

# **For Want of “India Narrative” Scourge of Insurgencies in North-East India**



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# For Want of “India Narrative” Scourge of Insurgencies in North-East India

*“We cannot make events. Our business is wisely to improve them.... Mankind are governed more by their feelings than by reason. Events which excite those feelings will produce wonderful effects.”*

—JN Rakove

## PREAMBLE

### **The Run of Post-Independence Insurgencies**

Nearly uninterrupted over the past decades of independence, violent secessionist insurgencies have been a major scourge against the overall stability and progress of the nation. Notably, all of the major anti-national insurgencies have been seeded by ethnic and religious pretensions of a few influential vested interest groups. Separatist narratives were thus germinated by one or more among the local groups of power-wielders in their attempt to perpetuate their long-time overlordship over the societies they had established control over. Obviously, such exercises of separatism were triggered whenever the traditional overlords of the societies—self-certified guardians by past practice rather than possession of requisite qualification—found their untrammelled grip over their fiefdoms being threatened by the egalitarianist dispensation that came with freedom and democracy. As for the colonial masters, it helped to be in league with such overlords to keep the environment pacified while the profits of colonialism were reaped.

Following independence, there have arisen a near-continuous series of armed insurgencies in India’s North-East (NE) region, and then in the States of Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir, all with the aim of striking at the very foundations of the Indian Union’s sanctity. The state has therefore, for over the past six decades plus, been obliged to bear with the excruciating effects of an unending series of violent secessionist insurgencies in various integral parts of the nation. No doubt, the Indian state has succeeded in overcoming all those anti-national machinations to keep its integrity intact, but that has come at heavy costs in terms of intense military commitments, decades of lost economic progress and vilification of hoary social fabric in the affected regions.

## Prevention of Separatist Seedings

Each of the secessionist insurgencies, in all aspects, have been analysed in comprehensive detail by the polity and the professionals who have been charged with the responsibility of dealing with them. Suitable responses, as appropriate under the prevalent circumstances, have also been devised by them with much success. Indeed, such dynamic cycles of appreciation-application had been at the fulcrum of independent India's remarkable resilience against her internal enemies.

However, when it comes to digging into, and subsequently digging out, the roots of secessionist insurgent motivations, perhaps there is a need for some deeper introspection. That need is better appreciated when one finds repeated "seedings" of somewhat repetitive themes of divisive narrative shaving been overlooked by the polity, leadership and the state. Doubtless such overlook had been caused by novice statecraft which failed to notice and then scotch the spread of nexus amongst the intransigent elements of the state and the citizenry, much to the benefit of rabid preachers of secessionist rhetoric.

In a system of tenure-based turnover of the state's political and executive machinery when governing priorities and expediencies get revised and institutional lessons fade away, the problem of innocent overlook of nascent dangers to the nationalist cause can get severely exacerbated over time. That fact establishes the necessity of undertaking, from time to time, analytical revisits of the curse of rise and re-rise of secessionist insurgencies—even in a free, democratic India.

The purpose of the said analyses, of course, is to prevent the rise of subversive narratives in the first instance itself. Falsified, ambitious and titillating to the gullible masses, such narratives aim at disorienting the common citizenry's perceptions in favour of divisive, anti-national notions. In a nation which is disposed towards untrammelled individual and group freedom, regular review of rise of dangerous anti-national narratives would offer good possibilities of preventing the seeds of any impending separatist scourge from being sown in the first place.

This Paper delves into the above purpose in the following Parts:

- **Part 1: Rise of Secessionist Trends among North-Eastern Ethnicities.**
- **Part 2: Propagation of Subversive Narratives and Instigation of Insurgencies in the North-East.**
- **Part 3: Observations and Inferences.**

The Paper ends with certain key concluding lessons culled out of the entire range of the discussions, which would be useful in forestalling the sowing of secessionist seeds in the future.

Presently, we may begin with the forerunner of all insurgencies—the North-Eastern insurgencies, the Naga insurgency in particular.

## **Part I: Rise of Secessionist Trends among North-Eastern Ethnicities**

### **Ethnic Make-Up of North-East India**

It would not be feasible to discuss the entire gamut of anti-national insurgencies and separatism in India's North-East within the bounds of just one paper. The focus in this paper therefore would be to recall a broad panorama of key situations and observable trends which had sown the seeds of anti-national notions to begin with. The purpose would be to intervene at the right time to expose false narratives from gaining people's endorsement at the nascent stage itself, and so save the nation from rise of potentially dangerous and long festering insurgencies.

Distant cousins of spiritual and political *Bharat* and assimilated with innate Indianness by somewhat subtler sinews of religious, social and filial relationships, India's North-East, from time immemorial, had been in a remote and autonomous existence. That part of India is inhabited by Indo-Mongoloid, Indo-Burman and Indo-Tibetan peoples, who over the centuries have spread across the eternal *Bharatvarsha's* vast North-Eastern terrain that is bonded by high Himalayan ranges and massive rivers, and segmented by numerous expanses of heavily forested hills, streams and fertile valleys.<sup>1</sup>

Over the centuries, as some of the ethnic groups found space to spread deeper into the voids that existed between the preceding habitations, the landscape became dotted with settlements of similar as well as varied tribal societies. Over time, the land gradually turned into a mosaic of settlements made up of clusters, villages, clans and tribes, each group developing their unique mix of culture, subculture and characteristics, some similar and some distinct. Thus evolved numerous native ethnicities comprised of over fifty tribes and more numerous sub-tribes who populated, in varied percentages, what now form the "Seven Sister" States of India's North-East—Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura and Meghalaya. All of these tribes and sub-tribes are rooted to their mother ethnicities, but over time, many of these have also developed cross-tribal and multicultural affiliations.

## Mosaic of Tribal Lands

At the regional level, the people of North-East, with some exception of the Brahmaputra River Valley, lived more or less cocooned from the rest of India by the intervention of hazardous terrain, living by their hoary tribal practices and guided by their traditional headmen and benevolent rulership. Of course, there were occasional clashes among themselves over land or husbandry disputes. But adherence to their sublime cultures and noble code of conduct mostly prevailed. Notably, notwithstanding the foolishly exaggerated stories of “head hunting” and “primitive” living, the North-East was no more of those than any of the rural regions of the rest of the nation.<sup>2</sup>

Interactions across the region with rest of the *Bharatvarsha* were limited to exchange of innovative implements of living, agriculture and occasional pilgrimage, but little else. Some of such exchanges must have brought trouble enough for the “outsiders” or “plainsmen” and even some of the dissimilar ethnics to be viewed with trepidation, suspicion, sometimes even hostility. But generally, it was a simple and introvert existence. That was, more or less, the situation till the early parts of the second millennium CE.

Even afterwards, between the twelfth and eighteenth centuries, as foreign-origin empire builders, first from West-Central Asia and then followed by the Europeans, found India to be their preferred base, they could find no prospects of settlement or revenue generation from the North-East. Difficult terrain and strong native opposition made this region neither easy for conquest nor useful as bases for campaigning to the territories beyond. These empire builders, therefore, down the centuries of their rule, let these self-contained, introvert societies live in autonomous seclusion.

In the early part of the nineteenth century, the British rulers developed commercial and territorial stakes on the North-East. Rulers of Assam, Manipur and Tripura were the prominent powers in the region at that time, but the entire region was under ruthless usurpation from the neighbouring Burmese (what is now Myanmar) rulers. After ridding the region from incessant Burmese purges with their victory in the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26) and the conclusion of the Treaty of Yandabo, the British Indian administration gradually brought the entire region under its “protective” rule by the end of that century.

## Tribal Administration

Throughout this period and afterwards, the Government of British India followed a policy of “non-interference” with the tribal ways of life. They, however, qualified that the policy by application of what came to be known as the “Guardian Rule.” The purpose was to create a protective zone of

pacified population in what was then the Assam Hills or the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), while keeping the incessant Burmese and the Tibetan aggressors away from the fringe territories of the Empire. One cheap and easy way to meet that end was to play a mediating role in inter-tribe conflicts while allowing tribal exclusivities to remain preserved.

The purpose of the Empire's security was met by positioning "Commissioners" and "Political Officers" to keep the areas under observation, maintain accommodative relationships with the tribal chiefs and rulers, and occasional application of control mechanisms with the help of small bands of constabularies. These constabularies were manned by a mix of amenable tribals and volunteers from Eastern India, led by native officers who mostly came from outside the region, and when needed, commanded by British military officers.

The Guardian Rule, however, was dispensed with when it came to the descent of groups of highly committed Christian missionaries well funded by their sponsor Church establishments. Overcoming difficulties and dangers, these missionary-Samaritans, by their dedication and resourcefulness, spread far and wide to mentor and convert a large part of the population from their native social and religious practices. Widespread conversions during the better parts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries elevated the indigenous people from societal primitivity while their new religious affinity helped the British in keeping the vast and remote region under control.<sup>3</sup>

The point to take cognisance of is that neither the massive cultural transformation, nor the assumption of administrative control by a distant and exploitative foreign power was resisted or seriously contested; most native mentors submitted to British subservience with little reservations. Yet, as it would be seen subsequently, when it came to post-independence self-rule, certain misguided native elements, with some incitement from foreign imperialists and a few radicalised religious preachers, would try to twist the Guardian Rule to invent a grossly distorted rhetoric of secessionist falsehood.

### **Princely State of Manipur**

The situation in Manipur and the contiguous belt along the Indo-Burma Border was somewhat different. Here, while strong cultural and religious connections with the rest of India flourished, it had a distinct political set-up. Ruled in succession by a line of charismatic and powerful rulers, this Meitei homeland (or Kangleipak) had developed, over the centuries, into a land of conjoined existence of valley based Meitei's of Indo-Burman lineage who in the middle of the second millennium CE had adopted

the Vaishnavi culture, the traditional highlander tribes, and the Muslim settlers known as Meitei Pangal who arrived during the Mughal rule in the seventeenth century. During the medieval ages, Manipur rulers had been in frequent engagements, both of friendly and violent nature, with the rulers of the Burman states across the Chindwin River, many times having to fight to preserve their independent status and highly advanced culture.

As in the Eastern parts of Assam, the Burmese gained control over Manipur in the early nineteenth century, and thus began a rather harsh foreign occupation. That usurpation was evicted by the British after the afore-mentioned Anglo-Burmese War of 1824-26, when the ruling monarchy was restored under British protection. In 1891, the Government of British India formalised its guardianship by incorporating Manipur as one of the 565+ princely states of the British Indian Empire. The royalists' titillating wish of sovereignty, something which it never could exercise, was thus, rather happily, reconciled by British paramountcy.

As elsewhere in the tribal North-East, after the transfer of British rule to an independent Indian Union, false narratives of Manipur's supposed politically "independent" existence would be spread by a cabal of vested interests, and furthered by far-fetched stories of the Meitei ethnic group's cultural and religious non-Indian "exclusivity." Notably, besides separatist notions, each kingpin of the cabal had competing ideologies to propagate and contrasting objectives to grab at. It therefore took some hard convincing from New Delhi before the Maharaja was prevailed upon to ignore their irresponsible clamour and sign the Instrument of Accession in 1949. Integration of the Princely State into the Union of India was formalised thus.

It requires no reiteration that the status of the princely state of Manipur was in no way any different from the 565+ others all over India—Cooch Behar, Hyderabad, Travancore, Jodhpur or Rampur, to wit. Over the next no less than three decades, however, the Indian state's inaction in addressing the false narrative, that was contrived by outlandish misinterpretation of medieval recounts of Manipur's pristine culture, would allow it to gather momentum. After 1977, Manipur too would become infested with secessionist insurgency.

### **The Brahmaputra Valley**

The situation in the Brahmaputra Valley was somewhat different. Indeed, the Assam region had been under the rule of several powerful, independent monarchies who exercised varying degrees of formal rulership over a number

of their smaller, local satrapies—just as the case had ever been in most of the historical times in the rest of India. Though cultural inclusion of the North-East within the idea of *Bharatvarsha* has ever been a historically established fact, as for the exercise of political control from the central seat of power was concerned, that had been limited to intermittent records of Assam rulers' notional tributary relationships with the Gupta Empire, Bengal's Turk Sultanate and the Mogul Empire after that. The Bengal Sultanate and the Mughals did foray into the Ahom land intermittently between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries, but they found little success in establishing their control over the fiercely independent minded and tough Assamese opposition. Later, however, in early nineteenth century, an aggressive Burmese regime gained control over the region, till they were expelled after the First Anglo-Burmese War of 1824-26.

In their turn, the British rulers, motivated by profitable prospects of revenue generation out of timber, tea, agriculture and petroleum trade, chose to expand the central power's effective control over the North-East. After the harsh Burmese usurpation of Assam was expelled by the British victory in the First Anglo-Burmese War, the traditional rulership in Assam was also restored, as in Manipur. Over time, as with the other feudal principalities of the rest of India, these too were formally incorporated as one of the princely states within the British Empire of India.

Thus, by the turn of the nineteenth century, with minor resistance and overwhelming endorsement, the entire North-East was brought under the central administration of the British Government of India. Meanwhile, secured by imperial control, commercial exploitation of Assam's natural resources resulted in large influxes of migrant labour, followed by bureaucracy, peasantry and traders, mainly consisting of Bengalis and tribals of the Chotanagpur Plateau.<sup>4</sup>

### **Pre-Independence Situation**

Conscious just of their little world which they guarded jealously against outside interference, ethnic tribes of the North-East had virtually no participation in India's freedom struggle. In the later half of the 1940s, as the reality of Independence dawned, many over-enthusiastic *swadeshi* flag-bearers appeared amidst these people and intending to paint rosy pictures of freedom and democracy, landed up in alarming the traditional societies and the hierarchies that controlled these. Tribal headmen's and their religious mentors' fears of losing their untrammelled grip over the societies from which they drew their power and wealth was the key trigger in ringing that alarm.

Apprehensions of descent of cunning “plainsmen” or “outsiders,” who were purported to be intent on “forcing” upon them a progress that they did not aspire for, a revenue system that they were not comfortable with and administrative regulations that they considered restrictive—demarcation of land and electoral governance, for example—worried the deliberately instigated tribes no end. Thus many tribes, otherwise cocooned in their self-exclusivity, found common cause with their somewhat similar ethnic groups to coalesce to form joint fronts under the notion of “protecting their settled ways of life and exclusive ethnic identities,” and so to prevent what they construed to be an impending alienation of their autonomous and traditional existence.

At the time of India’s Independence, such was the notion that loomed over most parts of the tribal regions of the North-East. Naga tribal group territories were the prominent incubators of such notions, before in the following decades the notion spread to other areas of the North-East, namely, Mizoram, Manipur and Assam. Indeed, there were many other uprisings in various areas of the North-East, but these were sustained by an urge for either local autonomy or separate statehood against alleged neglect from the erstwhile Government of Assam. These could be diffused by political consensus, and therefore, are not in focus here.

### **Subterfuge of Secessionism**

Viewed in the right context, the autonomous, even somewhat independent socio-political relativity of the North-East with the rest of India from time to time was no different than that of the other outlying parts of India’s geographic spread—the Peninsular South and Himalayan North, to wit. In the Indian landmass, as in most global geographic regions, dynastic rulerships had been in existence on and off in their autonomy or independence according to the political and fiscal expediencies of the times. At the same time, the geographic, ethnic, cultural and religious assimilation of the North-East into the gamut of Indianness has ever been consistent. Indeed, loose or undefined, diverse entities of the Indian landmass had been cognitively integrated with the idea of eternal *Bharatvarsha*.

Contrary to the ill-informed claims parroted by secessionist propagandists—that of “sovereign dispensation” being enjoyed by various parts of the North-East in the past—these could not have been further from the facts. That the “nations” propagated as such had none of the basic attributes of nationhood did not dissuade these disoriented “freedom fighters.” Sovereignty is attributable with many defining features—defined territory, composite habitation, formal governance,

economic sustainability, foreign relations, and competent internal and external security structure. None of the propagators of secessionist subterfuge could claim to possess those kinds of features. As the British had appreciated, the contemporary scenario of regional politics left no scope for small, thinly populated, ethnically disparate and resource starved territories to be viably independent political entities on their own. Indeed, the situation has further exacerbated in the contemporary era, and vulnerabilities of the diverse clusters of settlements against foreign interference pose grave dangers to India's national security.

Of course, just as the British—revanchist and wary of an independent India as they had been—conspired to detach Gilgit-Baltistan from the Indian State of Jammu and Kashmir and deliver these areas into the hands of Islamic Pakistan, similar was the attempt made in the North-East. Imperialists of the British administration, aided by their clerical affiliations, assumed the burden of instigating among the local habitant groups and their headmen, the notion of breaking away from the Indian nationhood. That ingrained many of the self-appointed societal “preachers” to resort to cleverly corrupted interpretations of past events that invariably led to define separatist objectives. Such narratives were then seeded into the society-at-large through the medium of ethnic and religious stranglehold of the vested interests. However, unlike Kashmir, herein the attempt failed, but not without fuelling internal unrest.

Impending transfer of power from British into Indian hands had resulted in a normative loosening of the governing mechanism during the transitional period. That allowed misguided frontmen-activists and their vested-interest loyalists, with help from some societal headmen, clergy as well as erudite mentors, to use the transition as an opportunity to claim their “independent nations”—dreams of private fiefdoms actually, to be ruled under their autarkic control. Curiously, a farcical notion, in which Burmese rapine or British slavery could be acceptable but democratic freedom with a truly native and all-inclusive Indian system not, had afflicted these propagators.

That indeed was the case in the areas inhabited by various Naga tribes. Herein, diverse tribes, sub-tribes and communities, mostly distinct in their culture, language, practices and historical self-image, were cobbled into an artificially composed ethnic group to be anointed as a regular “Naga nation.” Naga insurgency began thus with the banal ambition of gaining “independence” for that conglomerate. That was followed by the Mizo insurgency which was triggered by alienation of diverse tribes against the Government of Assam's maladministration. Later, in

the princely State of Manipur, a simmering movement for peoples' rule was corrupted into secessionist activism for an "independent" Manipur where rule of feudal majority, rather than rule of law, would prevail. Here, a low level but sustained insurgency simmers till this day. Similarly, the polity's short-sightedness and greed would push even Assam into another turmoil.

### **Historical Fabrications**

It was so that the kingpins of secessionist motivations turned provocateurs in spreading dissatisfaction and despondency among the people and conjured up fake notions of "exclusive" existence of their traditional homelands. Taking cue, many pseudo-ideologues of partisan motivations surfaced to conjure up fantastic theories of their clans' supposedly exclusively "non-Indian" culture and past exercise of political "sovereignty." Going further, sincere and harmonious suggestions made by leaders of the independence movement were falsified to support their fantastic theories. These frenetic elements would thus conspire to propagate their falsified notions and call for "regaining" what they fancied as their "lost" freedom, turning that subterfuge into a profitable occupation. Packaged with far-fetched but titillating narratives of past grandeur, the splurge of false propaganda would find the ears of a large section of the gullible people. Thus stoked by tribal and religious loyalties, invented discriminations, "Shangri-La' dreams and instigation of native bravado combined, large numbers took to, to begin with, World War II left-over arms and perpetrated violent insurgencies against their motherland, by now a sovereign, democratic Indian Union.

Seeded with outlandish notions of secession from the Indian Union, one insurgency after another followed over the subsequent decades of Independence. The culture of insurgency began with an alliance of diverse tribal groups under a banner of the "Nagas" which steadily grew strong and widespread. Over time, the Naga insurgency influenced, even assisted in the rise of some more—Mizo, Manipuri, and Assamese among these besides many other smaller ethnic factions. It is so that in terms of motivations, methods and machinations, the various insurgencies in the North-East have followed, more or less, a pattern set by the Naga rebels. Indeed, the seeds of anti-nationalist poison in different areas took varying periods of time to sprout according to the environment of their incubation that was made up by the fear of identity loss, tribal loyalties, ill-governance, natural disasters, secessionist notions, and finally, the rate of spread of intransigent motivations.

To reiterate the difference, while the larger secessionist insurgent groups operating astride the international borders professed “independence,” smaller ethnic factions elsewhere had adopted violent means to seek self-governing autonomy or separate statehood. No doubt, in perpetrating despicable acts of mass violence, the latter factions had some business contacts with the former groups, but operating in hinterland areas, the notion of outright secession was neither found practical, nor entertained. Such demands for local autonomy or even statehood could be addressed within the Constitutional provisions, and therefore the smaller ethnic uprisings may be left out of further discussion.

### Notable Inferences

From the discussion above, it is clear that:

- Colonial masters saw the North-East as a *buffer zone for security* of the British Indian Empire and a *source of what raw materials* were needed by them. As regards application of established norms of rulership, the region was left to “be” as long as the colonial mastery was not threatened.
- Unlike other parts of India, in most of the North-East little had been done to propagate the dream of freedom from colonial rule. *Neither in popular nor in cognitive domain was there any sustained attempt to link the masses of the North-East to the narrative of independence and democratic freedom.*
- Colonial administrators encouraged the North-Eastern natives to remain cocooned away from the rest of India. The purpose was to isolate them from the hotbed of what they saw as “troublesome” Indians.
- As India’s freedom struggle gained momentum, *British administrators made concerted efforts, as part of a larger imperialist stratagem, to instil separatist notions* among the people of the North-East. Prospects of a united independent India was seen—as it is even to this day—as a threat to Anglo-hegemony.
- The *freedom movement, on the other hand, did little to offer to the people of the region, more sublime narratives to appreciate, as it did elsewhere, and so prevent them from being sucked into the usual tricks of imperialist machinations.* Understandably, the independence movement might have been constrained in covering the North-East. But effort could still be made in that direction, just as it was the case in the Brahmaputra Valley, where Assam’s vital contribution was harnessed.

These inferences would be discussed in an overall perspective in Part 3. But before that, a brief look at the roots of various secessionist insurgencies would be necessary.

## Part 2: Propagation of Subversive Narratives and Instigation of Insurgencies in the North-East

Having been through an overview of ethnic discourses in general, the stage is set to dig into the roots of the armed secessionist insurgencies that have flared up in the North-East one after the other. To this purpose, this Part would recount, in a nutshell, four representative cases, that is: the Naga insurgency; the Mizo uprising; insurgency in Manipur; and terrorism in Assam. As stated, the governing system having fairly imbibed the manner of controlling anti-national insurgencies, the focus here would be on the origins of anti-national rebellion—“seeding” of secessionist notions, in other words.

### The Naga Insurgency

A conglomerate of 40-odd diverse tribes who were encouraged to coalesce under a common “Naga” banner were the first to take to armed insurgency to claim their imagined sovereignty. During the first half of the twentieth century, helped by social uplift that was brought about by the Christian missionary movement, a middle class—of some education but frivolous political understanding, excitable and prone to misguidance—had emerged among the Naga ethnic tribes. Falling into the trap of the baiters in independent India, a good many of these tribals started masquerading as “freedom fighters,” and took to armed insurgency. They set their goal on secession from the duly established sovereign Indian Union.

The Naga insurgents then let loose a five-decade-long insurgency, which they could sustain by a disoriented, albeit enticing and appealing, ideology. Socio-religious motivations from the ousted agents of the British Raj, China’s instigation by way of military training and hardware supplies, and sanctuaries offered by their kindred tribes across the Indo-Myanmar Border were of great help in stoking the insurgency. At a point, in 1956, the Army had to be deployed to preserve the sanctity of the Union against violent insurrection, and a long period of counter-insurgency operations, with all its usual ups and downs ensued. As usual, over time, insurgent leaders developed differences among themselves regarding the means, methods and authority—but not on the issue of “independence.” That led to many factions breaking away to operate independently; though when necessary to common advantage, tactical cooperation was resorted to.

After the insurgent’s run was curtailed to manageable limits through continuous, intense military action, a parallel political process led to the 16-Point Agreement of 1960 between the Naga leaders and the Government. The result was the formation of the new State of Nagaland in 1963, and that met most of the Naga aspirations. But, as it is usual in such instances, some

hardliner insurgent groups, fearing their marginalisation from the lucrative seat of power, decided to continue their fight.

Over a decade passed, and yet the insurgency could make no headway towards the secessionist ambition against effective military counteraction. Then in 1975, a wisened leadership of the Naga National Council (NNC) decided to come to terms and signed the “Shillong Accord.” However, once again, some breakaway groups repudiated the arrangement and decided to continue to fight for “independence” under the banner of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN). In 1988, further differences led to a break-up of the NSCN into two factions, namely, the NSCN (Isaac-Muivah, or IM) and the NSCN (Khaplang or K) named after the factional leaders. The latter is a smaller but more intransigent faction dominated by Myanmar Nagas and is operative along the Indo-Myanmar Border.

With the secessionist leadership aging and the drying-up of China’s and later Bangladesh’s support, the peace talks got resuscitated in the later half of the 1990s. Meanwhile, Myanmar government forces could also establish some degree of control, if intermittent and tenuous, over their own Naga rebels based across the Indo-Myanmar Border, and that restrained the Indian Naga insurgent’s cross-border support. Most significantly, it was the farsighted and matured efforts of the civil society groups, the Church, members of the Assembly and the people at large to bring peace, that began correcting the false secessionist narratives. In 1997, the NSCN (IM) accepted the Government’s offer of a ceasefire agreement which continues to hold out while negotiations for settlement of the Naga issue continues. The hardliner NSCN (K) too signed a ceasefire agreement in 2001, but finding their notion of “independence” rejected, repudiated it in 2015. Consultations continue.

### **Naga Peace Process**

While peace talks are going on over the past two decades, presently there is a “Suspension of Operation” agreement in force. Though the demand for “sovereignty” has not been formally given up, there are other terms which inter alia dispose of that notion. Principal leadership of the insurgency is participating in the talks while the NSCN (K) continues to play truant. A balanced settlement is stuck up on the demand for a “Greater Nagaland (Nagalim)” state which would encompass a wider sweep of all areas habited by Naga majority. That sweep, however, covers substantial settlements of other, even rival, tribes of the neighbouring States of Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh—even across into Myanmar. Needless to state, that is but a rather complicated and far-fetched demand, one of the many manifestations of its impracticability being the violent Naga-Kuki clashes of the 1990s when over a hundred thousand people had been internally displaced. Further, from

time to time, some tribes have even contested their identification within the “Naga” grouping. The log-jam is mutually appreciated, and would take time to negotiate. To that end, a forward movement was evident when a “Framework Agreement” for a final accord was signed by the NSCN (IM) and the Government in August 2015.

At the end of a long and futile struggle, Naga leaders understand that secession is out of question, as must be the case with the current interpretation of “Greater Nagaland” too. But the accommodative process must go on, one, to find a mutual “come-down” solution, and two, to give time to the rebel’s parallel “government” organisations, particularly the now idle rebel cadres, to be rehabilitated into the mainstream civil life. The rebels are on a long furlough so to say, sustaining themselves through illegal collection of “tax” from citizens, traders and contractors. Underhand drug-pushing, arms supply and mentoring other rebel groups of the North-East and elsewhere are the other profitable ventures. Violence associated with such activities, however, has mostly been controlled. The rebellion, in recessed form, has thus turned into an engaging industry. Inter-faction rivalry and attacks on state apparatus do occur once in a while when the state is obliged to intervene.

In the overall context, it is to the credit of the Naga leadership that they have prevented the insurgency from falling into the depth of uncivilised behaviour or getting overtaken by criminal organisations as most other insurgencies do, and have kept the path of negotiations open. Besides, having accepted a more agreeable life over the ceasefire years, no rebel would be pleased to take to the jungles again. Most notably, over the past decades of mutual understanding, a majority of the Naga people have accepted sovereignty of the Indian state. Therefore, complexities notwithstanding, there is hope for an eventual solution to everyone’s satisfaction.

### **Future Prospects**

There are mutual accommodations to be found before the Naga aspirations are fully met. Of course, like any other rebellion, there would surface many irascible accord-repudiating factions, minor but rebellious nevertheless, like the Kitovi-Neokpao or Khole-Kitovi, Reformation, Unification, the Eastern Naga National Government (ENNG) and so on. These factions might be tempted to question the Government’s offers, and more than that, even the authority of the visionary Naga leadership. But being transitory in serious business, these factions might gradually get accommodated.

As for the recalcitrant NSCN (K) faction, upon the passing away of the leader, there has been some succession related differences; besides,

there is the issue of domination between Myanmar Nagas and the Indian ones. After their repudiation of the agreement with the Government in 2015, the NSCN (K) sought alliances with some other anti-settlement fragments of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and the Coordination Committee (CORCOM) of seven Manipuri rebellious factions. However, these groups, little more than troublesome to peace and prosperity of the North East region, cannot threaten the nation's integrity. Meanwhile, though the Naga civil society led by the Naga Gaon Burha Federation (NGBF) has appealed to the Government to lift the ban and bounty on the NSCN (K) and the Naga National Council (Adinno Phizo) faction and invite them to the peace talks, these factions have not made up their minds over acceptance of the Indian Constitution.

On the idea of "Greater Nagalim," as expected, there is resistance from the states having Naga pockets, particularly Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh, against shedding their areas—even the Government of Nagaland is not on board. The reason, as stated earlier, is the mixed mosaic of tribal settlements across the area. Hopefully, the NSCN (IM) leadership would be agreeable to an "alternate arrangement" of "non-territorial social integration" of Naga habited areas.

### **Insurgency in Manipur**

Elaborating the discussion in Part I above, at the time of independence, Manipur was a princely state under British paramountcy and ruled by a Maharaja. At this juncture, the Maharaja found an opportunity to dream of gaining sovereignty for his State. Contentiously, while some of the politically active Manipuris under the Communist banner of Praja Sangh Party wanted an independent socialist state, there were other factions who preferred to remain as part of independent India. Then there were those who supported the monarchy including those anti-monarchists who turned coat to become "loyal subjects." Meanwhile, through the enactment of Manipur Constitution Act, 1947, a "democratic" form of government was established with the Maharaja as the Executive Head and an elected legislature.

In 1949, the majority, under the Manipur Congress Party, concerned of Burmese hegemony, inter-tribe conflicts and economic isolation, prevailed upon the Maharaja to sign the Instrument of Accession and join the Indian Union. As in the case of other princely states, the Indian Government applied the usual pressure—that of the peoples' demand for democratic union with the rest of India turning uncontrollable—to summon the Maharaja to Shillong in the Meghalaya State, where he signed a Treaty of Accession, thus merging

the kingdom into India. Thereafter, the legislative assembly was dissolved and Manipur became part of the Republic of India in October 1949.

The Manipuri have ever been culturally, religiously and politically integrated with *Bharatiyata*, or the idea of India. Yet, Manipur's formal merger into the independent Indian Union was resented by many sections of rumbustious votaries—inter and intra-tribal, hills-men and valley-men, royalists and communists, even Muslims—each propagating its conflicting agenda. In 1964 was formed the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) as a loose body of valley-based outfits to fight for “independence” which also meant Meitei domination.

Manipur is home to three major ethnic communities—the Meitei, Kuki-Chin and Naga—and their more than a dozen tribal constituents. These are spread in majority in some areas and in minority in the rest. Notably, there existed no pan-ethnic identity as such, loose tribal affiliations being determined based on clan, village, territorial connections and dialect. There are 13 tribal communities within the Kuki-Chin-Mizo ethnic group. In 1946, on the eve of independence, a “Kuki National Assembly” was formed to seek power for themselves. But soon enough these tribes, finding that they had more differences than commonalities, fell apart due to ideological, political and economic friction. The Thadous (1947), Paites (1949), Zomis (1958), Vaipheis (1960) Hmars (1962) and Mizos formed their own armed groups, each demanding their exclusive control over settlements inhabited by their clan whether in majority or not and irrespective of the consideration of geographical contiguity. Resultantly, there were on and off outbreaks of bloody inter-tribe clashes.

In 1960, the Kukis demanded their own homeland covering the Mizo Hills, the South Eastern Manipur and the contiguous Chin State of Myanmar. Later, in 1970, they expanded their claim even to the Eastern part of Assam. Similarly, the diverse clans among the Manipur Nagas too aligned themselves with various Naga factions citing gross neglect of their developmental interests by the Valley based Meitei majority. Resultantly, groups of mixed ethnicities, tribes and sub-tribes aligned at random to form diverse interest groups, many of these finding themselves affiliated to one or more extra-ethnic rebel groups professing conflicting ideals. Nevertheless, they all demanded separate statehood or autonomous district councils for themselves. After steady gestation during the 1960s and 1970s, the Kuki political and insurgent activities coalesced into a Kuki National Organisation (KNO) consisting of 10 groups, and the United People's Front (UPF) consisting of five factions.

As elsewhere in the North-East, Naga rebellion acted as an incentive for the different ethnicities to seek independent power and exclusive territorial

control over areas that they fancied to be their sole preserve in exclusion of other indigenous inhabitant groups. Many among the valley based Meitei, further misled by a few pretending ideologues who had rather imaginatively “rediscovered” their political and even more far-fetched cultural and religious “exclusivity,” demanded secession from the Union. Intrinsic to that demand was the urge of keeping the Manipuri Kukis and Nagas under Meitei’s hegemonic control. Diverse communities of Manipur thus took to separatist demands, as much against each other as against the Indian Union. Between 1977 and 1980, a secessionist insurgency alongside intermittent violent inter-tribe conflicts thus shaped up in Manipur. Further intra-ethnic divisions arose due to contentious listing of the Scheduled Tribes and notifications of autonomous district councils in favour of some when found practical, but not others.

The People’s Liberation Army of Manipur (PLA), formed in 1978, has emerged as the better organised anti-national insurgent band, though there are many other rumbustious kind of armed groups pretending to be freedom fighters and living by loot and extortion. After protracted counter-insurgency operations, some movement towards peace was made between 2005 and 2008, when Kuki and Zomi militant groups accepted a Secession of Operations and arrived at a Tripartite Peace Agreement. In 2013, Memorandums of Understanding were signed between the Manipur State Government and three more militant groups—including some of their factions like the Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP), KCP (Lamphel) and Kanglei Yawal Kanna Group (KYKG)—who agreed to give up arms and start peace talks. More negotiations brought a few more Kuki rebel groups in 2016 and 2018 to give up arms. Negotiations with 30-odd more fragment groups continue. Since 2005, there is a Suspension of Operations agreement in force. The insurgent cadres are meant to be located in designated camps while the arms are to be kept under double lock. But that does not prevent occasional inter-group clashes and even occasional attacks on Indian security forces.

The dominant armed groups—the United National Liberation Front of Manipur (UNLF), the People’s Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK), the PLA and its political wing, and the Revolutionary People’s Front (RPF) —are however not willing to find resolution to their armed rebellion within the framework of the Indian Constitution. These intransigents are given to parroting Pakistan’s Kashmir kind of rhetoric to propose such nonsense as “intervention of United Nations,” “plebiscite,” etc. Sporadic attacks on Indian security forces as well as against each other continue. Like Nagaland, rebellion has become an industry of extortion and manipulation.

## The Mizo Uprising

Like elsewhere, Mizos of the Lushai Hills of pre-Independence Assam had also been distressed by the transitory period of India's independence. The British had declared the Lushai and adjacent hill region as an "Excluded Area" and left it out to the gross maladministration of local "Chiefs" under the "Lal System." That in fact was at the roots of separatist tendency.

A Mizo representative political body, the Mizo Union, established in 1946, was focused on social reforms and release from dictatorial powers of the tribal chiefs, while looking forward to being an integral part of independent India. The same year, the Government of India set up a North East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas Committee of the Constituent Assembly. One faction of the Mizos, however, under the banner of United Mizo Freedom Organisation (UMFO) preferred merger with Burma, citing ethnic and linguistic similarity and such frivolous insinuations.

In 1960, the Assam Government's poor handling of the devastating famine (Mautam) of 1959-60 gave enough cause to the formation of the Mizo National Front (MNF) which professed "independence" for a "Greater Mizoram." After government offices and security camps were attacked in different parts of the Mizo district, "independence" was declared on March 1, 1966. The uprising was suppressed by the month's end. After some years of counter-insurgency operations and concurrent political dialogues, in 1970, the rebel's demand was moderated from secessionism to statehood within the Indian Constitution.

Following nearly a decade of separatist insurgency and its military counteraction, in 1972, a wisened Mizo leadership accepted the government's proposal for creation of a Union Territory of Mizoram. After the formal signing of the Mizo Accord in 1986, Mizoram gained full-fledged statehood in 1987.

## Terrorism in Assam

The Assam region, spread over the expanse of the great Brahmaputra Valley and its flanking hill areas has ever been a homeland of many different ethnic communities of North-East India, the people of Ahom stock being the main habitants. After it was formally incorporated into British Indian Empire in 1838, the state of Assam became the administrative capital for the entire North-East India. A couple of decades afterwards sprouted the idea of "Swadhin Asom" (free Asom) which sought to reinterpret history by pointing at the British as "invaders against a free Assam nation"—the British had actually intervened on a rescue mission against Burmese

usurpation, but later, their exploitative manners and continuous settlement of migrants over cultivable lands had raised people's consternation. The idea of free Asom was furthered thus, though finally it attained little.

As elsewhere in India, the pre-Independence period of power transition stoked a rather expansive notion among a section of the Assamese people, that of their having an exclusive, non-Indian national identity. Accordingly, in January 1948, the Assamese Jatiya Mahasabha leaders called for independent nationhood for Assam. No one took them seriously, not even the people of Assam.

But the post-Independence government's failure to stem illegal migration into the State of Assam gave rise to build-up of widespread consternation. Apprehension of the indigenous Assamese turning into a minority in their homeland thus manifested in the form of a series of massive popular agitations spearheaded by the All Assam Students Union (AASU). At the end of a long and bitter political process to resolve the matter, the "Assam Accord" was reached. Action on the ground to disperse the settlements of illegal migrants however remained ineffective due to political ambivalence. That led to the rise of a secessionist terror group of Assamese middle class, the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), in 1979. The ULFA found assistance from the NSCN in terms of training and weapon supplies and used its sanctuaries in Bangladesh to launch vicious anti-state terrorist attacks all over Assam.

Starting in 1990, Government of India banned the terrorist organisation and followed up with counterterror military operations. Inter-tribe and local-migrant disputes over land and power base led to parallel occurrence of a number of the most vicious riots which shook the State. The reign of terror was more or less brought under control after two decades of military counterterror operations. In 2011, the ULFA dropped its secessionist demand and entered into a "Suspension of Operations" agreement with the Government. That left a stump anti-talk faction to remain in defiance of the settlement. Soon, the rise of a successor terror outfit, the ULFA (Independent), followed. Since 2015 or so, this outfit, with some solidarity from criminal gangs, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and the renegade NSCN (K), has indulged in many serious terror activities.

The contentious situation in Assam has two aspects: One, the massive illegal migration and settlement of Bangladeshi citizens; and two, the inter-tribe and anti-migrant riots triggered by the struggle for space and resources. Counterterror operations thus continue, albeit at low key. But illegal migrants' usurpation of native Assamese as well as the tribal lands is at the root of all the trouble. Some concrete steps to identify the illegal migrants are presently underway, but the process runs in fits and starts, and

with no clear roadmap to assuage what must be a national concern rather than just that of the Assamese people. Occasional mumblings of independent nationalism for the people of Assamese stock, cleverly packaged with outlandish explanations do surface among a rather ignored element of anti-nationals.

### Key Observations

Discussion in this Part may be condensed into the following observable trends:

- In the run-up to India's independence, local power-wielders had been instilled with *anxieties of future uncertainties* and loss of their traditional control. This phenomenon was apparent in most of India, namely, the princely states, linguistic groups, border states.
- In India's outlying North-East region that anxiety manifested in the form of separatist narratives. *Historical past of clans and tribes were craftily subverted and twisted to give a stamp of authenticity to such false narratives.*
- Role of *British imperialists, manipulators of religious sentiments and entrenched societal overlords had been active in spreading false alarms and fuelling secessionist notions* amongst their subjects. Instigation from inimical neighbours gave much impetus to such notions and helped conflagrate these into armed insurgencies.
- Equally remarkable had been the *failure of the pan-Indian independence movement to permeate the awareness of the noble cause among the peoples of the North-East region, and so draw their solidarity over the coming dispensation of freedom and democracy.*
- Newly independent India had limited resources for good governance and lacked requisite force capabilities to neutralise the rising secessionism. *To the government's credit, it had yet been able to respond to the situational complexities and control the so many insurgencies of the most vicious kind.*
- Today there are *just four major factions of the erstwhile insurgent groups who defy the call to come to terms under the Indian Constitution:* the NSCN (K) in Nagaland, UNLF and PLA in Manipur and ULFA (I) in Assam. There are enough indications that India's sanctified sovereignty over her North-Eastern region, having found acceptance among the diverse sub-nationalities of that region, is getting consolidated. The future is sublime.

In the background of the discussion in the preceding two Parts, it is time to delve into the fundamental issue that had, and still does, instigate armed insurgencies in the first place. Accordingly, the focus of the next Part would be on seeding of false secessionist narratives by cabals of crafty power-manipulators to mislead the people's understanding of Indian nationhood.

### The Stake, and Focus

With the recent surge of nationalism among the informed citizenry, the time is ripe to have a detached re-evaluation at the situations that let the successive ethnicity based insurgencies to gather momentum. The purpose is to apply hindsight to highlight the forms of anti-national instigations.

When revisited without distracting into contrasting debates as to what “should have been,” it would be seen that in the early days of independence, the State’s cognitive as well as organisational resources were insufficient to match up to overcome deliberately stoked rebellious sentiments. Power hungry and manipulative nexuses could thus find little difficulty in sowing the seeds of anti-nationalism. With the State being constrained in detecting and arresting anti-national activities—and so to save the gullible masses from being misled into the secessionist trap and its socio-economic repercussions—the common citizen had been left with little scope to challenge the influential nexuses who organised themselves to contaminate the ethnic sentiments.

Whatever be the limitations of the state machinery and compulsions of private citizens, the fact is that the scourge of unending violence and separatist insurgencies have severely retarded the nation’s march towards egalitarianism and progress. Notably, therefore, a recall of situations leading to the secessionist insurgencies could offer good lessons for the State and its citizenry to guard against implant of innocuous sounding anti-national “seedings,” and thereby forestall the sprouting of anti-national trends at the beginning itself. In today’s dispensation of proud nationalism, such cautionary lessons would also help arrest the rise of more unsavoury influences—in the form of social, fiscal and political distortions in the national discourse—and in so doing, further the idea of “Rising India.”

### Fundamental Questions

Having observed the broad trends of insurgencies and separatism in the North-East in the preceding parts, we may now infer certain fundamental questions over India’s handling of past insurgencies.

The first question that comes to mind is that could the Indian State have handled the post-Independence situations, as discussed above, any better? Conditions in the North-East were the creation of centuries of unique socio-political environment, and inherited at the time of independence as such. Independence itself was a transformational event to establish an integrated

political Union with the promise of progressive management of national resources and democratic administration of an empowered citizenry. Such ideals require close alignment of political, and by implication societal systems, and that is a process which is invariably associated with a certain degree of trepidation and anxieties. Because of the cognitive conditioning of the masses over half a century of freedom struggle, India was fortunate not to have suffered the rise of such anxieties in the rest of the country when 565+ princely states had to be merged into a new sovereign Union. In the remote and restricted access North-East, however, people had not had the opportunity to be so prepared for the dawn of a new, modern dispensation. The churning of popular alienation and armed conflicts in the North-East was therefore a natural fallout of fear of unknown socio-political transformation. Wider penetration of the freedom movement in the remote North-East, admittedly against heavy odds, would have ameliorated that churning. That indeed was a blind spot of India's freedom movement which continued well after Independence.

The second question is that would it have been better if the Indian State had allowed to continue the old Gupta-Mogul-British system of segregation of the North-East ethnic communities from the rest of the nation. The answer should be a "no." That was the time when the umbrella of British power had gone while Burmese nationalism, Pakistan's territorial ambitions and Chinese expansionism was on the rise. It was only a matter of time when their predatory attention would have focused upon India's North-East. Even internally, if the long succession of extremely barbaric ethnic wars—Kuki-Hmar (1960), Kuki-Naga (1992-97), Meitei-Meitei Pangal (Muslim) of 1993, Kuki-Zomi (1997-99), Hmar-Dimsa (2003-4)—to name just a few of catastrophic proportions, are taken note of, it is imaginable as to what the situation would have been had the local ethnic groups been "independent" to fall into sinister provocations and instigations.

Concerns of internal and external dangers to a motley North-East, divided into weak, undeveloped, fragmented and mutually hostile "nations," are further exacerbated when the inevitability of meddling from inimical powers into their affairs is considered. Indeed, fallouts of the North-East's fragmented and isolated political structure would have been catastrophic—more devastating for the local people than elsewhere. By controlling the misguided insurgencies, India was therefore able to avert the rise of permanent turmoil and instability in the region. The cost, to state the obvious, has no doubt been heavy—in terms of blood spilled, economy stifled, time wasted and societies rent. But that must be the price to pay to retrace from past folly and secure the nation's integrity.

## Secessionist Subterfuge: The Price of Failed Political Foresight

### Nagaland: Abstruse “India Narrative”

The invention of ethnicity and religion induced separatist notions among the tribes of the North-East had begun, mainly among the Naga groups, as early as the second decade of the twentieth century, just as the *Swaraj mantra* was gaining ground in the rest of pre-independence India. The foremost task for the leadership of the self-rule movement was therefore to take the cause to India's North-Eastern parts too. That would have averted the seeding of distorted anti-national narratives by British officers and their missionary cohorts. To that end, the role of progressive minded people like the feisty Rani Gaidinliu in the 1930s could have been reinforced at the ground level.<sup>5</sup>

Having found a sinister growth of anti-national narrative among the North-Eastern tribes, it was for the polity of independence-eve India to propagate the right, sublime “India narrative” among them. That would have eased the integration of diverse sections of the people who had so far been “used” according to the colonial master's selfish motivations. Even when the government of the newly independent nation assumed power, it more or less left the people to the malignant devices of their surrogate mentors for nearly a full decade, till 1956, when the situation went out of control and the Army had to be deployed in counter-insurgency role.

Worse, the secessionist factions found encouragement from simple and innocuous freedom related utterances of leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Nehru and Sardar Patel, which they contrived to twist in order to propagate their secessionist ambitions among the gullible ethnicities. The 9-Point Agreement steered by Akbar Hydari with the NNC had mentioned, in all simplicity, about “autonomy,” “consolidation of Naga administrative units” and “review of the agreement” after a 10 years period. These terms were cleverly twisted to raise an anti-nationalist pitch that led to the so-called “Naga plebiscite” in 1951, followed by the NNC going underground. The anti-national subterfuge took another farcical turn when cyclic choruses of “mass murder and rape by defence forces” turned into a routinely contrived frenzy.<sup>6</sup>

All this mischief was perpetrated by a handful of foreign sponsored influentials, while the actually misled counted no more than 0.5 percent of the population. The government, on the other hand, afflicted by misplaced rhetoric of peoples’ “wishes and customs,” “rights,” “freedom,” etc., left uncontested the ground for such false insinuations to be seeded freely. The long period between independence in 1947 and outbreak of concerted Naga insurgency in 1955-56 was left for such poisonous seeds to sprout. By the time a sense of nationalism could be imbibed amongst the majority much later, a small but

dangerously misguided band of rebels had found the anti-national insinuations rather enticing. Long periods of insurgency, and the cycles of negotiations, accommodations, agreements and repudiations followed. While the rebellion became industrialised for profit, intransigence of some breakaway group or the other inevitably fouled with what agreements could be reached. As a result, the current situation in Nagaland, though much civilised, peaceful and mutually accommodative, remains yet short of the expected sovereign, democratic standards.

Similar manners of seedings of false narratives, suitably coupled to anti-national “causes” construed out of usual societal grievances to further secessionist notions among gullible people was seen in other instances too—Mizoram, Manipur and Assam being the representative cases.

### **Mizoram: Political Indifference**

As discussed in Part 2 above, in Mizoram, British abandonment of what they declared as the “Excluded Areas” to the dictatorial devices of the Lal System was at the roots of separatism. Neglect from the erstwhile Government of larger Assam, particularly its callous handling of successive “Mautam” famines, raised the pitch to secessionist level. But, subsequently, the rebellious groups heeded to the people’s verdict and when rejected by that verdict, saved themselves from being consumed by violence.

The cause of peace was also furthered by the rebellion being mostly non-ethnic and localised, and a mature role played by civil society, the Church and students working in tandem with the Government. Now and then, usual ambitions do simmer within some groups or the other like the Hmars, Chakma and the Bru, but that must be an accepted sign of democratic dispensation, to be negotiated with care and concern.

### **Manipur: Conceding to Societal Subversion**

If the Naga secessionism was a disorientation, that in the case of Manipur must be outlandish in its banality. Here, groups of ethnically divided and territorially dispersed habitants have just one thing in common: their cultural, traditional, religious and ethnic “Indianness.” And even as these groups cannot find peace among themselves without the Central Government’s intervention, they seek secession to establish their own brand of “sovereignty”—the perplexing question being as to which group’s sovereignty and how.

In this instance too, in the pre-Independence period, little was done to propagate the narrative of India’s sovereignty and so assimilate the peoples’ innate Indianness. In fact, the Indian leadership, in good faith and under romantic interpretation of freedom, allowed the rabble-rouser to germinate,

by riding on the rest of Indians' freedom struggle, the outlandish notion of secession from the Indian Union.

### **Assam: A Political Blunder**

Independent India's political failing of allowing poisonous implants to grow, even watering it, into Frankensteinian proportions is most starkly manifest in the case of Assam. For nearly three decades the State remained stable more or less, and bore with the mounting problem of illegal migrants usurping the native peoples' majority rights. All this time, the government, sold to the idea of human rights of illegal immigrants and thus being seen as a global good boy, chose to compromise the human rights of its own people and so be seen as callous. After much agitation and disruption, a modus operandi to deal with the illegal settlers was worked out, but even that process was stalled on some ostensibly "noble" pretext or the other. Finally, the Supreme Court's intervention has stalled the nation from slipping into an eventual political breakdown. The problem however festers.

People of Assam, in their turn, were allowed, even pushed, by the successive government's three decades of apathy, into inventing causes to rise in armed rebellion against constitutional governance. Notably, by no stretch of imagination can Assam be found to be a separate national entity—a class, ethnicity, clan or group perhaps, but no more. Yet, false narratives were invented by some pseudo-intellectuals to alienate the peoples' nationalism, a vocal section among them even going to the extent of entertaining secessionist notions. The subterfuge went to paint the Ahom monarchy and its state as a "non-Indian nation," and the Ahom army's one-off victory over the Mughals—later overturned but not followed further—as a sign of Assam's all-time "sovereignty."

Similarly, the nineteenth century British Government's rescue of the Hill Regions of the North-East from Burmese arm-twisting and internal anarchy was posted as an "arbitrary and forcible British usurpation" of Assam. Then, as a corollary, a separatist "understanding" with leaders of the freedom movement, at the independence-eve, was invented. The narrative went ludicrous when independent India's supposed "arbitrary incorporation" of Assam and its "Indian colonisation" was added to it. As an aside, it must be acknowledged that the sheer nonsense of such narratives shut up even those few who did not mind tasting the romance of rebellion, and that outright popular rejection put paid to the ULFA's ludicrous intransigence.

But the point is that all through the three decades of democratic existence, the Indian political system did little to prevent or counter the

rise of such poisonous anti-national narratives. Even now, when the issue of ridding Assam of illegal settlers has gained ground, there are consistent efforts among the polity to sabotage progress in the name of one or the other religion, refugees' human rights and brazen vote-bank attractions.

### **In Sum**

Finally, it is needless to emphasise that the right time to stop any slide into anti-national afflictions must be at the seeding stage itself. But that lesson comes in hindsight. The task for the Indian polity in future therefore is to imbibe that lesson, and so propagate a sublime nationalist narrative that would secure India's future for a strong, free, democratic and united nation-state.

### **Conclusion**

Invention of false, fissiparous and destructive narratives to promote anti-nationalist agenda have not been confined just to the North-East alone. Indeed, there had been attempts in the past to seed such dangerous narratives among the people of Telengana, Bengal and Dravid lands. Popular wisdom, however, had been strong enough to defeat such attempts. Conversely, anti-national subterfuge did draw enough followers in Punjab before the terrorist proponents of a separate "Khalistan" and their foreign-fed instigators could be defanged. Presently, the three-decade-long militancy in Kashmir that continues to strike at the noble fundamentals of Indian nationhood is but a result of another poisonous narrative succeeding in subverting the rich culture and balanced perceptions of the people of the Kashmir Valley. In all instances, it is the want of a sublime "India narrative," and a demonstrated national will to imbibe it, that has been at the core of all anti-national disorientations.

Meanwhile, seeds of separatism could be traced in the manner in which a reckonable section of India's myopic polity is intent on dividing the society into class, cast, linguistic and religious groups—all just to grab the advantages of power and pelf. Electoral politics thus undermines the very democratic foundation upon which it stands. Irresponsible polity has strangled good governance to such a level that the highest judiciary has to be invoked to adjudicate on issues which should logically be managed by popular conscience and the government's solemn commitment. That is a trend, perpetrated on the pretext of farcical versions of "egalitarianism," "people's verdict" and "democracy," which could lead to the judiciary being pulled into controversies, only to eventually lose its aura of perfection and righteousness. With most institutional pillars of freedom and progress compromising on ordained values to various degrees, such seemingly innocuous allowances are liable to grow into

ant-national discourses. As history points out, that indeed would be the first step to the nation's vivisection. The danger to the Indian nationhood therefore lurks.

To conclude, the events of the past half a century in the Indian North-East, as elsewhere, is a challenge of reposing, in all sagacity, the people's narrow affiliations from micro-communities, clans, castes, villages and larger pan-tribal, linguistic and religious groups to a strong, benevolent, progressive and integrated political system. For the Indian polity, it is therefore the greatest task to build a nation out of a collection of diverse tribes, communities and societies. So far, India has been performing that task as a matter of expediency, trying various combinations of appeasement, compromise, accommodation, overlook, postponement, etc. But given India's diversities, time has come to elevate nationalist ideals above everything else—even above electoral commitments—to consolidate the Indian nationhood. Truly, such an approach may not be seen as threat to liberalism, in fact it is the bedrock of democracy.

## Notes

1. In ancient religious texts and folklore, there are abundant references of intimate cross-regional, cross-ethnic relationships among the peoples inhabiting the North-East and those in other parts of the Bharatvarsha. The religious and social bonds are further substantiated by the traditional practices that continue to this day.
2. The tribes of Garo, Khasi, Jaintia, Adi, Nyishi, Angami, Bhutia, Kuki, Rengma, Deori, Mizo, Abor, Tsangla, Aptani, Bodo, etc.—over 50 of them and their 200-odd sub-tribes in all—are settled in various percentages in the seven North-Eastern States. Ministry of Tribal Affairs Census Report 2017.
3. Groups and independent Churches of various schools—Roman Catholic, Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Anglican—from England, the United States, Australia, the Netherlands, Germany and Italy had been active in the spread of Christianity among the various tribes of the North-East.
4. The Central Government of British India brought Assam (1826), Cachar (1832), Naga Hills (1877), Lushai Hills (1897), Manipur (1891) and the eastern-most frontier tracts (1890s) under its formal and regular control, thus ending their independent or autonomous status.
5. Promoting nationalist fervour requires some subtle degree of perception management backed with factual historical narratives.
6. In June 1947, just prior to Independence, an agreement was arrived at with Governor Akbar Hydari, representing the Government, and the NNC. Notably, the NNC was neither an elected body, nor did it represent the entire Naga clans.

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