

The **guns** are yet to fall silent in the North-east but in places where **development** has made an inroad, **peace has prevailed**. Only by **bringing all stakeholders** on board can the government hope to **end the region's alienation**.



CHAITANYA
KALBAG @1978

"... we have no social affinities with the Hindus or Mussalmans. We are looked down upon by the one for our 'beef' and the other for our 'pork' and by both for our want of education..." (Memorandum to the Simon Commission, January 1929, by the Naga Club)

What has changed 70 years after the British set up the first Naga autonomous council? What have years of exile, election boycotts, failed plebiscites, armed rebellion and ceasefires, and peace talks yielded?

When you try to answer such questions, it is like struggling out of sleep only to fall back into the same nightmare. Many things have changed in India's North-east; much has changed for the worse. Although the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act is a menacing presence, the army or paramilitary forces do not blanket a region once riven by insurgencies.

Over the past three decades, India has moved away from attacking North-east rebels militarily to tackling them politically and economically. Yet, there are at least 128 armed groups in seven North-eastern states. Gurbachan Jagat, a former director general of the Border Security Force and senior intelligence officer who was governor of Manipur from 2007 to 2013, says that state's 400-km border with Myanmar is very poorly guarded and an open conduit for drugs and guns.

Connectivity has improved somewhat—I used to travel 10 hours by rickety buses from Silchar to Aizawl in the early 1980s; you can now fly to the Mizoram capital. But the roads are not much better, and the Seven Sisters are still tethered to India by the very slim 26-km-long Siliguri Corridor. (Sikkim



T. NARAYAN

THE NORTH-EAST

Outside of Tripura, and despite thousands of crores of rupees in central budgetary support and multilateral funding, corruption is corroding everything that moves. Jagat says secretaries in the central ministries that are pumping money into Manipur never bothered to visit the state to monitor their projects.

WHEN EVERYONE GOT THEIR CUT

Manipur's rebel groups extort money under the guise of 'taxes' from every business. Tolls are levied on every truck coming in from Assam or Nagaland. Manipur has 90,000 government employees, and they have to pay a small 'income tax' to the militants. On the slightest pretext, the rebels blockade the lifeline highways. "Everybody was happy: the militants got their cut; the security forces were happy—they got their cut; and the politicians were happy—they got their money from corruption and cases, plus off the budget. Hardly any project was completed except for buildings like the high

LIVING DANGEROUSLY
WOMAN FIGHTERS OF THE NSCN (K) FACTION
AT THE KHETOI CAMP, NAGALAND

became a part of the North-eastern region in 2002). The region is still one of India's poorest, and heavily dependent on central dole-outs. In unintended irony, the ministry created 14 years ago to look after the region goes by the label DoNER.

Udayon Misra, a social scientist in Guwahati, says infrastructure has been neglected throughout the North-east. "When you talk about a Look East policy, you want to connect more to Southeast Asia, but there is no connectivity within the North-east."

Not one of the eight North-eastern chief ministers belongs to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party. Most of them have held office for a long time—Assam's Tarun Gogoi (14 years), Sikkim's Pawan Chamling (21 years), Manipur's Okram Ibobi Singh (13 years) and Mizoram's Lal Thanhawla, who has held office cumulatively for nearly 20 years. The consensus is that the most popular and successful of them all is Tripura's Marxist Chief Minister Manik Sarkar. A straight-talking and fiercely honest man, Sarkar has been in power for 17 years but gets by on a monthly party salary of Rs 5,000. "Tripura has built up a tradition of accountability," Misra says.

“

The people of Assam have not voted for parochialism or secession. They have voted for peace, prosperity and national integration.

Prafulla Kumar Mahanta
January 15, 1986

court and the secretariat,” the former governor said. The Khuga dam, whose foundation stone Manmohan Singh laid when he was a member of the Planning Commission in 1981, rocketed 2,500 per cent in cost and was inaugurated in 2010 when Singh was prime minister. Jagat notes that Manipur’s capital Imphal still lacks a sewage system.

Frustrated, Jagat wrote more than a hundred detailed notes to P. Chidambaram, who was home minister between 2008 and 2012. “But Chidambaram threw up his hands and said he could not do anything politically,” Jagat said.

Nor have the guns fallen altogether silent. Twenty soldiers died in a well-planned ambush this June on a hilly road in Manipur, not far from where 20 soldiers died in a nearly identical ambush 33 years ago. This time the attackers were from the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN)-Khaplang faction. In 1982 they were from the NSCN’s rival Isak-Muivah faction. The NSCN(IM) is now top dog and signed a Framework Agreement with Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s government in August. The NSCN(K) has repudiated the IM faction’s 1997 ceasefire and is hiding in camps in Myanmar, which the Indian government claimed to have attacked in a “surgical” cross-border strike after the June ambush.

Ravindra Narayan Ravi, the soft-spoken chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee and Modi’s chief interlocutor with the Nagas, crafted the framework deal with NSCN(IM) leader Thuingaleng Muivah. It is what it says: a framework that will lead to a full accord when all the stakeholders have bought into it. It is true that the 1997 ceasefire has held longer than the 1964 ceasefire did, but how will a new peace pact be different from the 1975 Shillong Accord which fell apart?

RESOLVE CONFLICT DON'T MANAGE IT

Ravi says it is because the Modi government has decided to pursue conflict resolution. His predecessors tried conflict management.

“Our belief all these years was that the North-east is far too complex and it is better to manage it. You can’t resolve the issue. So it was episodic intervention,” he told me during a long chat in his office.

“When you engage one particular organisation, you wish to pacify it. In the process of managing one entity, you create some other problems. All these societies are extremely heterogeneous. You have ‘n’ number of onion

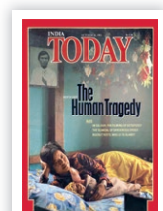
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COVER STORIES
on the North-east;
7 of them were
on riots and
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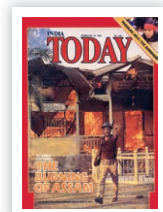
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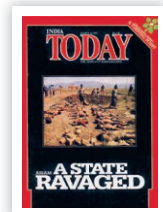
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layers. If you pursue ethno-nationalistic politics, you are opening a Pandora’s box.”

The onion layers can make your eyes water. The Naga rebels are split into seven groups. The NSCN(IM), which elder Naga peace activist Niketu Iralu describes as the “most ruthless, the most well-funded, the most well-armed”, wanted to talk with the Indian government on the principle that the Nagas are sovereign and any settlement must integrate Naga-inhabited areas across the North-east. The rebels forced Iralu to shut down his Reconciliation Commission. “They want to be with India but not within India,” says Ravi.

Even if it were to happen, a Greater Nagaland would be a messy jigsaw puzzle. About four million Nagas straddle India and Myanmar; they are split into about 70 tribes, each speaking its own dialect. “Not as bad as Papua New Guinea—600 islands and 1,000 tribes,” Iralu laughs. “Crazy world. Why Almighty God should allow so many tribes to increase I don’t know. God must have made a mistake in making so many Naga tribes. He made a second mistake—to give them the desire of being one people.”

TEN THOUSAND YEARS IN A LIFETIME

An erudite man, Iralu compares the Nagas variously to the Kurds in West Asia and the Tibetans, who are fighting the mighty Chinese. He also speaks of the history packed into Nagaland. “Our crisis is the *Ten Thousand Years In A Lifetime* crisis,” he says. That is the title of the autobiography of Albert Maori Kiki, a Papua New Guinea politician who transitioned from the stone age to modern civilisation in his lifetime.

Meanwhile, the long ceasefire years have given the NSCN(IM) a chance to build a well-oiled machinery. The rebels’ headquarters, at Camp Hebron near Dimapur, is run efficiently. “They have all the paraphernalia of a parallel government,” Ravi says. Middle- and lower-level commanders take part in decision-making. Every household and business in Nagaland—and in Manipur too where the NSCN holds sway—pays up quietly. The NSCN(IM) had a budget of Rs 125 crore this year.

If peace endures, will Nagaland’s economy change? Not very likely. Rich forest, mineral and tourist potential lie untapped with the government so heavily subsidised. So everybody has a stake in stoking the fires of

unrest. Development takes a back seat. “The heaviest toll is on accountability. So long as you have a disturbed situation, people tend to blame every unfinished task on the unrest,” Ravi says.

Recently, a World Bank report painted a dark picture of the ‘remote’ North-east’s economy. More than 80 per cent of the region’s population lives in rural areas, subsisting on low-value agriculture (lush Manipur, for instance, has only one paddy crop). The bank said 32 per cent of North-easterners live below the poverty line, compared with the national average of 21.9 per cent.

The World Bank noted that a third of electricity in the North-east was lost due to old and inefficient infrastructure. “Today, the annual per capita power consumption (of about 290 kWh) in the North East is less than one-third of the national average. The peak demand for power in the region (2,528 MW in 2015) is just over one-fourth the peak demand in the state of Haryana, which has about half the population,” the report said. More than half the households in the region do not have electricity.

It would help if the region could truly move away from its blood-soaked past. Between 1980 and 1983 I watched the Assam agitation against illegal migrants from Bangladesh, spearheaded by the All Assam Students’ Union (AASU) and the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), slide into a frenzy of communal savagery which peaked with the slaughter of more than 2,000 Muslim men, women and children in Nellie in February 1983. The Congress party won a pyrrhic victory in the 1983 state assembly election, capturing 91 of 109 seats. Just over two years later, the Assam Accord paved the way for an AGP government to take power.

The Assam Accord recognised migrants who had entered Assam prior to January 1, 1966. It disenfranchised all those who had entered the state between that date and March 24, 1971, and said all those who had entered Assam after this date would be “detected and expelled”.

But, 30 years after that accord, ethnic tension is again starting to climb in the same pattern. Recently, a Supreme Court lawyer, Upamanyu Hazarika, completed an investigation of border areas in Assam that looked at security, cattle smuggling and illegal migration. Hazarika had been tasked by the court to carry out his inquiry in the matter of Assam Sanmilita Mahasangha vs Union of India. Besides recommending steps to reduce cattle

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A STATE RAVAGED

Last fortnight, as the magnitude of Assam’s tragedy dawned, sources close to the agitation leaders, who were released on February 22 by the Gauhati High Court, from their NSA detention, said that they had decided not to participate in any further negotiations with the Centre. Their decision may be of the moment, but with the state so sharply divided into embittered segments, the problem has grown far beyond talks on foreigners, and the most pressing question is to calm tempers, and repair a torn social fabric. The Centre is obviously toying with the idea of a partition of the state. Highly placed sources confirm that exercises are currently being carried out to determine how exactly Assam can be split up into more “manageable” units. India today has learnt that the division would involve a new tribal Union territory taking in the whole of Karbi Anglong and parts of Darrang, North Lakhimpur and North Cachar; a Bengali Union territory comprising Cachar and parts of North Cachar; a Rajbangshi-dominated ‘Kamata Rajya’ enclave carved out of the western portion of Goalpara district and parts of Cooch Behar district in West Bengal; and Assam would consist almost entirely of the Brahmaputra valley. Whether or not such a partition takes place, it is ironical that so badly mauled a state should be ruled by a puppet government that will have to be heavily guarded and protected from a hostile populace. The Congress(I) in Assam has increased its representation in the Assembly tenfold since the 1978 elections. But it has succeeded in giving democracy a new and grisly definition.

by Chaitanya Kalbag in Guwahati

NELLIE MASSACRE IN ASSAM, ON FEBRUARY 18, 1983



BHAVAN SINGH

HISTORY AS IT HAPPENS RAJIV GANDHI SIGNS THE ASSAM ACCORD IN 1985

INDIAN EXPRESS

THIRTY YEARS AFTER THE ASSAM ACCORD, ETHNIC TENSION IS AGAIN STARTING TO CLIMB. APPEASING ETHNIC GROUPS HAS A LONG HISTORY IN ASSAM. IDENTITIES HAVE BEEN MANUFACTURED KEEPING AN EYE ON VOTE BANKS. //

smuggling, Hazarika also cited eminent civil engineer Indrajit Barua, who he said had investigated voter records in several polling booths in the Boko assembly constituency.

"He has also undertaken a statistical analysis of the change in demographic pattern and by extrapolating population growth figures has arrived at the finding that indigenous population will become a minority by 2047," Hazarika wrote in his report to the court. The Hazarika report has had predictable consequences. Already, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh has asked for a debate on the findings, and AASU is stirring from its slumber.

Appeasing different ethnic groups has a long history in Assam. When the British left, the state had only two ethnicity-based autonomous councils. Today it has 24. In 1995, on the eve of the 1996 elections, the then state government created five new councils. In 2005, on the eve of the 2006 elections, 12 new councils were created.

Identities have even been manufactured, Ravi says. "In 2005 the Assam government created the Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council. The Thengal Kacharis do not even exist in the Census list of tribes and number fewer than 20,000. But this was a potential vote bank."

So is there a silver lining?

Yes, if you look at Tripura. There, the once-majority tribals now number just 31 per cent of the population. In June 1980 I travelled to Tripura to report on the massacre of Bengali Hindus by tribal militants in Mandai village. Today, Chief Minister Manik Sarkar told me, economic development has brought peace and progress even though about 18 militant camps still exist across the border in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

| GATEWAY TO SOUTHEAST ASIA

Tripura's Marxist governments have pushed decentralisation and development. Sarkar said the state has 1,800 cooperative societies. The panchayat system is working well. Before he took office in 1998 his predecessor Dasarath Deb introduced the Jana Shiksha Andolan (people's education movement).

Sarkar aims to make Tripura self-sufficient in foodgrain in the next three years, and electricity-surplus sooner. Tripura is giving Kerala a run for its money. It is now India's most literate state at 94.65 per cent, and the country's second-biggest rubber producer. Hemmed in on three sides by Bangladesh, Sarkar says he is pushing for a link to Chittagong port in Bangladesh. "That would make Tripura the gateway to Bangladesh and Southeast Asia," he says.

Most promising of all, gas has been discovered in Tripura and neighbouring Mizoram. Despite the numbers, Sarkar does not sound satisfied with progress so far. "Much more needs to be done," he says.

Despite the violence and venality, Manipur is home to boxer M.C. Mary Kom and novelist, poet, playwright and National School of Drama Chairman Ratan Thiyam. Every morning hundreds of young people play and exercise in the Khuman Lampak stadium in Imphal. The Meira Paibi movement has enlisted nearly every adult Meitei woman and is a powerful counter to alcoholism, drug addiction and corruption. There is hope.

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