

accepted'.¹⁴ The ULFA says ethnicity has 'promoted more divisions within the revolutionary struggles and provided India's ruling classes with more and more opportunity to crush them'.¹⁵ According to a former security adviser to the Assam government, this is 'a clever ploy to broaden the support base of the ULFA insurgency against India'.¹⁶ But Assam's political leadership now speak the same language, of the need to satisfy the aspirations of the ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities to stave off another break-up of the state.¹⁷

Though ethnicity has been the mainstay of the region's separatist movements and often has formed the basis for creation of political-administrative units there, its self-corrosive properties have restricted the growth of local nationalisms strong enough to confront Delhi. It can create a Lebanon or a Bosnia out of northeast India but never a Bangladesh or an East Timor capable of breaking away from the post-colonial nation-state. All the states in the North East, most of which were created on the basis of ethnic distinctiveness, have failed to resolve their ethnic issues, thus exposing the illusion of a 'pure ethnic homeland'.

Meghalaya came into being as a tribal state because the leaders of the three major tribes (Khasis, Jaintias and Garos) felt that their aspirations were poorly served in Assam. Now they fight along ethnic lines for the spoils of political office and since Meghalaya, like most other North Eastern states, has a small legislature of 60 members, the state has to live with the instability of shaky coalitions. The latest power-sharing arrangement within Meghalaya's ruling regional coalition gives a politician of the Garo tribe (Purno Sangma) and one of the Khasi tribe (Donkuper Roy) two-and-half years each as chief minister. That Sangma, a former Speaker of the Indian parliament, comes back to his home state and becomes part of such a power-sharing arrangement to secure his dwindling political fortunes testifies to the power of ethnicity in Meghalaya—and perhaps in the rest of the region.

Mizoram also has problems with its ethnic minorities. The Reang and Chakma tribes complain of ethnic and religious persecution and allege that the dominant Mizos, who are mostly Christian, want to convert them to Christianity and to the Mizo way of life. The Lais and Maras want to join the Reangs and the Chakmas to form a separate unit, a Union Territory to be administered from the Centre.¹⁸ The Naga-Kuki clashes throughout northeast India that left hundreds

dead in the 1980s and 1990s raised the spectre of conflicting homeland demands that could lead to ethnic cleansing in pursuit of the impossible, namely, the creation of 'pure ethnic states'.

In Arunachal Pradesh, the largest state in northeast India, ethnicity has served to fragment the society and polity and has hindered political modernization. Its just over quarter of a million people are split up into 110 tribes and several plains communities. Twenty-six of these tribes are large and politically significant. The largest among them, including the Adis, the Nishis, the Singphos, the Khamptis and the Apa Tanis, are in perpetual competition for political power. They unite only when faced with a common scare and also when they find an acceptable scapegoat: the Chakmas and the Hajongs. Local politicians in the state whip up anti-Chakma passions to win elections or mobilize support during key political occasions.

The Chakmas and Hajongs fled from East Pakistan in the 1960s to escape economic pauperization and political persecution. One-fifth of the Chakmas were rendered landless in their Chittagong Hill Tracts homeland by the Kaptai Dam and had no choice but to flee into northeast India. The Indian government settled them in North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA), now Arunachal Pradesh. Since it was reckoned that both these communities would be loyal to India for the shelter and rehabilitation they received here, officials in the Indian Home Ministry felt that their presence in a state on the frontier with China would help India develop 'behind-the-lines partisan resistance' if the Chinese army were to overrun the province, as they partly did in 1962.

Local tribesmen, however, complain that the Chakmas and the Hajongs are infiltrators who were settled without their consent. Groups like the All Arunachal Pradesh Students Union (AAPSU) periodically voice their determination to push the Chakmas and Hajongs out of the state. They are seen as a threat by all the state's leading tribes because they now number between 60,000 and 70,000, which makes them more numerous than most of the larger local tribes. If they gain Indian citizenship in keeping with a Supreme Court order, they will unsettle current political equations in the state because they can join up with smaller tribes and challenge the preponderance of larger tribes. For this reason, the larger local tribes of Arunachal Pradesh have resisted fiercely moves by Delhi to grant Indian citizenship to the Chakmas and the Hajongs.

And successive state governments have refused to implement the Supreme Court order that recommended Indian citizenship for the Hajongs and Chakmas.

While ethnicity remains the driving force in the separatist and autonomist movements of northeast India, it has also come to play a prominent role in the legislative politics of the region. The Congress party, which continues to dominate the region, running governments in most states, exploits ethnic and religious sentiments as much as the BJP or the communists. In Assam, the Congress, whose grip on local politics grew out of its leadership of the nationalist movement against the British, has been increasingly challenged by the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP). The AGP, a party barely two decades old, grew out of the anti-foreigner agitation in Assam that redefined Assamese identity on the basis of ethnicity, thus weakening its traditional multi-racial base. The exigencies of legislative politics forced it to appeal to non-Assamese segments of the population as well, if only in a limited way and to address only electoral issues.

So strong is the pull of ethnicity that even leftist parties, that had opposed the Assam agitation for its alleged chauvinistic character, supported the AGP in coalition politics. The BJP has also wooed the AGP to push its own religious agenda amongst the *Asomiya* caste-Hindus. In fact, the BJP has tried to complement the AGP's grip on Assamese caste-Hindus by attempting to add to it its own vote bank amongst Bengali and Hindi-speaking Hindus. More and more groups have used ethnicity in Assam to build parties and organizations. All tribes now have student organizations modelled on the AASU and they use ethnicity as the basis for political articulation. Across the spectrum, political organizations like the Bodo Peoples Action Committee and the Autonomous States Demands Committee of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills are using an ethnic demand, like autonomy or statehood for an ethnic group, to gain political mileage.

The scene is no different elsewhere in the North East. The Naga regional parties—like the Naga Nationalist Democratic Party or coalitions like the Democratic Alliance of Nagaland that now rules the state—have a one-point programme: to push the Naga cause, be it by facilitating talks with the separatist groups or by demanding demographic security for the Nagas (by seeking the ouster of migrants) or by pressing for integration of Naga-inhabited areas of

states neighbouring Nagaland. The Indigenous Nationalist Party of Tripura and the Tripura Upajati Yuba Samity, before it, have developed their entire politics around the ethnic concerns of the indigenous tribespeople of Tripura and the undercurrent of marginalization amongst them in view of a continuous influx of Bengali settlers from across the border.

Organizations like the Manipur People's Party and Mizoram's People's Conference draw their strength from ethnicity as do the regional parties in Meghalaya, like the Hill States Peoples Demands Party (HSPDP). And a party like the Mizo National Front, a former rebel group but now Mizoram's leading opposition party, is so narrowly focussed on Mizo ethnicity as the basis for its politics that it has managed to alienate ethnic minorities like the Chakmas, the Brus, the Lais and the Maras. In some states, regional parties were born out of the Congress, after desertions by legislators and senior politicians from the Delhi-oriented Congress. Some returned to the Congress, some did not. These parties, such as the Manipur Congress of W. Nipamacha Singh and the Arunachal Congress of Gegong Apang, have chosen to articulate ethnic concerns after the breakaway from the Congress in a rather brazen way.

Thus, the North East has witnessed the rise of three types of ethnicity-based parties and organizations: (a) those, like the AGP, that grew out of local protest movements with clear ethnic overtones, like the anti-migrant agenda in Assam; (b) those with separatist roots but then returned to constitutional politics, like the Mizo National Front and (c) those which broke away from the Congress or another national party and articulated ethnic issues. The preponderant influence of ethnicity is apparent in the politics and the protest movements of northeast India, in its social processes, at times even in economic decision-making. But its manifestation is never uni-directional. Ethnicity has fragmented and also consolidated generic identities in the region in a dynamic process of socio-political change.

'NATIONAL LIBERATION' OR 'INDIAN REVOLUTION'

In some parts of what became India's North East, communist parties subtly articulated ethnic issues to create a support base among the indigenous tribespeople. In Tripura, the communists played on the

tribal's sense of loss and marginalization brought on by the end of princely rule and the kingdom's merger with India. Their leaders first gained popularity in the tribal areas through the 'Jana Shiksha' or the Mass Literacy movement. At the peak of its nation-wide armed movement in 1948, the Communist Party of India (CPI) absorbed into its fold the state's leading tribal organization, the Gana Mukti Parishad (GMP) or People's Liberation Council. The CPI adopted the GMP's political programme on tribal rights, loss of tribal lands and the threat to the distinctive social organization of the tribespeople. Unlike the Naga National Council, however, the GMP never demanded secession. The GMP guerrillas fought for an 'Indian revolution' rather than for an independent homeland like the Nagas.¹⁹

When the CPI gave up the armed struggle and denounced it as 'irresponsible adventurism', the tribal guerrillas in the communist Shanti Sena (Peace Army) gave up their weapons and returned to normal life. Taking advantage of the situation, the Congress-dominated state administration started resettling large numbers of newly arrived Bengali migrants in the tribal areas of Tripura. Since the tribespeople were largely supportive of the communists, the Congress wanted to alter the demographic profile of the constituencies by promoting the organized rehabilitation of the Bengali migrants. This did help the Congress in 1967, when it won both the state's parliament seats for the first time after having lost them to the communists in three successive elections. Having suffered in the numbers game, the tribals lost faith in the CPI and began to turn to militant ethnic politics.

After manipulating ethnic concerns to build up a party nucleus and a political base, the communists succumbed to electoral concerns in Tripura. With other tribal parties and insurgent organizations surfacing to articulate ethnic issues, the communists had to fall back on their growing support base among the Bengalis. Since 1978, they have won all but one of the state assembly elections, but their grip on the state's tribal areas has weakened. Twice in a decade, Tripura's ruling communists lost the state's Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council to a militant tribal party, first the Tripura Upajati Juba Samity (TUJS), then Indigenous People's Front of Tripura (IPF), both strangely aligned to the Congress for purely electoral considerations.

The IPFT, now renamed the Indigenous Nationalist Party of Tripura (INPT), enjoys the backing of the separatist National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT). The NLFT's rhetoric is secessionist but its leaders have said they are open to negotiations on an 'appropriate power sharing arrangement for maximum possible tribal control in state assembly, the autonomous district council and on the state's resources'.²⁰ Two more tribal parties have merged with the INPT—the TUJS, the first exclusive tribal party in the state, and the Tribal National Volunteers (TNV), which led a bloody ten-year insurgency during 1978–88. The ruling communists staved off the INPT challenge in two successive state assembly elections in 2003 and 2008. The tribal party's alliance with the Congress did not work and the majority Bengali voters were alarmed by the INPT's close links with the NLFT.

The communists in Tripura used a tribal organization and its leadership to promote their complex ideology in backward agrarian society where slash-and-burn agriculture (locally called *jhum*) was still prevalent and industry was virtually absent. The GMP had retained its distinct character even after its merger with the Communist Party organization, including its anomalous family-based membership. During the two decades that followed the end of the communist armed struggle, however, the GMP's influence on the communist political agenda dwindled sharply. Having widened their political base to win elections, the communists tried to sidestep the ethnic issues until they were forced to support the tribal autonomy movement in the 1980s. The tribal parties moved into the vacuum, aggressively ethnicizing the state's political discourse and questioning the relevance of communist ideology for the tribespeople. Unlike the TUJS, which accepted the role of a junior partner in the coalition with the Congress that ruled Tripura between 1988 and 1993, the INPT is more assertive, especially when it comes to articulating tribal issues and interests.

In Manipur and Assam, the communists continue to win a few seats in the state assembly. The CPI has strong pockets of support that were built up during the struggle for peasant rights, but it shares power only as minor partners in regional coalitions. In Manipur, the CPI has joined the Congress-led ruling coalition formed in February 2002 to keep the BJP out of power in the state. In Assam, on the other hand, it opposed the Congress in the 1996 state elections and came