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SUBIR BHAUMIK

Ethnicity, Ideology and Religion: Separatist Movements in India's Northeast

The “Northeast,” seen as India’s “Mongoloid fringe,”¹ was one of the last areas to be taken over by the British in the subcontinent. Having conquered almost the whole of it by the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the British turned to secure the frontiers of their Indian Empire from the perceived threats of Russian expansion in Central Asia and from the westward surge of the Burmese Empire. The debacle in Afghanistan forced them to leave it as a useful buffer between Tsarist Central Asia and British India, but the defeat of the Burmese army encouraged them to take over the Northeast of India.

The British decided on limited administration of the Northeast. The Inner Line Regulations ensured that the hill regions beyond the plains of Assam were largely left to their traditional chiefs once they accepted British suzerainty. The princely kingdoms of Tripura and Manipur were treated as dependencies, remote-controlled by political

1. Nandita Haksar, India’s leading human rights lawyer known for her campaign against excesses by security forces in northeast India, says “the northeast is very distinct from the rest of India essentially because of race.” See Haksar, “Movement of Self Assertion in the Northeast,” in Madhushree Dutta, Flavia Agnes and Neera Adarkar, eds., *The Nation, the State and Indian Identity* (Kolkata: Stree, 1996).

agents but not administered on a day-to-day basis. For the British, the Northeast remained a frontier, never a constituent region of the empire.² Only Assam was integrated, its rich tea plantations and oil-fields, its agricultural output and potential for industries providing enough justification for direct administrative control.

Even in neighboring Burma, the British followed the same policy. Lower Burma was administered directly from Kolkata, but the British chose to extend “limited administration” to the hill regions of Upper Burma. A rich plain like Bengal, Assam or Lower Burma, thriving on settled agriculture, rich in minerals and oil, was worth direct control despite native resistance. But a remote and difficult hill region was better left to political agents, spies and missionaries to closely watch rivals across strategic frontiers and convert the tribesmen to Christianity to secure their loyalty toward the empire. If the plains fed the economic sinews of the empire, the hills played the buffer against rivals in the Great Game and provided fighters for the colonial army.

But though northeast India and Upper Burma remained a partially administered frontier, some senior British officials, in the years before the final withdrawal, proposed to integrate these two hill regions and develop it as a “Crown Colony” to ensure a limited but strategic presence in rimland Asia.³ Due to strong nationalist opposition in both India and Burma, the Crown Colony plan failed to materialize.

Guerrilla War in Rainbow Country

BEFORE THE ADVENT OF THE BRITISH, no empire based in mainland India had controlled any part of what now makes up the country's Northeast. Migration from the Indian mainland was limited to preachers and teachers, traders and soldiers of fortune. Mainland cultural influence was also limited to Assam, Manipur and Tripura, where the kings adopted variants of Hinduism as the state religion. The uninterrupted freedom from mainland conquest for a great length of

2. Alexander Mackenzie first articulated the concept of a “northeast” frontier. See Mackenzie, *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the Northeast Frontier of Bengal* (1884), reprinted as the *Northeast Frontier of India* (Delhi: Mittal Publishers, 1979).

3. J. P. Mills in 1942–43 first proposed the “unification of the hill regions of Northeast India and Upper Burma.” Later Reginald Coupland fine-tuned the proposal that the area should be administered as a “Crown Colony” even after the British withdrawal from the subcontinent. See Coupland, *The Constitutional Problems of India, Part 3* (London: Oxford University Press, 1944).

history, coupled with the region's racial distinctiveness, gave its people a sense of being different from those in mainland India. So, India's northeast territories "look less and less India and more and more like the highland societies of Southeast Asia."⁴

After Partition, the 225,000-square-kilometer region remains sandwiched between Chinese-Tibet, Burma, Bangladesh and Bhutan, linked to the Indian mainland by a tenuous 21-kilometer wide "Siliguri Corridor." It is a polyglot region, its ethnic mosaic as diverse as the rest of the country. Of the 5,633 communities listed by the "People of India" project, 635 were categorized as tribals, of which 213 were found in the northeast Indian states. This project also listed 325 languages—of which 175 belonging to the Tibeto-Burman and the Mon-Khmer family were found in northeast India. Some of the bigger tribes, such as the Nagas, number around one million—the smallest, such as the Mates of Manipur (population: eight thousand), have just a few thousand left.⁵ Even the bigger tribes are often mere generic identities rather than nationalities, without a common language (as in the case of the Nagas), held together more in opposition to the Indian nation-state than by an organic growth of national consciousness.

All of India's major religions are practiced here, with Christianity dominating the hills and Hinduism and Islam dominating the plains. Animistic faiths and Lamaist sects are also found in the region. Assamese and Bengali speakers are the most numerous—but linguistic preferences in the region have often changed due to political considerations and have sometimes concealed ethnic and religious divisions. In Assam, the migrant Muslim peasantry of Bengali origin chose to register as Assamese speakers during every census after Independence to melt into the local milieu. The Assamese also co-opted Muslim migrants as "Na-Asasimyas" or neo-Assamese—if only to ensure a predominant position of Assamese language in the state; in such situations linguistic predominance is what ethnic domination is often built on. But when these Muslims were targeted by the Assamese on a large scale during the 1983 riots, many of them started registering as Bengali speakers, leading to a decrease in the number of Assamese speakers in the 1991 and 2001 Census.

4. Peter Kunstadter, *Highland Societies of Southeast Asia* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1967).

5. Subir Bhaumik, "Negotiating Access: Northeast India," *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (2000).

In the pre-British era, the population flow into what is now north-east India almost wholly originated from the east. Being closer to the highlands of Burma and southwestern China than to the power centers of the Indian mainland, this region was exposed to a constant flow of tribes and nationalities belonging to the Tibeto-Burman or the Mon-Khmer stock, one settling down only to be overrun by the subsequent wave. The incomplete process of racial assimilation, the frequency of fresh migrations and the restrictive nature of empire-building in the region account for its current ethnic diversity.

But the direction of the population flow changed with the advent of the British. The colonial masters brought peasants and agricultural laborers, teachers and clerks from neighboring Bengal and Bihar to open up Assam's economy. The trickle became a tide, and the sweep was soon to cover states like Tripura, where the Manikya kings offered Bengali farmers "jungle-avadi" or forest clearance leases to popularize settled agriculture that would, in turn, increase the revenue.⁶ The hill regions were protected by the Inner Line Regulations; the plains and the Princely domains were not. The steady population flow from mainland India, particularly from undivided Bengal, accentuated the ethnic and religious diversity and introduced a nativist-outsider element to the simmering conflict.⁷

The Partition led to a rise in the flow of refugees and migrants from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Tripura's demography changed qualitatively in two decades, with the Bengalis becoming a clear majority. The pace of demographic change was slightly slower in Assam than in Tripura, but it was pronounced enough to upset the "sons of the soil," provoking both armed and unarmed protest movements. The fear that other northeastern states would "go the Tripura way" has weighed heavily on indigenous peoples and early settlers throughout the Northeast and provoked the more militant of them to take up arms.⁸

6. J. B. Ganguly, "The Problem of Tribal Landlessness in Tripura," in B. B. Datta and M. N. Karna, eds., *Land Relations in Northeast India* (Delhi: Peoples Publishing House, 1987).

7. See Myron Weiner, *Sons of the Soil: Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978); Sajal Nag, *Roots of Ethnic Conflict: Nationalities Question in Northeast India* (Delhi: Manohar, 1990).

8. Subodh Debbarma, vice-president of the Tribal Students Federation (TSF) of Tripura, told a news conference in Guwahati, Assam, that "Assam would soon become another Tripura, where the sons of the soil have become aliens within half a century." Reported in *Sentinel* daily newspaper (Guwahati), 3 June 2002.

This paper examines the complex interplay of ethnicity, ideology and religious identity in shaping the insurgent movements in north-east India and examines their external linkages. The paper explores the degree to which these factors have promoted or restricted the growth of local nationalisms that could sustain the separatist movements in a position of challenge to the Indian nation-state.

Ethnicity, Guerrilla Warfare and the “Foreign Hand”

A TRADITION OF ARMED RESISTANCE to invaders developed in the region even before the British came. The Ahom kings fought back the Mughals, the Tripura kings fought back the Bengal sultans, but when the British went into the Northeast, they encountered fierce resistance in the Naga and the Mizo (then Lushai) hill regions in Manipur and in what is now Meghalaya. The Naga and the Mizo tribesmen resorted to guerrilla war, holding up much stronger British forces by grit and ingenious use of the terrain until, in some places of the Mizo hills, entire villages were “populated only by widows.”⁹

After the British left, the Indian nation-state faced uprisings in Tripura almost immediately after Independence and in the Naga Hills since the mid-fifties. The Communists, who led the tribal uprising in Tripura, called off armed struggle in the early fifties and joined Indian-style electoral politics. But since the 1980 ethnic riots, Tripura has witnessed periodic bouts of tribal militancy, with the Bengali refugee population its main target. The Naga uprising, the strongest ethnic insurrection in northeast India, has been weakened by repeated splits on tribal lines. Talks between the Indian government and the stronger faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), started in 1997, are continuing, but a possible resumption of Naga insurgency remains a worst-case scenario for Delhi in the Northeast.

Armed uprisings erupted in the Mizo Hills following a famine in 1966. A year later, guerrilla bands became active in Manipur and Tripura. Since most of these rebel groups found safe bases, weapons and training in what was then East Pakistan, the defeat of the Pakistani armed forces in 1971 adversely affected the rebels from northeast India. For nearly seven years, they were deprived of a major

9. Suhas Chatterjee, *Mizoram under the British Rule* (Delhi: Mittal Publishers, 1985).

staging post in a contiguous foreign nation. China, which trained and armed several batches of Naga, Mizo and Meitei since 1966, had stopped help by the early 1980s. By then, however, Bangladesh's military rulers, foisted to power by the bloody coup that killed the country's founder Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, had revived the Pakistani policy of sheltering, arming and training rebel groups from northeast India. Almost all the separatist groups in the Northeast—Nagas, Mizos, Meiteis, Tripuris, and now even those from Meghalaya—have subsequently received shelter and support in Bangladesh. On the other hand, Indian agencies used the Northeast to arm and train, support and shelter the Bengali guerrillas against Pakistan in 1971 and then the tribal insurgents from Chittagong Hill Tracts against Bangladesh.¹⁰

Since the 1980s, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) has also used Bangladesh to establish contact with some of the rebel groups from Northeast India. A few of them have received weapons, specialized training in explosives and sabotage, and even funds. Surrendered insurgents have said the ISI has encouraged them to take on economic targets such as oil refineries and depots, gas pipelines, rail tracks and road bridges.¹¹ Burma and Bhutan have also been used as sanctuaries by some of these rebel groups but there is little evidence of official patronage from governments of those countries. There are some unconfirmed reports of Chinese assistance to the NSCN, the Meitei rebel groups and the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA).¹²

10. For details of Chinese and Pakistani and then Bangladeshi support to separatist groups from northeast India, see Bhaumik, *Insurgent Crossfire: Northeast India* (Delhi: Lancers, 1996). Also see Sanjoy Hazarika, *Strangers of the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast* (Delhi: Viking, 1994).

11. Munim Nobis, former "foreign secretary" of ULFA, quoted in Hazarika, *Strangers of the Mist*. The Group of Ministers (GOM) report in India on security, intelligence and border management categorically mentions use of Bangladesh territory by the ISI to "destabilize" India's northeastern region. Report published in 2000.

12. Surrendered ULFA leader Luit Deuri told this writer in a BBC interview on 19 January 2001 that a Chinese agency codenamed "Blackhouse" had supplied them huge consignments of weapons through Bhutanese territory. Much of the weapons the NSCN initially procured from the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia between 1988 and 1995 are believed to have been routed to it by the Chinese agencies, the use of the surrogate designed to conceal the origin of the supply. Recent seizures of a huge quantity of weapons from the Meitei rebel groups by the Burmese army in November 2001 from around Tamu—nearly 1,600 pieces of automatic weapons—have prompted speculations about the supply from January 1990.

By the early 1980s, the whole region was gripped by large-scale violence. There were fierce riots in Tripura and Assam. Separatist movements intensified in Mizoram, Nagaland and Manipur, later spreading to both Assam and Tripura. India's young Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi took the initiative to arrive at settlements with the militant students of Assam, the separatist Mizo National Front (MNF) and the Tribal National Volunteers of Tripura. But other insurgencies continued and new ones emerged. If the separatist movements such as those of the Nagas and the Mizos had challenged federal authority, the recent insurgencies of the Bodos, the Hmars, the Karbis and the Dimasas directly confront the regional power centers—the new states of Northeast. If the Nagas and the Mizos fought for a separate country and finally settled for a separate state within India, the smaller ethnicities such as the Bodos or the Hmars fight for autonomous homelands they want carved out of the states such as Assam and Mizoram.

Very often in the Northeast, a negotiated settlement with a separatist movement has opened the ethnic fissures within it. The Hmars, the Maras and the Lais fought shoulder to shoulder with the Lushais against the Indian security forces during the twenty years of insurgency led by the MNF. But twenty years of bonding through the shared experience of guerrilla warfare failed to develop a greater "Mizo" identity. The Bodos, the Karbis and the Dimasas all joined the Assam movement to expel "foreigners" and "infiltrators." But after settlements with the Indian government, they felt the Assamese "had taken the cake and left us the crumbs."¹³ The result: fresh agitations, often sliding into violent insurgencies, spearheaded by smaller ethnicities demanding separate homelands. The ethnic imbalance in power-sharing has often caused retribalization, which has had its own cascading effect in restricting the growth of local nationalisms that could challenge the Indian state.¹⁴

13. The late Upendranath Brahma (former president of the All Bodo Students Union), interview by author, Agartala, 16 April 1988. Bhaumik analyzed this phenomenon of minor tribes and clans challenging the preponderance of the bigger ones in "Northeast India: The Second Ethnic Explosion" (paper presented at the Queen Elizabeth House, Oxford University, 22 January 1990).

14. Bhaumik, "Northeast: Evolution of a Post-Colonial Region" in Partha Chatterjee, ed., *Wages of Freedom: Fifty Years of the Indian Nation-State* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

After fighting India for forty years, Naga “nationalism” remains an incomplete process, its growth retarded by at least three major splits within the separatist movement, mostly along tribal lines. Even a China-trained leader like Muivah, a Tangkhul Naga from Manipur state, has no hesitation branding Angamis as “reactionary traitors” and his own tribe, the Tangkhuls—who form the bulk of the NSCN—as “revolutionary patriots.”¹⁵ On the other hand, the Tangkhuls who dominate the NSCN are seen in the Nagaland state as “Kaccha Nagas” (impure Nagas).¹⁶ The trend has been no different in Mizoram or Manipur. The Kuki demand for a separate homeland that pitted them against the Nagas has driven some smaller clans away from them and led to the emergence of a separate “Zomi” identity. Tribes such as the Paites prefer to be called “Zomis” and their militias have sided with the NSCN against the Kuki militant groups. The Hmars, Lais and the Maras have joined the Chakmas and the Reangs to challenge the Mizos.

In Tripura, the Mizos in the northern Jampui hills demand a regional council within the Tribal Areas Autonomous Council of Tripura to preserve their “distinct identity,” whereas their ethnic kinsmen in Mizoram are wary of similar demands by smaller ethnicities. The Reangs in Tripura resent attempts by the Tripuris to impose the Kokborok language on them. And they look back at the brutal suppression of Reang rebellions by the Tripuri kings as “evidence of ethnic domination that cannot be accepted anymore.”¹⁷ These intra-tribal tensions have weakened efforts to promote a compact “Borok” or tribal identity against perceived Bengali domination.

India’s first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, excluded the Northeast from the process of linguistic reorganization that Indian states were subjected to in the mid-fifties. Stress on language and ethnicity, he reckoned, would open a Pandora’s box for a remote, sensitive region such as the Northeast. So he let the hill regions stay with

15. Thuingaleng Muivah (NSCN’s general secretary), “Polarisation,” NSCN document, published from Oking (headquarters), 1985.

16. Bhaumik, *Nagas, India and the Northeast* (London: Minority Rights Group, 1994).

17. Dhananjoy Reang (founder of the NLFT), interview by author, Kumaritilla, Agartala, 16 October 1999. Reang was earlier vice president of the Tribal National Volunteers (TNV) and a pioneer in the tribal guerrilla movements of Tripura. But now he bitterly complains of how Reangs have been intimidated, their women raped and men killed by the NLFT.

Assam, and the two former princely states—Manipur and Tripura—were administered as Union Territories from Delhi. But the Naga insurrection forced Delhi to create the Nagaland state to take the steam out of the armed uprising. Once a million Nagas got a separate state, other ethnicities, some more populous than the Nagas, were to make similar demands. When refused, they would do what the Nagas did—challenge the Indian state with arms.

In the five decades after Partition, the Northeast has been India's most sustained insurgency theater. The intensity and the focus of the movements have changed over the years, and a number of the movements have been co-opted by the Indian state through power-sharing arrangements. But the call to arms has remained a popular option with the battling ethnicities of the Northeast—either in challenging Delhi or while settling scores among themselves. And quite often, a number of armed movements in the region have used separatist rhetoric, despite being essentially autonomist or nativist in character, merely to attract attention in Delhi.¹⁸

Once India carved out the state of Nagaland in 1963, Assam's role as a sub-regional hegemon was threatened, its position as India's political subcontractor in the Northeast destined to end. Within a decade of the creation of the Nagaland state, Delhi had to affect a political reorganization of the whole region, through which three new administrative units were formed. These three became full-fledged states in the 1980s, as India desperately sought to control violent ethnic insurgencies in the area. On the other hand, the breakup of Assam not only produced fresh demands for ethnic homelands within what remained of it, but it also drove a section of the ethnic Assamese to insurgency. With the hills gone, the Assamese turned to their valleys to find they were fast becoming a minority there. The anti-foreigner movement rocked Assam between 1979 and 1985 and led to large-scale, free-for-all types of ethnic riots. The ULFA, now the leading separatist organization in Assam, was born out of this movement. Its initial credo was ethnic cleansing—it sought by the force of arms to drive the “foreigners” (read: migrants from Bangladesh) out of Assam.

18. TNV fought for an “independent Tripura” but came to a settlement with Delhi in 1988 after it agreed to reserve a mere three additional legislative assembly seats for tribals. Such instances of using “secessionism” more as rhetoric than as a matter of conviction abound in the Northeast.

But over time, the ULFA's politics has changed. Sheltered in Bangladesh, Burma and Bhutan, and having to face the military might of the Indian state, the ULFA has denounced the Assam movement as "one that was led by juveniles, who failed to understand that migration per se was not bad and had helped many countries like the U.S.A. to become what they are today." The ULFA says that the Bengalis—Hindus and Muslims alike—have "immensely contributed to Assam" and "those of them who feel themselves as part of Assam should be treated as its legitimate dwellers."¹⁹ It is difficult to ascertain how much of this policy shift—projecting itself as the "representative of the Asombashis" (dwellers of Assam) rather than the Asomiyas (Assamese)—stems from tactical considerations such as seeking shelter in Bangladesh and gaining the support of Assam's huge Bengali population, and how much of it is a genuine attempt to rise above the ethnic considerations to forge a secular, multi-ethnic identity to fight Delhi.

But the ULFA is being pragmatic only in trying to project territory and a multi-ethnic credo as the basis for a future independent Assam. It is only acknowledging the polyglot nature of the state of Assam—and the rest of the region—despite its broad racial difference with the Indian mainland. It is seeking to restore the multi-ethnic and assimilative nature of the Assamese nationality formation process, which was ruptured by racial-linguistic chauvinism of the upper-caste Assamese power-holder elites in the 1960s, as a result of which tribe after tribe exercised the exit option from Assam, fueling the demands of an ever-increasing number of ethnicity-based states in northeast India.

Significantly, though the ULFA has targeted Hindi-speaking populations for large-scale attacks after 1990, it has avoided any attack on Bengalis, Nepalis or tribal groups that it sees as potential allies in the struggle against "Indian colonialism." The Hindi speakers have been seen as "Indian populations supportive of the colonial rule."²⁰ But its growing lack of faith in ethnicity as the basis for its political militancy stems from a realization that there could be no "pure ethnic homeland" in Assam or anywhere else in northeast India. A broad-based

19. Central Publicity Department, "Probojon Loi" (Regarding Infiltration), document issued by the Central Publicity Department (ULFA, 1992).

20. The Assam Tiger Force (ATF) claimed responsibility for attacks on the Hindi speakers in Assam, but Assam police say it is certain the ATF was a ULFA front.

Assamese nationalism, unless it caters to the distinct ethnic aspirations of the tribes and other communities in Assam, is a non-starter.

The ULFA therefore, shrewdly enough, projects a future independent Assam as a federal Assam, where Bodo, Karbi, Dimasa, Rabha, Lalung or Mishing, or even Bengali homelands can exist, so long as the “basic values of Assamese society and culture are accepted.”²¹ A security adviser to the Assam government describes this as “a clever ploy to broaden the support base of the ULFA insurgency against India.”²² But Assam’s political leadership now talks the same language, of the need to accept the polyglot character of Assam, and of satisfying the aspirations of the ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities, if not for anything else, only to stave off another breakup of the state.²³

So, though ethnicity has been the mainstay of separatist movements and often formed the basis for the creation of political-administrative units in northeast India, its self-corrosive propensities have restricted the growth of local nationalisms strong enough to confront Delhi. Meghalaya came into being as a tribal state; today the three major tribes, Khasis, Jaintias and Garos, fight for the spoils of political office on ethnic lines, while some militant organizations such as the Achik National Volunteer Council are fighting for a separate state for the Garos. Mizoram has problems with its ethnic minorities. The Reang and Chakma tribes complain of ethnic and religious persecution and allege that the dominant Mizos, almost wholly Christian, want to convert them to Christianity and the Mizo way of life. The Lais and Maras want to join the Reangs and the Chakmas to form a separate unit, a Union Territory, which they want to be administered from the Centre.²⁴ The Naga-Kuki clashes throughout northeast India that left hundreds dead in the 1980s and 1990s raised the specter of Bosnia or Kosovo, of how conflicting homeland demands could lead to ethnic cleansing in pursuit of the impossible—creation of “pure ethnic states.”

21. *Freedom*, ULFA’s weekly e-newsletter, 25 May 2001.

22. Jaideep Saikia (Security Advisor to Government of Assam), *Mukhomukhi (Face-to-Face)*, a chat show hosted on Doordarshan’s Seventh Channel (Kolkata), Rainbow Productions, 17 February 2002.

23. Pradyut Bordoloi (Assam’s Minister of State for Home), interview by author, *BBC World Service*, 29 March 2002. Bordoloi described Assam as a “multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and a multi-religious entity.”

24. Memorandum jointly submitted by the Lai, Mara and Chakma district councils to the Indian government on 17 August 2000.

Independence or the Indian Revolution?

IN SOME PARTS of what became India's Northeast, Communist parties subtly articulated ethnic issues to create a support base among the indigenous tribespeople. In Tripura, the Communists played on the tribal's sense of loss and marginalization following the end of sovereign princely rule and the kingdom's merger with India. Having first secured popularity in the tribal areas through a powerful literacy movement (Jana Shiksha or Mass Literacy), the Communist Party of India (CPI) absorbed into its fold the main tribal organization, Gana Mukti Parishad, at the peak of its nationwide armed struggle in 1948. The CPI adopted the Parishad's political program as its own on questions of tribal rights, loss of tribal lands and the threat to the distinctive social organization of the tribespeople but avoided demanding secession. Hundreds of Parishad activists and leaders turned into Communist guerrillas and fought "for the Indian revolution" rather than for an independent homeland like the Nagas.²⁵

But when the CPI gave up armed struggle and purged those advocating the "adventurist line," the tribal guerrillas in the Communist force, Shanti Sena (Peace Army), gave up their weapons and returned to normal life. And taking advantage of the situation, the Congress-dominated state administration started resettling the newly arrived Bengali migrants in large numbers in the tribal-compact areas of Tripura. Since the tribespeople were largely supportive of the Communists, the Congress wanted to alter the demographic profile of the constituencies by promoting the organized rehabilitation of the Bengali migrants. It did help the Congress—it won both the parliament seats in 1967 after losing them to the Communists in three successive elections—but as the tribals lost out in the number's game, they lost faith in the Communist party and began to turn to militant ethnic politics.²⁶

Having first manipulated ethnic concerns to build up a party nucleus and political base, the Communists succumbed to electoral concerns in Tripura. With other tribal parties and insurgent organizations surfacing to articulate the ethnic issues, the Communists have

25. For details on the Communist uprising in Tripura, see Bhaumik, *Insurgent Crossfire*, and Harihar Bhattacharya, *Communism in Tripura* (Delhi: Ajanta, 1999).

26. Bhaumik, *ibid.*

fallen back on their support base among the Bengalis. Since 1978, they have won all but one of the state assembly elections, but their popular base in the tribal areas has taken a beating. In 2000, for the first time, the ruling Communists lost the state's Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council to a militant tribal party, the Indigenous Peoples Front of Tripura (IPFT).

The IPFT enjoyed the backing of the separatist National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT). The NLFT's rhetoric is secessionist but its leaders have said they are open to negotiations on an "appropriate power-sharing arrangement for maximum possible tribal control in the state assembly, the autonomous district council and on the state's resources."²⁷ The IPFT has now been renamed Indigenous Nationalist Front of Tripura, with two more tribal parties joining it. One of them is the Tripura Upajati Juba Samity (TUJS), the first exclusively tribal party in the state, and the Tribal National Volunteers (TNV), which led a bloody insurgent movement targeting Bengali settlers and the security forces between 1978 and 1988. The ruling Communists admit that they face a stiff challenge in the next state assembly elections in 2003 with the INFT tying up with the Congress, which typically wins some seats in Bengali areas.

The Communists in Tripura used a tribal organization and its leadership to promote their complex ideology in a backward agrarian society where slash-and-burn agriculture was still prevalent and industries were virtually absent. The Ganamukti Parishad had retained its distinct character even after its merger with the Communist Party organization, but during the two decades that followed the end of the Communist armed struggle, it played a much reduced role in influencing the Communist political agenda. Having widened their political base to win elections, the Communists tried to overlook the ethnic issues until they were forced to support the tribal autonomy movement in the 1980s. The INFT has moved into the vacuum, aggressively ethnicizing the state's political discourse and questioning the relevance of Communist ideology for the tribespeople. Unlike the TUJS, which accepted the role of a junior partner in the coalition with the

27. Nayanbashi Jamatia (NLFT leader), telephonic interview by author, used in BBC Bengali service on 3 March 2002. Jamatia said the NLFT leadership had communicated its desire to negotiate with Delhi through the Assam Rifles, which, he admitted, had been in touch with them.

Congress that ruled Tripura between 1988 and 1993, the INFT is likely to dominate the coalition because it is likely to win more seats than the Congress.

In Manipur and Assam, the Communists continue to win a few seats in the state assembly. They have strong pockets of support that were once built up through the struggle for peasant rights, but they share power only as minor partners in regional coalitions. In Manipur, the CPI has joined the Congress-led ruling coalition formed in February 2002 to keep the BJP out of power in the state. But in Assam, it opposed the Congress and came to power by teaming up with the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), a party that grew out of the “anti-foreigner” agitation of the 1980s, which the Communists had opposed as “parochial” and “chauvinist.”²⁸ The AGP later ditched the Communists and forged an alliance with the BJP before the 2001 state assembly elections.

But the Communist ideology, in its Maoist manifestations, did find takers among the secessionist groups in the Northeast. The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) of Manipur, throughout the 1980s, said it was “part of the Indian revolution,” its stated mission to “bring down the bandit government of Delhi.”²⁹ Only much later did it limit itself to fight as the “vanguard of the struggle for the independence of Manipur.”³⁰ Its reading of Indian polity as being “semi-colonial and semi-feudal” bears striking resemblance with the class character analysis of the Indian state done by Indian Maoist groups such as People’s War or the Maoist Communist Center (MCC).

The PLA’s core leadership was trained in China. Though the ethnic rebel armies of the Naga and the Mizo hills had received military training in China before them, the Chinese only tried to politicize a few Naga leaders such as Thuingaleng Muivah, the present general secretary of the NSCN. Muivah says he had some exposure to Marxist-Leninist ideology before he led the first batch of Naga rebels to China in 1966 at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution.³¹ But there was no attempt to politicize the Mizos or most of the Nagas, who were devout Christians. China merely wanted to use them against

28. *Peoples Democracy*, mouthpiece of the CPI (M), 27 March 1981.

29. *Dawn* (mouthpiece of the PLA of Manipur), 3 June 1980.

30. Thuingaleng Muivah, “Never Say Die,” interview by author, Mannerplaw, Thailand, published in *Sunday* magazine, Kolkata, June 16–22, 1996.

31. *Ibid.*

India to counterbalance the continued Indian support to the Tibetans. But the PLA's core leadership—the first batch of eighteen “Ojhas” (pioneers)—went through heavy political training. The Chinese had hopes they would coordinate their struggles with the Indian Maoist groups and strengthen the cause of the Indian revolution.³²

Later, ULFA, a separatist organization committed to Assam's liberation from India, had voiced the Marxist-Leninist (M-L) “colonial thesis” of India's peripheral regions, such as Assam being an “internal colony” of India. Individual ULFA leaders, some of whom came from left political backgrounds, have expressed admiration for CPI (M-L) leader Charu Majumdar, hailing him as the “first real hope of the Indian revolution.”³³ The Autonomous State Demands Committee, which wants an autonomous state for Karbi tribesmen in central Assam, have close connections with the CPI (M-L)—at least two of their senior leaders are in the CPI (M-L)'s central committee. But the ASDC has lost out on influence to an armed insurgent group in the area, the United Peoples Democratic Solidarity (UPDS). This is a repeat of the Tripura scenario—pro-Left organizations seeking to use ethnic issues to build up influence, but finally losing out to groups directly articulating ethnic concerns and keen to use the distinctive ethnicity as a plank for political power-sharing or protest.

The Maoist groups in mainland India, despite their very limited presence in the Northeast, support the “struggle of the oppressed nationalities” in the region.³⁴ In private, Maoist leaders differentiate between those struggles led by a “conscious leadership” (meaning those who repose faith in Marxist-Leninism) and the rest.³⁵ The Maoists are perhaps aware of the potential for a tactical understanding with the ethnic separatist groups in the battle against the Indian state—but they have their preferences. The ULFA in Assam, the PLA in Manipur, or even an NSCN led by Thuingaleng Muivah would be more acceptable to them than a National Liberation Front of Tripura,

32. Nameirakpam Bisheswar Singh (former PLA chief), interview by author at his Babupara residence in Imphal, 16 May 1986.

33. Arun Mahanta, an important ULFA functionary in a personal e-mail to the author, made this comment about Charu Majumdar on 6 May 2000.

34. *Biplobi Yug* (Revolutionary Age), monthly journal of the Peoples War group's Bengal unit, 18 August 2001.

35. Comrade Sagar (real name: Niranjan Ghose), Peoples War's central publicity secretary, interview by author, *BBC Radio World Today*, 19 May 2001.

which not only pursues violent ethnic cleansing against Bengalis and smaller tribes such as the Reangs and the Chakmas, but also declares “evangelization” of the tribes of Tripura as a key objective.

The Cross, Saffron and Crescent

THOUGH ETHNICITY AND IDEOLOGY—the former more than the latter—remain major influences on separatist and autonomist groups in northeast India, religion is increasingly beginning to influence the political agenda of some of these groups. Religious distinctiveness, when coterminous with ethnicity, exacerbated the sense of otherness in the Naga and the Mizo hills. Since the tribespeople in both these former head-hunting hill regions had been largely converted to Christianity since the last quarter of the nineteenth century, they felt emotionally alienated from the Indian cultural ethos, which was often equated with the “Hindu entity.”³⁶ Christianity reinforced and complemented, rather than supplanted, the sense of distinct ethnicity and otherness among the Nagas and the Mizos. Separatist groups such as the Naga National Council (NNC) and the MNF laced their separatist rhetoric with free use of Biblical imageries—and the MNF even christened its military operations (e.g., its first uprising on 28 February 1966 was referred to as “Operation Jericho”). But rebel regiments were named after tribal heroes such as Zampuimanga rather than after Biblical heroes.³⁷

When the NNC decided to send the first batch of Naga rebels to China, the powerful Baptist Church was upset with the rebel leaders. The NNC as well as the NSCN, which is led by the China-trained Thuingaleng Muivah (who continues to revere Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai as the “greatest leaders of the century”),³⁸ have subsequently made conscious efforts to appease the church. Muivah, much

36. The NSCN manifesto says: “Though as a doctrine, Hinduism is not a recruiting force, it is backed by a Hindu government. The forces of Hinduism, viz., the numberless Indian troops, the retail and wholesale dealers, the teachers and instructors, the intelligentsia, the prophets of non-violence, the gamblers and the snake-charmers, the Hindi songs and Hindi films, the rasgulla makers and the Gita, are all arrayed for the mission to supplant the Christian God, the eternal God of the Universe. The challenge is serious.” The Manifesto was issued from the Oking, the NSCN headquarters inside Burma, on 31 January 1980 by its chairman Issac Chisi Swu.

37. Nirmal Nibedon, *Mizoram: The Dagger Brigade* (Delhi: Lancers, 1983).

38. Muivah, interview in *Sunday*.

less of a practicing Christian than is the NSCN chairman Issac Chisi Swu (who prays regularly), was the one to coin the phrase, "Nagaland for Christ," which found its way into the NSCN's lexicon. This writer found the "Nagaland for Christ" slogan boldly hanging over the churches in the NSCN camps where Sunday services were regularly performed by the NSCN's "Chaplain Kilonser" (religious affairs minister) Vedai Chakesang and his team.³⁹ Though personally attracted by Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong thought, Muivah was quick to see that most of his leaders and fighters were devout Christians, and that religion and ethnicity could complement each other to foment separatism among the Nagas.

The MNF was much more serious about its Christian identity and much more particular about fostering religiosity. Senior leaders such as Zoramthanga, then MNF vice president (and now chief minister of Mizoram state), personally conducted church services in the rebel camps. Many MNF leaders became preachers after their return to normal life. Consumption of alcohol and drugs, so easily available in the Northeast because of its proximity to Burma, was strictly prohibited among the guerrillas, who were encouraged to propagate their "evil influences" to the rest of the society.⁴⁰

But MNF chief Laldenga, after becoming chief minister following the political settlement with the Indian government, snubbed the church when it started pressurising his government to ban the sale of alcoholic drinks. Laldenga did not want to lose one of the most important sources of revenue for his government. The Congress took advantage and proclaimed in its election manifesto its commitment to promote "Christian Socialism" in Mizoram.⁴¹ The MNF was defeated in the ensuing elections in 1989 with the church's support. After Laldenga's death, Zoramthanga took over as party president and repaired the MNF's relations with the church. He assured the church leaders of his commitment to continue with prohibition and the MNF is said to have won the last state assembly elections with church support.

39. Bhaumik, "Brothers in Arms," *Sunday*, 20 June 1987.

40. MNF "order" no. 3 (1986), entitled "Eradication of Drugs and Liquor in Mizo Society," issued to all units of the organization.

41. Congress (I) manifesto for the 1989 Mizoram state assembly elections, issued in Aizawl, Mizoram.

In neighboring Tripura, first-generation Christian converts constituted a large percentage of the leadership and the fighters of the Tribal National Volunteers (TNV). Its chairman, Bijoy Hrangkhawl, remains a devout Christian. Non-Christian tribesmen who joined the TNV were encouraged, though not forced, to convert. But the state's strongest rebel group now, the NLFT, insists on conversion of non-Christian recruits. Some of those who have broken away from the NLFT—such as its former area commander Nayanbashi Jamatia—are Hindus or animists who say they strongly resent “the leadership's interference with personal faiths and religions.”⁴²

The NLFT, in keeping with its stated objective of turning Tripura into “the land of Christ,” has also issued fiats to tribal communities to convert to Christianity as a whole.⁴³ That has provoked the predominantly animist Reangs and the Hindu Jamatia tribesmen to resist them. Even after the NLFT “banned” the worship of Durga (Goddess of Power), Saraswati (Goddess of Learning) and Laxmi (Goddess of Wealth) in the hills, the spiritual head of the Jamatia tribe, “Hada Okrah” Bikram Bahadur Jamatia performed the Pujas (worship).⁴⁴ But his followers had to face attacks and Bikram Bahadur Jamatia escaped two assassination attempts. Some leading tribal priests, such as Shanti Kali, were killed by the NLFT; even their womenfolk were raped by the rebels. On 7 August 1999, the NLFT kidnapped four senior leaders of the Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). All four are said to be dead. The NLFT allegedly enjoys the support of the Tripura Baptist Christian Union (TBCU). According to TBCU sources, both voluntary and forced conversions to Christianity have increased among the tribespeople in Tripura since the TNV, and then the NLFT, intensified its activity.⁴⁵ For many tribesmen, Christianity is a source of a new, extra-territorial

42. Nayanbashi Jamatia (NLFT leader).

43. The Constitution of the NLFT, “Sacrifice for Liberation,” issued on 22 December 1991, talks of its armed wing as the “National Holy Army.”

44. Statement of the “Hada Okrah” Bikram Bahadur Jamatia, reported in *Dainik Sambad*, Bengali daily of Agartala, Tripura, 16 September 2000.

45. TBCU sources say the number of Christian converts has gone up sharply since the TNV and NLF started operating in the hilly interiors of Tripura. In 1981, Tripura's Christian population stood at 24,872. By 1991, it had risen to 46,472. TBCU sources say there are now nearly 90,000 Christians in the state, almost wholly made up of converts. The TBCU's mouthpiece, the *Baptist Herald*, details the major acts of conversions.

identity providing confidence to challenge the dominant cultures of the Bengali migrants rather than being absorbed by such cultures.

In Manipur, the Meitei separatists, mostly born Hindus, advocated a revival of the state's leading pre-Hindu faith, Sanamahi. They also tried to undermine the use of the Bengali script for the Meitei language and promote the Sanamahi script to encourage ethnic revivalism for strengthening the appeal of the separatist movement. But there were hardly any reports of conversion to Christianity among the Meitei rebel groups. They undermined the role of religion, either in practice or by abnegation.

In Assam, the ULFA stayed silent on the question of religion, and its guerrillas played a visible role in containing religious riots in the Hojai region of the Nagaon district.⁴⁶ The ULFA has been accused of recruiting Muslims of Bengali origin in greater numbers in the last few years, apparently to appease sentiments in Bangladesh, where Muslims continue to find refuge. But this writer has been to several ULFA camps and has interacted with a wide cross-section of ULFA leaders and guerrillas—some still fighting and others surrendered—and has hardly seen any religious activity in the camps. Hindu, Muslim and Christian cadres of the ULFA participate in Assamese festivals such as Bihu, which has more to do with harvests in what is still essentially a peasant society.⁴⁷

In Tripura, where the NLFT has run into stiff resistance not only from Hindu tribesmen but also from left-minded rebel groups such as the All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF), religion has also played a divisive role in the Bodo separatist movement in Assam. The National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) is predominantly Christian. It supports the church's demand for the use of the Roman script for the Bodo language—similar to the NLFT's support for a similar church demand to use Roman script for the Tripuri Kokborok language—and its guerrillas have killed many Bodo intellectuals, cultural icons and writers who oppose the demand. Their victims include a

46. "ULFA jangira bandhuk uchiye danga thamalen" (ULFA stops riots at the point of gun), a report in *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, Bengali daily of Kolkata, 21 December 1992.

47. This writer has extensively visited a number of ULFA camps in Bhutan and Burma as well as those of other northeast Indian rebel groups. Absence of religious activity is conspicuous in ULFA camps and those of the Meitei rebel groups.

former president of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (Bodo Literary Society). The All Bodo Students Union (ABSU), the Bodo Peoples Action Committee (BPAC) and the underground Bodoland Liberation Tigers Force (BLTF) remain committed to the “traditional Bodo way of life” and oppose the demand for using Roman script for the Bodo language.

The overt Christian religiosity of some separatist groups has provoked Hindu nationalist groups such as the RSS to see a “foreign hand” behind the ethnic rebellions of northeast India. RSS leaders, upset with both the spread of Christianity in ever-new areas of the Northeast as well as rebel attacks on their leaders and institutions supported by them, refer to the church’s use of “liberation theology” slogans like “To Christ through People’s Movements” (used by some Baptist denominations in the Northeast) as evidence of its connivance with ethnic separatism.⁴⁸ To counteract this alleged nexus, the RSS is trying to infiltrate a number of ethnic movements, mostly spearheaded by smaller tribes who oppose imposition of Christianity by bigger ethnic groups and rebel armies. Along the Tripura-Mizoram border, the RSS has a strong presence in the camps where the Reangs, displaced by violent evangelistic Mizo groups, have taken shelter. There have been reports that the Reang rebel group, Bru National Liberation Front (BNLF), has received backing from the RSS—as have the Jamatias opposing the NLFT. The RSS has even asked the federal home ministry to provide arms and funds to the Reang and the Jamatia groups. But most of the organizations supported by the RSS represent mainland Indian communities.

The Congress had also used the religious factor in the Northeast when it built up a Zeliang Naga leader, Rani Gaidiliu, to counter the Naga separatist movement. The Rani’s followers practiced the animistic Haraka faith and were opposed to Christianity. But unlike the RSS, which sees religion as the major cause of the ethnic divide in the Northeast, the Congress used religion to promote challenges to separatist movements and weaken them by simultaneously playing on the religious (Haraka versus Christian) and the ethnic (Zeliangs as different from Nagas) divide.⁴⁹ Its stand on the religious question in the

48. V. Sudarshan (RSS chief), interview by author, Kolkata, 20 January 2002.
49. S. C. Dev, *Nagaland, the Untold Story* (Kolkata: Glory Printers, 1988).

Northeast has been governed by electoral concerns—from the use of the sects of Anukul Thakur and Anandmoyi Ma, Hindu cult figures, to win the Bengali Hindu vote in Tripura, to the use of Pir of Badarpur or Jamaat leader Assad Madani in Assam to win the Muslim vote, to the championing of “Christian Socialism” in Mizoram—and its use of religious issues in the Northeast smacks of rank opportunism.

But though the RSS has been stridently vocal about the church-separatist nexus, its preoccupation with the emerging threat of Islamic radicalism in the Northeast and the rest of the country has occasionally prompted its leaders to try and promote “Hindi-Christian understanding” in the region. The RSS chief V. Sudarshan recently told a news conference that “the resurgence of militant Islam based in neighboring Bangladesh and continuous infiltration from that country were the biggest threat to the region that Hindus and Christians must fight together.”⁵⁰ But efforts to bridge the Hindu-Christian divide in the Northeast by playing up the issue of illegal infiltration from Bangladesh were not very successful after Hindu fundamentalists elsewhere in India attacked Christian preachers, including the brutal murder of Australian priest Graham Staines, which evoked a lot of protest from the Christians in the Northeast.

By the time India was partitioned, the Muslim population in north-east India was mostly concentrated in Assam with a small sprinkling in Tripura. Assam, similar to undivided Bengal, was ruled by a Muslim League government during the Second World War. During that phase, a large number of peasants from Eastern Bengal were encouraged to settle down on the “chars” (river islands) of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries. But just before Partition, Sylhet was detached from Assam and given to Pakistan. Some Hindu leaders felt that “amputation of the diseased arm” had been good for Assam.⁵¹ But the inflow of Muslim migrants to Assam has continued even after the breakup of Pakistan. Some religious parties in Bangladesh still feel that Assam should have gone to East Pakistan during the Partition because of its large Muslim population.⁵² In Assam and princely Tripura, Islamic

50. Sudarshan's news conference as reported in *Shillong Times*, Meghalaya, 16 May 1997.

51. Sardar Patel, quoted in R.N. Aditya, *Corridors of Memory* (Kolkata: KLM Firma, 1970).

52. Jamaat-i-Islami monograph, “Bharat Baghe Mussalmanra ki Hariyeche” (Dhaka, 1969).

parties tried to merge those territories with Pakistan during and after 1947—and parties such as the Jamaat-i-Islami continue to feel these areas of northeast India would be a “normal appendage” of Bangladesh.

But until the rise of the BJP in India and its growth in parts of Assam by skillful exploitation of the Babri Masjid issue, Islamic radicalism was practically absent in Assam and the rest of the Northeast. The riots during the Assam agitation, though apparently aimed at “outsiders” and “infiltrators,” did target the Muslims of Bengali origin in a big way. More than two thousand of them were killed in the riots at Nellie and Chaulkhowa Chapori from February to March 1983. The ferocity of the violence split the groups leading the Assam agitation along religious lines, and a number of Assamese Muslim leaders broke away from the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) immediately after the 1983 riots, alleging that the agitating groups had been “infiltrated by the RSS.”⁵³ But there was no violent Muslim backlash. Only some defense groups, such as the All Assam Minority Students Union (AAMSU), were organized in the predominantly Muslim area. And though political parties and the police in Assam made exaggerated projections of their strength and intentions, and the local Assamese press floated stories about their linkages to Islamic fundamentalist groups in Bangladesh, these groups were essentially defensive in nature.

Immediately after the riots and the Assam accord of 1985 that brought an end to the agitation, the Muslims of Bengali origin joined their linguistic Hindu brethren to form the United Minorities Forum (UMF). Traditionally they had voted for Congress but they felt let down by the Congress government in 1983. One of the founders of the UMF said: “For the first time in post-Partition Assam, the Bengali Hindus and Muslims felt the need to come together to protect their interests. We found we were in the same boat. Since we were more than 40 percent of the state’s population, we were sure we could defend our interests against rising Assamese chauvinism.”⁵⁴ But after

53. Seema Guha, “Assam Movement: Shadow of the RSS,” *Sunday*, 28 February – 6 March 1983.

54. Gholam Osmani (former UMF president now back in Congress), interview by author, 28 May 1995.

the rise of the BJP, Bengali Hindus in Assam, unlike their brethren in West Bengal and Tripura, largely turned toward the politics of Hindutva in a decisive way. The Muslims were left with little choice—in elections, they began to vote for the Congress and most of the UMF leaders returned to that party. But the younger and more religious elements did form some militant groups, defensive to begin with but now increasingly proactive. The Idgah Protection Force (IPF) was formed just before the demolition of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya, and some of its supporters were responsible for the attack on the Hindus at Hojai in 1992, in which ninety Hindus were killed. Incidentally, the victims were mostly Bengali Hindus who had started supporting the BJP and its campaign to construct a Hindu temple at Ayodhya in place of the disputed Babri Mosque.

Following the Hojai riots, a number of Muslim radical groups have surfaced in Assam, essentially feeding on the community's growing insecurity in a state where the power-holder elites see them as "agents of Pakistan or Bangladesh." The Assamese fear of being reduced to a minority in their own land, fuelled by the changing demography of the state during the last forty years, has given rise to strong anti-Muslim feelings. Assamese political groups advocate the scrapping of the Illegal Migrants Determination by Tribunals (IMDT) Act promulgated in 1983 by the state's Congress government. These groups say the act, by placing the burden of proof of someone's foreign identity on the state, is actually protecting "illegal foreign migrants" in Assam.⁵⁵ The Assamese groups have received strong support from the BJP, which, in Assam now, has a strong base both among Bengali and Assamese Hindus. Recently, the regional party, Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), has called for a special session of the Assam legislative assembly to discuss the infiltration issue. The ruling Congress government has ruled that out, suspecting a fresh move by the AGP and the BJP to whip up passions against the IMDT Act, a legislation the Muslims see as their only source of legal protection against arbitrary and forced deportations.

55. Sarbananda Sonowal (AASU president), interview by author, aired in South Asia Report, *BBC World Service Radio*, 22 August 1994.

In the 2001 state assembly elections in Assam, the AGP and the BJP worked out a political alliance to fight the elections together. For the first time, Assam witnessed the politics of “religious consolidation,” as the AGP was now reconciled to the BJP’s political stand of treating Bengali Hindus as refugees and Bengali Muslims as infiltrators, preferring to shelter the former and push back the latter into Bangladesh. The Congress came back to power with the support of its votebanks among the Muslim and the Tea tribes (descendants of those who came from Bihar’s tribal regions to work the British tea estates in the nineteenth century), who account for more than 40 percent of the electorate. The BJP’s subsequent efforts to penetrate the Tea tribes, exploiting the religious divide within the community (Assam’s tea laborers are largely first- or second-generation Christian converts, but many remain Hindus), have not met with much success. Assam’s Muslim and Christian minorities, faced with “religious consolidation” of Bengali and Assamese Hindus who would account for more than 40 percent of the population, have decided to stick it out with the Congress. Their combined strength does give them a chance to share power and ensure security.

But this does not appease some Muslims in Assam who have formed militant Islamic groups. The Muslim United Liberation Tigers of Assam (MULTA) is the strongest of these groups.⁵⁶ Formed in 1997, the MULTA has close connections with the Sunni radical group, Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP). The MULTA leaders signed an agreement with SSP leaders at a meeting at Jamait Ul Uloom Ali Madrassa in Chittagong in February 2001. The SSP decided to back the MULTA in its militant activities in Assam. At the political level, the MULTA demands 30 percent reservation in education and employment for Muslims in Assam and also a similar reservation for seats in the state assembly, quite in keeping with their share

56. The Assam police lists a total of seventeen Muslim fundamentalist groups it says are active in Assam, including the MULTA. The other groups are Muslim United Liberation Front of Assam (MULFA), Adam Sena, People’s United Liberation Front (PULF), Muslim Security Council of Assam (MSCA), United Liberation Militia of Assam (ULMA), Islamic Liberation Army of Assam (ILAA), Muslim Volunteer Force (MVF), Islamic Sevak Sangh (ISS), Islamic United Reformation Protest of India (IURPI), United Muslim Liberation Front of Assam (UMLFA), Revolutionary Muslim Commandos (RMC), Muslim Liberation Army (MLA), Muslim Tiger Force (MTF), Muslim Security Force (MSF), Harkat-ul-Jihad-al Islami of Bangladesh, and Harkat-ul-Mujahideen of Pakistan.

of the state's population. But at the religious level, they want the establishment of a chain of Islamic courts in Assam to dispense justice in keeping with the tenets of Shariat.⁵⁷

The Assam police have arrested some MULTA activists, while some have surrendered. During interrogation, some of them have confessed to receiving training at al-Qaeda and Taliban camps in Afghanistan with logistic support provided by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).⁵⁸ The MULTA also recently participated in a convention of Islamic radical groups in Bangladesh held at Ukhia near the coastal town of Cox's Bazaar on 10–11 May 2002. Six Bangladesh-based Islamic militant groups, such as Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HUJAI) and Islamic Shashantantra Andolan, were joined by two Burmese Rohingya Muslim rebel groups and the MULTA at the convention, which was attended by more than sixty delegates of the total nine groups who joined the convention. The convention decided to form an umbrella organization to coordinate the jihad for turning Bangladesh from a "Dar-ul-Harb" (Land of Infidels) into a "Dar-ul-Islam" (Land of Islam)—but it also decided to intensify efforts for the creation of a "Brihat Bangladesh" (Greater Bangladesh) by incorporating areas of Assam and Burma's Arakan province that are now largely settled by Muslims of Bengali origin. Indian intelligence sees the Bangladesh Islamic Manch as a replica of the United Jihad Council in Pakistan. While the United Jihad Council coordinates the struggle for Kashmir's forced merger with Pakistan, the Bangladesh Islamic Manch, in its inaugural declaration, says it will work for the "willful merger" of areas of Assam and the Arakans, which have large Muslim populations of Bangladeshi origin.⁵⁹ That Assam has India's highest percentage of Muslims in any state other than Kashmir only reinforces their fear.

At last, the scare scenario that generations of Assamese have been fed is finally coming true. Groups that would prefer to merge areas of Assam with a Muslim majority and contiguous to Bangladesh have finally emerged. Security analysts in Assam envisage the "eastward surge of the Jihadis"—a projected growth of Islamic militant activity

57. Saikia, "Swadhin Asom or Brihot Bangla" (Independent Assam or Greater Bengal), in *Contours*, a collection of his columns (Assam: Sagittarius, 2001).

58. *Ibid.*

59. "Bangladesh Islamic Manch—Formation and Alignments," report prepared by the Special Bureau's Bangladesh Desk, June 2002.

in the arc that begins at India's Siliguri Corridor (North Bengal area that connects India to its Northeast)—goes through Bangladesh and stretches in India's Northeast and Burma's Arakan province with linkages running west toward Pakistan and the Middle East and east toward Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines.⁶⁰ The presence of Islamist parties, such as the Jamaat-i-Islami and the Islamic Aikyo Jote in Bangladesh's present ruling coalition, has fuelled fears that the country founded on the ideals of Bengali nationalism might become the fulcrum of jihad in the eastern slice of South Asia, which is quite as sensitive and conflict-prone as its west.⁶¹ The repression of Hindu, Christian and Buddhist minorities in Bangladesh after the change of guard in October 2001, widely reported in Bangladesh's vibrant and largely secular press, has provided substance to such apprehensions.⁶²

If globalization is the mantra of the new millennium, then conflicts, just as economies, are likely to be globalized. And if the religious divide fuels a "clash of civilizations," South Asia and its regions will be sucked into it. Religion, which led to the Partition of the Indian subcontinent but did not overtly influence the "little nationalisms" of northeast India, may begin to play a more important role in politics of the region. Not the least because ruling entities such as the BJP in India and the four-party, BNP-Jamaat-led coalition in Bangladesh are choosing to play up and play by the religious divide.

60. Saikia, *Contours*.

61. Bertil Lintner, "Beware of Bangladesh: Cocoon of Terror," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 4 April 2002.

62. Bangladesh press reports detailing atrocities on minorities are quoted in the *Annual Autumn Souvenir* of the Bangladesh Hindu-Buddhist-Christian Council.