

SAMIR KUMAR DAS

Ethnicity and the Rise of Religious Radicalism: The Security Scenario in Contemporary Northeastern India

This paper focuses on the complex interconnection between ethnicity and religious radicalism in contemporary northeastern India and seeks to derive its implications for the region's security. While ethnicity is always considered as one of the dominant factors influencing and shaping the politics of the region, its connection with religious radicalism has become a subject of discussion only in very recent years. In most of the writings on politics of the region, religious radicalism—or for that matter any of its kindred variants—hardly receives any mention.¹ In strategic circles, however, religious radicalism in the Northeast is predominantly seen as a major threat sponsored and masterminded by unfriendly foreign powers acting in close collaboration with, and sometimes at the behest of, forces having no

1. To cite an example, a recently published book on Assam does not contain any entry on religion in its index. See Sanjib Baruah, *India: Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Identity* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

national and territorial base.² Thus, in sharp contrast to the first genre of writings, they not only express a particularly alarmist view but also vociferously deny its internal basis.³ Both of them, however, fail to appreciate the fact that much of religious radicalism in the Northeast is embedded in ethnicity and does not exactly manifest itself in the way it does in other parts of the country. Religious radicalism situates itself within an ethnic matrix and assumes a highly complex character. This paper highlights the importance of understanding this complexity and its bearing on the security scenario of the region.

Religion, in the sense of a standardized set of ideas and practices, was relatively unknown to the predominantly tribal-inhabited parts of the Northeast. The oral nature of tribal religions and traditions allows a certain degree of flexibility and openness. The ideas and practices would vary significantly from one area to another, even among the members of the same family of tribes. Many of them do not feel the necessity of codifying and standardizing their ideas and practices. The religion of the Khasis of Meghalaya, for example, describes man's relation to God as direct and unmediated. No fixed set of ideas and practices is expected to govern their inter-relationships. Since there is a direct "covenant" between man and God from the beginning of time, there are no scriptures and standard forms required to follow while communicating with Him.⁴ As religion becomes standardized, it rules out the possibilities of flexibility, openness and local variations. Standardization therefore serves as a means through which the adherents of religious ideas and practices articulate themselves into a relatively stable community. The articulation of a community, in other words, presupposes a certain standardization of its religious ideas and

2. See, for example, Jaideep Saikia, "Swadhin Asom-Brihat Bangla?" in *Contours: Essays on Security and Strategy* (Guwahati: Sagittarius, 2001), 18–20. See also P. V. Ramana, "'Networking' in the Northeast: Partners in Terror," *Faultlines* 11 (April 2002): 99–126. Strategists and strategic analysts often accuse the social scientists who research this region of being insensitive to the threat posed by "terrorism" in general and Islamic militancy in particular. See Ajai Sahni, "Social Science Research and Contemporary Conflicts: The Challenge of Research on Terrorism," *Faultlines* 9 (July 2001): 131–57.

3. Saikia, for example, observes that the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), one of the principal insurgent groups operating in the region, has failed to rope in new cadres deeply committed to its ideology and also in "instilling a growth curve in its ideology." See Saikia, *Contours*, 72.

4. Kynpham Singh, "Khasi Religion and Khasi Society," in Sujata Miri, ed., *Religion and Society of North East India* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1980), 44–45.

practices. For unless the norms are fixed and ideas and practices crystallized, no stable community of adherents can cluster around them. If people fight among themselves over what the ideas and practices are or should be, they do not form a homogeneous community.

“Religious radicalism,” to my mind, is a comparatively recent coinage. Its preference to other adjacent and much-used yet necessarily distinct terms, such as “communalism” and “fundamentalism,” may not at first sight appear to be too obvious to someone who is not very conversant with the society and politics of South Asia. While these terms may not be mutually exclusive, each has its distinctive accent and emphasis. The term “communalism” is usually reserved for referring to the political use of religion by arraying one community against another, whereas “fundamentalism” refers to the transformation (often described as “distortion”) at the level of ideas and practices characteristic of any particular religion. Political use calls for certain flexibility in the realm of these ideas and practices, for their use must render them serviceable to the exigencies of a given situation. Fundamentalism, by definition, rules out such flexibility for it freezes off certain ideas and practices by way of accepting them as “fundamental” and hence inviolate. But if one takes a longer time frame, one notices that ideas and practices held as “fundamental” to a particular religion by its adherents at any given time may not be held as such at another time. The changes in the corpus of so-called fundamentalist ideas and practices, even in the case of such stable and standard religions as Islam and Christianity, are too obvious to be easily brushed aside.

Religious radicalism, as we have said, is a new currency.⁵ It first of all underlines the importance of religion in clustering a body of adherents around it and making them chart out a separatist path. Religious radicalism serves as the principle of community formation. As it brings together a group of adherents, it enables them to supersede the differences that are otherwise internal to them. Nagas, as we know, are an extremely polyglot and heterogeneous body of people consisting approximately of thirty-two groups strewn around various

5. Aijaz Ahmed used the expression in 1996. Aijaz Ahmed, “Radicalism of the Right and Logics of Secularism,” in Praful Bidwai et al., eds., *Religion, Religiosity and Communalism* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1996), 37–74.

parts of the Northeast and bordering Myanmar. They are not only culturally different but speak languages and dialects sometimes unintelligible to each other. Insofar as the Nagas convert themselves to Christianity, they are capable of transcending many of their cultural and linguistic differences. By the same token, the advent of Christianity introduces new and hitherto unknown sources of division within the same ethnic community (say, between the Christian and non-Christian Nagas). The rise of “radical” Islamic organizations in Assam, especially in the 1990s, has its social constituency among the Muslim immigrants—mostly from East Pakistan/Bangladesh. This has in fact brought about a sharp division between the Hindus and the Muslims among the immigrants. The riots that broke out in Assam in 1992 were confined to these two communities of immigrants. More often than not, community formation goes hand in hand with the demand for a separate statehood—whether within the Indian Union or without. As we will see, radicalism and separatism usually go together. Sometimes separatism is also expressed through a plea for redefining the nationhood, per se, of a country in a way that implies exclusion of certain communities hitherto considered as its constituent parts.

Secondly, all this is accompanied by a certain radicalization of the ideas and practices. Some of the factors responsible for this may be noted in this connection. One, the newfound zeal in following and observing them—especially in the Christian-dominated parts of the Northeast—is not only obsessive but speaks of a certain ethnicization of an otherwise universal faith. The Christianity practiced by the Nagas is known as “Naga Christianity.” Similarly, the Christianity practiced by the Khasis is called “Khasi Christianity.” Even if most of the Nagas and the Kukis happen to be Christians, they seldom pray in the same church. Vaishnavism in Assam also has its own peculiarities and is markedly different from that of Bengal or other parts of eastern India.⁶ Likewise, Hinduism in Manipur is different from that of the rest of India.⁷

Two, this also implies a certain standardization of the norms and practices of the religion. The early flexibility in the observance of

6. See Suniti Kumar Chatterji, *The Place of Assam in the History and Civilization of India* (Guwahati: Gauhati University Press, 1955), 69–71.

7. N. N. Bhattacharya, *Religious Culture of Northeastern India* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995), 49.

norms and practices slowly gives way to their standardization. Certain ideas and practices are taken to be the be-all and end-all of a community so much so that anybody not seen to be falling in line faces various forms of social punishment (e.g., ridicule and rebuff, social ostracization, physical harm or annihilation or the threat of such). In the absence of a standardized religion among many of the communities living in the region, some of their ideas and practices are expressly projected as their own and enumerated to hold the members together and put up an organized resistance to others—maybe their Christian counterparts. For them, it is like founding a new religion seen as a cementing force in the face of a Christian or Hindu onslaught. *Brahma* among the Bodos,⁸ *Sanamahi* among the Meiteis of Imphal valley,⁹ *Seng-Khasi* among the Khasis of Meghalaya¹⁰ and *Heraka* among the Kacha Nagas (consisting of the three tribal communities of Zemei, Lingmei and Rongmei, also known as Kabui)¹¹ living in the hills of Manipur are illustrative of this trend.

Three, radicalization in the Northeast assumes an organized character. The militant Islamic organizations seek to arrogate to themselves the sole authority of interpreting Islam. Social and political organizations set forth the norms according to which the adherents are expected to conduct their lives. This involves gradual restriction of scope for local variations and flexibility in the observance of these norms. An example may be cited in this context. Professor Leela Gogoi has classified “the Muslims of Assam” into five distinct categories: the descendants of the prisoners of war held hostage by the Ahom rulers in course of their operation against the Mughals; the descendants of *pirs* (holy men) and their disciples who came to Assam for preaching their respective dispensations; the descendants of eight artisan families specially employed by the Ahom dynasts; the natives

8. See Kameswar Brahma, *A Study of Socio-Religious Beliefs and Practices and Ceremonies of the Bodos* (Kolkata: Punthi Pustak, 1992), 193–208.

9. See N. Vijayalakshmi Brara, *Politics, Society and Cosmology in India's North East* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

10. See N. K. Das, *Ethnic Identity, Ethnicity and Social Stratification in Northeast India* (New Delhi: Inter-India, 1987), 231–34. Also see Sunil Sen Gupta, “Alienation or Crisis of Identity: Struggle of the Seng-Khasis” in S. B. Chakrabarti, ed., *Social Science and Social Concern*, Felicitation Volume in Honor of Professor B. K. Roy Burman (Delhi: Mittal, 1988), 346–55.

11. See Stephen Fuchs, *Godmen on Warpath* (New Delhi: Munshiram Banarasilal, 1992), 136–51.

(*thaluwa*) converted to Islam; and temporarily settled, cultivating (*pamuwa*) Muslims.¹² Since most of the Muslim immigrants are engaged in farming and cultivation, they evidently belong to Professor Gogoi's last category. Interestingly he makes a distinction between the "Muslims of Assam" (*Asomar Musalman*) and the "Assamese Muslims" (*Asomiya Musalman*). In his words, only the latter ought to be regarded as "an inseparable part of Assam's original (*mul*) nationality."¹³ His hesitation to include the immigrant Muslims in the "original" Assamese nationality is overt. Today, however, the inclusion of the Assamese Muslims in the so-called original Assamese nationality is not as unproblematic as Professor Gogoi wants us to believe.¹⁴ The examples of harassment and humiliation meted out to such eminent litterateurs as Syed Abdul Malik, whose identity as "Assamese Muslims" has never been in doubt, were by no means rare during the days of the Assam movement (1979–85).

This paper makes a preliminary attempt to draw attention to the formation of radical religious discourses that are slowly gaining currency in the region in recent years. The importance of studying their historical roots can hardly be denied. The paper of course makes occasional references to the region's history. But this should not be taken to mean that present-day religious radicalism in the Northeast stands in any simple and linear correlation to its history. In fact, there are as many histories of religious radicalism as there are radical religious discourses. Thus to cite an example, as many as ten political organizations "representing the Meiteis and those who speak Meeteilon" in a memorandum submitted to the prime minister of India raised the demand for inclusion of Meeteilon in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India in 1992. They also urged the central government to recognize "original" Meeteilon script (in place of Bengali prevailing at that time) as "the only script" to communicate their language. The memorandum seems to have presented a history that not only draws them closer to their Mongoloid and tribal

12. Leela Gogoi, *Asomar Sanskriti* (in Assamese) [The Culture of Assam] (Jorhat: Bharati Prakashan, 1982), 273. Note: All translations from original Assamese/Bengali sources are by the author.

13. *Ibid.*, 279.

14. For an analysis of the crisis of identity faced by Assamese Muslims, see Udayon Misra, "Immigration and Identity Transformation in Assam," *Economic and Political Weekly* (Mumbai) 34, no. 21 (22 May 1999): 1,270.

neighbors but virtually erases another equally significant “history” of their incorporation into the Vaishnavite brand of Hinduism since the beginning of the eighteenth century. Bengali, being the language of Santa Das Gossain—the meandering monk from Sylhet who had preached Vaishnavism to Manipur Court—becomes the visible symbol of such incorporation. In other words, the formation of a radical religious discourse makes certain historical statements possible and thereby sets forth a trajectory that fixes its limits.

In a region like the Northeast, radical religious discourses are situated within a very complex demographic and ethnic matrix. The process of community formation inspired by the emergence of radical religious discourses in the Northeast has taken on an ethnic character as much as the prevailing ethnic lines of difference slowly get translated into religious divisions. To appreciate their complex interconnections, it may be instructive to keep three relatively distinguishable *moments* in mind. Each moment is characterized by a specific conjunction of ethnic and religious forces. These moments should not be taken as precise and neatly divided chronological stages. For all of them can be (and in reality are) simultaneous and overlapping. The first moment is represented by the tribes’ *encounter* with the standard religions from outside. In most cases, such encounters have resulted in the incorporation of the masses of tribals into some standard religion—whether Hinduism or Christianity. It may be noted in this connection that Islam did not exist as an alternative in a region that never formed part of Mughal India. As we have seen, the encounter invested the tribals of diverse groups and sub-groups with some form of a pan-tribal identity. The second moment is that of *resistance*. This is a moment characterized by the tribes’ resistance to the dominant trend toward their incorporation into the fold of any standard religion. Interestingly, the articulation of tribal religions at this moment follows the same rules and codes as those of the so-called standard religions. In a region like the Northeast, where immigration from across international borders has already assumed alarming proportions, the third moment is represented by the slow and rather imperceptible *translation* of the citizen-foreigner dichotomy into a plain and simple Hindu-Muslim divide in recent years. We know that the number of Muslims living in Assam, especially in bordering districts, has gone up to a point where it cannot be accounted for merely by their

natural growth. Muslim immigrants are viewed predominantly as a threat to the language and culture of the Assamese.

The paper also discusses the implications of the rise of religious radicalism for the security of the northeastern region. The Indian state faces a threat to its security insofar as its claim to represent the nation is contested through the invocation of radical religious discourses. Such discourses, as we will see, contest not only the state's *authority* to stake the claim but also the *way* it imagines the nation into existence while representing it. As argued elsewhere, the nation that the state in post-colonial India claims to represent is marked by a certain discontinuity with the one that came into being in the course of the nationalist movement.¹⁵ We view religious radicalism as a threat—whether actual or potential—to the state's representation of Indian nationhood.

Accordingly, the paper is divided into four closely inter-related parts. The first three parts analyze three distinct moments of religious radicalism in the Northeast. In the fourth, we seek to derive their implications for the security of the region.

Before we make any headway, it is necessary to mention at least three major limitations of this paper. First, it is true that the relative invisibility of religious radicalism in the region produces a certain insensitivity to the security threat associated with it. But the paper does not suggest that we instantly press the panic button. Such reactions, I feel, are extremely premature. Although the combination of the ethnic with the religious makes for an interesting and in some sense unique case, no attempt has been made in this paper to compare it with the scenario of the rest of India. Secondly, the main objective of this paper is to analyze, *in very broad terms*, the phenomenon of religious radicalism in contemporary northeastern India. While pursuing this objective, the paper draws on some examples and cases that may appear to be of a highly selective and arbitrary nature. The selection of cases was by no means an easy job. But in most cases, it has been inspired by concern for the region's security. While the importance of closer and detailed micro-studies can hardly be doubted, any analysis of the overall security scenario in the region at the initial stage calls for an understanding of the phenomenon only in

15. Samir Kumar Das, *Ethnicity, Nation and Security: Essays on Northeastern India* (New Delhi: South Asian, 2003).

broad terms. It is also interesting to know whether fragmented and dispersed micro-studies, by themselves, can at all contribute to any meaningful understanding of the region's overall security scenario. In support of my arguments, I have depended primarily—though not exclusively—on some of the research I have conducted in various parts of the Northeast during the 1990s. References to many of these examples and cases are both brief and sketchy. Thirdly, foreign powers—not quite known for their friendliness to India—reportedly play a role in aiding and abetting the phenomenon of religious radicalism. We do not have any independent way of verifying the linkage. This definitely is one of the major limitations of the paper. It is only likely that they try to fish in *already* troubled waters. But to attribute the entire phenomenon to the activities and machinations of a few foreign powers and external forces is perhaps too simplistic.¹⁶

Encounter

CONTRARY TO WHAT THE COLONIAL RULERS and anthropologists would have us believe, contemporary evidence suggests that the Nagas, especially those living in the foothills, were in constant contact with the tribes of the nearby plains in upper Assam. But the nature of the contact was such that they by and large did not perceive it as a source of threat to their distinctive cultural identity. Such contacts involved a wide variety of social, economic and cultural exchanges of commodities, services and women. But it was only with the colonial annexation of the Naga Hills during 1832–74 and the advent of the American missionaries in 1872 that the Nagas felt threatened and organized themselves against the colonial rule and the American missionaries.¹⁷ By all accounts, the early history of the spread of Christianity in the hills was fraught with frictions and violent conflicts between the missionaries and the autochthonous tribal groups.¹⁸

16. I have criticized the “foreign hand theory” in Samir Kumar Das, “National Security in the Age of Globalization: A Study of the State’s Responses to Ethnic Insurgency in Assam,” in Gurnam Singh, ed., *Ethnicity and the Emerging International (Dis)Order* (New Delhi: Kanishka, 2002).

17. See Sanghamitra Misra, “The Nature of Colonial Intervention in the Naga Hills, 1840–80,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 33, no. 51 (19 December 1998), 3,273–79; Sajal Nag, “The Context of Insurgency in Northeast India” (2002, photocopy).

18. Verrier Elwin, himself associated with the church, chronicles many examples of such frictions in the nineteenth century. See Verrier Elwin, ed., *The Nagas in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969).

Contact per se was not a taboo for the Nagas. But the contact that brought them into an essentially asymmetrical relationship with the colonial rulers definitely was. Interestingly, it was only after independence of India that Christianity became a formidable force and the number of Christian converts started growing up by leaps and bounds.

It is interesting to note how Christianity plays a key role in the articulation of the Naga rebel discourse. Today Naga rebel discourse, especially the one articulated by the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (now Nagalim) (I-M), has reached a point where it is impossible to sever it from Christianity. First of all, Christianity serves as thread that is believed to have bound heterogeneous Naga groups together into one single Naga “nation.” Now 98 percent of the Nagas happen to be Christians. The articulation of the Naga rebel discourse implies an erasure of the pre-Christian past that is marked by fierce and violent internecine conflicts among various Naga groups. A.L. Ao, a distinguished Naga scholar, in his recently published book argues that it is only “through the love of Jesus” that the Nagas “came to know of each other and recognize the existence of the co-tribes.”¹⁹

Secondly, while Christianity could not serve as a unifying symbol in the battle against the colonial rulers practicing the same religion, it is looked upon as a potent force that is capable of differentiating Nagas from the “Hindu state” in India. The Manifesto of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (I-M), prepared in 1980, accuses the Indian state of having “introduced decadent Hindu culture and literature to the Nagas on a massive scale.” This, as Ferdaus Quarishi argues, may be one of the factors explaining the rising number of converts in the wake of independence of India.²⁰

It is clear that the Naga rebel discourse shows a tendency of accepting Christianity as an accomplished and irreversible fact of Naga history. While the role of Christianity in bringing the Naga “nation” into existence in its present form can hardly be denied, its relation to the constitution of the Naga “nation” is neither axiomatic nor free from hassles. Some of the problems that continue to act as fetters may be

19. A. Lanunungsang Ao, *From Phizo to Muivah: The National Question in Northeast India* (New Delhi: Mittal, 2002), 217.

20. Ferdaus Quraishi, *Christianity in the Northeastern Hills of South Asia: Social Impact and Political Implications* (Dhaka: University Press, 1987), 11.

noted at this point: One, it has brought in a new source of division between the Christians and the non-Christians even within the Naga rebel ranks. The friction can be traced back to the days of Naga National Council (NNC), the harbinger of insurgency in the Naga Hills. In the 1960s when a section of Naga rebels started hobnobbing with China and sought help from her, the church leaders under Rev. Longri Ao expressed their concern.²¹ The tilt toward Communist China was perceived by the church as a threat to the propagation and spread of Christianity. In July 1989, Isak Swu and Tuengaling Muivah, the chairman and secretary, respectively, of NSCN, accused Khaplang, then vice chairman, of killing dozens of “Christian socialist revolutionaries” who were Tangkhul Nagas. Two, the increase in the number of Christians in Nagaland is neither sharp nor unilinear. The abrupt decline in number, especially in some years, actually shows that some Nagas who had earlier converted to Christianity must have refused to identify themselves as Christians in subsequent years. If one tabulates the volume of the Baptist Church’s membership between 1941 and 1965, one is surprised to discover the sudden fall in some particular years. For example, in 1944, the membership dropped to 30,980 from 32,452 in the immediately preceding year. In 1947, the figure stood at 41,237 compared to 50,601 in the previous year. In 1952, membership declined to 56,272 from the previous year’s 63,392. In 1959, it fell to 72,531 from 74,053 in 1958. Similarly, it declined from 90,718 in 1961 to 76,840 in 1962.²² It seems that their conversion makes room for such withdrawals and the path from tribalism to Christianity is extremely slippery.

We may wrap up this section by way of pointing to the transformation that Christianity undergoes while becoming a rallying cry for the constitution of the Naga “nation.” Christianity among the Nagas is of course “Naga Christianity.” According to Julian Jacobs, Christianity in Naga Hills has “a character that is *sui generis*.”²³ Ethnicization of religion deprives it of its universal appeal and prevents them from being united with other non-Naga Christians (e.g., the Kukis). Even after

21. B. G. Verghese, *India’s Northeast Resurgent: Ethnicity, Insurgency, Governance, Development* (New Delhi: Konark, 1997), 93.

22. Figures compiled from P. T. Philip, *The Growth of the Baptist Church in Nagaland* (Gauhati: Baptist Mission, 1976), 226.

23. Julian Jacobs, *The Nagas: Society, Culture and Colonial Encounter* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1990), 157.

embracing Christianity, Khasis do not cease to be Khasis. R.T. Rymbai, for example, argues that of “the three commandments” that guide the religious life of the Khasi-Pnars of Meghalaya, the third (*tip kur, tip kha*) “forms an integral part of their religion.” While paraphrasing this commandment, he writes:

The Khasi-Pnars take their descent from the mother. The children take their surnames from hers. All those who descend *ka iawbei*, the first ancestors, form one composite clan. Marriage between members of a clan is forbidden. It is a sin, which is unforgivable....I cannot imagine a Khasi-Pnar born and brought up a Christian, deliberately violating this commandment and can hope that this abominable sin, which the Khasi-Pnars called *ka pap ka sang*, will be forgiven if he prays in the name of Jesus.²⁴

Resistance

WE HAVE ALREADY SAID that the tribals’ encounter with standard religions was never free from problems. They found their own religion insufficiently equipped to put up a resistance to the spread of Hinduism or Christianity. The eclipse of tribal religions in the wake of what we call “encounter” has more or less been a universal story. Tribal religions are commonly categorized as “Others” in government circles. The figures under this category register what looks like an irreversible decline. In the encounter between the standard and tribal religions, the latter was seen to give way. In Assam, the decrease between 1951 and 1961 was about 7 percent; in Manipur about 22 percent. Between 1961 and 1971, the decrease in Meghalaya was about 4 percent and in Nagaland about 21 percent.

In most cases, resistance is triggered by the threat tribal religions face while encountering standard religions from the plains. The Bodos were the earliest in the region to have embraced Hinduism under the influence of the Vaishnava *gossains* (preachers) in the sixteenth century. Before their encounter with Hinduism, the Meiteis of Imphal valley had their traditional religion that included “total” faith

24. R. T. Rymbai, “Some Aspects of the Religion of the Khasi-Pnars,” in *Miri, Religion and Society*, 38–42.

in Lord Sanamahi, the highest local deity of Manipur, homage to *paphal* (a particular posture of a coiled serpent symbolizing cosmic power) and the observance of a number of rituals and festivals. Over a period of three centuries, the Meiteis were converted to Hinduism through the introduction of alien Hindu religion under the patronage of King Garib Nawaj (1707–48). The entire Meitei population was converted to Hinduism during his time by a royal edict passed in 1717. This was followed by a series of measures to destroy all traces of the traditional Meitei religion. In 1723, most of the temples of the *lais* (local deities) were destroyed. In 1927, all the *maichous* (local scholars of excellence) were ordered to bring all the books and manuscripts written in old Meitei script in their possession and all these were burnt to ashes in an event popularly known as *puya maitabha*. A strict royal edict was proclaimed that forbade singing of the devotional songs in Manipuri. Many people reading Meeteilon script were executed. As Hodson comments: “Religious dissent was treated with the same ruthless severity as meted out to political opponents, and wholesale banishment and execution drove the people into acceptance of the tenets of Hinduism.”²⁵

It is interesting to note how resistance is organized by way of “reviving” what the members of a tribe consider to be their traditional (sometimes described by them as “original”) faith. The recent “revival” of the worship of *Bathou* as the supreme God and cactus (*sisu*) as the emblem of that God is an expression of their eagerness to differentiate themselves mainly from the Assamese-speaking Hindus. It is interesting to note that the Meitei resistance to their gradual incorporation into the Hindu fold took on an essentially linguistic character. During the Meeteilon movement, the Government of India was accused of having unleashed and perpetrated “linguistic imperialism.” In November 1991, the All-Manipur Students’ Union (AMSU) spearheaded a civil disobedience movement that included, among other things, boycotting of the scheduled languages in educational institutions, rebuffing the national anthem and a ban on screening of the Hindi and other scheduled language films. Mr. K. Saratchandra, then president of AMSU, warned that if the government failed to concede their demand (for the inclusion of Meeteilon

25. T. C. Hodson, *The Meitheids* (London: David Nutt, 1908).

in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution), “it might harm the integrity of India.”²⁶ In short, traditional Meitei religion and culture were invoked only to emphasize their role in vitiating the language and posing a threat to the natural continuity of the community. The Meitei case demonstrates how religion becomes secondary only to language in the quest for collective identity.

It is in this context that the tribal attempts at reviving their religions need to be examined. We have already said that conversion to standard forms does not rule out their distinctive ethnic identity. The “revival” of the tribal elements is possible because “Hindu eschatology absorbs (rather than obliterates) the tribal traditions.”²⁷ In most cases, tribal religions are seen to undergo some kind of standardization while organizing their resistance. Stephen Fuchs, for example, has described the introduction of *Heraka* among the Kacha Nagas as a means of “sanskritizing” their faith and keeping them at par with Hinduism.²⁸ Rani Gaidiliu, one of its principal mentors, became a member of the All-India Hindu Council in 1962.

Translation

ASSAM REMAINED by and large outside the communal map of India. While large parts of India were rocked by successive tremors of post-Partition riots, Assam and many other parts of the Northeast were surprisingly free from the menace. The state did not fall in line when communal riots broke out in northern India in 1964 on the issue of the alleged theft of the holy relic of the Prophet from the Hazratbahl mosque in Kashmir. It seems that Assam’s inclusion in the communal map is a comparatively recent phenomenon. It is only with the demolition of the “Babri Masjid”/“disputed structure” in 1992 that the news of communal riots starts to trickle in from the state. It is important to understand the phenomenon in its proper perspective.

26. *Hindustan Times*, 29 April 1992.

27. Chandra Jyoti Sarmah, “Religious Trends and Identity Crisis: A Cross-cultural Study among Three Plain Tribes of Assam,” in Sarthak Sengupta, ed., *People of Northeast India: Anthropological Perspectives* (New Delhi: Gyan, 1996).

28. Fuchs, *Godmen on Warpath*, 145.

The Assam movement (1979–85) is usually regarded as a benchmark in the politics of the region on several counts. First of all, it was perhaps the only one of its kind in post-colonial India that could not only involve diverse segments of the people of Assam but also sustain itself for six long years. Indeed, the popular base of the movement was so significant that the *Assam Tribune*, then the largest circulating English daily published from Assam, in one of its editorials likened it to the Gandhian civil disobedience movement of 1942. Secondly, it brought to a head for the first time the issue of “illegally settled foreigners” coming from across the borders. Migration to Assam is by no means new or unprecedented. Assam’s attraction as a favorite destination of the immigrants since the beginning of the last century is by now well recorded.²⁹ With a vast expanse of fertile, alluvial land and population density at its lowest in the-then India, it became the natural destination of the poor and land-hungry peasants. Communal considerations might have played a part in bringing in an ever-increasing number of immigrants—mostly peasants of Muslim background, from adjoining East Bengal as a means of broadening and consolidating the support base of the Muslim League reigning in Assam in the early part of the twentieth century. While sporadic outbursts by the natives against such settlement were by no means rare,³⁰ there was hardly any organized and enduring mass movement of this magnitude organized against the settlers. The Assam movement in a way seems to have burst open the lid that had capped, as it were, the grievances accumulated over the years in the minds of the natives. Thirdly, it sparked similar movements in many other parts of the Northeast at about the same time or even thereafter. Tripura, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh were rocked by a series of similar anti-foreigner agitation both in the 1980s as well as in the 1990s. In many ways, the Assam movement is paradigmatic of many of these subsequent movements in the region.

Since it was a movement that could successfully draw diverse segments of the people of Assam together under the umbrella of a

29. Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826–1947* (New Delhi: PPH, 1977), 102.

30. According to Amalendu Guha, Manik Chandra Baruah was the first to have raised his voice of protest against the dangers involved in indiscriminate immigration of Muslims way back in 1915. See Amalendu Guha, *ibid.*

strong and enduring mass movement (at least during the initial years), the Assam movement was bound to be of multi-dimensional nature. The movement seems to have been characterized by the complex interplay of a number of discourses. All of them converged at a common site, enacted and played out in complex and apparently unpredictable ways. There is a tendency in scholarly circles to lose sight of this enormous complexity and reduce the movement to any one of them. We feel that the complexity was irreducible, and it is interesting to see how these discourses impinged on each other and produced strange and unanticipated results. At one level, it was a movement that centered on the opposition between the citizens and the foreigners. (A “tussle between the citizens and foreigners” as Prafulla Mahanta, the president of the All-Assam Students’ Union during the movement, who subsequently became the chief minister of Assam, points out.³¹)

The three major demands underlying the movement were detection, disenfranchisement and deportation of foreigners. The leaders and ideologues of the Assam movement strove hard to keep the opposition from sliding into a simple Hindu-Muslim divide. For example, it was asserted that the movement was explicitly targeted against the “foreigners” irrespective of their religious and ethnic identity.³² This is what encouraged them to describe it as “Indian” and emphasize their identity as Indian citizens. They congratulated themselves on being the first to take up a cause of national importance. They also wondered why such a cause had so long been neglected at such great expense. As Mahesh Joshi, an ardent sympathizer of the movement, has put it: “The basic fact of the Assam movement is that the people of Assam are fighting an all-India battle ... single-handed.”³³ It is true that in some cases, as we have said, the Muslims per se were indiscriminately branded as “foreigners” and those among them whose identity as Indian citizens was never in doubt were forced to bear the brunt of the movement. It amounted to a violation of what the leadership had

31. Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, *The Tussle between the Citizens and Foreigners in Assam* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1986).

32. All-Assam Students’ Union, *The Foreigners Problem: Why a Solution is Still Elusive?* (Panbazar: Lawyer’s, 1983).

33. Mahesh Joshi, *Assam: The Indian Conflict* (New Delhi: Prachi Prakashan, 1981), 90.

celebrated as the *authentic* opposition.³⁴ Caught in the grave dilemma of failing to acknowledge what in practice was widespread, the public reactions of the Assamese leadership to the incidents of violation were interesting: sometimes, it simply refused to accept the fact that violations had taken place at all and chose to adopt an ostrich-like policy. Often it was forced to acknowledge violations at the instance of others by disingenuously reading them into the authentic one, by castigating the victims as people who might have been Indian citizens themselves but went out of their way in sheltering and protecting their co-religionist “foreigners,” thereby jeopardizing Indian interests. “Good” Muslims are always “bad” citizens. The perceived otherness of immigrant Muslims remained deeply embedded—yet publicly unacknowledged—in all such attempts. Besides, the leaders and ideologues seemed to have made a subtle distinction between the Hindus and the Muslims among the immigrants and went on record saying that the threat to their language and culture came from the Bengali-speaking Hindu immigrants rather than their Muslim counterparts. As Homen Borgohain observes: “The problem of outsiders for many of the Assamese is the problem of Bengali Hindus. Because they believe that it is only from them that the danger to their culture could come.”³⁵ The Muslim immigrants have returned Assamese as their mother tongue in consecutive census operations conducted in the state especially since Independence. It was only in 1991 that many of them returned—albeit at the instance of some minority organizations (e.g., the United Minorities Front)—Bengali as their mother tongue, thereby forcing a decline in the percentage of Assamese-speaking people for the first time in Assam’s history.

But at another level, the leaders and ideologues emphasized their identity as Indian citizens not because the Assamese were any more Indian than others, but because they looked upon their Indian identity as a vehicle of preserving their distinctive ethnic identity, language and culture. Most of the documents published by the organizations

34. I have discussed this opposition in Samir Kumar Das, “In Search of a Community: The Immigrant Muslims of Contemporary Assam,” in C. Joshua Thomas, ed., *Dimensions of Displaced People in Northeast India* (New Delhi: Regency, 2002), 350–51.

35. Homen Borgohain, *Bahiragatar Samasya* (in Assamese) [The Problem of Outsiders] (Guwahati: Kamal Malakar, 1979), 24.

leading the movement emphasized the threat that the alarming influx had posed to the Assamese language and culture and asserted their “right to place under the sun.”³⁶ In short, Indian citizenship provided an empty space within which their Assamese identity was enacted and played out.

Immigration from across the borders has by all accounts gone down in recent years. Census figures show that Assam’s population grew by 53 percent between 1971 and 1991 (no census could be held in 1981 due to the movement), 1 percent lower than the All-India average. Though decreasing in numbers, there is reason to believe that immigration has acquired some alarming proportions in recent years. Research intermittently conducted on the problem of immigration in the Brahmaputra Valley points to some alarming trends. First, the migrants no longer come in a haphazard and sporadic manner. They do not pour in from wherever they can. Nor do they settle wherever they see vacant land in Assam, which earlier was the case.³⁷ In most cases the immigrants enter Assam from some well-known points of entry in an organized and planned manner. They usually take the help of their local contacts—sometimes people of their own villages settled in Assam, or even Indian brokers or middlemen who make money by way of getting them transported to their places of destination and providing them with “official” papers as proof of their Indian citizenship. It seems there exists a well-knit network thorough which migration takes place. The role of the early settlers coming from the same village or district of Bangladesh is important in getting the late-immigrants settled and economically rehabilitated. Since the entire process works as a chain, their detection and punishment by the guest-state become highly improbable. By the time their presence starts being felt in the polity and economy, they are pretty well settled and it is impossible to single them out and detect them. While the presence of operatives, middlemen and brokers establishing a network through which immigration takes place and continues unabated

36. See for example, Asom Sahitya Sabha (Asom Literary Society), *Eclipse in the East: An Analysis of the Present Agitation in Assam* (Guwahati: Publicity Cell, Asom Sahitya Sabha, 1980), 8.

37. I have discussed migration in Samir Kumar Das, “Immigration and Agricultural Modernization: The Case of Assam (1979–83),” *Socialist Perspective* 20 (Kolkata), nos. 3 & 4 (December 1992–March 1993): 165–75.

can hardly be doubted, their connection to what Hiranya Kumar Bhattacharyya calls, “Muslim conspiracy” of transforming the demographic composition of Assam is not all too apparent.³⁸

Secondly, the demographic pattern of the Brahmaputra Valley thus has undergone a distinctive change in recent years. The valley is known for the presence of some very conspicuous immigrant-inhabited pockets and there is reason to believe that these pockets are swelling, in terms of percentage of the population living there. The extraordinary growth of population in pockets known to have a very high concentration of immigrants is disproportionately greater than the average growth rate of population in Assam. Two factors continuously work against any neat and precise estimate of the district-wide composition of population in Assam. The cracking and splitting of districts, especially since the early 1980s, does not allow us to compare the population trends in any simple manner. Moreover, since no census operation could be held in Assam in 1981, population data usually come in the block of twenty years. However, if one chooses to break up the entire block in order to obtain the average for the decade—whether of 1971–81 or 1981–91—certain interesting facts become obvious. Most of the districts, though not all, which during either of these two decades recorded a growth rate higher than that of 1961–71, are believed to be immigrant-inhabited pockets of the state. Table 1 on the following page gives us some idea of the population trends in these districts.

Table 1 takes into consideration only those districts where the percentage of population growth during 1971–81/1981–91 has been greater than that of the previous decade. Not all cases of unusual increase can be attributed to the influx of population from across the borders. For example, the increase in some of the upper Assam districts, such as Jorhat, may have been due to the displacement of population caused by the devastating rounds of annual floods in the adjoining districts of Majuli and Dhemaji.³⁹ Cachar and Hailakandi,

38. See Hiranya Kumar Bhattacharyya, *The Silent Invasion: Assam versus Infiltration* (Guwahati: Spectrum, 2001), pp. 122–28.

39. Studies have been conducted under the auspices of O. K. D. Institute of Social Change and Development, Guwahati, to survey the impact of floods on the population composition of some of the upper Assam districts. The reports are available for private circulation.

Table 1. District-wide population trends (%) in Assam

District	1961–71	1971–91	1971–81/ 1981–91
Kokrajhar	8.12	22.48	11.24
Kamrup	1.07	26.92	13.46
Darrang	1.51	12.39	6.19
Sonitpur	-8.2	29.52	14.76
Morigaon	0.38	13.39	6.69
Nagaon	3.08	12.27	6.13
Golaghat	4.81	27.27	13.63
Jorhat	6.7	15.63	7.81
Sibsagar	-3.89	12.29	6.14
Tinsukia	4.9	16.01	8.00
N. C. Hills	3.05	58.3	29.15
Hailakandi	-3.62	22.93	11.16
Cachar	1.36	22.63	11.81

Source: *Statistical Handbook: Assam* (Guwahati: Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam, 1996), 18–19.

though outside the Brahmaputra Valley, are a favorite immigrant destination primarily because of their ethnic proximity to the local population. N.C. Hills has a substantial percentage of tribal population and of late there is believed to have been a perceptible immigration of the tribals from the neighboring states of the region. But the districts of lower Assam mentioned above are widely believed to have contained many immigrant-inhabited pockets. The ethnic divide between the immigrants and the natives shows signs of coinciding with a certain territorial segregation in the state. The hitherto noticed cheek-by-jowl settlement of the immigrants and the natives might have its pitfalls, but it certainly gave both these groups an opportunity to know each other and interact. This has led a number of social scientists working on the region to express satisfaction with the process of social assimilation taking place between the groups. In a sense, this was true. For example, some recent studies point to a growing assimilation of the people living in the *Char* (embankment) areas. According to a report prepared by Assam's Char Unnayan Nigam

(Embankment Development Corporation) in 1997, an estimated 2.1 million people live in as many as 2,089 Char villages. Muslims constitute an overwhelming majority (about 1.8 million) among them. Most of their forefathers came to Assam in the late-nineteenth century and have become, in the words of Dr. Rezaul Karim, “an inseparable part of the Assamese nation.”⁴⁰ They have adopted Assamese as their mother tongue and even sided with the Assamese in the language movements of 1960 and 1972. But with the change in the demographic settlement pattern, occasions of interaction between these groups have been considerably reduced. As the immigrants—mostly Muslims—live in ghetto-like settlements and in the process reduce the natives to a minority in the immediate neighborhood, they cannot be expected to “accept Assamese cultural icons and institutions so easily.”⁴¹ Hiranya Kumar Bhattacharyya refers to a survey conducted by Sudhakar Rao on the settlement pattern in the district of Marigaon, which is known for its high concentration of immigrants. According to him, during the early 1980s when the Assam movement was at its peak, as many as twenty-five villages of the district were “totally de-Hinduized.” Rao analyzed the case of seventy-four other villages, which were “exclusively Hindu villages until 1983” but which were in the process of “being taken over by the Muslim immigrants.”⁴² The rate of immigration exceeds that of assimilation. In fact, according to Udayon Misra, it is the other way around. The inclusion of “the neo-Assamese Muslims” (in an obvious reference to the immigrants who had returned Assamese as their mother tongue in the consecutive census operations) has led to the “transformation of the Assamese identity”:

Regarding the majority of the Assamese language, there seems little doubt because the number of neo-Assamese will keep on increasing. But while the future of the Assamese speaker is ensured, the future content and course of Assamese language and literature is bound to change along

40. Rezaul Karim, “Asomar jatiya jeewan aru char-chaporir musulman” (in Assamese) [The National Life of Assam and the Muslims of the Embankments], *Asom Sahitya Sabha Patrika* 56, no. 2 (February 2001): 29.

41. Udayon Misra, “Immigration and Identity Transformation in Assam,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1,264–71.

42. Quoted in Bhattacharyya, *The Silent Invasion*, 125.

with the expansion of the cultural determinants of the Assamese society. While the large majority of the neo-Assamese Muslims are today in the process of being integrated with the Assamese community whose cultural determinants are largely Hindu, yet further imbalance in the demographic structure in favor of immigrant Muslims may result in the rise of pan-Islamic positioning.⁴³

Thus to conclude, the particular settlement pattern and the waning of social intercourse between the immigrants and the natives are what make the present-day immigration particularly threatening.

Thirdly, the immigrant pockets seem also to turn fast into hotbeds of fundamentalism and insurgency. It is true that fundamentalism has never been altogether alien to the political practice of the immigrant Muslims. Yet, its present-day version is remarkably different on many counts. First, there is reason to think that the newly ascendant Islamic fundamentalism has acquired an organized and militant character. Security agencies in India reportedly have information that about fifteen militant Islamic organizations are operating in the state, of which three (viz., Muslim United Liberation Tigers of Assam [MULTA], Muslim Liberation Army [MLA]—formerly known as the Muslim United Liberation Front of Assam [MULFA], and Islamic Liberation Army of Assam [ILAA]) are quite strong. Many of them are reportedly acting at the behest of such foreign espionage agencies as the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and “ultra-fundamentalist bodies” such as Islamic Chhatra Shibir and Jamaat-i-Islami of Bangladesh. Formerly their activities were restricted to the multi-ethnic areas of the Brahmaputra Valley (e.g., Nagaon and Marigaon) where Muslims have always been in sizeable numbers. But now their activities have spread out to the vast areas of BARPETA, Goalpara and Dhubri, and even to such far-off areas as Cachar of the Barak Valley.⁴⁴ While their activities are engulfing ever-newer areas, they are also undergoing a certain militarization. The roots of fundamentalist militancy among immigrant Muslims may be traced back to the large-scale

43. Udayon Misra, *The Transformation of Assamese Identity: A Historical Survey*, H. K. Barpujari Endowment Lecture 4 (Shillong: North East India History Association, 2001), 82.

44. Dileep Chandan, “Assam: Closing Ranks,” *Sunday*, May 7–11, 1997, 59–60.

anti-Muslim pogroms in the Brahmaputra Valley organized during the tumultuous days of 1983. One may recall that the Muslim section of the AASU leadership, comprising such persons as Nurul Hussain and Nekibur Zaman, was so deeply hurt at this that it severed all connections with the organization for turning itself into a mouthpiece of the “chauvinist Hindus” and thereby sacrificing its secular character. A Muslim Volunteers’ Force was raised in Assam as a vanguard for protecting the Muslims against attacks from the Hindus. Its stated objectives are:

... to impart training in the Muslims for self-defense, to form “death squads” to enroll people and training them for protecting the people belonging to the Muslim community in buses, trains and in public places, to take suitable measures against those who by virtue of their power and high ranks are condemning the Muslims, torturing and killing them, to take counter-measures then and there, to take steps for restoring Muslim interests wherever they are in jeopardy, to extend help to Muslims who are in dire straits, to convert Assam into the Waterloo of RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) and to take a constant vigil on government employees and to inform the authorities about their misdeeds.⁴⁵

Even Saiyad Azad Madani, widely appreciated for his moderate views, called upon the Muslims to unite against the Asom Gana Parishad, a proclaimed successor to the forces loyal to the erstwhile Assam movement, and to take up arms whenever necessary:

The religion has not prevented Muslims from fighting the enemies. If someone comes to attack you, then try to make him understand with sympathy; but if someone does not understand, then engage him in a frontal battle.⁴⁶

In the same public meeting held at Doboka, Assam, Madani also exhorted Muslims to train in karate and kung fu in self-defense and to spend a minimum of three to four hours a day for arms training. The

45. *Saptahik Neelachal* (in Assamese), 20 July 1983.

46. *Agradoot* (in Assamese), 25 February 1990.

Muslims, he added, should remember that Asom Gana Sangram Parishad, which had spearheaded the movement, killed “thousands of their brothers” in earlier years. Muslim fundamentalism has so far made it a point to see the Indian state as the ultimate savior and protector of Muslim interests. But now it seems that the fundamentalists no longer show the patience of keeping faith in the state. Their faith has of late been severely eroded with the effect that they either fall prey to foreign forces or feel the necessity of standing on their own and resolving their problems without resorting to the Indian state. That the faith of Muslim immigrants has considerably eroded in recent years is evident from the fact that *Kalam*, which by its own admission is the spokesman of the Muslims, accused Hiteswar Saikia, then chief minister of Assam, of falling “victim to the Hindutva-wadi game plan.”⁴⁷ The more this feeling gets entrenched, the less they are likely to approach the state to vent their grievances.

It is true that the opposition between citizens and foreigners shows signs of being translated into a plain and simple Hindu-Muslim dichotomy. But still a section of insurgents is not easily reconciled to this trend. In tune with its “secularist” stand, United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) promises to fight hard against this. ULFA’s designation of the immigrants from East Bengal as “one of the major parts of the people living in Assam” (*Asombasi*) is significant. In one of its most detailed statements on the question issued in 1992, ULFA argues that Assam has always been a “nation of immigrants” insofar as the people of diverse nationalities and sub-nationalities came to Assam at different times and made it their home. The organization reminds us of the rich contributions made by the immigrants from East Bengal—whether by rendering vast tracts of fallow land cultivable or by enriching the Assamese language and culture by embracing them. It is unfortunate that the “All-India political leaders” have used them as “political pawns” and “vote banks” by making false promises. Warning against the commonplace attempts at condemning and stigmatizing them as “neo-Assamese” or “cultivating Assamese,” ULFA proposes to redefine the word “Assamese” (*Asomiya*) and make immigrants of East Bengal one of its inseparable parts. As it maintains: “Instead of referring exclusively to the

47. A. H. Imran, “Anuprabesh: sharyantrer neel naksha” (in Bengali) [Infiltration: The Blueprint of a Conspiracy], *Kalam* (Kolkata), August 1992.

Assamese-speaking people, by Assamese we refer to all the ethnic groups and their combinations, to all those who are committed to the all-round development of Assam.”⁴⁸ Two, it actually calls for translating the citizens-foreigners dichotomy into a battle against *dilli-bad* (“Delhi-ism” or the “colonialism of New Delhi”). It counts on the immigrants from East Bengal as a partner in its battle against “colonial domination”: “People who are backward in terms of education and economy and who are involved in the fierce struggle for existence cannot be our enemies.”⁴⁹ It seems that ULFA looks upon them as crucial class allies in this battle.

ULFA’s “secularist” outlook was reflected in the role it played in course of the communal riots of Nagaon in 1992. On the one hand, it took upon itself the responsibility of maintaining law and order and compensated for the reported inadequacy of both police forces and firearms at their disposal. On the other hand, the “armed” campaign of its cadres against the perpetrators of communal hatred and, most importantly, for the preservation of peace and communal amity was, according to newspaper reports, very effective.⁵⁰ However, the Front’s self-professedly “secularist” stand on the question of immigrants is not at all free from ambiguities. For one thing, it runs the risk of alienating the general Assamese sentiments that still largely weigh against the presence of illegally settled foreigners. ULFA perhaps understands this, and it is because of this that it reportedly issued a statement in quick succession, overriding the one mentioned above. A similar statement of Arabinda Rajkhowa (its present chairman), released to the press in late 2001, is reflective of ULFA’s continuing uneasiness with the question of foreigners. Besides, according to some strategic analysts, ULFA cannot afford, for obvious reasons, to alienate Bangladesh by way of coming down heavily on the foreigners.⁵¹ For ULFA, it is really tight roping insofar as the question of immigrants is concerned.

48. “Asomabasi Purbangeeya janagoshtiloi ULFA-r Ahvan” (in Assamese) [ULFA’s Call to the Groups of East Bengal Living in Assam], *Budhbar* (Guwahati), 24 June 1992, 5–6.

49. *Ibid.*

50. Subir Bhaumik, “Sena-police noi, Nagaonke banchalo ULFA jangirai” (in Bengali), [Neither the Army nor the Police, ULFA Militants Saved Nagaon], *Ananda Bazar Patrika* (Kolkata), 15 December 1992.

51. Saikia, *Contours*.

The Question of Security

RADICAL RELIGIOUS DISCOURSES pose a threat to security on at least two mutually divergent grounds. First, some of them question the very *raison d'être* of the nation-state. When religion is made to serve as the basis of an Islamic *Ummah* or Brotherhood, it refuses to be confined to any particular nation and evidently cuts across diverse ethnic and national lines. The Taliban is a classic example of this critique. It does not propose to replace one nation-state by another. Rather, it proposes to do away with the very structure of nation-states.⁵² Notwithstanding the universalism, its connection with the Islamic *jihadi* groups, reportedly operating in some parts of Bangladesh and the Northeast, is believed to be tenuous. That the Bangladeshis are not taken by bin Laden as “true Islamic Brothers” and are castigated as *mishkins* speaks of the deep yet latent ethnic divide that marks the movement.⁵³ The mission of Islamic Brotherhood is likely to take more time to articulate.

Secondly, insofar as religious radicalism serves as a basis of separate community formation—variously described by its adherents as a “nation” or a “nationality”—it produces a plea for bringing a separate state into existence. The nation-to-state trajectory is perfectly in consonance with the classical paradigm of the nation-state. For by establishing themselves as a nation, the members of a community lay their claim to a separate and independent statehood. What is significant to note here is that it contests only the Indian state’s claim to represent them. One of the arguments advanced by a section of Naga rebels is that since they are Christians, they do not form part of “Hindu India.” While the claim to nationhood is vindicated by the presence of a separate religion—separate from that of the “Hindi-Hindu mainstream”—their presumed nationhood becomes the basis of the demand for political self-determination and separate statehood. A section of the immigrant Bengali-speaking Muslims of Assam provides the social constituency of the demand for an independent “Islamistan” or “the United States of Bengal” comprising the border-

52. See Oliver Roy, “The Changing Patterns of Radical Islamic Movements,” CSNS Policy Paper Series, (New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2001).

53. Bhaumik, “Bangladesh: The Second Front of Islamic Terror” (2002, photocopy).

ing districts of Assam and Bangladesh. The very demand of such states—let alone their formation—challenges the “ideological basis” of the Indian state.

As a corollary, the discourses question merely the Indian state’s authority to represent their communities as parts of the Indian nation. But these do not necessarily question the authority, per se, of the Indian state to represent the *Indian* nation. The point is, since they do not consider themselves as constituent parts of the Indian nation, they likewise do not like to be represented by an agency that represents it. The Naga rebel discourse is interesting because it not only wants to assert the right to “political self-determination,” but also looks upon the enjoyment of this right as a guarantee for promoting “good neighborliness” between the Indians and the Nagas.⁵⁴ However, it is firmly entrenched in the nation-state paradigm.

The interconnection between ethnicity and religious radicalism in the Northeast is far too complex to allow any simple conversion of the religion-based “two-nation theory” into a multi-nation theory where Christianity is yet another basis of nationhood or its axiomatic linkage with external forces. Mediation of ethnicity by the forces of religious radicalism keeps the process of community formation in the region perpetually fluid and uncertain.

54. See Kaka Iralu, “Why I Write the Book: A Note to the Reader,” in *Nagaland and India: The Blood and the Tears* (Kohima: Kaka Iralu, 2000).