

6	Forest conservation in Manipur HOINEILHING SITLHOU	102
PART II		
Ethnicity, identity and belonging		
7	Identity, deprivation and demand for bifurcation of Meghalaya PURUSOTTAM NAYAK AND KOMOL SINGHA	119
8	Identity politics, conflict and development among the Mizos in Mizoram LALRINTLUANGA	121
9	Identity, conflict and development: a study of Borok community in Tripura MOHAN DEBBARMA	130
10	Oral narratives and identity discourse in Arunachal Pradesh SARIT KUMAR CHAUDHURI	151
11	Identity, conflict and development in Nagaland KILANGLA B. JAMIR	173
12	A nation's begotten child: Arunachal Pradesh in India's troubled Northeast TAJEN DABI	195
13	Democracy and ethnic politics in Sikkim M. AMARJEET SINGH AND KOMOL SINGHA	213
14	Ethnic assertion in Manipur: reflection on electoral integrity and governance L. MUHINDRO SINGH	226
		247

A nation's begotten child

Arunachal Pradesh in India's troubled Northeast

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Introduction

Arunachal Pradesh, earlier known as *North East Frontier Agency* (NEFA), attracted the attention of post-independence Indian state and political analysts after the Chinese invasion of 1962 in a major way. This chapter draws a general outline of the recent history of Arunachal Pradesh and tries to understand why the state is 'peaceful' in the otherwise politically restive Northeast India. The emergence of ethno-religious identity is linked to the larger process of 'nation building' and modernisation and shows that ethno-political consciousness in the state is, unlike most other parts of the region, taking roots in manners that does not contradict with the terms of 'mainstream' ideology-cultural and political. This chapter tries to develop a critique of the post-Nehru policy of Central Government and some other non-state agencies in Arunachal Pradesh.

Island of peace in Northeast India

Post-independence India witnessed numerous secessionist movements. Northeast India is known more for such movements. Nagas, Mizos, Meiteis, Assamese, Tripuris, Bodos, Kukis and Karbis, in random order, among others, have different ideological roots, inspirations and methods in pursuance to their claims and 'national' struggle. In this context, Burman (2007: 24–40) writes:

Leaving aside the Bengali population of Barak and Brahmaputra valleys, and taking stock of the overall historic-political situation it can be said that while in general the peoples of the North-East have mixed feelings about their place in the state structure of India and the articulation of the same with the state processes of the country,

they frequently entertain mytho-poetic sentiments about their relations with South-East and East Asia.

Despite frequent fights among them, the communities were all oppressed to the Indian state (Guha, 2007: 625). Their struggle were, and are, sometimes directed against each other's interest, the more known and recent one being the Bodo movement (presumed by the 'mainstream' Assamese political and intellectual group as an attempt to 'divide Assam'). Such movements are absent in Arunachal Pradesh. It is commonly regarded as the 'island of peace' – in academia and in public – amidst hostile restive neighbours. This view reflects a law and order perspective bias in the assessment of ethnic situation in the region in general and Arunachal Pradesh in particular.

The context of 'peace' in Arunachal Pradesh

The Northeast India¹ constitutes two geographical regions: plains (Assam – Brahmaputra and Barak valley) and the Hills (roughly starting from south – Mizoram, Tripura, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh). As per historical records, the main highlights of the relation between the state(s)/kingdom(s) of the plains and the roaming semi-pastoralist groups/chiefdom(s) of the hills were – one, barter economy, and two, raids from the hills into the plains. While the barter trade kept lines of communication open within the hills and between the hills and the plain, the raids into more affluent plains suggest that the trade did not evolve in a regular, profitable and sustainable manner. Throughout much of Ahom and British colonial times, the nuisance of raids² remained a pressing political question of the day, and at times guided strategic policies of the respective governments. It would be no exaggeration to say that the *Inner Line Regulation*,³ the most important and, to some, controversial piece of law introduced by the British that allegedly 'created' and continues to separate the hills from/and the plains, was enacted as an institutional response to such raids. That the context and meaning of the regulation have undergone much change, now acquiring cultural-territorial dimension, is only indicative of the fractious notions of sovereignty each evolving identity groups harbour – in the hills and the plains, against each other, and against India. Thus, political contestations and disturbances, in its own specific context and relevance, were as much a reality in the past as is in the present. The recent history of what we call 'Arunachal Pradesh' today did not emerge from a situation significantly different from this. Historical, archaeological, ethnographical and folk traditions and memory attest to this.

- own land beyond the line. It is still in force in Nagaland, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh. Various civil society organisations in Meghalaya are now demanding for the same to be introduced in the state.
- 4 Family chronicles maintained by the Ahom kings.
 - 5 Borrowed from the title of Thomas Harris's 1988 novel, *The Silence of the Lambs*.
 - 6 Tax/blackmail/ tributes levied by various, but not all, tribes on the neighbouring peasants and gold washers of plains. The latter were subjects of Ahom Kingdom, and later the Colonial state. Raids were organised chiefly for extracting *Posa* which was given in kind (Ahom time) and cash (British period). Interestingly, *Posa* is another arena where the presumed 'supremacy' is contested now both by historians based in Plains and Hills. This assumes significance in the light of present interstate boundary disputes Assam (plains) has with its neighbours - Nagaland, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh, roughly all former *Posa*-receiving/exacting parties.
 - 7 De facto imaginary line between British India and Tibet conceptualised in the last decades, a time when British India was hardly bothered about the international border with China, of nineteenth century. The more precise, and controversial, Mc Mohan Line demarcating the international boundary came up in the second decade of twentieth century.
 - 8 Constituent part of the Indian union directly administered by the Union government.
 - 9 Until after Chinese aggression (1962), it remained under the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India.
 - 10 Noted anthropologist, tribal sympathiser and adviser to the Government of India (Nehru) on tribal issues.
 - 11 Interview with Khampati students, Rajiv Gandhi University, Itanagar.
 - 12 *Very Very Important Person*; a part of Indian political culture much aped in Arunachal.
 - 13 One of the popular songs of the noted Assamese singer, Dr Bhupen Hazarika also proudly asserts Assam as the 'the first province of Bharat where the sun first rises'. It is interesting to note that Assamese political leaders and intellectuals of last generation have a nostalgia with the name 'NEFA', the erstwhile name of Arunachal and during which time they assumed NEFA to be a 'part' of Assam. 'Arunachal' signifies the symbolic break of ties - political and cultural - with 'Assam's NEFA'.
 - 14 Credited to a local singer from Upper Subansiri, Takio Soki, the song has since acquired many versions; translation author's.

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Itanagar:
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