Borders As Disturbed Areas

Securitization Of India's Northeast And Its Implications

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Abstract

This paper tries to examine the complex interface between security and territoriality in the context of the Post-Colonial Indian State's policy of militarization and other co-optation policies of the geo-strategic northeast region and the socio-economic, geo-political and foreign policy implications of the same. The emergence of the seven states of Northeast India has been marked by violent secessionist movements, insurgencies, assertions of ethno-cultural identities and demands for self-determination and autonomy. This has invariably prompted the Indian State to declare various parts of the region as 'disturbed areas' under different legislations, effectively equipping its armed forces with extraordinary powers over the civilian populations in these areas. The securitization of northeast is exemplified by the prolonged imposition of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) 1958 that is borne out of the national security mindset of New Delhi's policymakers in their effort to stem the separatist tendencies of the Nagas and the Mizos, leading to excesses in law and order implementation and numerous human rights violations in the areas concerned. In this backdrop, the present study will try to draw attention to the futility of military-led counter-insurgency measures of the post-colonial Indian state that fail to take into account the unique aspirations and issues of the communities concerned and the need to adopt a balanced and holistic approach in dealing with its volatile border region. The paper uses qualitative method and relies on secondary sources drawing from a rich literature on the northeast including books, journals and online materials.

Keywords: Northeast, Border, National Security, AFSPA, Counter-Insurgency, Post-colonial.

Introduction

The northeast region[i] of India has for long been neglected and relatively unknown due to its geographical remoteness and ethno-cultural distance from the Indian national mainstream[ii]. However, in the post-cold war scenario of foreign policy changes especially with the introduction of Look East Policy (renamed Act East since 2014), the region appears to be 'rediscovered' and accorded new priority by policymakers in New Delhi. In the recent times, the discourse on Northeast has been increasingly incorporated into the wider international area studies owing to its unique geo-political location and significance in New Delhi's diplomatic and strategic calculations. Situated at the tri-junction of South, Southeast and East Asia, it naturally forms a part of a larger transnational highland zone as conceived in the idea of 'Zomia', a vast expanse of non-state spaces traversing five Southeast Asian nations and four provinces of China (Scott 2010). The region shares 98 per cent of its boundaries with five other countries- China, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Nepal and

Myanmar[iii]- while precariously linked overland with mainland India through the narrow chokepoint of Siliguri Corridor sandwiched between Nepal and Bangladesh. This had been a direct result of the post-colonial partition of the Indian sub-continent[iv] that deprived the northeast of its natural access to the sea and rendering it landlocked and virtually cut off from continental India (Schendel 2005).

The geo-political history of the region as a British colonial frontier, the peculiarities of the creation of ethnic homelands and autonomous districts within the region and the secessionist movements, insurgencies and militancies associated with such formation makes the region a 'troubled child' or 'troubled periphery', a problematic label that defines much of 'Northeast's image' in the post-independence period (Bhaumik 2009). Northeast is a region peripheral to the national imaginary (Baruah ed 2009) and peripheral in the national consciousness of the racially dominant mainland India (George 2012). As a matter of fact, the use of the monolithic term 'northeast' belies the great complexities and diversities of the ethnic, ecological, cultural and linguistic composition of the individual states which practically make them 'anthropological hotspots'[v]. Many scholars have in fact steered clear of seeing or analyzing the northeast as a compact whole or a single entity and suggested a more nuanced and elaborate approach in understanding the region's diverse problems. Also, the hill-plain divide within the Northeast has been a defining feature that embeds ethnic aspirations, conflicts and autonomy demands among various groups and communities manifested in intra-regional politics- as in the case of Manipur- as well as in the multi-faceted relations with the centre (Baruah 2007). The hills have been theatres of prolonged armed struggles for self-determination and independence since the British withdrawal from the sub-continent.

But noteworthy is the fact that these upland hill areas are inhabited by ethnic tribes dubbed as 'wild savages' in the colonial parlance (Lewin 1912) that strongly resisted colonial sovereignty but are subsequently subjugated and co-opted by the more advanced colonialists. The forceful colonial penetration into and later mapping of the remote hill tracts between Chittagong (Bangladesh) and Arakan/Rakhine (Myanmar) was faced with colossal challenges due to lack of knowledge about the extremely difficult topographies and the fierce opposition put up by the war-like 'savage' tribes in defending their territories (Jangkhomang Guite 2014). These assertions took the form of frequent raids into plantation areas that fell under the British jurisdiction causing insecurity and loss of revenues and even lives to the latter. Thus punitive expeditions were carried out in successive stages "in a show of force" to deter the 'most powerful tribes' from launching their attacks on a recurrent basis (Reid 1983, p. 2). Although such operations were eventually successful in bringing the hill tribes into the fold of the British rule by the gradual process of fusing their traditional forms of governance, i.e., chieftainship with modern means of civil administration, they were allowed to remain autonomous in handling their affairs to some extent. The Chiefs, usually from the upper clans of the village, became the tools for expanding and consolidating British suzerainty over the hills in a policy of co-optation and indirect administrative control, an exercise extensively emulated by the post-independence Indian State.

The existence of exclusionary policies like the Inner Line Regulations exacerbated the disconnect between the state spaces of the plains and the non-state spaces of the hills, especially after the latter were declared Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas under the Government of India Act 1935. The Nagas, as a consequent, have always maintained their sovereignty vis-à-vis India and launched one of the most resilient struggles for independence in Asia since 1947. The Naga National Council (NNC) headed by A.Z. Phizo declared independence one day before India gained its freedom[vi]. This was followed two decades later by the Mizo Uprising in the wake of a severe famine called *Mautam*[vii] led by the Mizo National Front (MNF). The uprising was a cumulative response to the longstanding grievances of the Mizos against the post-colonial Indian government and their inability to collectively reconcile with their inclusion into the Indian Union, triggered by the inaction and indifference of the political establishment in Assam with which the famine situation in the hill district was dealt with (Bhaumik 1995).

The Mizo movement lasted for another two decades until a Peace Accord was signed on 30th June 1986 in New Delhi and Mizoram achieved full statehood. The Naga movement, on the other hand, was later carried on by the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) under the factional leadership of Thuingaleng Muivah, Isak Chisi Swu (NSCN-IM) and S.S. Khaplang (NSCN-K) after denouncing the 1975 Shillong Accord between the NNC and the Indian government. The Assam Disturbed Areas Act first came into force in 1955 in order to give a free hand to the Indian army to suppress the Naga uprising that erupted in March the same year (Iralu 2015). It was later repealed and incorporated into the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act which was passed by both the Houses of Parliament and approved by the President on 11 September 1958.

It is in this context that the paper tries to highlight the complex interface between ethnicity, border and security through a geo-political and geo-strategic understanding of New Delhi's policies and approaches towards the northeast region. The implications of such policies that give supremacy to the 'national security interests' are far-reaching and cannot be sufficiently captured in a single narrative. This study will thus limit itself in focusing on the post-colonial experience of northeast as a 'conflict zone' trapped in a vicious cycle of violence and counter-violence and the deep sense of mistrust and suspicion borne out of the imposition of draconian laws like AFSPA 1958 on areas declared as *disturbed* by the central Indian government. It argues that the military-led counter-insurgency strategy had proven to be futile at best and alienating at worst and only serves to deepen the emotional chasm between 'mainland' and 'periphery' even in the present context of transnational economic cooperation and regional engagement that prioritizes the borderland region in a number of ways.

Table 1: Some Important Particulars of the Northeast States

State	Population (as per Census 2011)	Area (In sq. km)	Capital	Date of Attaining Statehood	No. of seats in Lok Sabha	No. of seats in Rajya Sabha
Assam	31,169,272	78,438	Dispur	15 Aug 1947	14	7
Arunachal Pradesh	13,82,611	83,743	Itanagar	20 Feb 1987	2	1
Manipur	27,21,756	22,327	Imphal	21 Jan 1972	2	1
Meghalaya	29,64,001	22,429	Shillong	21 Jan 1972	2	1
Mizoram	10,91,014	21,081	Aizawl	20 Feb 1987	1	1
Nagaland	19,80,602	16,579	Kohima	1 Dec 1963	1	1

Tripura	36,71,032	10,486	Agartala	21	Jan 1972	2	1

Source: Based on States of the Northeast at a glance prepared by MDoNER as per 2011 census available at www.mdoner.gov.in

Crisis of the Post-Colonial Borderlands

The most interesting conceptualization of the northeast region has been its transformation from that of a colonial frontier into a borderland or border region in the post-colonial era (Schendel 2005; Upadhyay 2009; Baud and Schendel 2005). The breaking down of post-colonial Assam, in what some authors refer to as the 'Balkanization of Assam' and the creation of five smaller ethnic states (Kar 2009, p.79)- greatly impacted upon the borderland ethnoscape in the northeast. It is precisely this problematic transformation that underscores the varied contestations and claims regarding ethnic homelands based on ethno-cultural as well as socio-political claims and aspirations. In this context, the mental and geographical distance between the northeast and the rest of India became even more conspicuous. If Northeast was physically aloof from mainland India before and during the colonial period, its isolation in the aftermath of independence was somehow complete (Bhaumik 2009). The post-colonial political changes further shaped northeast into a peripheral borderland, cut off from the mainland India yet disjoined with neighbouring Burma, Bangladesh and Bhutan[viii]. The partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan and subsequent formation of Bangladesh rendered northeast practically landlocked and inaccessible.

The region's geographical advantage through its communication network with East Pakistan including rail, road and river links was severely limited. Moreover, the region is bounded by boundary lines such as the MacMahon Line, the Radcliffe Line, the Pemberton Line and even the Inner Lines- as laid down in the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulations 1873- that marked off the erstwhile frontier hill areas from the more advanced plains in an attempt by the British to preserve the non-state traditional spaces of the tribesmen. These arbitrarily drawn imperial lines continue to dictate notions of sovereignty, autonomy and geo-polity in the northeast. According to David Zou and M. Satish Kumar, the European cartographic culture of geographical courses impinges on the construction of a distinctive "geo-ethnic" regional identity delineated by inner and outer boundary lines. The objectified "geo-body" of British Assam pictured by European maps reduced India's Northeast borderlands to thin boundary lines. This objectification process based on rough survey maps continued in the post-colonial period (David Vumlallian Zou and M. Satish Kumar 2011, p. 5).

The continuation of the Inner Line system- an offshoot of the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulations 1873- is also a form of recognition of the strategic location of these areas along the international borders as well as their cultural and physical distance from the plains and the restricted connections between the two. An Indian citizen from the mainland areas being considered an 'outsider' and therefore requiring an official permit to enter the hill states is somewhat an intriguing aspect of the outcome of post-colonial Indian engagement with the Northeast. This way, post-colonial spaces of the diverse ethnic groups were re configured in the name of protection of their territories from "land-hungry" outsiders and preservation of their cultural integrity from the plains people as well as from each other. The nationalist leaders' attempt to integrate the myriad communities and territories of British India post-independence coincided with the rise of political consciousness based on ethno-cultural identities in the Northeast. The Nagas, for example, have always maintained their distinct and unique ethno-racial identity which has formed the basis of their fight for an independent homeland called 'Nagalim' and resisted being assimilated into the integrationist discourse of the post-colonial State by forging their own political path through insurgency.

According to Barry Buzan et al (1998: 23-24), security is the move that takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames the issue either as a special kind of politics or as above politics. In their argument, any public issue can be located on the spectrum ranging from nonpoliticized (meaning the state does not deal with it and it is not in any other way made an issue of public debate and

decision), through politicized (meaning the issue is part of public policy, requiring government decisions and resource allocations or, more rarely some other form of communal governance), to securitized (meaning the issue is presented as an existential threat, requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure). The prolonged armed resistance of the Nagas against inclusion into the post-colonial Indian system has led to the same being seen as an existential threat for the Indian government justifying thereby its securitization (as opposed to a mere politicization) by the latter. In analyzing the securitization of the Naga imbroglio, Roychoudhury (2015: 5) observes that by legitimizing the use of 'emergency measures', securitization approach in effect prescribes military action by the state on a short-term unilateral basis to counter the threat (identified as such) to security and sovereignty.

The rebel consciousness of the 'nations from below' defied the nation-building agenda of post-colonial India which was seen as hegemonic and state-centric. Hence, the much desired state-sponsored national integration and citizenship was not achieved (Roy 2005). Two outstanding issues in this context came to the fore; viz., *the ethnic political mobilization* and *the national security question.* While the former soon assumed separatist overtones and violent assertion of and demands for autonomy, the latter became the rallying point, as well as justification by the Indian political leadership of its forceful suppression of ethnic uprisings. The juxtaposition of these two forms the core analysis of insurgency and counter-insurgency in several scholarships pertaining to the northeast. While the northeast insurgencies can fall under various categories depending on the ideology that guided them, the post-independence separatist movements were largely a product of the 1947 Partition and the new national consciousness in the borderlands it created (Schendel 2005: 263). Leaders of these insurgent groups saw India as an occupying or colonizing power and hence sought assistance from neighbouring countries like Pakistan as well as China, "realizing that the enemy of their enemy was their friend" (Ibid, 264).

The transnational nature of northeastern borders made it possible for insurgents to seek hideouts from neighbouring Bangladesh (former East Pakistan) and Myanmar and by extension, to seek support from other rebel groups camped in these territories and also training and weaponry from China. These endeavours had included long and arduous treks in the jungles and into unfamiliar terrains for days and months at a time and helped in externalizing the insurgent movements to a great extent. Intensified Indian Army operations on the western side of the border also drove the Naga insurgents to seek sanctuaries and lines of communication through the sparsely populated hills of northwestern Burma in the early 1960s (Lintner 2015:75). Their success in establishing external linkages as well as in receiving military and financial support from foreign powers was largely responsible for sustaining these movements which proved to be resilient despite the various counter-insurgency measures employed by the Indian state. After the 1962 Sino-Indian border war that starkly revealed vulnerabilities of India's northeast, the Indian establishment under Nehru also became concerned of a possible truce between the Chinese army and the Naga insurgents that could result in a 'Tibetan-style liberation' of the Naga Hills. The granting of statehood and emergence of Nagaland state in 1963 could be seen to some extent as an outcome to allay such fears (Bhaumik 2009: 41).

The spillover effects of northeast security crisis across the borders had also been one of the major factors that pushed India's foreign policy towards Myanmar for a shift in trajectory in favour of a 'constructive engagement' since the early 1990s, charting a new course in border cooperation and management at the bilateral and sub-regional levels. Such foreign policy shifts have enabled 'transnational imaginings' of the landlocked periphery that situate northeast in a wider context. India's new border-centric approach and its courting of Myanmar's military government was however widely deduced as a strategic move guided heavily by its security interests and as an expansion of its counter-insurgency tactics while counter-balancing the Chinese growing overtures in Myanmar (Renaud 2008; Saikia 2009; Bhatia 2011; Gupta 2013).

Rule of AFSPA and The Culture of Impunity

In the light of the above discussion, it can be argued that Northeast India's 'durable disorder' as aptly termed by Sanjib Baruah, has its roots in the colonial and post-colonial configuration and re-configuration of the complex ethnic landscape of the region. According to Baruah (2007), the transformation of non-state spaces into state-controlled spaces provides the backdrop to many conflicts in Northeast India and engendered multiple forms of resistance. The simplistic notion that most often identifies economic backwardness as the causative factor which is borne out of a developmentalist mindset does not hold ground in the face of evidences of India's post-modern nation building efforts that failed to accommodate alternative histories of smaller nationalities (Baruah 2002; Dutta 2005: 100,101). The re-organization of the northeast since the early 1960s and the subsequent formation of ethnic majority states had cast a long shadow on the governance structures of the borderlands as well as the overall socio-political climate. Baruah (2007) noted that the northeastern states that came into existence were created primarily in pursuit of an agenda driven by national security unlike other parts of India. The failure to correctly diagnose the root cause of Northeast's political crisis has incurred huge costs in terms of state resources and loss of lives.

It is helpful to mention Baruah's application of the concept of 'security dilemma' to the proliferation and persistence of ethnic militant groups in the absence of the State as a reliable security provider, an important function they sought to serve for and within their respective ethnic communities (Sanjib Baruah 2005, p. 16). Apart from ethnic rivalries and competition for State's resources and centrally-sanctioned finances, some visions for ethnic homelands have made neighbouring states uneasy, such as in the case of Greater Nagaland or *Nagalim.* The NSCN (Isak-Muivah)'s proposal for amalgamating all Naga-inhabited areas including parts of Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh within India and also parts of Northwest Burma's Sagaing Division can be understood in the context of the 'mindless post-colonial mapping' of the territorial lands and fragmentation of the traditional ethnoscape of these tribes that resulted in their incorporation into different political entities (domestic or foreign) without their due consent. However, the homeland demand has also caused enormous inter-state tensions and proved to be a stumbling block- along with other issues- in the conclusion of the longstanding Naga peace process[ix].

Despite the fluidity of conflict and the multi-layered nature of insurgency in the northeast, one current feature that stands out in all the cases is the strong presence of the military/ paramilitary and the human rights abuses associated with their presence (Kunal Mukherjee 2014, p. 20). It is interesting to point out here that most of the security personnel deployed in the remote borderlands are from mainland India who look nothing like the indigenous 'mongoloid' peoples of the northeast and are outside the cultural spheres of the latter (Ibid). Their presence in the region is thus comparable in some ways to external intervention in other parts of Asia such as the United States' military presence in Afghanistan where one can easily tell the difference between the occupier and the occupied (Ibid). Although demands for secessionism or greater autonomy in the case of northeast are usually dubbed as internal conflicts that legitimize the Indian State's military intervention, the fallouts of extensive security installation have led to an Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act-induced security regime and an accompanying culture of impunity to take hold in various parts of the northeast.

As argued by Baruah, parts of India's human rights record in the northeast would have put many other democracies to shame (Sanjib Baruah 2005, p. xvi). With ethnic tensions and conflicts refusing to dissipate and the ever increasing rise of armed militias taking advantage of the situation, the imposition of extra-judicial laws like the AFSPA and its uninhibited enforcement constantly places Northeast under a virtual state of emergency. AFSPA, which was passed on 11 September 1958, empowers the Indian security forces to arrest anyone without warrant, to search any place that supposedly harbors suspicious elements, and to fire or to use force even to the point of causing death against any person or an assembly of persons who are deemed to have broken the law in the areas declared as "disturbed" (Amit Rahul Baishya 2010, p. 15). Section 3 of AFSPA stated thus:

If in relation to any State or Union Territory to which this Act extends, the Governor of that State or the Administrator of that Union territory or the Central Government, in either case, is of the opinion that the whole or any part of such State or Union territory, as the case may be, is in such a disturbed or dangerous condition that the use of armed forces in aid of the civil power is necessary, the

Governor of that State or the Administrator of that Union territory or the Central Government, as the case may be, may, by notification in the Official Gazette, declare the whole or such part of such State or Union territory to be a disturbed area.

What makes AFSPA particularly controversial, however, is inscribed in Section 4 of the Act that sanctions any commissioned officer or warrant Officer, or non-commissioned officer or any other person of equivalent rank in the armed forces, after giving due warning, "...to fire upon or otherwise use force, even to the causing of death, against any person who is acting in contravention of any law or order for the time being in force in the disturbed area..." Although the AFSPA is technically against Article 21 (right to life) and Article 22 (protection against arbitrary arrest and detention) of the Indian constitution, it has been implemented in the States of Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Tripura as well as Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram. The most problematic aspect of investing extraordinary powers to the paramilitary forces dealing with conflict situation is that they have 'zero accountability' and maximum authority. Echoing the Act's moniker as 'the license to kill', lawyer and scholar A.G.Noorani terms Section 4(a) of the Act a statutory obscenity, a carte blanche that occurs in no statute anywhere in a democracy.

In fact, AFSPA retained the second and third clauses in the Assam Disturbed Areas Act which empowered the army personnel to shoot and kill and provided them with legal immunity against prosecution except by that of the central government (Chasie and Hazarika 2009). The Disturbed Areas Act, 1976 the National Security Act, 1980, Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act, 1985 are some of the other laws that have been used to counter insurgency activities in the Northeast region. The Indian army executed these laws with the help of other central paramilitary forces such as the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), the Border Security Force (BSF), the Assam Rifles and the various intelligence bureaus and the police forces of the concerned states (Upadhyay 2009, p. 85).

Goswami argues that while AFSPA does represent the skewed security regime of the Indian State in the northeast region, it is not a sole instance of the case but only a symptom of a larger malaise characterized by alienation, militarization and a dangerous counter-insurgency strategy (Goswami 2010). There had been intense public debates and discussions about the law especially in the more recent context due to rising allegations as to its misuse against civilians. The excesses of the Indian military in the form of human rights violations constitute a paradox in the Indian democracy. Concerns over abuse of human rights under AFSPA and Indian government's have been raised time and again by the United Nations Human Rights Committee in its reports as India is a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCCPR). It has been pointed out that sustained deployment of the Indian army and federal paramilitary forces on "internal security duties" has militarized, rather than democratized, the social and political spaces in the northeast (Subir Bhaumik 2009, p. 16.).

The constitutionality of AFSPA has been a major point of debates and discussion by various committees and human rights groups including the United Nations Commission for Human Rights (UNCHR). A 1997 report by a fact finding team of Indian lawyers, journalists and human rights activists observed that the security forces have "blatantly violated all norms of decency and the democratic right of the people of the region and that militarization had become "a way of life" in Northeast India (NCC-AFSPA 1993:53 cited in Sanjib Baruah 2007). To put things into context, one needs to revisit the past and present conditions under which militarization of public and civilian spaces have taken place and the security implications of such as can be seen in the context of *Rambuai*- the period of insurgency in Mizoram where the brunt of military repression under AFSPA had been acutely felt.

Counter-Insurgency and Village Re-grouping in Mizoram

At the time of the British withdrawal, there was a great uncertainty about the political future and apprehensions grew in the Mizo Hills. The Mizo Union[x] mainly comprised of moderates agreed to join the Indian Union within the constitutional framework while the extremist groups were strongly against it. In a memorandum submitted to the Bordoloi Committee, the leaders of the Mizo Union expressed their willingness to stay within the Union of India for a duration of ten years provided that their demands for creation of Greater Mizoram[xi], autonomy on matters of internal administration and granting of sufficient annual grants to Mizoram for

developmental needs are guaranteed (Prasad 1987). With regard to the future status of the Mizo district, they maintained in a consensus that they should be given the option to secede from India once the interim period of association was over (Ibid).

The option of joining Burma once India gained independence was proposed by the United Mizo Freedom Organization (UMFO) citing cultural proximity and prospects for better representation. However, the desire to secede gained momentum in the wake of *Mautam*, a severe rat famine crisis, as the much anticipated help did not come on time from the government despite repeated requests, leaving thousands of Mizo to suffer grave consequences (Khiangte 1991). Thus, a Mizo National Famine Front was conceived in 1960 to undertake relief measures for the famine victims. It later transformed into a political party under the name 'Mizo National Front' (MNF) with Laldenga as its President and ultimately spearheaded the independence movement for the Mizos. At the height of armed conflict between the Indian army and MNF rebels in the late 1960s, the army proposed to carry out resettlement of the Mizo villages as a counterinsurgency tactic to isolate the guerillas from the civilians.

Inspired by the British system of concentration camps in Malaya after the Second World War, this tactic was applied in the Naga Hills in 1957-58 wherein thousands of Nagas were driven out of their homes to live in barbed-wired concentration camps (Chandola 2013). In the Mizo context, according to Vijendra Singh Jafa, former Chief secretary of Assam, the Indian security forces suffered high casualties due to lack of hard intelligence and unfamiliarity with the terrains and came under pressure to provide evidence of a higher level of competence than they had shown in the past. He accounted the manner in which the scheme was allowed to be executed as follows-

> The Army called it 'Operation Accomplishment'. In its 6 p.m. news broadcast on January 3, 1967, the All India Radio announced the decision of the Government of India to group villages in Mizo Hills for security reasons. Lt. Gen. S.H.F.J Manekshaw and A.N. Kidwai, Chief Secretary of Assam, announced the decision in press conferences held in Calcutta and Shillong simultaneously on that day. The Indian press generally appreciated the gesture of the government to have taken them into confidence in this matter. Former orders were issued by B.C Carriapa, Commissioner of Division for Cachar and Mizo Hills, under Rule 59 of the India Defence Rules, 1964, which directed habitants of 100 villages within a 20-mile belt astride Vairengte-Aizawl- Lunglei road to remove them, if necessary, by use of "minimum force" (Jafa 1999).

Thus, in a rigorous counter-insurgency effort to cut off the underground MNF insurgents from the civilian population, the Mizo civilians were subjected to wide-scale forced resettlements by means of village regrouping carried out in a series of four stages (B.G.Verghese 1996). From January 1967 towards the end of 1970, as many as 466 villages with 236,162 persons or 82 per cent of the total population of Mizoram had been herded into grouped villages under military security (Ibid.). The regrouped villages were called Protected and Progressive Villages (PPVs) and became semi-urbanized centres each placed under an Administrative Officer (AO). To give stature to this set up and to inculcate the national spirit and integration, the offices of the AOs were allowed to fly the national flag as a rare and special case and the people including the students were made to sing the national anthem "Jana Gana Mana" on important occasions like high official visits, village meetings, sports events etc (Ray 1982:171).

The experience of being uprooted from one's ancestral village and having had to relocate to another under threat and coercion created deep wounds, mistrust and hatred of the Indian army and by extension, the central Indian government. Recollections of *Rambuai (*as is vernacularly known to locals of the period of insurgency and turmoil in the Mizo Hills District) through vernacular music, literature and popular discourse mainly allude to the regrouping as the 'most painful experience' with long lasting social and psychological implications. Allegations of human rights excesses ranging from rape and arbitrary detention, beatings, torture and forced labour further widened the gulf between the peripheral people and the rest of the nation and also tended to create a great degree of empathy for the militants (Verghese 1996). The 'winning of hearts and minds' tactic applied by the British in their colonies[xii] far contrasted with the Indian army's repressive zeal to accomplish their village grouping programme in the name of 'Operation Security' that only served to alienate the recipient population (Vanchiau 2014).

Aerial Bombing of Mizoram

In a rare case of an extreme counter-insurgency measure, the Indian Air Force (IAF) conducted a series of aerial raids on the Mizo Hills to suppress the rebels during early March 1966 soon after the MNF declared independence. At the order of the central government, Indian fighter aircrafts bombarded the then Aizawl town and several other villages in a routine manner leaving behind large casualties and damages. The bombardment destroyed most of Aizawl market area, houses and residential areas were burnt to ashes, and the whole town looked like a hell of fire overshadowed by a canopy of a hell-like damned dark smoke (C. Zama 2014). The government was in denial of using any excessive force on the Hills with the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi herself maintaining that the Indian Air Force was deployed only for reinforcements of ration supplies (Hindustan Standard, 9 March 1966 cited in Hluna and Tochhawng 2012). This prompted two members of the Assam Legislative Assembly, Stanley Nichols Roy and Hoover Hynniewta (both representing the Khasi Hills) to gather eyewitness accounts and material evidence and came up with the following observation:

> Some of the loyal people of India had wondered after they had seen and heard some of the newspaper reports, they wondered if supplies had been dropped by the Air Force perhaps these bombs that they had seen, some of the unexploded, perhaps they should send them to Delhi and ask, "how do you cook this ration?" (Hluna and Tochhawng 2012, p. 100).

The bombing campaign, apart from creating an environment of fear and insecurity, also highlights the physical distance between the perpetrator and the people against whom it was directed and the anonymity and impersonality of the former (Barbora 2006). The government's military approach to counter violence with another form of violence, sanctioned and legitimized by the state through draconian laws like Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) is nothing but an extension of the imperial mindset that persisted in the policy discourse of post-colonial India towards the Northeast (Khongreiwo 2009). For all purposes, the enforcement of AFSPA in the Northeast states since 1958 has the intended effect of militarizing civilian spaces and exacerbating the spirit of armed revolution among the warring groups.

Continued Militarization of Manipur and Nagaland

The grim human rights situation in the Northeast owing to the strong military presence and their active reliance on AFSPA for exercising extra-judicial powers has been a moot point for decades on the streets and Parliament as well as public and media platforms. As compared to other states in India, the human rights complaints in these states mainly pertain to abuses by the Army and paramilitary forces, a testament to the ill effects of prolonged militarization of civilian spaces and a corresponding atmosphere of army impunity in the name of counter-insurgency (Chaman Lal 2004). There has been a growing concern about extensive militarization and military acquisition of indigenous lands, territories, forests, sacred, cultural and religious sites and other public spaces such as highways, roads and rural tracts of lands in Manipur (Yumnam 2017). Due to the physical remoteness and relative inaccessibility of the northeast states and their continuous marginalization in the national and political spheres, there has been very little publicity as regards the ground reality of security excesses in the region as compared to Kashmir or elsewhere (including the Maoist-infested states) in the country. This has been pointed out by Ben Hayes who commented that "reporting on unlawful activities involving the police, the army, state officials or local mafia exposes journalists in the NEI to a raft of dangers particularly those working for local and state media" and that international observers and journalists too are often not allowed access to the region by the Indian government on grounds of the same being 'too dangerous' and hence unsafe. Thus freedom of press and free movement is greatly curtailed by multiple conflicts in the region that allows both underground insurgents and the army to cover their human rights abuses (Hayes 2012: 12). However, the brutal torture, suspected rape and killing of the 24-year old Thangjam Manorama- a low-key cadre of the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA)- in 2004 in Manipur by the Indian paramilitary unit of the 17th Assam Rifles proved to be a turning point as the incident caused immense outrage and sparked widespread protest in the state. The protests in the immediate aftermath especially by a group of twelve middle-aged Manipuri mothers outside Imphal's Kangla Fort- headquarters of the Indian Army- who stripped naked and flaunted banners that read- '*Indian Army Rape Us*' and '*Indian Army Come Take Our Flesh*' generated much awe, interest and awareness among the wider

public in India about the depth of anger and frustration of local people and their sense of vulnerability and helplessness towards the AFSPA regime (Hazarika 2018).

The haunting image of middle-aged and naked elderly women standing in front of the Fort soon became symbolic of protests against the Indian army's brutality in the region. Another iconic struggle against AFSPA by the Manipuri lady Irom Chanu Sharmila and her sixteen year- long hunger strike that came to end in 2016 had also managed to garner national attention to the atrocious rule of ASFPA and the plight of the common people vis-à-vis security forces in conflict regions. Her status as a 'prisoner of conscience' given by the Amnesty International earned her worldwide recognition and helped highlight the cause behind the protest.

Although recent decisions by the Union Home Ministry signaled the easing of its military grips on the borderland spaces by rescinding the centre's prerogative to invoke AFSPA in two states, viz., Assam and Manipur (Vijayta Singh 2017), the pattern of militant activities by recalcitrant groups in the region will continue to 'justify' the refusal to repeal it altogether. The Committee headed by Justice B.P. Jeevan Reddy that was constituted in the wake of the Manorama killing to review AFSPA submitted its report in May-June 2005 wherein it recommended the removal of AFSPA and formulated a structure aimed at undoing the draconian aspects of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act by proposing clauses that could curb the sweeping powers of the state and its functionaries (Hazarika 2018:64). The current practice of extending Disturbed Areas Act every six months is one such example that could be done away with if the Committee's report was implemented.

As a matter of fact, AFSPA becomes operational only after the promulgation of the Disturbed Areas Act by either the state or central government, effectively delegating the power to deal with security conditions in situations where local law enforcements are considered inadequate (Hazarika 2018:65). For instance, Nagaland had been declared as a 'disturbed area" for six more months with effect from 30 December 2017 till end of June 2018 as "killings, loot and extortion have been going on in various parts of the state which necessitated the action for the convenience of the security forces operating there" (PTI, The Hindu, 1 January 2018). This has pointed to the deeply entrenched 'security culture' enforced by New Delhi that allows the centre to easily enforce its will in these areas. Mizoram, on the other hand, has enjoyed relative peace in the post-insurgency period and had dissociated itself with the 'disturbed area' tag. AFSPA has been unused in the state since the signing of the Peace Accord. However, even in states where active insurgencies no longer operate, paramilitary deployment continues nonetheless as is the case of Mizoram, Meghalaya and Tripura where the Assam Rifles, Border Security Forces and the Central Reserve Paramilitary Forces continue to be stationed and make their presence felt in the border areas guarded by them. Thus restoration of political stability and an ongoing peace process (in the case of the Nagas) does not deter the central government from committing to 'continued securitization' and active militarization in the northeast, adding to a state of unease and uncertainty.

From 'Disturbed Areas' To 'Transborder Zones'

At the political level, the discourse on insurgency in the context of northeast borderlands is increasingly countered by the rhetoric of development that aims to transcend the security-centric framework of understanding the region. This appears to be more of an acknowledgement of the region's 'transnational character' in geo-political terms rather than an outcome of a revisit of the pre-colonial history and tradition of the native inhabitants. Nonetheless, traditional linkages and resilient cross-border cultural practices play an important role in enabling the re-envisioning of Northeast as a transborder region despite the existence and emergence of non-traditional security challenges[xiii]. In an age of global inter-connectedness and regional economic integration, India's aspirations to become a key player both in Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific region make it impossible to overlook the criticality of ensuring peace and stability in its strategic areas, particularly the Northeast. Thus, building connectivity infrastructure to usher in economic progress as a viable solution for conflict in the northeast has gained ground over the years. This has been clearly documented in the Vision 2020 document released in 2008 by the Ministry of Development of Northeastern Region (MDoNER) and the North East Council (NEC), both located in New Delhi.

Table 2: Northeast India's International Borders

State	Bangladesh	Bhutan	China	Myanmar	Nepal	Total
Arunachal Pradesh	0	217	1080	520	0	1817
Assam	263	267	0	0	0	530
Manipur	0	0	0	398	0	398
Meghalaya	443	0	0	0	0	443
Mizoram	318	0	0	510	0	828
Nagaland	0	0	0	215	0	215
Sikkim	0	32	220.35	0	97.80	360.15
Tripura	856	0	0	0	0	856
Total	1880	516	1300.35	1643	97.8	

*International Border *(in Km)*
Source: Ministry of Northeastern Region

As such, increased trade, investments, people to people contact based on cultural commonalities of the Northeast with Southeast Asia and harnessing the region's huge natural resource potential constitute the main objectives of this new vision. However, there are critical issues and challenges involved in such a transformation. Duie-Ra observes, "Despite the new language of openness, participation, cooperation and paradigm shifts, counter-insurgency still underpins the politics of the Northeast leading to contradictory practices, exacerbating grievances in the region, and creating additional problems for the region's peoples" (Duncan McDuie-Ra 2009, p. 7). Besides, without the political resolution of key conflicts- especially the Indo-Naga conflict- it would remain far-fetched to conceptualize the borderland States as constituting a transnational zone in the formal sense as security and conflict management continues to dominate policy thinking (Baruah 2009).

Even in the case of formalization of cross-border linkages, there is the danger of trans-nationalization of the AFSPA culture, as pointed out by McDuie-Ra, especially in the context of New Delhi's courting of Myanmar's Junta with the purpose of cross-border military crackdown of insurgents in mind. Here it should be pointed out that the Indo-Myanmar border cooperation that took shape since the early 1990s with the signing of the first border trade agreement had this objective well in place. Willem van Schendel has remarked that, "If insurgencies had an impact on sections of the borderland, the borderland also had an impact on insurgencies" (Schendel 2005, p. 270). It has been established that insurgent groups including the Chin-Kuki rebels, the Naga NSCN factions, United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA) and MNF have utilized their cross-border linkages to obtain assistance in intelligence and training, financial aids, arms supplies as well as moral and ideological support. The counter-insurgency measures of the Indian government also drove the militants to seek sanctuaries in the neighbouring countries including Myanmar, Bhutan and Bangladesh where they set up clandestine networks of operations (Egreteau 2008). Consequently, the Indian government had time and again sought assistance of these countries in flushing out rebel camps and restricting free movement of militants across the porous borders.

Further, the opening up of international boundaries for the purpose of creating cross-border connectivity networks as initiated under the ongoing Act East Policy would have meant closer scrutiny and policing of borders making movements difficult and regimented (McDuie-Ra (2009). Although this seems justified from a national security perspective, such surveillance mechanisms would be detrimental to the traditional border livelihoods that thrive on the organic linkages between ethnic kinship and mutual economic inter-

dependence. Unless the schemes for trans-border development of the peripheral areas take into account the peculiarities of border communities and their livelihood systems, these will only serve to enhance the sense of alienation already felt by the latter. As Anne-Sophie Maier (2009) points out, there are also apprehensions that the opening up of the region in the name of development might adversely impact the traditional way of life, culture and economy of the northeast people as well as their fragile ecology and environment. Besides, the top-down approach of devising big development projects from the mainland's capital may not result in the intended trickle down effects for the more marginalized communities in this region and only serve to benefit the regional elites co-opted by the "national security managers" at New Delhi.

The special treatment of the northeast by virtue of generous grants for developmental works channeled through MDoNER has signaled the centre's desire to tackle development deficiency in the region. But it has not led to robust and efficient governance able to undo decades of violence and unrest especially in the remote and rural parts of the region that have not been sufficiently reached by such funds and initiatives. Development as a counter point to insurgency in the context of northeast is also called into question as the state development programmes are garnered by security related concerns, which in Bhagat Oinam's opinion, shows the paucity of state responses in terms of formulating innovative state policies towards the region (Oinam 2008:36). It remains to be seen whether the Indian State's re-conceptualization of the northeastern borderlands, once seen as most sensitive to national security, as a 'gateway' or a 'corridor' will transform the region from 'conflict zones' to 'transborder zones' of economic and cultural cooperation. The problems of Northeast, in this sense, can be seen as multi-faceted as opposed to the simplistic proposition of economic development, trade and/or GDP growth as the panacea for the political and socio-economic crisis of the region.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be argued that the post-colonial Indian State's military approach towards Northeast and the protracted securitization process has resulted in a 'fear psychosis' in the daily lives of common men in the region. The impunity of security forces invested with extra-judicial powers has created widespread mistrust and suspicion in these states towards the Indian establishment they represented. The implications of such policy formulations have been far- reaching and affect various spheres of existence in the northeast. The nation building efforts of independent India and its rigorous attempt to inherit colonially administered areas without any prior claim of sovereignty had resulted in armed independence movements of major tribes like the Nagas and Mizos that became the basis of promulgating the 'Disturbed Areas' legislations. The re-organization of post-colonial Assam and creation of five ethnic states, viz., Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh as well as the integration to the Indian union of the princely states of Manipur and Tripura were more of an act of political engineering to quell the 'independentist spirits' of the hill tribes rather than a genuine acknowledgement of their unique histories and cultures vis-à-vis the heartland. Thus boundaries were haphazardly drawn to accommodate the political interests of major groups like the Nagas and Mizos without taking into account their cross-border linkages and pan-ethnic aspirations that transcend the domestic and international borders that came into existence in the aftermath of independence and partition of the sub-continent. The partition of 1947 also completed the physical isolation of the northeast region.

The preponderance of ethnic-based militant groups in the region with rhetorical separatist agendas is only symptomatic of the post-colonial Indian State's mismanagement of the region's complex problems. Although ethnic aspirations were accommodated through different methods over the years- from granting autonomy and statehood to pumping enormous funds for development projects in the region- India's northeast continues to reel under ethnic conflict and related issues. In fact, the post-colonial history of northeast has been dominated by the national security discourse that emphasized on territorial integrity of the newly independent India that often times resorted to military coercion to achieve the said objective. Thus in order to control the volatile borders and enforce state-orchestrated norms of security and stability, extraordinary legislations such as, and most notably, AFSPA were introduced in the so-called 'disturbed areas'. The non-state hill spaces marked off since the British period became replete with contemporary human rights violations, extrajudicial acts of violence, military-civilian conflicts, all in the name of counter-insurgency which became a dominant frame with

which the Indian State deals with its Northeast. Unless there is a strong political will to repeal such draconian laws, there is little likelihood of ensuring long term peace and prosperity in the borderland areas especially with the increase in non-traditional security concerns as a result of porosity of the region's borders as well as better and increased cross-border connectivity.

Acknowledgement

Endnotes

i The Northeast Region, also referred to as NER in official documents, covers an area of 25, 5083 sq km, a mere 8 % of the total geographical area of India. It comprises of seven contiguous units commonly referred to as 'the seven sister states'[i] viz., Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Tripura. These states have a combined population of around 40 million which represents 3.1% of the country's total population, and is roughly equal to the demographic size of Odisha, the 11th most populous state of India (as per the 2011 census). The eight state, Sikkim was made a part of the region in 2003 when it was included in the Northeastern Council (NEC).

ii Here, by 'national mainstream' is meant the Brahmanic, Aryan and Sanskritic cultures as opposed to the Indo-Burman Mongoloid cultures that most tribes in the northeast sought to identify themselves with.

iii Both the names, that of the anglicized 'Burma' and the native 'Myanmar' will be used interchangeably in this paper to refer to the same country- the first to allude to the colonial and post-colonial aspects of the country; the second for the post-1989 contemporary scenario.

iv The Partition of the Indian sub-continent resulted in the creation of the Muslim state of Pakistan and the subsequent formation (or liberation) of Bangladesh, the erstwhile East Pakistan in 1971 with the help of Indian military intervention.

v The Northeast is ethnically diverse and is home to around 213 of the 635 tribal groups listed by the Anthropological Survey of India.

vi Angami Zapu Phizo argued that independence was favoured by 99.99 per cent of voters in a plebiscite held in Nagaland in May 1951. Bertil Lintner (2012) comments that what was referred to as a 'plebiscite' resembled more of a tribal oath-taking ceremony than a traditional referendum and hence dismissed as an exercise of a 'political hoax' by the Indian authorities without any legal validity (p.71).

vii Mautam literally means 'bamboo death' caused by flowering of the bamboos which in turn gives rise to a phenomenal increase of rodents resulting in a wide-scale destruction of crops. It is a devastating cyclical ecological phenomenon that occurs in Mizoram every 50 years.

viii Here I mean to imply that the Northeast States along with the Hill Districts were never really given the option to integrate with the newly independent neighbouring states and remained like buffer zones during the dilemma in their political destiny. Four plans were drafted by some British officers to secure the crown colony status for the upland tribal areas but never materialized due to the political circumstances not really in their favour.

ix The centre's 'divide and rule' tactic of bringing many stakeholders from the Naga National political groups (NNPGs) into the table to strengthen its bargaining position against the Naga rebel groups has also stretched out the peace process for many years but failed to bring the 'desired results' for New Delhi. The 2015 Framework Agreement signed with the Isak Muivah's NSCN faction has not brought the anticipated solution and talks remain inconclusive as the Naga leaders are divided around the demand for a separate flag and a separate constitution.

x The Mizo Union, earlier the Mizo Commoners Union, came into being as a political movement against the century long tradition of hereditary chieftainship in the Mizo Hills and was formed in 1946 to advocate for abolition of the same. It became a political party representing the Mizo District Council within the State of Assam.

xi Greater Mizoram symbolizes an inclusive territorial homeland for all the cognate Mizo tribes inhabiting contiguous areas across present day Tripura, Cachar, Manipur, Chittagong Hill Tracts and Myanmar to be amalgamated with the erstwhile Lushai Hills/ Mizo Hills District (now Mizoram).

xii The British had executed the grouping policy in Malaya (1948-60), Kenya (1952-55), Aden (1963-68), Oman (1957-59), Cyprus (1954-58), and Malaysia (1963-66).

xiii Apart from cross-border militant activities, issues of money laundering and counterfeit currency, weapons and narcotics smuggling, human trafficking, illegal immigration and illegal trade continue to pose challenges to the security and stability of the region.

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