal people from Jharkhand and Orissa in order to meet the demand of cheap labour in British-owned tea gardens.¹¹ In search of better living the poverty ridden tribal people of those areas migrated to Assam. The situation opened the floodgates of migration of people during the British regime. Thus the British-owned tea gardens had remarkably grown but failed to accommodate emerging Assamese middle class in jobs. This had eventually led to an anti-Bengali feeling amongst Assamese middle class who failed to understand the colonial limitation. The British also ignored the demand for replacement of Assamese as language in schools and courts. The linguistic conflict between migrant Bengalis and native population generated socio cultural conflict between the two groups.¹²

The immigration of people from erstwhile East Pakistan or Bangladesh, took a precarious turn during post independence period but the Government of India did not have a clear-cut policy to handle the issue. On the contrary Nehru-Liaquat Pact facilitated and accelerated infiltration during post independence era by providing for restoration of rights of immigrants over their properties (Pact, 1950). The agreement was against the spirit of Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act, 1950 enacted by Parliament that provided for expulsion of certain immigrants from Assam. In the early

¹¹Cf. S. L. Baruah, *A Comprehensive History of Assam* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1995), 16.

¹²Cf. Priyam Goswami, *The History of Assam from Yandabo to Partition (English)* (Guwahati: Orient Black Swan, 2012), 16.

sixties, the Govt. of Assam armed itself with Prevention of Infiltration from Pakistan (PIP) Plan, 1964 launched an aggressive campaign to flush out immigrants, who settled in Assam since January 1951.¹³ Bimala Prasad Chaliha, the then Chief Minister of Assam even disregarded the then Prime Minister's plea to go slow on the deportation. Chaliha even went on to say that the problem was so critical that Assam's demography and culture would be permanently damaged. Chaliha's campaign pressed a panic button among the Muslim immigrants. Ultimately Chaliha's Plan was put in cold storage and those who were deported earlier gradually returned and again settled in Assam. It has to be noted here that the Assamese members of the Constituent Assembly advocated for giving much wider power to the States.

The proposals include the right to legislate on immigration; inclusion of citizenship matter in the concurrent list; giving residual powers to the states; limitation of central power over subjects in the central list; not to give power to the Union Government to unilaterally redraw state boundaries; to make state Governorship an elected office and to give a much larger share of the exercise and export duties on tea and petroleum to the producing states (Baruah, 2005). During the post Bangladesh era, the All Assam Student's Union (AASU) started a movement called Bideshi Khedao Movement which is also known as Assam Movement. The movement was actually triggered by the discovery of sudden rise of registered voters in the electoral rolls in 1970s. Taking advantage of the deeprooted sentiments and discontentment of Assamese people, AASU successfully translated the agitation into widespread popular movement. Tens of thousands of Bengalis — both Hindus and Muslims were displaced all over Assam in violence unleashed during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, particularly during six years of anti foreigners agitation.¹⁴ However, the agitation leaders when they came to power and ruled the state since 1985 to 1996, failed to continue the work of detection and deportation of the illegal immigrants.

The ethnic violence in Bodo areas started with the Bodo movement in 1987. The Bodos who are the largest plains tribe in Assam alleged that there has been long socio cultural alienation, discrimination, de-culturalisation and anti-tribal policies of the government toward them. The Assam Movement that resulted in Assam Accord mainly

¹³Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam 1950) Act.2012 Assam Violence (2012).

¹⁴Dennis Austin, *Democracy and Violence in India and Sri Lanka* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1994), 63.

aimed at preserving and protecting Assamese identity and culture. The Bodos objected the clause 6 of the Assam Accord (1995), which promised to safeguard the culture and identity of Assamese people. The All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) along with Bodo Sahitya Sabha launched the Bodo Movement demanding a Bodo state for protecting and preserving their identity.¹⁵

In the initial years the movement was quite peaceful and democratic but later on the movement turned violent because of the conflicts that emerged with the increase of the non-Bodo population. To establish peace the state government and ABSU signed an accord making provision for setting up of Bodoland Territorial Council (BAC). However, BAC failed to meet the aspirations of Bodo people.¹⁶ The BAC area is not contiguous and in some areas under the BAC there were more than fifty per cent non-Bodo population. However, to have complete hold over the territory, the Bodos started ethnic cleansing with large scale attack on Muslims of Bengali descent in October 1993. Violent clash between Bodos and immigrant Muslim settlers displaced 3,568 families consisting of 18,000 people in Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon district. Again in May-June 1996 massive attack was launched against Adivasi Santhals. The conflict has resulted in displacement of 42,214 families consisting of about 22, 62682 persons throughout western Assam. After this initial outbreak, conflict between the two ethnic groups became a regular feature in western Assam.¹⁷ In 2004 Bodo Santhal conflict resurfaced again leaving 37,000 people displaced. The enmity between the immigrant Muslim settlers and tribal communities has increased over the years in Assam as the migrants encroach upon the areas previously dominated by tribal communities.¹⁸ Both groups are fighting over the same natural resources and geographical space. In 1998, clash between Bodos and immigrant Muslims displaced 48,556 families and within a span of two years, nearly 5.5 lakh people were living in camps at some point and about 44,000 of them were children. Again in August 2008 ethnic violence took place between the two groups in Udalguri, Darang, Chirang and Sonitpur districts killing 55 and displacing 2,12,000 persons. During the conflict 54 villages were directly affected and residents of 150 villages fled from their homes for fear of being attacked though there was no attack in their villages.

¹⁵Cf. S. K. Dutta, *Birth of a Problem in Blisters on their Feet* (New Delhi: Sage Publication, 2008), 90.

¹⁶Cf. A. K. Deka, "Understanding Conflict in BTAD Assam," Vol. 50/37 (September, 2013), 4.

¹⁷Cf. Bhaumik, *India's Northeast Nobody's People in No-man's Land in Internal Displacement in South Asia* (Delhi: Sage Publication, 2005), 34.

¹⁸A. K. Deka, "Understanding Conflict in BTAD Assam," Vol. 50/37 (September, 2013), 4.

More recently in July 2012 conflict between the two communities displaced 400,000 people from about 400 villages.

Conflict in North Cachar (NC) Hills and Karbi Anglong is another serious issue in the region. The two hill districts of Assam NC Hills and Karbi Anglong are mostly inhabited by indigenous tribes like Karbi, Dimasa, Kuki, Khasi, Jaintia, Hmar, Bodo, Tiwa, Rengma Nagas and Zeme Nagas. These two hill districts are continuously plagued by unprecedented ethnic violence in recent years. Root causes of the violence are control over land resources and establishment of homeland based on ethnicity. The clashes are between Karbi-Kuki, Karbi-Rengma Naga, Karbi-Dimasa, Dimasa-Hmar, Dimasa-Zeme Naga groups fighting each other and leading to killing and displacement of people in large numbers. According to a report given by the Asian Centre for Human Rights, as a result of ongoing conflict 44,016 Karbis and Dimasas have been displaced till October 2005 in Karbi Anglong, North Cachar Hills and Hojai sub-division of Nowgaon district.¹⁹ The recent conflicts between the Karbis and the Rengma Nagas, has caused so much damage to both the ethnic communities. Their homes were burned down, their crops destroyed, livelihood wiped out and rendered so many of them homeless. For the moment the clashes are brought under control but it could re-erupt any moment.

Ethnic Violence in Manipur

One of the worst ethnic violence took place in Manipur during the middle of 1992. The conflict between the Nagas and Kukis resulted in wanton killing, kidnapping, and burning and destruction of houses. This ethnic conflict forced many people to flee from their original places of settlements. A large number of people affected by ethnic violence moved to villages and towns where there they could find some sense of security and more economic opportunities leading to significant change in demography in the hills districts of the state. As a result of that, population in the state's least populated district of Chandel, that had only 71,014 as per 1991 census jumped to 1,18,327, in 2001 census (Thongbam, 2006). Naga-Kuki clash was followed by Meities and Pangal clash in 1993. The last in the series was the Paite-Kuki clash in Churachandpur district of the state. A number of factors are responsible for the outbreak of the clash. There was a disagreement between the Kukis and the Paites over

¹⁹Habib ur Rahman Laskar, "Insurgencies in NC Hills and Karbi Anglong," <http://assamconnect.blogspot.in/2008/05/insurgencies-in-nc-hills-and-karbi.html?m=1> (24.11.2014).

the acceptance of the term to be used as the common nomenclature to describe all the Kuki-Chin-Mizo group of tribes in the state. Another important factor which contributed to the Kuki-Paite clash was the fact that the Kukis and Zomis including Paites are at loggerhead over the issue of Kuki homeland taxes and fees. The third reason was that the Paites always wanted to rename Churachandpur as Lamka, which was opposed by the Kukis. The Paites killed 210 Kukis in the clashes and lost 298 of their own tribesmen. Three thousand houses in 47 villages were destroyed and 22,000 Kukis and Paites displaced.²⁰

Ethnic Violence in Nagaland and Assam Border

Ever since Nagaland was carved out of Assam's Naga Hills district in 1963, Nagaland and Assam has been in constant conflicts due to boundary disputes. Both the states believed that the disputes boundary belong to them "historically". The Nagaland government has been insisting that a 16-point agreement of 1960, which led to the creation of Nagaland, also included "restoration" of all Naga territories that had been transferred out of the Naga Hills after the British annexed Assam in 1826. The Assam government's stand is to maintain the boundary "constitutionally" as decided on December 1, 1963, when the hill state was created. Assam and Nagaland share a 434 km boundary. Assam says Nagaland has been encroaching upon over 66,000 hectares in Sivasagar, Jorhat, Golaghat and Karbi Anglong districts. This includes over 42,000 hectares in Golaghat alone (the site of the recent trouble). The encroached area also includes over 80 per cent of reserved forests. Assam says Nagaland has set up three civil subdivisions on Assam territory.²¹ Nagaland, on the other hand, insists that more tracts under Assam "occupation" belong to Nagaland.

There has been a series of ethnic violence incidents since Nagaland was created. Three major incidents took place in 1979, 1985 and 2014, leaving at least more than 100 persons dead between them. On January 5, 1979, 54 Assam villagers were killed in a series of attacks by armed men from Nagaland in Chungajan, Uriamghat and Mikirbheta of Golaghat district, while over 23,500 persons fled to relief camps. In June

²⁰S. Bhaumik, *Tripura: Decommissioning of Gumti Hydel Project Crucial for Conflict Resolution in Monirul Hussain's Coming Out of Violence* (New Delhi: Regency publication, 2007), 22.

²¹Cf. V. B. Ganesan, "Three Decades after Assam Movement: A Study on Identity," *The Hindu*, 13 December 2013, 5.

1985, a major flare-up at Merapani, also in Golaghat, left 41 persons dead on the Assam side. These included 28 Assam Police personnel. In 2014 the problem that continues till today has left more 15 people dead, so many properties of both the states have been destroyed and burned. Many had fled from their villages to the relief camps and safer cities. In all incidents, Assam claimed that the attackers included Nagaland Police personnel with the help of Naga insurgent groups. However, this claim of Assam was strongly refuted by the Nagaland Government. Both the states continue to blame the centre's negligence to the issues and they continue to demand the immediate solution to this boundary disputes so that further ethnic violence could be avoided in the future.²²

Ethnic Violence in Mizoram

In 1997 conflict between Mizos and Reang community presently known as Bru which is the second largest tribal group of Mizoram, began with the latter's demand for autonomy within Mizoram. Mizos consider it as an attempt to fragment the Mizo state. To counter such demands of minority tribal groups, the Mizos branded them as outsiders. Various attempts were made to invalidate their claims like deleting their names from the voter's list, questioning the census report etc. According to Bru leaders, their cultural practices were obstructed and they were forced to adopt Mizo language. Though they already had their native language - Kokborok - they were forced to accept Mizo language as medium of instruction. Bru leaders also alleged that the names of about 20,000 Reangs were deleted from the electoral rolls.²³

In 1997 ethnic violence took a severe turn when the Mizos unleashed a wave of terror against the minority Reangs. As many as 35,000 to 50,000 people belonging to Reang tribe crossed over from Mizoram to Tripura following atrocities committed against them allegedly by Mizo tribes. The Reang women were raped and men were beaten up and killed. The Reang militant group, which calls itself the Bru National Liberation Front (BNLF) started attacking Mizoram police and that further provoked the Mizos to commit atrocities on Reangs.²⁴ The Tripura Government says that 30,690 Reangs belonging to 6,859 families have fled into Tripura during the period of three years. But the Mizoram Government refuses to accept them. According to Mizoram

²²Bharti Jain, "Border tension: Minister of state for home Kiren Rijiju to meet Assam, Nagaland CMs," *The Times of India*, 21 August 2014, 3.

²³S. S. Ali, "The Reangs of Northeast India: A tireless battle of existence," 2005, 12.

²⁴S. S. Ali, "The Reang Refugees," 1998, 5.

government Tripura government has not given details of residence of 10,435 people belonging to 2,075 families.²⁵ Therefore, their claim to be residents of Mizoram is untenable.

Ethnic Violence in Tripura

A large number of Bengali Hindus entered Tripura from Chakla Roshanabad (now in Pakistan). The influx of large number of people over a long period of time brought about demographic changes in Tripura. The indigenous people in the state, who accounted for 95 per cent of the population of Tripura in the 1931 census, had been reduced to just 31 per cent at the time of the 1991 census. This has become a serious threat for the tribals, who have become minority in their own land. The demographic explosion which reduced the tribals to minority created fear psychosis in the minds of the tribal people and gave way to ethnic violence. The continuous influx of Bengali people from Bangladesh intensified the progressive alienation of tribal lands and traditional forest rights. There were large scale transfers of cultivable land of the tribal people to the Bengali migrants as the Bengali migrants practiced relatively advanced pattern of wet-rice cultivation compared to the age-old jhum cultivation.²⁶

As a consequence of influx of large number of migrants, a growing number of ethno-centric tribal parties mushroomed. The Debar Commission and Hanumanthiya Commission which looked into the development of the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) suggested a tribal compact area to fulfill the aspirations of development of tribal people. In the meantime the government enacted Tripura Land Reforms and Restoration Act in 1960 to restore alienated tribal land. The Act was amended in 1964. But all these had failed to protect the tribal groups, creating a feeling of mistrust and betrayal amongst the tribals. The state witnessed serious ethnic violence between tribals and non-tribals since 1980 till March 2002.²⁷ This tension of violence continues even today as the original inhabitants of Tripura are reduced to minority population in their own state.

²⁵S. Bhaumik, *Tripura: Decommissioning of Gumti Hydel Project Crucial for Conflict Resolution in Monirul Hussain's Coming Out of Violence* (New Delhi: Regency publication, 2005), 22.

²⁶Almost all writers on Tripura insurgency have identified land alienation amongst the tribal people as the major cause that had fuelled the violent insurgency in the state (Bhaumik S., 2005).

²⁷The direct fallout of large scale alienation the Sengkrak Movement started, the ruling Congress government backed the forcible occupation of tribals in the Deo valley by the Swasti Samity — an organization of Bengali settlers. The Sengkrak movement was subsequently outlawed by the state.

Ethnic Violence in Meghalaya

One of the unique features of the state of Meghalaya is that majority of tribal population follows matrilineal system where lineage and heritage are traced through its women/mothers. The non-tribal communities in Meghalaya are made up of migrants from other parts of India and recent migrants from neighbouring countries particularly Nepal and Bangladesh. The Khasi and Garo hills fall under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India that provides for establishment of autonomous district council to enforce customary law, use of land as well as reservation in Parliament, educational institutions and government employment. It has to be noted here that unlike some of the states in the Northeast which have been passing through violent insurgencies, Meghalaya has not yet experienced a full blown insurgency but large scale exodus of Bengali and Nepali people had taken place on several occasions.

Since late 1980s numerous cycles of ethnic cleansing rocked the state and people belonging to Nepali, Bengali, Bihari and Marwari communities became the target of the attack. In the 1990s Bengalis remained the prime target of the ethnic violence. The pattern was repeated at regular intervals mostly before or during the main Bengali Hindu festival of 'Durga Puja'. Unlike Tripura or Assam, only about 50 people had died in these attacks, but that was scary enough to trigger a Bengali exodus. Since the early 1980s, an estimated 25,000-35,000 Bengalis have left Meghalaya to other parts of India especially to West Bengal. Ethnic violence between the Rabha and the Garo communities in December 2010 and January 2011 displaced tens of thousands of people in Assam's Goalpara district and adjoining East Garo Hills district of Meghalaya. During the conflict 10 people had been killed and more than 50,000 persons displaced from both communities. Conflict between the two groups erupted over the issue of the legislative and executive status of the Rabha dominated Rabha Hajong Autonomous Council. However, this ethnic violence has left black years in the history of relation between the Rabhas and the Garos.

CONCLUSION

Ethnic violence in the Northeastern region can be thus attributed to diverse factors - land alienation, heavy and continuous influx of immigrants, fight over space, homeland and fight over natural resources in the same geographical space, issue of

majority and minority population, insurgency conflicts etc. As such, it becomes clear that peace can be restored in the region only through the restoration of land and people's cultural identity, socio-political autonomy, poverty alleviation, education and development especially in the rural areas.

Problems of indigenous people of the region have continuously been ignored by successive governments. Furthermore, there is lack of strong and committed leadership in the region because of which human resources could not be effectively and productively utilized for the good of the indigenous communities in the region. What is urgently needed at the present is the collective efforts of the Central and State governments, social, political and religious leaders, old and young citizens, men and women, churches, institutions, NGOs, local bodies and very importantly conflict-management or peace experts to come forward and form a common ground for working toward bringing in peace and harmony in the region, weighing all aspects and from all angles. This is because, individual efforts alone will not work or succeed in such a complexly-interwoven structure of conflicts in the region.

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