

A
Status Report on Displacement in
Assam and Manipur

Monirul Hussain
Pradip Phanjoubam

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While inter-ethnic conflicts have by no means been rare in India's Northeast, population displacement induced by such conflicts is sharply on the rise particularly since the 1980s. Conflicts and violence confined in the past mainly to the armed groups and the security forces of the state seldom triggered off population displacement of such scale and magnitude as one notices now. It is important that we take note of the changing dynamics of conflicts and violence in the region. Conflicts today have acquired a truly mass character in the sense that they show an alarming propensity of engulfing an ever-greater number of people involved in them. In this situation, it is ironic that the two rights of home and homeland run at cross-purposes. This has its implications for the politics, ecology and topography of the region. Mixed areas with historically practised exchanges and transactions between communities are at peril. And, thus for instance, never before in its history has Manipur been so much divided as it is now. Internal displacements sparked off by conflicts are a product of many a hidden partition in the society seldom officially acknowledged. This study on fifty years of population displacement in Manipur tells us the story of a society that has hit almost a blind alley with little clue as to how to cross the divides and negotiate its rapidly changing ethnic landscape. We need to complement it with many other stories. As various stories marked by these divides unfold, they reveal a surprisingly similar structure – a structure that constantly reminds us of how violence once initiated eventually gathers its own momentum and takes its toll on each one of us – big or small, powerful or powerless. The essay on Assam prods us to think in terms of formulating an agenda that takes us beyond the given fault lines. It underlines the need for dialogues as a means of addressing the issues of rights and justice. We cannot ignore the fact that the development-induced displacement against this backdrop of ethnic tensions has complicated the problem related to rights and justice in India's Northeast even more.

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Status Report on the IDP Situation in Assam

Monirul Hussain

Internally displaced persons constitute one of the largest excluded groups in the society. Displacement from one's home and habitat is very pathetic because when the displaced move from their original habitats, they incur immense losses in life sustaining resources including social networks, neighbours and access to common property resources. Although the problem of internal displacement is similar with the refugee problem, the plight or status of the internally displaced is even worse than the refugees as the former cannot cross international borders and has to seek help from that authority which is very often responsible for their displacement. By and large, this group of people remain outside the public "consciousness" or "imagination", experiencing a high degree of alienation, marginalisation and exclusion from the larger society. Here emerges the question of human rights, care, protection and justice for the Internally Displaced Persons (henceforth IDPs).

North East India has been a very distinct civilisational, geographical, socio-economic, cultural and political entity in India. Of the 635 tribal groups listed by Anthropological Survey of India, 213 were found to be living in the Northeast India. This region is geographically isolated and connected with the rest of India through a narrow corridor. Besides, the region is also economically underdeveloped. The migrations of different groups at different periods of history from the neighbouring areas have made the society in Assam rich and diverse in terms of race, religion, language and culture. Even the society in the hills of North East also reflects high degree of diversity though each community living therein has its distinct characteristics. However, with its annexation into the British colonial India, Assam was exposed to a very high degree of in-migration as an inseparable part of the colonial transformation of society, polity and economy. Obviously, a large number of these migrants, were, in-fact the displaced people. Whether the tribal from the Jharkhand region who migrated to Assam's tea plantations, or the or the uprooted peasants of East Bengal who migrated to Assam in large number in search of land and livelihood, all of them were in fact the displaced people induced by the political economy of colonial India. Briefly speaking, Assam remained the unofficial host to large number of displaced people throughout the colonial period. End of the British colonialism also forced Assam to become a host of a large number of East Pakistan refugees. Unlike, Panjab and Bengal the outflow of refugees from the North East was virtually insignificant.

As Assam entered into the postcolonial phase it gradually transformed from a major host of displaced people to a major generator of displaced people in India. A large number of people are living in state sponsored relief camps for decades together without proper relief, care and protection. Their quest for return, resettlement and

rehabilitation has remained unfulfilled. Most internally displaced persons in the North East are victims of environmental degradation, skewed development processes and political conflicts. Though they are technically citizens of the country, empirically they are refugees and their exact numbers are still to be estimated accurately.

Classification of IDPs

One can find all the three kinds of IDPs in the North East India i.e.

1. Conflict induced IDPs
2. Development induced IDPs and
3. Natural disaster/ environment induced IDPs (many preferred to call them Environmental Refugees).

Before presenting our report we must tell that North East is neither a homogeneous nor an even region as it is assumed to be in the rest of India. It is a highly heterogeneous and highly uneven region. Communication is still difficult, freedom of movement to a large part of the region has been restricted by the state and non-state actors. In such a situation, it is an arduous task to prepare a status report on the IDP situation in the entire region. Perhaps the best way to present it would be to deal with each state individually with equal importance given to each of all the three categories of the IDPs and draw some broad conclusions about the region. That too is difficult given the time and resources we have at our hand. Even then we are trying to present a broad view of the situation. It is difficult to collect data on IDP situation until and unless we have a day to day basis monitoring of the situation with an inbuilt mechanism for periodic verification.

Data Limitation

Data on IDP is very scanty. Most difficult is to find data on natural disaster/ environment induced displacement of population. Next in order of difficulty is to gather data on development induced displacement. North East has experienced a massive development induced displacement of population during the postcolonial period (Fernandes and Bharali 2006, awaiting publication, Hussain 2007, forthcoming). Compared to these two categories, it is relatively easier to collect data on conflict induced displacement of population. It is mainly because the media normally does not miss to report conflict because it is an important political event. Our media is largely obsessed with the political news and largely ignore the development and environment issues that displace people. Hence, in the process, we get some information about the conflict induced displacement but not much on development and environment induced displacement of population in North East India. Besides, if not all, a significant number of media personnel accept the events of human displacement caused by environmental degradation as “natural” events.

Similar is the case with the displacement caused by development projects. Here too population displacement becomes natural!

Conflict Induced IDPs

Ethnic conflicts became endemic in postcolonial North East India. Here, ethnic conflict includes the conflict between the state and ethnic groups/ insurgent groups, inter ethnic and intra ethnic conflicts. One particular situation of ethnic conflict may reflect one, two or all these three kinds of conflicts simultaneously.

Among the North Eastern states, internal displacement has been quite high in Assam. Conflict has been the main cause of major displacement of population in Assam. Although it is very difficult to give an exact data of IDPs caused by conflict in this region, we can give some estimates of government and some other agencies here. Tens of thousands of Bengalis, Hindus and Muslims, were displaced all over Assam in violence unleashed during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, particularly during six years of anti foreigner's agitation led by students and the dominant Asamiyas . During the worst phase of violence in July-September 1960, almost 50,000 Bengalis, mostly Hindus crossed over to West Bengal seeking shelter there. Again, in 1972-73, 14000 Bengalis fled to West Bengal and elsewhere after the breakout of riots over language issue. However, the real figure of displacement is far more than mentioned here because government account includes only those people who took refuge in the camps of West Bengal. Thousands died in the riots during the agitation between 1979 and 1985 - almost 2,000 in the village of Nellie alone. (*Bhaumik, 2005, Hussain, 2000*).

The inter-ethnic clashes in the Bodo heartland of Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon has displaced a large number of people. At one stage, the number of IDPs reached more than 3 lakhs. It should also be mentioned here that the Bodo-Muslim ethnic violence that occurred in October 1993 has displaced about 3568 families consisting of 18000 persons. Again, a series of major incidents took place throughout the district in May 1996 when a section of Bodos attacked ethnic Santhals. This conflict has resulted in the displacement of a huge population. Almost 42,214 families consisting of about 2, 62682 persons were displaced by this conflict "at the peak of the Bodo Armed Movement, Assam accounted for nearly more than half of India's population of Internally Displaced Persons", says Sanjib Baruah of the Centre for Policy Research in Delhi (*Bhaumik, 2005*).

These victims were sheltered in 78-relief camps around Kokrajhar and its adjoining areas. After staying as inmates in the camps many of them return to their villages in 1997 with a small amount of returnees grant provided by government of India. However, in 1998 again conflict started between the two groups resulting in the displacement of 48,556 families consisting of 3, 14,342 villagers. Till April 2005, in Kokrajhar 1, 26,263 inmates were living in 38 state sponsored relief camps in the district.

Table 1. Distribution of Population in the relief camps of Kokrajhar and Gosaigaon Subdivisions following the ethnic violence of 1996-1997

	No of Relief Camps	No of Families	Population		
			Adult	Minor	Total
Kokrajhar sub-division	15	7269	27499	14500	41999
Gosaigaon sub division	23	16687	55216	29084	84268
Total	38	23983	82715	43548	1,26263

Source: Office of the Deputy Commissioner, Kokrajhar (April 2005)

Some of these conflict-induced IDPs are living in the relief camps for more than a decade now. The government is providing only rice to the inmates of some of the camps for 10 days a month. Even that supply too was erratic. Sometimes, the IDPs do not get their rations for months together. Assam government records, as informed by the BBC, indicates only 33,362 displaced people were left in the camps Kokrajhar district and 74,123 were left in the camps in Gossaigaon district.

Table 2 gives us the latest data on the IDP situation in Kokrajhar subdivision. It reveals the fact that in the Kokrajhar sub division number of inmates in the relief camps has decreased from 41,999 to 28,961 on August 2006. Little more than one-third are children and two thirds are adults. However, we could not verify the number of IDPs as given by the district administration. Still the number of IDPs is quite large despite settlement of the Bodo issue. The leadership of the Bodoland movement now leading the Bodoland Autonomous Council as well as a part of the present Congress led coalition government of Assam. It seems they have given utmost priority to the rehabilitation of the ex-insurgents. And resettlement and rehabilitation of IDP is still a low priority issue in the political agenda of the state government as well as the Bodoland Autonomous Council.

Table 2: Present Relief Camp wise number of Inmates in Kokrajhar Sub-Division Following the Ethnic Violence of 1996 and 1998

Year of Riot	Name of the Relief camp	Community	No. of family	Population			
				Adult	Minor	Total	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
1996	1. Joypur	Adivasi	263	1177	374	1551	Going to Rehab.
	2. Bishmuri	Adivasi	145	460	129	589	
	3. Deosri	Adivasi	281	1240	489	1729	
	Sub-Total		689	2877	992	3869	
1998	1. Vety. Complex, Bengtol	Adivasi	97	331	197	528	
	2. Joypur (A)	Adivasi	1880	5985	3847	9832	
	3. Bhumka-Maligaon	Adivasi	74	291	91	382	
	4. Jaypur (B)	Adivasi	754	3077	1163	4240	
	5. Shantipur	Adivasi	246	1106	300	1406	
	6. Seosri (B)	Adivasi	271	856	508	1364	
	7. Bishmuri (B)	Adivasi	365	1260	485	1745	
	8. Runikhata & Bhurpar	Adivasi	967	3109	2486	5595	
Sub-Total		4653	16015	9077	25092		
Grand Total		5342	18,892	10,069	28,961		

Source: Deputy Commissioner, Kokrajhar 2006

Table 3 shows the present situation of Gossaigaon sub-division of Kokrajhar district. Here too, the number of IPDs decreased from 84,268 persons to 25,785 persons. Here, too number of IDP children is more than one third of the total IDP population.

Table 3 Population in the camps of the Gossaigaon sub-division (As on 3.8.06)

Total no. of relief camps	14
Total no. of families	4937
Total Adult Population	16,818
Total Minor Population	8967
Grand Total population	25,785

Source: Deputy Commissioner, Kokrajhar 2006

If we combine the IDP population of the two sub-divisions, it becomes more than 54,000. The number is still quite high for the district. It needs to be recollected that in the wake of Bodoland movement and its consequent inter ethnic conflict induced a large

number of IDPs from the early nineties of the twentieth century. Hence, a large number of people are living in these makeshift camps for more than one and half decade. The time period is good enough to assess the impact of IDP situation without proper care and protection.

Table 4: Community-wise break up of the population of Gossaigaon camps (As on 3.8.06)

Name of the community	Total population
Bodo	1290
Adivasi	24280
Rava	215
Grand Total	25785

Source: Deputy Commissioner, Kokrajhar 2006

Table 4 shows the community-wise break up of the inmates of IDP relief camps in Gossaigaon sub-division. Community-wise the Adivasis have been the major victims of ethnic violence. Still, the largest number of the IDPs belong this category mainly composed of Santhals.

Though, the Kokrajhar district has been on focus for IDP camps, it would be wrong to ignore the IDP situation in the neighbouring Bongaigaon district. The following Table depicts the situation in Bongaigaon district.

Table 5: Relief camp-wise inmates position in Bongaigaon District Following the Ethnic violence in 1993 (As on 01.01 05)

Name of the relief camp	Community	No. of families	Total no. of population	Name of sub division
Garimari	Muslim	1832/1760	9999	Bijni
Hapachora	Muslim	1332	6265	Bijni
Balajani	Muslim	595	2980	Abhayapuri
Tapatri	Muslim	60	300	Abhayapuri
Total population -			19544	

Source: Deputy Commissioner, Bongaigaon

Although the government reports are claiming decrease in the number of the inmates of these camps but it is also found that these displacees are forced to leave the camps. Many tribal leaders allege that the administration was stopping rations to force these people out of the camps.

“We have been literally chased out of the camps by the officials. They said we have to go or else we will have to starve,” says Joachim Baxla, a Santhal tribal leader at Nabin Nagar, where only 103 families were left in the camps”. (Bhaumik, 2005)

The Muslims of Bengali origin chased out by the Bodo rebels in 1994 are living in pathetic conditions in some places of Assam. Near Bijni on the National Highway, nearly 8,000 such Muslims live in huts on both sides of the National Highway 37. Another tribesmen Kartick Hembrom, in nearby Matiajuri said, “We are uncertain about our future. We may not get back our cultivable lands from the Bodos who occupied it after we fled the violence in 1996”. (Bhaumik, 2005)

"We cannot go and work in the fields because the Bodos threaten us, we cannot buy lands anywhere under the new autonomy arrangements, we cannot get back our lands," says Sabebur Rehman (Bhaumik, 2005). The life of the IDPs living in the camps in Assam has been very difficult. Most of them do not get adequate food, nutrition and proper medical care. Children of these camps are deprived of formal education and health care services. Though, some receive food aid, but it often arrives sporadically and insufficient in quantity and nutrition. Thus these losing their possessions like land, home and livelihood live in a dehumanized condition.

Mr Digambar Narzary, the head of Nedan Foundation, an NGO sponsored by UNDP is of the view that, because of poverty and conflict, there is widespread trafficking women and children in the North East. He further says that very often the trafficker carry out recruitment drives in the relief camps of Kokrajhar district. They make false promises of jobs in the cities and bring the girls from the camps. According to the study made by this foundation, hundreds of girls of these camps have left their places in search of job. Interestingly, some of these girls are found in cities like Delhi, Chandigarh, Lucknow, Kashmir and Goa. Thus, it opens up huge possibilities for the spread of HIV/AIDS. Therefore the study made by the foundation states that the inmates of the camps are contributing towards the enormous rise of HIV positive in the state. (www.undp.org Amar Asom, 18th May, 2006)

According to the Home Minister of Meghalaya, approximately 350 Pnar people having close affinity with the Jaintia community of Meghalaya have fled the North Cachar Hills district following the Dimasa- Hmar conflicts in 2003. This has not only spread terror in and around the Cachar district, but resulted in thousands of Dimasas and Hmars being displaced from their gutted down villages, to take shelter in about 25 relief centres. "Almost a quarter of the population of NC Hills got displaced in this period. People belonging to both the communities fled to villages where their respective communities command the majority. These are not identified as refugee camps in the official 'situation reports' sent by the government agencies, which do not reflect the true magnitude of the tragedy." (Liberation, June 2003) Again, 4,000 Khasis and Pnars fled from Assam to Meghalaya after getting threat from Karbi militants in November 2003. The displaced were sheltered in camps.

However, after staying for a period of two months in the camps the displacees return back.

However, in late 2005, the Karbi Anglong district witnessed one of the worst and longest spells of ethnic violence of Assam. Such violence continued unabated for over one month. The two militant outfits of this district – United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) and Dima Haram Daoga (DHD) fought with each other resulting in mass killing and violence in the district. The UPDS is the dominant Karbi militant group, while the DHD claims to represent the Dimasa tribe's aspiration for a separate homeland. This conflict has also affected the Bodos living in the district. Not to speak about the Karbi and Dimasa villages, but the villages having the majority of other groups had to flee their places. At first, the conflict was concentrated mainly in Diphu sub-division, but later it spreads to Hamren sub-division also. Thousands of families have been rendered homeless with Karbis attacking the Dimasas in some places and the Dimasas retaliating in full measure in other areas. The panic stricken people of villages though not directly affected, have also fled their houses to stay in the relief camps. All along the highway, scores of relief camps have sprung up. However, people belonging to other ethnic groups are also taking shelter in the relief camps. Even when violence was abated to some extent, the people did not want to go back to what remains of their homes and hearths. Although, official sources asserted that there is no shortage of relief materials, many relief camps are facing shortage of food, medicine, clothing and kerosene. (*The Assam Tribune*, 23rd October, 2005). Another major problem is that the students of the districts are suffering as more than 40 schools have been transformed into relief camps.

According to an estimate the ethnic violence of October 2005 has displaced more than 60,000 tribal people belonging to Karbi and Dimasa tribes. Hence, at the present moment it can be estimated that in Assam only, there are over two lakhs conflict induced IDPs in various relief camps both in the plains and the hills awaiting resettlement and rehabilitation. It must be mentioned here that in many cases a number of displacees remain unnoticed and undocumented in the state.

In November 2003, hundreds of Hindi-speaking people left Assam in the wake of the backlash that followed attacks on the train passengers of northeast India in various places of Bihar. Leaving aside the uncounted numbers of those internally displaced, about 20,000 persons, perhaps more, are believed to have fled the State." (*Frontline* 6 December 2003)

Tension in the border areas also results in the displacement of the people. Very recently, on August 10, 2006; the Bangladesh Rifles attacked two outposts of the Border Security force in Cachar and Karimganj districts killing two women. The BSF also retaliated and the firing between the two border guards continued for a long time. Anticipating further violence, nearly 3000 residents of Harinagar, Kinarkkal and Tukegram villages of Cachar and Karimganj fled their homes in panic. (*The*

Assam Tribune, August 11, 2006) The displaced people have been lodged in the relief camps opened at schools and club buildings at a safe distance from the international border. There are problems in the Indo-Bangladesh border over land in Cachar district, as it is believed that the Bangladeshi national try to cultivate in the land of Harinagar area of this district. This is stated to be the main reason behind such an incident. However, later on Indian government has dismissed the report on land encroachment by the Bangladeshi National in the Indian side. (*Special correspondent, The Assam Tribune, 18th August 2006*). Again on 20th August there were exchanges of fire between India's BSF and Bangladesh's BDR in which a Bangladeshi woman died.

People living in the border area, whether an international or inter-state in North East India always suffers from a deep sense of fear because of conflict between inter-state border and intra state border. Like Indo-Bangladesh border, the Assam and Nagaland border and the Assam and Arunachal Pradesh border have very often generate displacement of population. However, such displacements have not received adequate attention from the media.

Interestingly, anti-Bengali movement has displaced people not only from Assam earlier but also from Tripura and Meghalaya. In Meghalaya there was a large-scale displacement of Bengali population, mainly from Shillong. Since the early 1980s, an estimated 25,000-35,000 Bengalis have left Meghalaya and settled down in some other states of India, mainly in Assam and West Bengal. According to Meghalaya Census report, in 1981, there were 1,19,571 Bengalis in Meghalaya, constituting 8.13 percent of the state's population. But in 1991, this stood at 144261, constituting only 5.97 percent of the total population. (Bhaumik, 2005). There has been a steady decline of Bengali population in Shillong over last three decades.

In Tripura, attacks on Bengali has been more widespread. Here, the Bengalis constitute the majority and taken over land on a large scale from the indigenous communities. The violence started between the two communities with the riot of June-July 1980 in which about 1076 Bengalis and 278 tribals were killed. during this riot, 189,919 people, 80 per cent Bengalis and the remaining 20 percent tribal were displaced and took shelter in the 186 camps that were set up for them. After the return of normalcy, it was difficult for the Bengalis to return back to their villages as they were taken over by the tribal. Some of the tribal youths formed Tribal National Volunteers (TNV). Between March 1992 and March 2002, these rebels killed 823 Bengalis and 3312 were kidnapped. About 1/7th of those kidnapped did not return. Thus, after 1980 since the first major ethnic riot in Tripura, more than 100000 Bengalis have been displaced from the state. (Bhaumik, 2005)

The Tripura State Revenue Minister, in a statement in the Legislative Assembly, on 24 September 2003, quoted IDP figures in the state; in what could be the first such attempt by any state government in the region to assess the scale of physical movement of people due to militancy. The minister said, "Between March

1998 to February 2003, 19,468 families have been displaced from their original places". If each family is estimated to have five members, the total number of people displaced would be around 98,000, roughly amounting to more than three per cent of the state's total population. (Routray, 2004). This is a very large displacement indeed.

Similarly, Manipur has witnessed substantial internal displacement and ethnic relocation in the wake of the Naga-Kuki and the Kuki-Paite feuds in the 1990s that led to nearly 1700 deaths and destruction of property worth millions of Rupees. At least 600 villages were burnt down during the Naga- Kuki feud, in which nearly 10000 houses were destroyed. The Nagas killed 898 Kukis during the eight-year-old feud while 312 Nagas were killed by the Kukis. On the other hand, the Paites killed 210 Kukis in clashes and lost 298 persons from their community. Almost 3000 houses in 47 villages were destroyed and 22000 Kukis and Paites were displaced. Again, during the riots between the meites and Pangals, more than 100 were killed in which 196 houses in 9 villages were destroyed. (Haokip, 2002).

On the other hand, the regrouping of Mizos by the Indian Army in the wake of Mizo rebellion had displaced a large number of Mizo population. During the first regrouping, 45000 and in the second regrouping 87000 Mizos were regrouped. This had forced the Mizo farmers away from his lands as they were forced to settle in roadside locations guarded by the army (Bhaumik, 2005).

Mizoram has also witnessed a massive outflow of Burmese refugees in 2003. The Chin refugees who had taken refuge in the state following persecution by the Burmese Junta in the post-1988 democracy uprising were forcibly repatriated to Myanmar during July-August 2003. It is reported that more than 4000 Burmese refugees went back to Myanmar after this violence. More than 50,000 ethnic Chin, Kuki and Naga refugees from Myanmar have been left at the mercy of the state governments and the local populace. (Haokip, 2003)

About 30,000 to 40,000 Brus/also called Reangs fled from Mizoram State of India to Tripura to escape from a campaign of violence and terror against them allegedly by members of the Mizo Zirlai Pawl (Mizo Students Union) and Young Mizo Association (YMA). From 15 October 1997 onwards, Reangs from Tungbagin, Kawnmun, Pheileng, Laxmicheraa, Kwartha, Rangdil, Fileng and Tuipuibari areas of Aizwal district of Mizoram fled to neighbouring states to escape from persecution from the non-state actors. It is alleged that the state too remained as silent spectator.

According to an estimate of Tripura government, 30,690 Reangs belonging to 6859 families have fled into Tripura in last 3 years. Later on, at the initiative of the Mizoram government, almost 3000 refugees returned back to Mizoram but a majority has chosen to stay back in the IDP camps of Tripura. During the visit to the relief camps under Kanchanpur sub-division in North Tripura from 2-4 January 2006, Asian Centre for Human Rights found the conditions of over 34,000 displaced Brus in the camps in North Tripura as sub-human. Medical and sanitation facilities are

almost non-existent in these camps. The inmates use the water from ponds and streams as a result of which water born disease spread out very easily. More than 5000 children in the camps are deprived of education. Even Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan has not been extended to these camps. (www.achrweb.org).

Another survey in these camps reveals the fact that the inmates are also becoming victims of AIDS. A survey at the refugee camps in Kanchanpur Sub-division of North-Tripura district conducted by the state health department has found that at least 6 Bru IDPs staying at these camps have been suffering from AIDS and 12 others are found to be HIV positive. Health department sources further say that a section of poverty stricken refugees were working as sex workers and a section of youth were drug addicts, who are contributing towards the spread of this disease. (*The Assam Tribune*, 28 May 2006).

The Brus/Reang IDP issue is far from resolved. The Bru National Liberation Front (BNLF) laid down their arms in February 2005 following a peace accord with the state government of Mizoram. However, the Bru Liberation Front of Mizoram (BLFM) remained underground and according to the Mizoram Government, they are still involved in kidnapping and extortions. Besides, there exists some disagreement between the government of Mizoram and Tripura about the number of Bru IDPs living in relief camps in south Tripura adjoining Mizoram.

The Mizoram government identified five villages for the resettlement of 1,700 Bru families in the first phase of repatriation. Accordingly, Tuipuibari, Aampa, Tengpui, and Tuirum villages would resettle 500 Bru families each while the rest would be resettled in Thaidawr and Tumpuan Lui.

In the second phase, the Mizoram government instructed to prepared ground to resettle the remaining 1,300 Bru families in three villages i.e. Bunghmun, Rengdil and Zamung. However, quite a few influential Mizo NGOs opposed the move to resettle the BRu IDP families in the specific areas (Ibid) on the other hand, 16 point memorandum submitted by the Brus demanded that the Brus of resettled in group collectively and not in a divided manner (Ibid). All this has created a blockade for the return of Bru IDPs to Mizoram.

Development–Induced Displacement

Development projects are very often linked with the problem of displacement. The development projects of the North East region have directly affected the poor and powerless tribal both in the hills and plains. Absence of adequate resettlement and rehabilitation policy for the displaced has led to further pauperisation, marginalisation and helplessness among the oustees. The South Asian Solidarity for Rivers and Peoples (SARP) maintained that from the 72 hydel projects proposed in the NE region only the contractors and dealers of cement, iron etc will be benefited, not the common people. It will also help the better off to lead a luxurious life, but at

the same time the poor and the backward communities will be deprived of their livelihood. It is also interesting to see that Central Allocation for NE projects has increased substantially in 2005-06 financial year. Eighty new projects were sanctioned in this year for this region. By now it has become clear that mega dams have done more harms than good to the people. But still the central government is proposing new plans having dangerous consequences ignoring the fragile ecology of this region. The common people have become conscious of the fact that such projects are not only going to displace them, but also discrete their timeless bond with the elements of nature. They will be alienated from their own place. The people have now understood that Dams and other mega projects will imperil their sustainable modes of living making their life more difficult. Geological condition of this region is fragile. Instead of making any effort protect the rich flora and fauna, the central government is coming with new proposals for setting up different projects in this region, which will have serious consequences in the long run. It is also interesting to see that are by some the development projects of the neighbouring states have also generated IDPs in this region, e.g., the Kaptai Dam constructed on the river Karnaphuli across the international border in the Chittagong Hill Tracts has displaced a large number of Chakmas and Hajongs of the CHT. A large number of them settled down in Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh creating refugee problem. The indigenous communities of Arunachal apprehend that the 65,000 strong Chakma-Hajong refugees could in future emerge as a dominant political force. Such an eventuality would seal any prospects of their deportation. They are also increasingly worried about the alleged gradual transfer of their land to the refugees. Besides, the refugees are also accused of encroaching on the reserved forestland. (Singh, 2005)

Among the northeastern states, development induced IDPs are more visible in Assam. The oil sector in Assam also contributed towards the problem of displacement. New oil townships are established in various places of upper and lower Assam displacing the inhabitants of those areas. Two paper Mills of Assam at Jagiroad and Cachar have also forced people out of their homes besides destroying the greenery. The Jagiroad paper mill has mostly displaced the people belonging to Tiwa tribes. On the other hand, the Cachar Paper Mill in Barak Valley of Assam has reduced the bamboo forest in the neighbouring area.

Moreover, urban expansion of Guwahati city has displaced the tribal mostly belonging to Karbis and Bodos. Urban expansion is pushing these people out of the city to the periphery. In 1973, when Assam's capital was shifted from Shillong to Guwahati once again the tribals had to sacrifice. An estimated 1,00,000 population were displaced at that time. Again educational institutions like Gauhati University and IIT, Guwahati have also displaced the original inhabitants of the outskirts of the city without proper rehabilitation.

The Pagladiya Dam Project is to be constructed in Nalbari District of Lower Assam. The project is going to irrigate 54,125 hectares of land, protect 40,000 hectares of land from flood and erosion, and generate only 3 MW of electricity. But it would

displace almost 1,05,000 population most of whom are tribal people. The rehabilitation and resettlement package offered by the government is also not acceptable to the people of the area. Besides many of them do not possess proper ownership documents and therefore will not get any compensation. Hence, the people have started their movement under the banner called *Pagladia Bandh Prakalpar Ksatigrastha Alekar Sangram Samiti* against the implementation of the project. The Central government as well as the Brahmaputra Board, which is the implementing agency of the project, is making all efforts to construct the dam there. But till now the resistance of the people have been quite successful and the authority has failed to do even the ground survey because of the massive resistance of the people.

For the construction of the fourth bridge over the mighty Brahmaputra 'the Bogibeel Bridge', already more than 2000 bighas of land have been occupied. According to an estimate, almost 500 families having ownership documents of these lands are not compensated yet. It is to be mentioned that the land has been taken for keeping stones and other materials required for the construction of the bridge.

The 2000 MW Lower Subansiri project to be constructed on the border areas of Assam and Arunachal is already facing lot of opposition from the people as well as from the governments of both the sectors. The project was planned by National Hydro Electric Power Corporation (NHPC), a government run public sector unit and it is very keen to construct the dam as it has obtained environmental clearance for the projects. The proposed height of the dam is 116 meters and it will submerge 3436 hectares of land. At the same time more than 1 Lakh tribals of Arunachal Pradesh will be adversely affected by the dam, out of which about 15000 faces the threat of physical displacement. Besides it will affect the rich bio diversity of the region as 42 hectares of land belonging to Tulley Valley reserve forest will also be submerged, where many rare animal species can be found. The NHPC has already constructed their office on an elephant corridor. As a result of this the elephants have started attacking and destroying the neighbouring villages. The indigenous people of Arunachal are also worried over the threats posed by these projects to their habitats and unique cultural heritage. They further fear that the project would also lead to influx of outsiders creating social problems. Again, the project is going to submerge a vast tract of cultivable land in Arunachal Pradesh impoverishing a large number of indigenous people, while people of other states will get the benefit. However in a significant development, the Ministry of Power has decided to drop plans for the construction of Upper Subansiri dam in Arunachal Pradesh following directions by the Ministry of Environment and Forest on the basis of Indian Board of Wildlife. (*The Assam Tribune*, 27 November 2005)

The Dumbur Dam of the Gumti Hydel Project in South Tripura district, aims at generating 8.60 MW of power, has displaced a total of 5845 tribal families – between 35,000 to 40,000 people in all. The Gumti Hydel project has mainly displaced the people belonging to Reang community. Although a rehabilitation scheme was taken up for the permanent rehabilitation of the affected families and

payment of compensation in terms of acquisition of their land was also undertaken by the state government but it is experienced that most of the affected population dispersed in different localities of Tripura States and they are not in a position to response during the course of rehabilitation activities. Another point to be mentioned here is that the affected Reang communities are mostly jhumias and they are having no land records even of their homestead land. Therefore it is virtually impossible for them to get resettlement without land document.

Likewise, the Tipaimukh Multi purpose project is also going to displace over 15,000 people. It would mainly attack two tribal communities- Zeliangrong Nagas and the Hmar. It is to be mentioned here that the tribal people have very close relationship with the nature. Moreover, they are attached to the mother earth and have a very well knit web of community life. The construction of such projects disturbs their community life and breaks their relationship with the nature. Besides, in the North East such displacement due to development creates the problem of space further creating ethnic conflicts among them.

Tuli paper Mill of Nagaland has also displaced hundreds of tribal families and affected the rich bio diversity and environment. The Loktak Hydel project in Manipur displaced around 20,000 people as their villages went under water. In Arunachal Pradesh more than 20,000 would be displaced by the Siang project (Bhaumik, 2005).

Displacement due to Environmental Degradation

It is difficult to estimate the number of IDPs caused by environmental degradation, i.e. flood, riverbank erosion, and landslide etc. However, some reasonable conclusions can be drawn about the enormity of the problem. As a result of continuous environmental degradation; flood and riverbank erosion in the plains, and landslide in the hills have become endemic. This has caused innumerable deaths, destruction and population displacement. The intensity of flood, riverbank erosion and landslide has increased substantially over the years in terms of area and victims. It would be pertinent to point out that the plight of the riverbank erosion induced IDPs are much more severe than that of the victims of flood. The victims of flood at least can go back to their original land once the flood water recedes. However, the riverbank erosion induced ID peasants can not go back to their land. Because, their land has become a part of river's new/extended bed. It is not only the mighty river Brahmaputra but also the innumerable small and medium sized rivers are also causing havoc in the plains of Assam, i.e. the Brahmaputra Valley and the Barak Valley.

The flood of 2004 alone affected more than ten million people in Assam valley. Excepting two hill districts, all the districts of the plains of Assam experienced devastating flood and riverbank erosion. In an unprecedented flash flood in October of 2004, nearly one thousand people died in Goalpara district of Assam.

The government provided some relief to some of these flood-affected people, which was far from adequate. Besides flood, erosion has also created problem for the people of Assam. According an official report, the river Brahmaputra eroded 4, 29, 657 hectares of prime agricultural land. Roughly, 7% of the land in the plains has been eroded between 1951-2000. This has definitely displaced at least 3 million peasants. Today they constitute the most pauperised community in Assam's plains. In the absence of proper resettlement and rehabilitation policy, most of them have experienced multiple displacements.

United Nations Guiding Principles Relating to IDPs : Implementation in the North East India

The United Nations Guiding Principles on internally displaced Persons has given a framework for taking care and providing adequate protection of the displaced. These 30 principles cover all three phases of internal displacement – the pre-displacement, situation during displacement and the post displacement i.e. the return and resettlement of the displacees. However, it is very unfortunate that these principles are not implemented in India in general and Assam in particular. It seems the state too totally oblivious to the UN guiding principles on IDPs.

Principle 1 says that IDPs shall enjoy in full equality the same rights and freedoms under international and domestic law. But the IDPs living in the camps as well as outside the camps in the North East never enjoy the freedom as enjoyed by other citizens.

Principle 2 states that these principles shall be observed by all authorities, groups and persons irrespective of their legal status and applied without any adverse distinction. So, all the non-state actors and different groups are under obligation to follow/ obey it. However, these are not observed, rather violated very often in the North East India by different groups.

Principle 4 is very vital particularly to this region because it states that the IDPs should not face discrimination. It should be mentioned here that the displaced who mainly belong to the minority or backward groups often have to face discrimination in various respects in this part of the country.

Principles 6 and 7 have been grossly violated in the Northeast India time and again. This principle states that every human being have the right to be protected against being arbitrarily displaced from his/her home or place of habitual residence. Principle 7 states that it prohibits displacement unless the authority ensures the safety and security of the people to be displaced. Implementation of these principles will safeguard the people from development-induced displacement.

Observance of Principles 8 and 9 by the authority in the North East India would have led to the betterment of the condition of the displaced people. Principle 8

states that displacement shall not be carried out in a manner that violates the right to life, dignity, liberty and security of those affected, while principle 9 states that states are under obligation to protect against displacement of indigenous people, minorities, peasants etc. with a special dependency on and attachment to their lands. Contrary to this, in the North East India, most of the time, it is found that the displaced belong to the indigenous, minorities and peasant groups.

Again, principle 11 states that, the IDPs should be protected against rape, torture and other gender specific violence; slavery of any form and sexual exploitation. But the IDPs living in the camps are very often become the victims of these types of exploitation.

Principle 14 of the UN Guiding Principles mentions about the right of the IDPs to move freely and to choose his or her own residence. But it is difficult for the IDPs of the North East to enjoy these rights in and out of the camp. Besides, it is nearly impossible for them to choose their own place of residence.

Principle 17 emphasises on the integrity of the family of the displaced and reunion of the members of the family. This is of great significance to the IDPs of the North East where a large number of people are displaced by conflicts and in case of such displacement it is likely that the families will be disintegrated.

Principles 18-22 of the UN Guiding principle specifically deal with the basic needs of the IDPs, medical care and protection of the property. But the IDPs staying in the camps hardly receive all these facilities. Moreover, it is very difficult for them to get back their property.

Principle 23 speaks about right to education and states that special efforts should be made to ensure full and equal participation of women and girls in educational programmes. But the inmates of camps as well as those living outside hardly enjoy the right to education.

Principle 25 makes the national authority responsible for giving humanitarian assistance to the IDPs. Therefore, it has great significance as the displaced do not have to depend on the provincial authority for getting the assistance.

Principles 28, 29 and 30 specifically deal with the return, resettlement and reintegration of the displaced persons. It allows the internally displaced persons to return voluntarily, in safety and with dignity, to their homes or places of habitual residence or to other place. It also speaks about the full participation of the internally displaced persons in the planning and management of their own resettlement and rehabilitation.

Thus, the Guiding Principles emphasize on the individual's right to be protected against arbitrary displacement and providing basic facilities to the

displaced. Besides it also speaks about minimising the adverse affects of displacement. Implementation of these principles is the need of the hour to improve the conditions of the displaced, particularly in the North East.

Here it should be noted that in Assam, it is quite likely that one person may face different types of displacement during his lifetime. For example, a person displaced by flood or riverbank erosion may cross the boundary experience conflict-induced displacement in his/her new place of residence. Thus, displacement becomes a serialized and multiplied experience. All these have made it very difficult to correctly estimate the number of IDPs in the North East. Usually, the method of head counting of those people who take shelter in the relief camps is used to make an estimate of it. However, such method excludes the population who choose to migrate to the urban centres of the state in search of livelihood.

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Population Displacement in Manipur in the last 100 years

Pradip Phanjoubam

Any discussion on conflict-related displacements in Manipur will have to begin with a study of the larger political background that first of all introduced the conditions for these conflicts. The last 100 years have been particularly interesting in this regard. There have been other kinds of displacement of populations, especially related to development projects and in recent times, to economic factors, but the mandate of this paper is to focus on the conflict related category. The physical scars of conflicts are starkly evident if one were to consider the present political map of the northeast region as such. It is not too rare to hear of the narrow 22 km or so “chicken neck” corridor between Bangladesh and Bhutan that connects mainland India with the northeast, being used as an apt image to describe the alienation of the northeast from the so-called national mainstream. This 22 km of border is supposed to constitute only about two percent of the total boundary of the northeast. All of the rest of 98 percent are international borders, China and Bhutan in the north, Myanmar in the East, Bangladesh in the South and much of the West. The picture is unambiguous. It conveys an awesome sense of lack of contact, physical and spiritual, with sub-continental India.

Many have indeed argued powerfully how this physical condition portrays an inner psychological distance that is the destiny of the relationship of the northeast with the soul of India. From its lack of development to the numerous secessionist insurrections it is witnessing, have all been attributed in varying degrees to this distance. The only shortcoming of this perspective is, the question as to how much this chicken neck is a political one and not physical, has seldom followed as a natural interrogation. This is serious because the omission results in the obscuring of a historical fact that the chicken neck is a residual fallout of colonial politics and administration, rather than a given, natural, physical feature.

To be precise, how responsible is the Radcliffe Line, the boundary drawn by the British colonial administration before they departed from India in 1947, the culprit behind the “distance” between the northeast and rest of India? Did this boundary commission have to have the northeast connected to India by a chicken neck? If the Radcliffe Line did not make this chicken neck a chicken neck, would the alienation of the northeast that has almost become a cliché today, have been the same? Of course the chicken neck does expose another general mindset of the Indian leadership at the time the Radcliffe Line was drawn, and perhaps even today. They allowed the chicken neck to materialize, which it is doubtful they would have if any other part of the Indian heartland were to be thus isolated by an international political boundary. No war has been fought over the Radcliffe Line’s

chicken neck, but one was over another border demarcating the northeast – the McMahon Line.

Nothing as the northeast existed in pre-Independent India. It is, in every sense of the word a creation of the colonial politics and the confinement the region is subject to today is indeed a colonial confinement. Its map and regional identity are defined by colonial boundaries. In the south the Radcliffe Line, in the north by the McMahon Line and its eastern boundary was also very much a consequence of the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826, which too bears a colonial stamp.

Then there was also the British policy of Partially Excluded and Excluded Areas with regard to their frontier policies in the northeast. The logic behind these always had to do with protecting British commercial and strategic interests. Hence, it may be said that much of the British punitive expeditions into the Naga hills, most particularly the Angami territory, was to protect its tea gardens and Assam. No outsiders were allowed to enter the Excluded Areas, while outsiders could enter the Partially Excluded Areas with permits. After India's independence, these policies have their inheritors in the existing inner line permit system, applicable in Nagaland, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh, by which all, including Indian citizens are required to have special permit to enter these states, and the Protected Area Permit, PAP, applicable to Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram, whereby foreigners are restricted entry and have to pay a fee to enter these states.

These lines did much more to alter the face and psychology of the northeast. Ever since they came into existence, the sea suddenly became remote, the Barak Valley came to be undermined considerably politically and commercially, thriving border trades became stiflingly regulated or else condemned to slow strangulation etc. Without going into the rigmarole of the justness or otherwise of these lines, for indeed they are a reality today not to be undone, at least not easily, one simple question begs an answer. What was it like, or what must it have been like, before these lines were drawn, in the case of some of them, not much more than half a century ago?

The issue of migrations, and ethnic unrests must also take into consideration these factors for a fuller understanding. These questions are now beginning to be asked in so many other situations everywhere in the post-colonial world, and with astounding results. Economic and cultural zones that transcend but do not disturb national boundaries are emerging. The Greater Mekong Sub-region, GMS, the Association of South East Asian Nations, ASEAN, the much heard of Track-II "Kunming Initiative" which envisages to create the BCIM, Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar economic cooperation and connectivity, to name just a few. One way of attempting to answer the question as to what it must have been like before the national boundaries came up, could be to have a look at the unofficial relations that still exists despite the boundaries. The popular unofficial trade routes, or smuggling and gun running channels if you like, is one such.

Would making these routes official make a difference to the scenario and bring what is underground, overground, as much as make what is illegal, legal? The other approach would be to refer to the abiding memories of the time that still lingers on. Just as Cox Bazar and Mandalay are familiar names to unofficial traders, so are Dhaka and Chittagong to many first, second and even third generation, Western educated literati in places like Manipur. Sylhet too is fond memory for many in Manipur who still have distant relatives living there.

The legacies of these political developments are still very much visible in the northeast. Boundaries coming up in haste, where earlier there were none and at best were frontiers. This however does not mean there were no organized polities in the region and that these took birth as a consequence of colonial influence. I make this qualification for very often the “indigenous other” has been viewed by the colonial eyes as basically unaccountable or un-assessable in terms of modern values and understandings of political organizations. The vision determined by a mimicked “coloniality” persists even today, and the northeast often falls under this cloud. Hence many, even academics have tended to see the northeast as constitutive of places and peoples without history: A region whose dominant characteristics are ones of lawlessness, atavism, mindless and violent tribalism, etc. Things however are not so simple.

Defining the Other World

How do we imagine or define Manipur? The question is posed sometimes provocatively and at other times honestly, during seminars and symposiums outside the state of Manipur, as to what the nature of the presumably ancient Manipur is all about. How could it ever qualify to be a “nation” or even a polity before the modern times? Where are the proofs that the Kabaw Valley ever belonged to Manipur etc? We sense a similar flawed presumption of historical progression in these questions. Who says a nation has always to have hard boundaries with boundary pillars, fenced off by barbed wires, guarded zealously by professional soldiers etc. The pre-colonial world outside of Europe did not understand nations and territory this way. Rather than national boundaries, there would have been frontiers only. In the Hindu epic *Ramayana* there was a particular ceremony Rama performed to demarcate the domain of his kingdom, whereby he released a white stallion and let it run free. If anybody stood in the way of the free run of the horse, he would have to face the might of the king and if he managed to stop the king, that would be where the former’s kingdom was deemed to have ended. Such understandings would be more applicable to say, the contested ownership of the uninhabited Kabaw Valley of the time between the kingdoms of Ava and Manipur. For that matter the very frontiers of Ava or Manipur or other Southeast Asian kingdoms, and indeed the rest of the non-European world would have been determined by such principles. If a king stuck his flag on the bank of a certain river and nobody dared oppose him, that point would become the extent of his kingdom. These understandings cannot simply be forced into the nineteenth century European paradigm of nationhood.

The point is, not everything outside the so-called “civilized” world is “uncivilized.” This acknowledgement is absolutely essential in all our efforts to understand the northeast. The place is not ruled by inexplicable tribal feuds, mutually hostile bands of wild people, with customs and traditions beyond comprehensible and not worth attempting to understand. There is nothing so mysterious, wild or inaccessible about the ways of the northeast. It does not need to be tamed, but understood. If there are tensions between the Nagas and the Kukis, or between the Nagas and the Meiteis, it is not out of any instinctive tribal xenophobia or any basic bloodlust. There are objective reasons for all these frictions. Understanding these is the challenge before any peace arbitration effort.

Case Studies

Manipur is today an ethnic cauldron but one in which the different ethnic groups have not been able to evolve a common identity. Tensions between them have traditionally been determined by competition for the control of resources and land, but in recent times, it has been politics - which has given these tensions a new and dangerous dimension, altogether. Manipur’s geography was always embedded in the potential for a divided population, a condition - which is a reality today. This Northeastern state of 22,327 sq km constitutes 20,089 sq km mountainous terrain surrounding an oval shaped valley of 2,238 sq km in area located almost accurately in the middle of the state. It is only to be expected that the first major psychological division that the state is stymied by today, coincide with this topographical feature.

There is a paucity of scientific studies on the migration patterns in pre-historical as well as the proto-historical periods of this region, but it is generally believed that the hills were first populated, the valley being initially largely water-logged and marshy. Evidences of a water-logged past of the valley and the gradual drying process are to be seen even today in the continued shrinking and disappearances of many lakes and other forms of wetlands that dot it. The 200 sq km freshwater Loktak Lake is itself, according to experts, in danger of drying up, largely because of heavy silting caused by many rivers that empty into it from the surrounding mountains.

The Loktak serves as the reservoir of the waters from these rivers and the excess that it cannot hold is drained out of the state to flow into two major trans-national river systems. One of them is the Chindwin which joins the Irrawaddy at Kalewa in Myanmar. The other waterway is an artificial tunnel dug through the hills that flank the Imphal valley in the west, to power a hydro electric power generation project, which ultimately flows into the Barak River which meanders through the Barak valley in Assam onto the adjacent Surma valley in Bangladesh and meets the sea at the Bay of Bengal.

Mythologies of the various ethnic groups living both in the hills as well as the valley somewhat coincide on the belief of migration of population from the hills to settle in the valley. The most popular and touching of these tells of two brothers in their mountain home parting ways. The elder decides to remain in the security of their established home, while the younger and more adventurous opts to look for his fortune in the valley below. The younger valley dweller later came to be the Meiteis and elder who stayed behind are the hill tribes, in later years the Nagas, and Kukis (Naga and Kuki are recent nomenclatures, each tribe was then known by its individual tribe names only).

It is not difficult to imagine that the Meiteis discovered what a blessing the fertile, well-irrigated, alluvial river valley proved to be for a farming community. They would have progressively grown more prosperous, opening up an economic gap with their brothers in the hills, thus setting the roots of all the complicated problems of disparity and inequity. This divide was to continually widen in the years ahead, and indeed one of the most daunting challenges before the Manipur administration today is to bridge this hill-valley chasm, and since the hills and valley dwellers have come to acquire different ethnic identities, an ethnic problem as well along this divide. (Pradip Phanjoubam, 'Fractured Land' in Geeti Sen (ed.), *Where the Sun Shines and the Shadows Fall*, New Delhi: OUP 2006).

Manipur has seen four major ethnic feuds in the recent decades.

- 1990s: Kuki-Naga clashes:
- 1993: Meitei-Pangal clashes:
- 1997: Kuki-Paite clashes:
- 2001: NSCN(IM) ceasefire extension troubles
- 2006: Hmar displacement because of underground clashes and harassment

“The Mother of all Insurgencies”

It is amazing how an iconic image can influence decisions not just at the individual level, but at community and governmental levels. The advertising world will know better of this power, and indeed they recommend pumping in billions of dollars to the effort of creating such images for the products they sponsor. The makers of these products too willingly spend these astronomical sums, obviously realizing the wonders that these images can do their businesses. Indeed much of the world of advertising is about promoting an illusory world of these iconic images to whet the worldly appetites of consumers and make them simply continue buying compulsively. And it succeeds, that is why the phenomenon has not only remained but also grown.

But the iconic image business is not always a success especially when it strays out of the confines of the consumer market. In politics especially it has proven to be a flop far too often. We have a very immediate example in the

northeast to demonstrate this. The current philosophy of the counter insurgency policy of the Government of India for instance is built on a single, widely circulated iconic idea: “The Mother of All Insurgencies”. Anybody who has been following the affairs of the region close enough will understand who this supposed “mother” is, although many of the numerous insurgencies will disagree if at all they consider this so called “mother” as their “mother”. It is uncertain where the idea may have had its genesis, but probably it was a phrase coined by some journalist struck by a flash of bright idea to colour up his copy of the day. The image however has struck a chord in popular imagination and has been somewhat immortalized. As we have said, without doubt, it has also influenced profoundly, government policies on insurgency. The understandable approach has been to tackle the mother in the hope all its supposed offspring will come under control. We also know today how badly this approach has misfired. At this moment, it is practically impossible to say which is the mother and which the child in the complex matrix of northeast insurgencies. Considering the endless complications the approach has led to, all concern would have also realized by now that tackling the “mother” is hardly the key to a final answer to insurgency in the region.

The decade of 1990s in Manipur was very interesting in this regard. The chain reaction in the multiplication of insurgencies amongst the Kukis, to say the least, was phenomenal. It began with the Naga-Kuki clashes that left over a thousand dead and many more destituted and homeless. Unlike the Nagas, who had 50 years of militancy behind them, insurgency amongst the Kukis at the time was nascent and marginal, and if it did have a cognizable presence, it was the Kuki National Army (KNA) in the Moreh area but mostly along the Burmese side of the international border. But the clashes, in which the Kukis bore the major brunt, exposed the Kuki community’s vulnerability and it was this insecurity that became the fertile ground for the spawning of various armed militias amongst the community. This process was catalysed by the virtual absence of any effective state intervention, or its impotence in instilling any sense of confidence amongst the victimized community. If this was the reason for the sudden growth of Kuki militancy in the mid-1990s, this phenomenon in turn left other smaller kin communities of the Kukis insecure. To resist Kuki hegemony, they began making friends with the adversaries of the Kukis, angering the latter. The bloody fratricidal Kuki-Paite clashes in Churachandpur district even as the Kuki-Naga feuds subsided will have to be explained as a part of this vicious chain. Each link of this chain has also now become a separate reality not to be taken for granted at all. But this is just one chain to demonstrate how such a chain works. There are plenty more. The interesting thing is, once formed, no part of a chain is the “mother” to the other parts anymore and they become all the same. There is also no other way than to treat the whole chain as one entity. In the insurgency scenario in Manipur today for instance, it would be unrealistic to have cessation of hostility with one group and expect peace to set in, just as it would be equally unrealistic to ask only one group to disarm while the rest remain armed.

Kuki Naga Conflict

One of the major ethnic clashes in recent times has been undoubtedly the one between the Nagas and Kukis that turned the hills of Manipur red during much of the early and middle parts of the 1990s. In the early 1990s, tension between the Nagas and Kukis reached a flashpoint with the United Naga Council serving a quit notice to the Kukis settled in "Naga areas" in 1992. Manipur has nine districts, four in the valley, dominated by the Meiteis and five in the hills, four of which are dominated by the Nagas. The Kukis and other kin tribes dominate in one. The Nagas consider much of the Manipur hills as their traditional homeland and that the Kukis living in these districts were in a way their tenants, hence the UNC quit notice. Persecution of the Kukis began thereafter but it was only in 1993 that the feud broke out in the open. The Kukis being largely migratory, were scattered and were hence much more vulnerable. Moreover the Kukis at the time did not have any well organized militia of their own whereas the Nagas did, having run an insurgency for over 50 years then. The results were predictable but the Kukis were the main victims, although in the years to follow, the Kukis too became more organized, and did hit back - causing casualties amongst Naga villagers too.

The Kuki-Naga feud has now concluded, but the bitterness remains. There has been a multiplication of militant organizations amongst the Kukis since. Amongst these are the Kuki National Front (KNF) and its factions, Kuki National Army (KNA), kuki Liberation Army (KLA), kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA) etc.

It also caused the largest single displacement of population in recent times. Constituency profiles have virtually altered in many cases because of the ethnic cleansing. While some villages have disappeared new ones have come up. The ethnic divide between the two groups of tribal population have also become virtually water-tight with even government servants from either communities remaining away from areas dominated by the rival tribes. Without doubt again, this is the conflict that resulted in the most of displacements. In the other conflicts, if there have been displacements, they were temporary. After the condition of feuding concluded, most of the displaced returned back to their original homes. In the case of the aftermath of the Kuki-Naga feud however, there were huge population shifts. Many villages were uprooted for good while new ones came up in different districts. A good many of them too joined the (urban migration basically to Imphal) to eke out a living, often not in legally permitted ways.

Police Annual Report 1997-98

Ethnic clashes between the Nagas and the Kukis

"The clashes between the kuki and Naga tribes which started in June 1992 when a Kuki youth was kidnapped at Moreh Bazar by suspected Naga extremists and was later found dead in a nearby jungle, continued unabated in 1993 1994 and 1995.

Since then there has been a downward trend although sporadic incidents take place every now and then.

“The Naga kuki clash was (sic) first started in the hill areas of state in the middle of the 1992. The starting point being from the brother town of Moreh. In Manipur mass scale forced displacement and migration of small villages to their safer and nearer to the larger groups of major community which they claimed to belong to started in these years.”

Table 1: Year wise No. Of Houses Displaced

Year	Tribe	Killed	Injured	Displaced
1992	Kuki	11	22	Nil
-do-	Naga	02	26	11
1993	Kuki	261	68	2144
-do-	Naga	60	72	1365
1994	Kuki	95	49	262
-do-	Naga	67	28	425
1995	Kuki	65	39	404
-do-	Naga	44	43	653
1996	Kuki	32	18	61
-do-	Naga	21	15	127
1997	Kuki	54	47	212
-do-	Naga	38	24	33
1998	Kuki	16	11	27
-do-	Naga	25	13	Nil
1999	Kuki	Nil	3	Nil
-do-	Naga	9	2	Nil

Source: Manipur Police

Sadar Hills Litmus

The little news item some days ago about a certain organisation demanding that the creation of the Sadar Hills administrative district must precede any move to implement the Sixth Schedule provisions in the state is a matter that must not be taken lightly. The first time the Sixth Schedule came very close to being implemented, if we remember correctly, during Prof. Meijinlung Kamei's stint as a Union minister of state for home affairs in the mid 1990s, among the foremost stumbling blocks the move encountered was the Sadar Hills lobby. The issue continued to be a virtual nemesis of the Sixth Schedule in the days that have followed since. As many commentators have pointed out, we too tend to agree that the opposition to the Sixth Schedule in the hills from the valley would not have been as vehement as it is now, 5 years ago, and perhaps it will not be so again 5 years or less hence. The picture of a possible vivisection of Manipur thrown up by the

developments that culminated in the June 18, 2001, explosion of public sentiment, has come to be the dividing line. Rightly or wrongly, there is a strong apprehension that the schedule is a first step, and an indirect route to breaking up of Manipur. We are not so much concerned about the veracity of this logic, but the important thing is, the apprehension this has created is very real and strong, and as long as the perceived threat to the territorial integrity of Manipur remains, it is also unlikely to go away at anybody's wish or curse.

We are not interested in campaigning for any side of the argument, but we are definitely interested in a settlement of the issue, and for that matter all other issues of public importance, amicably. This can happen only if all concerned parties try to understand each other's aspirations as well as apprehensions honestly. It is here that we feel that the Sadar Hills issue can be the litmus test for the honesty of purpose of those demanding the implementation of the schedule, as well as those opposing it. When Prof. Meijinlung made the proposal for creating Autonomous District Councils, ADC, under the Sixth Schedule in the state, for reasons that proved quite controversial and also fuel for suspicion, he advocated the creation of either two, three or five ADCs. In the two ADC option, there would be the traditional Naga districts in one and the non-Naga district, namely Churachandpur in another. In the three ADC combinations, Ukhrul and Chandel would form one ADC, Senapati and Tamenlong another and Churachandpur the third. In the five ADC combinations, the existing five hill districts would each be an ADC. Sadar Hills was never in the picture as a separate entity, and the boundaries of these ADCs always had an ethnic colour, separating the Nagas from the Kukis. It may very well be that there was very neutral and motive-free logic behind these proposals, but the fact is they fed not so innocent speculations, not just among those in the valley, but also amongst other non-Naga population, being as it was in the wake of the bitter Kuki-Naga riots in the hill districts.

Assuming that there were no motives behind these proposals, let us test the same waters again by making a different set of proposals. What if we have six ADCs, with Sadar Hills included over and above the five existing hill districts. Or what if we have seven or eight or 10 ADCs, with the ADC boundaries drawn purely on considerations of administrative convenience, such as general accessibility, population, resources etc, as is generally the case in the case of Panchayati Raj institutions in the valley districts. It will be interesting to note who protests against such a proposal and for what. If the valley still protests to such a proposal, our conclusion would most likely be that the hill public were always correct – the valley population do not want the fruits of development and administration to reach their brethren in the hills. If on the other hand the hill public, more particularly the Naga population protest, then we would most likely conclude that the wide apprehension in the valley that the Sixth Schedule demand is rife with less apparent agendas, was not altogether baseless after all.

Nations within Nations

Observers from outside the northeast, including journalists who are not too familiar with the northeast, are often awestruck by the complexity of the nationality question in Manipur. Often, the reason they had been given northeast assignments, in the first place, is that they have had the experience of covering Kashmir and hence presumed that it would not be difficult for them to get at the roots of the conflicts in the northeast.

To their utter dismay, they discover that although the conflict in Kashmir is much more intense, they need only to understand certain direct equations between state and non-state power players. Not so in the northeast. The vogue has always been to talk of a dominant national current so that it is relatively easy to identify the undercurrents that run counter to it. Hence, the “mainstream” and the “sub-stream” become distinct and non-confusing. The northeast ethnic cauldron defies such simple equations. There is the Indian “mainstreams” and there are not just “sub-streams” that run counter to it, but also “sub-streams” of the “sub-streams” and so on and so forth, in a progression that can extend right down to the village community.

Often they come to Imphal in the hope of studying what they believed was Manipur’s problem with the Indian Union. In Imphal they do get the impression of such an antagonism, hearing of complaints against Central acts such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, AFSPA. They gathered information about Manorama and Sharmila, of the two Nupi Lals against the colonial state etc. Soon enough they get the feel of the hill-valley divide, after all, local newspapers screamed daily of the verbal duels in the regard. In 2005 July there were two simultaneous bandhs, one by the All Naga Students’ Association Manipur, ANSAM, and the other by the Sadar Hills District Demand Committee, SHDDC, both along the National Highway-39. Journalists who had come to Manipur at the time thought the two added up to the same hill-valley divide equation and decided that a trip to Senapati, the hub of the ANSAM’s activities, would further clear up their understanding of the issues involved. Sure enough, at Senapati they heard angry voices against how the Nagas had been suppressed by the Meiteis of the valley; how the latter had forced their language and script to them; how developmental funds meant for the hill districts were being routinely diverted to the valley; how the Meiteis were standing in the way of the Naga aspiration for a unified, sovereign Nagalim etc.

All this would have been well, but for what the journalists heard from the agitators along their way to Senapati from Imphal. They discovered all too soon that the ANSAM blockade and the SHDDC bandh were about similar issues but not the same. If Senapati district wanted to break away from Manipur on the plea of unfair deals to them by the Manipur government, Sadar Hills wanted to be separated from Senapati on the charge that the district was doing to them what Imphal is deemed to

be doing to Senapati. On a larger plane, Manipur is pointing similar accusative fingers at the Union Government.

1993 Meitei-Pangal Clashes

On May 3, 1993, an aberration in the history of ethnic relations between the Meiteis and the Meitei Pangals (Manipuri Muslims) happened, surprising everybody. In all 97 Muslims were killed and several of their settlements burnt down. Only two Meiteis were casualties. Fortunately the trouble did not last long, nor the bitterness remained. Displacement was virtually nil and a commission is today looking into the matter of resettlement. The riots lasted basically for two days and were completely controlled in a week's time. One of the consequences of the clash however was the emergence of two militant organisations amongst the Muslim population the NEMF and the more dominant PULF.

The feud, provoked by a hitherto unheard of militant group called People's Revolutionary Army, PRA, left 102 Muslims dead and 3 Meiteis killed. It also left many Muslim villages burned down. All of these villages have since been resurrected and returned to their original inhabitants.

Ethnic clashes between the Kukis and the Paites

The Kukis and Paites are kin tribes. In fact, till about a decade ago, they were all known collectively by a generic nomenclature of Khongsais by the valley dwelling Meiteis. (Yambem Laba, "Cant See Guitars for Guns", mimeo):

Small tribes, like the Paite, Vaiphei, Simte, etc. had been remaining aloof from all armed movements but with the rise of Kuki militancy after the Kuki-Naga clashes, started feeling insecure and unprotected. They also feared surrender of their identity to the dominant Kukis and decided to form their own armed organization called Zomi Reunification Organisation (ZRO) with its armed military wing Zomi Revolution Army (ZRA) on May 7, 1993 under the leadership of one Khaizang Guite at Phapjan Chin state, Myanmar. Later on 2-9-95, the leaders of Paite, Simte, Vaiphei and Tadim Chin along with the ZRO/ZRA leaders took a formal customary oath affirming their unity and solidarity. (Police report)

As a direct consequence between the Kukis and Nagas, militant organisations of both the tribal groups began wooing the Zomis and because of their perceived threat of losing their identity to the Kukis, the latter began showing inclination to align with the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM). The Kukis too started suspecting the Zomis of having nexus with the Nagas and charged them for giving shelter to the Naga militants with the alleged intention to wipe out all the Kukis from Churachandpur district, the territory traditionally shared by the Kukis and the Paites.

With the intention to check this alleged activities of the ZRO/ZRA, KNF activist attacked the Saikul Paite village under Churachandpur district on June 24, 1997 in which six villagers were killed and 6 other villagers injured, One more succumbed to his injuries at the District hospital the next day. A series of clashes between the Kuki and the Paites at different villages in Churachandpur district resulted.

Table 2: Kuki-Paite Ethnic Clashes in 1997 (between 24-06-97 and 31-12-97)

Sl NO.	Name of Tribe	Killed	Injured	Kidnapped	Houses burnt
1	Kuki	42	19	7	1536/1565
2	Paite	1	54	47	1342
3	Vaiphei	9	3	3	493
4	Zou	7	3	4	35
5	Simte	9	10	3	84
6	Mizo	1	Nil	Nil	Nil
7	Chin (Closed to Paite)	2	Nil	Nil	Nil
8	Kom	Nil	Nil	1	2
9	Hmar	Nil	Nil	3	Nil
10	Meetei	Nil	2	1	Nil
11	Non-local	1	Nil	1	Nil
Total		162	93	71	3521

“Besides the above figures, many Government quarters, Schools, Churches, Community Halls were also set ablaze and many houses damaged during the period in the ethnic clashes.” (source Manipur Police)

Interestingly however, it was the accord that ended the feud on October 1, 1998, which spoke eloquently of the causes of the feud between the kin tribes, speaking virtually the same language, following virtually the same customs, and celebrating virtually the same festivals.

The Three main Clauses of the Accord

1. The nomenclatures of both Kuki and Zomi shall be mutually respected.
2. Surrender all forcibly occupied houses of either of the former warring groups
3. Militant groups of either side would indulge in collection of taxes from members of the other communities, be they government officials, contractors or businessmen

2001 NSCN (IM) Ceasefire Extension Troubles: Land, homeland, Insurgency etc.

In 2001 June 14, the Government of India and the Naga militant group NSCN (IM) reached an understanding whereby the ceasefire agreement the two parties had agreed upon in 1997 would be extended “without territorial limits”. This implied the ceasefire between the NSCN (IM) and the GOI would come into effect in Manipur territory. A huge agitation erupted in the state, particularly in the Imphal valley climaxing on June 18 when agitators burned down the Manipur State Legislative Assembly and many official quarters of legislators protesting against the decision. The contention was that the agreement implied an acknowledgement of Greater Nagaland and thus the disintegration of the historical state of Manipur. In the agitation 18 people lost their lives to bullets of security personnel in charge of the VIPs, and even after this, when there were no signs of the agitation subsiding, the GOI withdrew the clause of the ceasefire extension that said “without territorial limits”. The agitation cooled gradually after that.

The pitch of the agitation was such that many Naga residents in Imphal Valley fled to the hills although in a phenomenon that surprised even the die-hard pessimists, not a single Naga resident or their properties were harmed during the agitation. The number of people who fled contrasts greatly between what Naga NGOs projected (close to 40,000) and the government’s figure which put it at about 3000 during the heat of the agitation. The government also claims that all but a few have returned.

2006 Hmar Displacement

Meitei militants have been using the remote Tipaimukh subdivision as a stronghold for a long time, but especially after they were flushed out of the Sajik Tampak area of Chandel district, close to the Myanmar border. They were then allies of the Hmar militant group Hmar People’s Convention or HPC. But towards the middle of 1995 they fell out and as did many other Kuki militant groups at the time, entered into a clandestine accord with the Army. The Army crackdown began on the Meitei insurgent groups thereafter and the bitterness between these militants and the HPC grew. Harassment of Hmar villagers which were considered sympathetic to the HPC by the former intensified until it overflowed on January 16, 2006, when a group of 18 militants, six belonging to the United National Liberation Front or UNLF and 12 to the Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP) arrived in the dead of the night at Lungthulien, and after calling out and beating up brutally more than 400 villagers, allegedly raped 21 girls. The allegation of rape was however denied by the accused although they admitted to beating up villagers who they thought were sympathetic to the HPC. The matter is now being probed by a Judicial Commission.

More than 800 Hmar villagers fled their villages and took shelter in neighbouring Mizoram in makeshift refugee camps. 685 of the Hmar villagers have

since returned to their homes as on October 24, 2006 (IFP report quoting official sources) from the Sakawrdai refugee camp in neighbouring Mizoram. These are from 155 families. Each of the families was given Rs.5000 to reestablish itself. Of the 685, 459 were adults and 226 minors. They belonged to Lungthulien, Tuilbung, Parbung, Phulpi, Moulien, Damdei, Taiithu and Rovkot.

Second World War: Indians turned out of Burma: M. K. Binodini's Account

Another cataclysmic event in the last century that visited Manipur and Nagaland was the World War II. The Japanese after virtually taking over Burma from the British began their push towards Delhi along with the Indian National Army, INA of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. The battles fought in the two states were some of the most bitter, according to Field Marshal Sir William Slim in his book *Defeat Into Victory*, but were not given their due because of the North Africa campaigns at about the same time which were thought to be more immediately threatening to Europe. There were 65,000 soldiers who died in these battles, 45,000 of them Japanese.

But Japan's initial victory in Burma had another consequence. The Burmese took the opportunity of the administrative chaos to launch xenophobic campaigns against its citizens of Indian origin who left their homes in hordes and walked with the retreating British forces towards India. They arrived in Imphal and went on to Dimapur railhead. Many of them settled in the two states. The conditions in which they arrived in Manipur is described in the account of a lady whose husband was a doctor at the time, as told to noted writer M. K. Binodini and translated from Manipur by the author:

"We came to learn of the imminence of the war reaching Manipur months before it actually broke out. There were plenty of rumours, some plausible, others wild. One of them said if the Japanese took Singapore, they would arrive in Manipur before your day's laundries dried.

"Prophesies from the purans (Meitei ancient books of prophesies) began floating freely, with nobody actually knowing how they originated. The one that caught the people's paranoid imagination most was that the flight of 18 white egrets across the Manipur sky would signal the beginning of the war. When the phenomenon was sighted the advice was to flee and take shelter at places with names beginning with the consonant 'K'. Everybody watched the skies day after day for the white birds with anxious expectation and apprehension. My son Jotin, the eldest of 11 siblings was 11 years old at the time.

"The Allied troops began arriving into Manipur in endless convoys. Soldiers of different colours and built that we have never seen before, huge armoured military vehicles, tanks and anti-aircraft battery began filling up our roads. It all made up for a very awesome and intimidating picture.

“The war time administration then began bombarding the place with pamphlets, instructing the civil population of the dos and don’ts during the war. One of the many advices was to dig trenches to hide during bombing raids. Trainings were also imparted on these precautionary measures. Amidst the growing nervous tension, we continued to watch the skies for the 18 egrets in flight.

“My husband was then posted at Thoubal. He left me and the children in the relative safety of Lilong but he became so busy those days that he was unable to visit us for extended periods. It was a time when refugees of Indian origin began pouring into Manipur from Burma. Many of them, especially women and children, were sick and on the verge of death from starvation and fatigue. He was busy attending them.

“One day he showed up at our residence at Lilong briefly. He seemed depressed. He told us the story of a refugee then on his last leg, brought to him for treatment. The unfortunate man had been suffering from cholera for some time during the trek to India. My husband treated him but was too late to rescue the dying man. On his deathbed, the man presented my husband a tin box which he had lugged all the way from Burma and said it contained money, weeping that he was to die without seeing his family. My husband said he took the box and although the dead man had gifted it to him handed it over to the British wartime authorities, telling them to do what they thought was the needful.

“My husband was honest to a fault and had no particular cravings for unearned money. His story however made us all grieve for the dead man.

(Did the white egrets appear? I interrupted impatiently at this point).

“Yes, yes! They did come flying. But they were not the birds that we were expecting. Instead, they were white airplanes. The first time they came they did not unleash their loads of fire and brimstone. As per instructions we ran and jumped into our trenches but the planes simply turned and flew away. The first day gave us a very wrong impression of the war. We could not figure out why the White men were so fussy about airplanes and the trench routine.

“A few days latter, on May 10, the airplanes returned and shocked us all out of our complacency, pouring on us bombs that exploded like unending thunder claps. Many said there were 18 of them. So perhaps the puran prophesy did come true.

“It rained bombs continuously from then on for a long time. A lot of familiar landmarks were flattened. A refugee camp too took a load and many unfortunate souls were killed. The spectacle of terror was simply beyond words.

“One day my husband turned up at our residence again very briefly. He said he had been transferred to Churachandpur and would be proceeding there immediately. He asked us to stay on at Lilong until the fighting lightened and

then to try to make it to Moirang. He had asked Uncle Nongthonba in Moirang to help make it possible.”

The battles of the WW-II in Imphal also caused a lot of local displacements, but after the war, all returned to their homes to reclaim them.

Reassessing Identity

Considering all of the most bitter conflicts and conflict related displacements were on account of ethnic identity assertion, and also the fact that much of these issues seem to be headed towards a dead end, there is a crying need in the state today for all to discard yesterday's slogans in facing today's challenges.

Ideally, the defining parameters of nationhood, as well as the identity of its citizens should be constitutional, which presumably is the summary of the experience through history, as well as the vision of the future of the nation and its people. Such a constitution must however not be a monolith, to be revered as a sacred and irrefutable with no scope ever of adapting to the changing times and needs.

The proposition is important in the present context of Manipur and the also the nation. In Manipur the question is relevant because of the upsurge of ethnic nationalisms and the consequent conflict situations, and in the country as a whole, because of the upswing of the rightist philosophy of cultural and religious nationalism. Both in their distinct ways undermine the constitution. An article by Amit Choudhury in *Outlook* raises an interesting point. He talked of his experience during his decade long stay in the United Kingdom before moving on to the United States. A decade or two ago, he was of the opinion that United Kingdom was one of the most racial and intolerant countries in the Western world. Today, despite the strong residue of racism still prevalent, the country has more or less come to terms with the problem, and consequently is one of the most ethnically diverse countries. His analysis of what happened is most interesting. He says it was not on account of a voluntary change of attitude on the part of the racists amongst the Whites Britons, but the aggressive and pro-active posture of the children of the Asian and other immigrant populations on their political status and citizenship that ushered in the change. To the abuse “go home”, the answer became “this is home,” not said merely to sting back, but out of a conviction that England was indeed their home, and that they as citizens have a right to claim every guarantee under the British constitution. Choudhury's was a reflection on the plight of the Muslims in India, and how they should abandon the hysterical attitude of the cornered, recoiling in the process deeper and deeper into their shells, and instead go out and claim their place in the nation to the extent that the nation's constitution guarantees every one of its citizens.

In the secular, democratic, republic that the Indian constitution defines India to be, all citizens are citizens as per its definition of citizenship, and all of them are equal. Any violation of this guarantee, by anybody, regardless of religion, caste or

creed; regardless of who is in power in the government; regardless of any attempt, popular or otherwise, to give nationalism a cultural twist, it will remain a crime.

In Manipur's context too, this argument is, we are of the opinion, extremely relevant particularly in any consideration of the people of Manipur's relations with the larger Indian polity, as much as in the settling of the often conflicting inter ethnic relationship in the complex maze of ethnic interests the state has necessarily to negotiate. Perhaps the proactive posture would be to say that like religion, ethnic identity consciousness must remain a private affair, while politics and law must be deciding factors of public life. The different communities and ethnic groups must by all means be encouraged to retain their ethnicity, for this identity is in their instinct, but when it comes to governance and rights, it must be decided by a common denominator – a general law drawn up with the constitutional philosophy as guideline.

Alien Problem

The issue of illegal immigration from Bangladesh and the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunal) Act 1983, in force in Assam legislated basically to deal with the issue has always been a problem area. Many want the Act repealed to be replaced by the Foreigners Act 1946. The IMDT Act 1983, make it mandatory for complaints to be lodged of the presence of foreigners with the tribunal and then places the onus of proving the alien status of the subject or subjects of the complaint, on the shoulders of the complainant or complainants. This has meant virtually no official identification of foreigners much less deportation, long after the agitation in Assam and some other northeastern states, two decades ago. The Foreigners Act, repealed just about a year ago, on the other hand reverses the procedure and makes the onus of proof of citizenship on the accused.

Legality apart, the issue is extremely sensitive. The six year long anti-foreigners agitation in Assam, spearheaded by the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and the profiles of its opposition and support bases should testify this. The then chief minister of Assam, the late Hiteswar Saikia, of the Congress (I) and the late Sanjay Gandhi, had openly confronted the agitating students then, as well as much after the agitation wound up after the signing of Assam Accord of 1986. Saikia's logic – that of the electoral benefits he stood to reap by patronising the immigrants – was no secret. At one point he had even declared there are no illegal immigrants at all in Assam. But vote bank politics notwithstanding, there is more to the matter than meets the eye.

In the present anti foreigners upsurge for instance, there is a religious tinge to the whole issue and perhaps inevitably so. The campaign makes a clear distinction between Hindu "refugees" and Muslim "illegal immigrants." The former category hence gains domicile legitimacy before the law, the country's as well as international, while the latter is devoid of it altogether. The question then is no

longer a question of fixing a cut off date for identification as illegal immigrants to be deported or disenfranchised, as was the demand of the AASU in the 1980s, but of fixing a cut off date and then specifying a screening process solely on the basis of religion. The understanding seems to be, Hindu refugees were forced out of Bangladesh because of state persecution, while Muslim immigrants had come across the border in search of greener economic pastures. This later aspect of the problem, even if it is based on facts, is bound to create a lot of extra bitterness.

But this is not all. There is a subtle interplay of contradicting nationalisms. The present xenophobia in a larger part of the northeast is based less on religious nationalism, and more on linguistic and ethnic nationalisms. At the time of Partition, Assamese linguistic nationalism that feared numerical domination by Bengalis in their own state had led to the gifting away of Hindu majority district of Sylhet to the then East Pakistan. Likewise, it must be noted carefully that the reports of work permits in Nagaland are not to Bangladeshi immigrants alone, but to non-Naga, Indian nationals as well.

Politics of Recognition

In the illegal migration question the basic concern was of the number game of democracy. The more your number the more voice and power you are entitled in the policy making process of the state. But there is another competing interest that has developed in multi-ethnic small states like Manipur. The competition is for recognition under the constitution of India as an independent tribe so as to reap the benefits of the policy of positive discrimination under it. In a span of 20 years, the number of scheduled tribe communities in Manipur has increased from 26 to 29. The incentive structuring in the India system is such that it has encouraged communities to be labelled “backward” or “tribal”. Unwittingly perhaps, it has also been an instrument for division. As for instance, there was once a time most of the southern tribes of Manipur came under the nomenclature of Kuki. Today the Kuki family has splintered. In fact, the Kukis and Paites have fought a fratricidal war already in 1997.

To be acknowledged as an independent community however, a certain number is essential. Hence, especially in recent times, population census exercises have become sensitive and far too often controversial. The latest 2001 census, in particular in Manipur nearly came to blows with extraordinarily abnormal growths recorded in two hill districts. But demography changes have other larger implications. They also must reflect in the constituency delimitation, and in a state like Manipur where there are reserved seats for tribals and general seats, it becomes problematic when tribal constituencies expand. For one thing it results in the disenfranchisement of general voters who get incorporated in the reserved constituencies.

2001 census will indeed go down as another Pandora's box in the state's endless list of such boxes full of troubles. The issue is, how has population grown so haphazardly, with significant to extraordinary rises in some districts, and stagnation or drops in others. If the growth in population is by the natural laws of biological reproduction, the disparity in the growth pattern does seem a little discordant. Normally, it should have been the valley areas where income avenues are far more in abundance, which should have been at the top of the growth chart. But since this is not so, there must be other factors involved. We can think of two. One, it can be by migration from outside the state, or else by population shifts within the state. Two, it can be by a grossly faulty, dishonest and incompetent census enumeration process. Without making any presumptions on which of these factors is responsible for the present growth imbalance, the responsibility before the state authorities is to establish the truth of the matter before blocking or acting on the proposal for constituencies realignment.

The census report itself should also be able to provide some vital clues. We are sure it has break-ups of the population constituents. If the increases in some of the districts have been because of adult population rise, it would be obvious the second of the two reasons cited would be responsible. Conversely, if the increase is of children under 10 years of age, (the period between the 1991 and 2001 population censuses) the safe assumption would be that the increase is very much by natural population proliferation. Since the increase is also in the number of people of voting age, another way of screening the truth can be by comparing the 1991 census figures with those of the 2001.

It should not be difficult to determine whether the number of minors in the 1991 census who would have attained voting age in 10 years, tallies with the increase in the number of persons of voting age recorded in the 2001 census. If it does, then it is a natural growth and if not, there are extraneous factors that have influenced or manipulated the census records. If the increase is natural, then nobody must stand in the way of the proposed delimitation. Representation in the state Assembly must be by the democratic norm of population proportions. If the case is of an unnatural growth in population, then the matter gets more complicated.

One, if the discrepancies indicate a faulty census enumeration, delimitation must not be allowed. Two, if the increase is by migration or population shifts, the issue must be whether the incremental population constitutes of tribal or non-tribal population, and consequently, whether the new constituencies, if at all, should fall in the reserved or non-reserved categories. While proportional representation is sacrosanct, disenfranchisement by unconsidered reservations can be a gross violation of human rights too. It does seem that the matter needs a lot closer scrutiny and there is no time for the government to drag its feet. On the other hand, if the census enumerations are found to be either dishonest or incompetent, those responsible for committing the blunders in the preparation of a vital document of national and international significance should not go unpunished.

Delimitation Cautions

In Nagaland the problem is similar. The vehement protest from practically every section of the Naga population in Nagaland over the proposal for a delimitation of constituencies in the state, should give some pointer to the kind of opposition the same proposal may face in Manipur. In Nagaland, the issue among others was the question of an explosion of population in and around the Dimapur area of the Kohima district on account of sizeable labour immigration. In Manipur similar problems will be faced particularly in the Senapati district, and in fact may even be more compounded, considering there have been considerable population shifts in the wake of the ethnic turmoil in the state, most notably the Kuki-Naga feud of the early and mid 1990s. Realignment of constituencies, if deemed essential by the population norm, must be done, but keeping in mind the whole exercise can easily be reduced to skating on thin ice. For one, the delimitation must not be a cause for fresh ethnic strife. Any move to profile freshly created Assembly constituencies on ethnic lines, must be avoided and the population norm must be strictly adhered to. However, since there are two clear-cut officially sanctioned difference between constituencies in the state, one reserved for scheduled tribes and the other open, care must be taken so as not to disenfranchise non tribal population by reserving constituencies with sizeable non-tribal population. The state already has a big problem with regard to seven Assembly segments of the Outer Manipur Parliamentary seat, in the Thoubal districts. It also needs to be studied carefully whether the disproportionate jump in the population figure of the Senapati district and to a lesser extent in the Chandel district, is because of the Malthusian phenomenon or else by immigration, with two objectives in mind. If there are illegal immigrants, they must not be listed as voters, and if there are legal non-tribal immigrants like the Nepalis, they cannot be disenfranchised. Then again, it also needs to be established if the population shifts the state witnessed, especially during the agitation against the territorial extension of the NSCN (IM)-Government of India ceasefire, are permanent.

The other problem that the delimitation exercise must seek to rectify is to empower marginal communities buried within constituencies dominated by bigger communities. We can think of the Koms, Koirengs, Purums, Moyons, Monsangs, Lamkang, Kharams, Gangtes, Simtes and a number of others, among whom we know there are enough capable leaders, but because of their number, they have little hope of ever sending up a direct representative to the Assembly. They must be empowered indirectly by constituency structuring wherever possible. As for instance, even if no Kom can hope to be an MLA, the Kom community must be made to command a lobby within the constituency or constituencies they fall in, so that no MLA can ignore their interest. In ethnically diverse and deeply riven society as Manipur, we do not see the delimitation proposal as a simple process. In fact, if not handled sensitively and with tact, the men in charge of this onerous mission, may end up opening yet another Pandora's box, plunging the state deeper into crisis. Or else committing immense injustice.