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Understanding ethnicity-based autonomy movements in India's northeastern region

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Soon after independence, India's northeastern region was swamped in a series of conflicts starting with the Naga secessionist movement in the 1950s, followed by others in the 1960s. The conflicts intensified and engulfed the entire region in the 1970s and 1980s. However, in the 1990s, following reclamation of ethnic identities amid gnawing scarcities, the conflicts slowly turned into internal feuds. Consequently, alliance and re-alliance among the ethnic groups transpired. In the 2000s, it finally led to the balkanization of ethnicity-based autonomy movements in the region. Unfortunately, the state's ad-hoc measures failed to contain protected conflicts and, instead, compounded the situation and swelled hybrid ethnic identities.

Keywords: autonomy; ethnicity; NER; state response

Introduction

The history of separatist movements in India's northeastern region (NER or simply region hereafter)[1] can be traced back to 1918 when the Naga club was formed in Kohima (present capital city of Nagaland) and submitted a memorandum before the Simon Commission in 1929 to exclude the Nagas from the proposed constitutional reform in the British administration in India. But, it was ignored and the Government of India Act of 1935 came into effect from 1 May 1937, making the Naga Hills Backward Tract of 1919 an "excluded area" (Kotwal 2000). In 1946, the club was renamed as the Naga National Council (NNC) and took a violent path for Naga independence. After India's independence, as an appeasing policy, the Naga Hills district of the undivided Assam was converted into a full-fledged state of Nagaland in 1963. But, the armed movement against the state showed no sign of respite and continued until 1980 when the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) was formed and further split in 1988 as two factions: NSCN Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM) and NSCN Khaplang (NSCN-K). Thereafter, the two factions engaged in bitter infighting, while the NNC became less active. As the long-running armed movement became a self-destructing mission of the Nagas (Pillai 1999), in the 1990s, they tried to distance themselves from the powerful insurgent groups, especially the NSCN-IM led by Manipuri tribes from Manipur (Ravi 2014). Subsequently, the outfit concentrated their activities mainly in Manipur.

In the Lushai Hills of the undivided Assam, the Mizo National Famine Front, renamed in 1961 as the Mizo National Front (MNF), protested against the government over sheer

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negligence regarding the Mautam famine in 1959 that devastated the hills. The protest turned into violence and became a movement for "Independent Zoram." Since then, the government of India (GoI) intensified counterinsurgency operations and the Indian Air Force bombed Aizawl (the present capital city of Mizoram) on 5 March 1966, the only instance in which an air attack was used to curb internal rebellion in India's history (Ngaihte 2013). After several rounds of negotiations, the MNF signed the Mizo Accord on 30 June 1986. Though the aspiration of "Greater Mizoram" was not fulfilled (that includes the dreams of Hmar, Paite, etc.), the Mizo problem was settled with the formation of Mizoram state on 20 February 1987. Since then, the Hmars and Paites continued their movements from Assam and Manipur.

In Tripura, the number of Hindu Bengali migrants backed by the GoI increased rapidly after the country's independence as they out-numbered the indigenous Tripuris (Boroks) and became a state dominated by Bengali migrants (Debbarma 2016). With the fear of losing identity and land, a separatist movement kicked off with the formation of the Tripura Upajati Juba Samiti in 1971 and it intensified since 1981 when another group, the Tripura National Volunteers, joined it. Deportation of the migrants and self-determination have been the major goals of the Borok insurgent groups. But, in 1999, the Bengalis started hitting back at the Boroks after the formation of a Bengali militant group, the United Bengal Liberation Front. At the same time, a counterinsurgency operation against the Tripuri insurgent group intensified (Bhaumik 2012). Since the administration, economy, and decision-making power have all been in the hands of the migrants, the Tripuris realized the impossibility of secession from India and deportation of the migrants. This coupled with strategic development interventions made by the sagacious Chief Minister Manik Sarkar paved the way in defusing militancy in the 2000s (Sahaya 2011).

Similarly, in Assam, with the growing number of Bengali migrants from Bangladesh, an alarm bell has been raised about losing Assamese/Ahom ethnic identity and economic opportunities. In 1960, the Assamese launched a language movement and in 1979, the All Assam Students Union (AASU) along with the Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AGSP) launched a movement to drive out illegal migrants (Borkakoti 2013). In the same year, the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) was formed and secession from India was its determined goal. When the ULFA intensified its armed movement against India, the mass agitation of AASU–AGSP ended in August 1985 with the signing of the "Assam accord." Its leaders formed a political party called the "Asom Gana Parishad" (AGP) and engaged in electoral politics (Rajagopalan 2008). On the other side, with the upsurge in tribal movements against Assamese domination, the state has been riven by a series of internal feuds. At the same time, against the ULFA, the state conducted four major army operations from 1990 to 1995, weakened the outfit, and finally entered into a peace agreement with the government in 2011. But, the internal conflicts caused by the greater autonomy aspirants continued and further complicated.

In the case of Manipur, following discontent over the forceful annexation of the kingdom in 1949 several organizations with separatist leanings emerged in the early 1950s (M. A. Singh 2010). The armed movement for secession from India kicked off in the 1960s with the formation of the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) and intensified in the 1980s when other like-minded organizations joined it. However, in the 1990s, with the emergence of the "Southern Nagaland" movement led by the NSCN-IM and its counter-movements by other groups, the armed conflict, which had been perpetuated between the state and non-state actors, digressed toward internal conflicts (Oinam 2003). Since then, it became the worst conflict-affected state in the region.

As for Sikkim, no insurgent activity has been reported; while in Arunachal Pradesh, negligible insurgency-related activities that mainly spilled over from Assam and Nagaland have been witnessed. Similarly, in Meghalaya, barring low-intensity Khasi-Garo infighting over economic and political interests, not much serious movement was witnessed. In the 2000s, Assam and Manipur were the worst affected states by ethnicity-based autonomy movements vis-à-vis the six other sister states of the region (see Appendix 1 for state formation).

Theoretical background

While conceptualizing ethnic movements, constructivists viewed ethnic identities as constructed for economic and political interests over time, and that that results in divergent ethnicity and hostility between them. Ethnicity is generally a construct, not a constant. They are easily formed for economic reasons and when they succeed, they are easily disbanded (Dudková 2013). This pattern of ethnic identity formation is termed, by Prabhakara (2005), as "manufactured identity." Similarly, Fearon and Laitin (2000) contend that ethnic conflict is primarily caused by the construction of identities for a specific political purpose. Members of ethnic groups are conditioned by the ethnic discourses that predispose them to perpetuate conflict against other groups. In this manner, in the 1990s, most of the conflicts witnessed in the world were internal (Vogt 2014), and approximately 68% were mainly ethnically driven (Savage 2005).

According to Johnson (2010), ethnic conflicts are likely to recur under two conditions – (i) when the state (or elements within it) seeks to "protect" its minority kin on the other side (s) of the boundary and (ii) when the state becomes weak and creates several opportunities for violence to erupt. Other scholars, like Vogt (2014) and Lijphart (2002), opined that the terms and conditions used to demarcate separate territories into distinct states might resolve some key problems that bedevil the peace-building process, but are unlikely to produce long term peace, unless they – (i) separate the warring ethnic groups demographically and (ii) maintain a balance of power between the post-war states. Generally, in a defined geographical area where minorities are compactly settled, creation of a separate state or greater autonomy is preferred; this becomes a chief issue of conflict, not a solution to the problem (Blagojevic 2004; Cornell 2002; Khorshidi, Fee, and Soltani 2010). However, according to Balcells, Daniels, and Escribà-Folch (2016), low-intensity intergroup violence escalates in the areas where there is parity between groups and similar-sized rival communities are geographically in contact with each other. Vogt (2014) categorized it as an "unranked ethnic system," which is composed of a priori equal groups without any historical and political hierarchies between them. According to Zartman (2001), it involves bargaining between the parties to the conflict where both sides have power over each other. In a multi-ethnic society, more often than not, leaders of the minority groups want accommodation of their demands in terms of jobs, security, development, and so on. When these are turned down by the dominant group(s), insurgency takes root, separatist groups come into existence, ethno-nationalism gains ground, and demands for greater autonomy escalates (Kom and Brahma 2012; L. M. Singh 2011). However, the state generally seems reluctant to accede to such demands because autonomy is the first step toward eventual secession from the union. Also, the secessionism is likely to be significantly higher among autonomous minorities than among non-autonomous minorities (Cornell 2002). In the case of the NER, according to Weiner (1989), weak modern political institutions and their inability to deal with local religious obligations, linguistic differences, and unequal sharing of power and resources led to ethnic conflicts. Inoue (2005) opined that the region's heterogeneity of

communities has been primarily responsible for the unrest and conflict, while Ravi (2012) contended that the alleged forcible integration of the region into the Indian union is the major cause. Some others (Motiram and Sarma 2014; Phukan 2013) argued it as a fallout of immigration and the state's skewed policies.

Research questions and objectives

Having understood the ethnic backgrounds discussed above, the major research questions raised in this paper are: (1) What prevented the states of Assam and Manipur from resolving long-running ethnic conflicts when other sister states have more or less resolved theirs? (2) Have the ethnicity-based autonomy movements been purely a tactical shift from the secessionist movements by the insurgent groups? (3) Why did the state fail in containing ethnic conflicts? Using secondary information, historical antecedents, and established facts, this paper attempts to analyze the ethnicity-based autonomy movements and their ramifications in the region. It also tries to assess the processes of how ethnic identities have been constructed from the strategies of elites seeking to gain power and territorial autonomy. The paper adopts a theoretical approach to explain the historical development of ethnic formation and its ramifications.

Regarding the case selection, based on the magnitude and complexity of the conflicts discussed above, the two states of Assam and Manipur have been chosen for a detailed analysis. The paper spins around the following hypotheses: (1) Ethnic identities have been constructed on economic and political lines, (2) a priori equal ethnic groups are likely to continue conflict for a long time, and (3) newly manufactured ethnic groups, without historical links and cultural bonding, are likely to follow more internal feuds in the post-autonomous period.

Ethnicity and autonomy movement

In the true sense of the term, ethnicity hardly exists in its purest form; it is more a product of the interaction of the state, politics, and economic processes (Nag 2003; Nagel 1994). It sometimes finds expression in political domination, economic exploitation, and psychological oppression. This negative impact of ethnicity disrupts social harmony and often leads to demands for territorial autonomy in a multi-cultural society (Baqai 2004). It is more apparent in NER. How the ethnic movements have been shaped in these two states is discussed in the following sections (see Appendix 2 for a political map).

Assam

Assam state consists of two valleys – the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys inhabited mainly by the Assamese (Bodos in northern Brahmaputra valley) and Bengalis, respectively; and two hills – the Karbi Anglong and NC hills – where the Karbi and Dimasa tribes, respectively, formed a majority. Its geographical area, at present, is 78,438 km^2 with 32 revenue districts. Demographically, according to the 2001 census, the Assamese make up around 49%, followed by 28% Bengali, and 12.4% Scheduled Tribes (STs). Of the total STs, the Boro constitute 41%, followed by the Miri (17.8%), Mikir (10.7%), Rabha (8.4%), etc. Barring the Mikir and Dimasa, all the tribal communities in Assam belong to the Plain Tribes category.

Large-scale migration from then East Bengal (Bangladesh) to Assam started when the All India Muslim League was formed in Dhaka after the Bengal province partition in 1905.

A large number of Hindu Bengali migrants also reached Assam since the partition in 1947. A riot in Bangladesh in 1964 alone caused more than 75,000 Hindu Bengali migrants to move to Assam (Chowdhury 2007). This raised an alarm bell among the indigenous population of Assam about losing their identity and economic opportunities. In 1960, the Assam Official Language Act imposed a one language policy in Assam. However, it was vehemently opposed by the Bengalis, Dimasa, Karbis, and Bodos. Finally, four language models were employed: Assamese in the central Brahmaputra valley, Bengali in the Barak valley, English in the Karbi and NC Hills, and Bodo in the northern Brahmaputra valley (Singha and Singh 2016a, 1–20). Eventually, the AASU and AGSP launched a movement in 1979 to get rid of illegal migrants, seeking the detection of illegal migrants, deletion of their names from the voters' list, and their deportation (Borkakoti 2013). Talks between the GoI and the agitators broke down over the disagreement regarding the cut-off year for the definition of "illegal migrants."[2] In the same year the ULFA was formed and the secessionist movement kicked-off despite promulgation of the president's rule[3] in the state. Initially, the ULFA was operating in close co-ordination with the AASU and the AGSP (Sahni 2002). As their cadres were being trained in Bangladesh, they tried to distance themselves from the popular anti-foreigner flank of the AASU. In this regard, the AASU questioned ULFA leaders for their silence over the issue of illegal migrants from Bangladesh that crossed few lakhs by that time (Nandy 2003). When the ULFA intensified armed movements, mass agitation from the AASU–AGSP ended with the signing of the Assam accord in August 1985. Its leaders formed a political party (AGP), engaged in electoral politics, and subsequently came into power in December 1985 (Rajagopalan 2008). However, the student leader turned politician Prafulla Kumar Mahanta progressively lost control over the ULFA. To contain their armed movement, the central paramilitary forces conducted "Operation Bajrang" in September 1990. Once again the state was put under presidential rule on 28 November 1990 and the ULFA was proscribed under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act in 1990. State Legislative Assembly elections were held in June 1991, after a measure of normalcy was restored and the AGP was defeated by the Congress party led by Hiteshwar Saikia. Unfortunately, the ULFA immediately resumed its violent campaign and the army launched "Operation Rhino" in September 1991. After four months, the Saikia government suspended army operations in January 1992 with the announcement of an amnesty for all militants who were willing to surrender. During this period, however, the ULFA once again proved extremely resilient, acquired new military hardware, and established a chain of training camps across the borders, moving from Bangladesh to Myanmar's jungles. In April and May 1995, to crack down on the outfit, the Indian and Myanmarese armed forces jointly conducted "Operation Golden Bird" along the Myanmar–India border (Sahni 2002) and thereafter, the ULFA moved into the jungle in Bhutan. Between 15 December 2003 and 3 January 2004, "Operation All Clear" was conducted on their hideouts in Bhutan. Finally, the ULFA entered into formal peace talks with the GoI on 3 September 2011 and signed the Suspension of Operation pact.

On the other side, following discontent over Assamese dominance, a tribal council called the "Plain Tribal Council of Assam" (PTCA) was formed in the early 1960s led by the Bodos (Barman 2014). Under the aegis of this council in 1967, a popular movement was initiated for a new state for all the plain tribes to be called Udayachal on the northern Brahmaputra valley. Unfortunately, it did not materialize due to internal squabbles. Thereafter, the Bodos decided to move ahead separately for their Bodoland (Nath 2003), by bifurcating 50% of Assam (Motiram and Sarma 2014). The Bodos started social and language movements, and eventually the Bodo language was granted the status of an official

language in the Bodo areas in 1984. But, they did not give up their statehood movement (N. K. Das 2009; Srikanth 2015). However, the People's Democratic Front (PDF) and All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU), the main groups who spearheaded the Bodo movement backed by two insurgent groups, the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and the Bodoland Liberation Tigers (BLT), respectively, split on political lines (Basumatary 2014). The BLT was alleged to have been a beneficiary of state patronage (C. K. Sharma 2012) and eventually gave up its demand for a separate Bodoland which was initiated by the ABSU in 1987 and reconciled itself to autonomy under the Sixth Schedule[4] under the Constitution of India, while the NDFB has been persistently advocating for a separate state (Sengupta 2014). On 10 February 2003, the central government, the BLT, and the Assam government signed the "Second Bodo accord" [5] for the creation of a Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) under a modified provision of the Sixth Schedule. After the Bodo accord, the insurgent groups tried to drive out non-Bodos from the BTC area. Large-scale attacks were carried out by the Bodos against the Adivasis (that includes Santhal, Munda, Oraon, and Tea tribes). During the Bodo movements, there were two dreadful attacks carried out by the Bodo militants, killing at least 69 Adivasis in May 2014 and slaughtering 46 Muslim settlers in December 2014, and a large number of non-Bodos were displaced from the BTC area. These merciless attacks compelled the Santhals, Muslims, and other non-Bodo communities to arm themselves and start hitting back. It resulted in a significant displacement of the Bodo population in other parts of the state where they were a minority. Against the Bodos, in 2011, the non-Bodos living in the BTC area led by Muslim front organizations formed the Non-Bodo Suraksha Samiti to safeguard their rights. Consequently, the Muslim migrants backed by the Muslim United Liberation Front of Assam raised demands for a separate state comprising the five contiguous districts, in which Muslims form a majority (Sahni 2002).

Similarly, the Rabha/Rabha-Hasong tribe, concentrated in the two western districts, Goalpara and Kamrup (rural), on the southern bank of the Brahmaputra River bordering the East Garo Hills district of Meghalaya, started social and political movements. To appease them, the Rabha-Hasong Autonomous Council (RHAC) was constituted in 1995, but not guaranteed by the Sixth Schedule. It gave rise to ethnic clashes between the Rabhas and non-Rabhas (especially the Garos and Bengali Muslims) within the Rabha areas and caused two issues. One, the Muslims demanded that the government should not include 239 villages in south Kamrup where non-Rabhas are a majority in the RHAC. Second, the Rabhas's demand had become a direct challenge to Garos and led to the Rabha-Garo ethnic riots in December 2010 and January 2011. The Rabhas belong to the Scheduled Tribes category in Assam but not in the contiguous East Garo Hills district of Meghalaya and the Garos in Meghalaya enjoy the benefits of the Autonomous District Council (ADC) under the Sixth Schedule.[6] Since the Rabhas are not included in the ST category in Meghalaya, their representation in the council is denied. For quite some time, they were agitating in Meghalaya for ST status, but the Garos opposed it. Therefore, the Rabhas resorted to violence against the Garos in Assam. In upper Assam, the Mishing/Miri, who sparsely inhabit the upper Assam districts, formed an armed group called the Liberal Democratic Council of Mishing Land in 2009 for a separate homeland for the Mishings or Tani-land. At the same time, the Koch Rajbongshi people in western Assam, bordering West Bengal, perceived themselves as socially, politically, and economically deprived by the bigger communities, especially the Assamese. Consequently, they fielded an armed group called the Kamtapur Liberation Organisation, to carve out a separate Kamtapur state comprising six districts of West Bengal and four contiguous districts of Assam (Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Dhubri, and Goalpara). To pressure the state for their

demands, the Greater Cooch Behar People's Association blocked rail connectivity between NER and the rest of the country for four days in February 2016.

In the hills, the Dimasas (Barman in present day Cachar district) concentrated mainly in the NC Hills district and its surrounding areas and started a movement for self-determination. In fact, the Dimasas were treated as a sub-tribe of the Kachari/Bodo tribe until the 1961 census and were separated thereafter as a distinct tribe (Barman 2014). In 1951, the two separate hill districts of Mikir and NC Hills merged into a united Mikir-NC Hills district. However, in 1970, it bifurcated into two separate districts, the Mikir Hills and NC Hills district due to their internal differences. In September and October 2005, these two tribes had violent ethnic clashes. Despite the benefits of ADCs, both tribes have been demanding two separate states. In 2010, the NC Hills Indigenous Students Forum came out against the creation of Dima Hasao ADC. But the area claimed by these groups overlapped others, cross-cutting several ethnic territories. In this manner, at present, the entire state has been engulfed with various ethnicity-based movements and it thwarted the aspiration of ethnic Assamese nationality.

Manipur

Manipur consists of two regions – valley and hills. The former comprising one-tenth of the total geographical area is inhabited by 64.5% of the Meitei population, ringed by the latter with nine-tenths of the total area where 33 recognized and many sub-tribes reside and they account for 34.4% of the state's population, according to the 2001 population census. The Thadou, Tangkhul, Kabui, Hmar, Paite, Mao, etc. are some of the bigger tribes in Manipur.[7] Meiteilon (the mother tongue of the Meiteis) is the lingua-franca of the state. As per the Manipur Land Revenue & Land Reforms Act of 1960, no non-tribe (including Meitei) can buy and own land in the hills, while the tribes can settle and own land in the valley. The state covers an area of 22,327 km^2, bordering Myanmar in the east and south-east and the Indian states of Nagaland, Assam Mizoram in the north, west, and south, respectively. Administratively, the state consists of nine districts – five in the hills and four in the valley.

As mentioned above, following discontent over the forceful annexation of the kingdom in 1949, fueled by the delay in conferring statehood in 1972, several organizations started raising their voices against India (Baruah 2003). The armed movement for secession kicked off in the 1960s with the formation of the UNLF and intensified when other organizations joined it in the 1970s and 1980s. In this manner, the valley area of Manipur was shattered by the armed movements for secession from India. But, this movement was not reflected in the hill districts. With the Meitei being a valley-based, majority community throughout the period from monarchy to the present day, politics, administration, and development activities have been mainly in their hands. The hill districts or tribes felt neglected, especially due to road connectivity (Hassan 2006). Despite a number of affirmative actions like the reservation for jobs, seats in educational institutions, land regulation, separate tribal development funds, and others, the tribes could not develop on par with the Meiteis. As a result, they felt alienated, deprived of their rights, and eventually started raising their voices against the Meiteis. This slowly compelled the small tribes to unify and shape autonomy movements under the banner of three broad tribal ethnic groups – Naga, Kuki, and Zomi (N. Kumar 2012). In reality, the term "Kuki" was vaguely recorded after British colonization. Different Chin-Kuki heterogeneous communities who had migrated from the Chin state of Myanmar and the southern province of China settled in the southern hill tracts of the state and were grouped together as the Kuki ethnic group (Kipgen 2013; Kom 2011;

K. G. Singh 2009). This group was heard of for the first time in Manipur in the 1840s (John-stone 1896). Similarly, the origin of the word "Naga" is a very recent phenomenon, coined by the Assamese and British for the tribes living in the Naga Hills of the then undivided Assam (Baruah 2003). As for the Manipuri Naga, in the 1880s, irrespective of their origin, the communities living in the northern and north-west hill tracts of the state were called "Naga" by the British (Oinam 2003). "Whether or not some people included in the Naga category should indeed be considered Nagas is in fact a highly contested matter" (Baruah 2003, 322). These tribes are in no way historically related to the tribes of the Naga Hills. The words "Naga" or "Kuki" were not known before the British (Kom 2015; Piang 2015) and the term "Hao" was for the first time replaced by "tribe" after their arrival (Singha 2012).

As for internal movement in the state, the NNC leader A. Z. Phizo resurrected the Naga movement after the 1951 plebiscite, by incorporating the "pan-Naga" component, in which the tribes across the Naga Hills of then undivided Assam were welcomed and they started the armed movement with the objective of a Greater Nagaland/Nagalim. Subsequently, the GoI intensified counterinsurgency operations against the NNC and declared the Naga Hills a disturbed area in 1956. Phizo's call for Naga integration to form 'Nagalim/greater Nagaland' across the Naga Hills enthralled some of the tribal leaders of Manipur, who were not happy with the state and they joined Phizo's pan-Naga mission (Ravi 2014). With the dream of freedom from the Meitei, many smaller tribal communities in Manipur were rechristened as "Naga," including old Kuki tribes (first-generation Kuki migrants in Manipur) of the southern hill tracts (Kipgen 2013; Kom 2011). After Phizo's self-exile to London in 1960, the NNC became less active and that led to the signing of the Shillong Accord in 1975, which agreed to settle the dispute within the Indian Consti-tution. But it disappointed the leaders who had joined the Naga integration movement. Their aspirations were not considered by this accord. Tangkhul (a Manipuri tribe) leader Th. Muivah and the Hemi tribe (of Myanmar) leader S. S. Khaplang defected from the NNC and the breakaway group formed the NSCN in 1980. Within no time, the two leaders developed an internal rift. The majority of the rank and file in the NSCN were from the Konyak tribe of Nagaland, while the command structure was dominated by the Tangkhuls of Manipur. The Konyaks had an apprehension about the Tangkhuls/Muivah leadership that they were about to accept the GoI's plan for Manipuri Nagas (Kotwal, 2000). "Allegations and counter-allegations on the basis of tribal identity or origin domi-nated the political struggles of the faction. While Khaplang described Muivah as a Manip-uri, not a Naga; Muivah, in turn, termed Khaplang as being of Myanmarese origin" (Sashinungla 2005). This resulted in a vertical split in the NSCN in 1988 – NSCN-IM (led by Muivah) and NSCN-K (led by Khaplang). The NNC, which was spearheading an independence movement became less active after the outfit's bifurcation in 1980 and Phizo's demise in 1990, while the NSCN-IM became very powerful (Kotwal 2000).

But in the 1990s, the long-running armed movement did not benefit the Nagas much and had fractured Naga society. Coupled with the fear of the loss of economic opportu-nities, an anti-Manipuri Naga drive was initiated by the Nagas in Nagaland (Ghosh 2008; G. Singh 2007). Soon, the NSCN-IM led by the Manipuri tribes also realized the impracticability of the Nagalim mission (Bose 2013; George 2012) and shifted their move-ment to "Southern Nagaland"[8] for the mission of a supra-state within the state of Manipur, as doubted by the Konyaks (George 2012). As a result, Naga ethnic identity formation was initiated in the northern hill tracts of Manipur under the patronage of the NSCN-IM. On the other side, the Kuki National Front (KNF) was formed on 18 May 1988 and started a Kuki-nization movement in the southern hill tracts to counter the increasing influence of the

NSCN-IM (CDPS 2015). This led to the alliance and re-alliance of smaller tribes either with the Naga- or Kuki-fold through political means or intimidation (Kom 2015). Some of the smaller communities (e.g. Lamkang, Maring, Anal, Moyon, Monsang) were compelled to merge with either of the groups for their security and economic and political benefits (Kipgen 2013; Oinam 2003). Eventually, a number of sub-tribes even changed their affiliation from the Kuki- to Naga-fold (Gangte 2009; Haokip 2008, 185–208) and from the Naga- to Kuki-fold (EPW 2005) for the same reason. Still, many (e.g. Hmar, Kom, Gangte, Paite, Vaiphei) were reluctant to merge with either of the groups (A. Kumar et al. 2011). This ethnic defragmentation process caused Kuki-Naga ethnic conflicts in the 1990s and led to the greatest ever demographic shift in Manipur. It took 800 people's lives, left 480 injured, and left 5713 families displaced (Hussain and Phanjoubam 2007). The proposed "Kuki homeland/Zalengam" map released by the Kuki insurgent group and the earlier map of "Southern Nagaland" floated by the NSCN-IM have raised serious concerns among the communities (Kom 2015; Rupachandra 2012). On the other side, seven communities (neither with the Naga- or Kuki-fold) led by the Paite tribe formed the Zomi Reunification Organization in April 1993 and its armed wing the Zomi Revolutionary Army (ZRA) emerged in 1997. It finally started a movement for "Zogam" or "Zomiland." The Paites were targeted by Kuki militants on the ground because the former did not support the latter during the Naga-Kuki riots in 1992–1997 (Shashikumar 2007) and they did not adopt the Thadou language (the language of Thadou, a majority tribe in Kuki-fold) (M. A. Singh 2010). It led to the "Kuki-Paite" clash in 1997 and 1998 that took 162 lives, injured 93, kidnapped 71, and burnt 3521 houses (Hussain and Phanjoubam 2007). In this manner, three major hill-based ethnic groups have been fighting for dominance and greater autonomy within the state. All these disappointed the Meiteis' movement for secession from India.

Still, the biggest and latent turf war, besides the two ethnic clashes (Kuki-Naga and Kuki-Paite) that has been haunting Manipur for a long time is the tension between the Meiteis and the Nagas. It was exhibited in June 2001 when the GoI decided to extend the NSCN-IM ceasefire "without territorial limits" to other states of the NER including Manipur. This decision was perceived as a threat to the territorial integrity of Manipur, especially by the majority Meiteis community in the valley. Thousands of people came out onto the streets to protest against the decision which turned into violent agitation and led to the burning down of the State Legislative Assembly building. To curb the agitation, security forces killed 18 protestors on 18 June 2001. The message from the Meitei was Manipur's territory cannot be decided by Delhi; the "Naga peace accord" should be applied only in the home of the Nagas (i.e. Nagaland).

Unresolved issues

With the Meiteis and Ahoms being the majority communities in Manipur and Assam, respectively, political power, economic opportunities, and development initiatives have all been in their hands and the smaller groups continue to face disadvantages. In this context, Shimray (2007, 20) said the "politics of ethnic hegemony tends to promote the politics of assimilation of the smaller groups in order to uphold and protect the dominant's vested interest." Similarly, Kom and Brahma (2012) opined that the comparatively high degree of ethnic aggravations and contestations in the region at present result from supremacy of the majority group which refuses to recognize the internal autonomy of smaller groups. This led to the integration of tribal communities to counter majority communities (Singha 2013), the formation of "space-centric identity," and also instigated smaller

communities to claim similar demands within the same territory shared by different ethnic groups (C. K. Sharma 2012). At the same time, the majority communities of the region are also living in a web of insecurity impinged by the varying territorial autonomy movements. The tribes of diverse dialect and social and cultural milieu have regrouped in the recent past to scale up their political bargaining power so as to reach at-par dominant communities. This process continues with the changing economic and political power equation. According to Vogt (2014), ethnic conflict is likely to continue longer between equal powers than unequal groups. Therefore, amalgamation of the tribes has been the preferred option. No two sub-tribes within the ethnic groups, which amalgamated recently in the region, have a common language. In the 1960s, Phizo proposed to the Lushai leader Laldenga that the Lushais and Nagas could launch a joint struggle against India to establish a sovereign state comprising the Lushai and the Naga Hills and even agreed that Lushai could be the state language (Nag 2003). Though Phizo's mission was not accomplished, it attracted many of the desperate tribes across the Naga Hills of the then undivided Assam.

Understandably, when the demands of the tribes were turned down by the majority groups, new ethnic groups formed, insurgency activities emerged, and greater autonomy movements escalated. Such demands ranged from secession to greater autonomy within the state, depending on the bargaining power of the groups. More often than not, the ethnic autonomy aspirants scaled down their demands from the highest possible level to the bottom. For instance, the Bodos, Karbis, Koch Rajbongshis, Nagas, Kukis, and Paites initially demanded complete secession from India, but slowly scaled down to a separate state, ADC, and further to regional council, etc. But the larger question is: how have the autonomy demands from different smaller tribal groups emerged despite the constitutional provision for ADC under the Sixth Schedule? In reality, the Assam Autonomous District (Constitution of District Councils) Rules 1951 under the Sixth Schedule was meant for an undivided Assam. However, there is now a strong demand from different tribes for its application in the region, when statehood demand has declined. But, the contentious issue of this provision is the disenfranchisement of people who do not belong to a particular community for whom the ADC is given (Phanjoubam 2002). The ADC demand is not different from the statehood demand and it was evident from past experiences how Meghalaya and Mizoram separated from the then undivided Assam. Granting territorial autonomy to a minority group would be the first step toward eventual secession from the state (Cornell 2002). In that regard, Phanjoubam (2002) said, "it is no longer just a neutral instrument for administrative efficiency in the northeastern region. It creates an ethnic and a relative political boundary through the ADCs, and has a strong tendency to promote ethnic polarization and sub-nationalism." None of the ADCs in the region have shown to be fruitful steps; rather, it creates a two-tier differential structure in a multi-ethnic society and whips up more such demands (C. K. Sharma 2012). Everyone knows it well, be it an autonomy aspirant or the majority community or the GoI. The Bodos, Mikirs, Dimasas, etc. have not given up statehood demands even after enjoying the ADC benefit because it is one of the powerful bargaining chips for the autonomy aspirants to deal with the government when all attempts have failed (Yenning 2013). In this regard, Brass, (1997) opined that institutionalizing ethnic violence and keeping communal conflict alive have remained a preferred option for the predatory elites. It is also apparent that varying demands in the region have invariably been raised by the newly emerging groups, impinged by the ethnic armed insurgents, and encouraged by the state (C. K. Sharma 2012). Though Meitei insurgent groups had not entered into a formal peace agreement with the state at the time of writing, their mission for secession from India has already been shattered by these internal autonomy demands and the same

holds true for the Ahoms/Assamese as well. In this manner, major secessionist groups are now being engaged by the state in balancing ever-growing internal movements (Ravi 2012). The armed conflicts, which were perpetuated between the state and non-state actors, have now slowly tangled with internal feuds.

Both politics of integration of the smaller communities and on the other hand the granting of greater autonomy sound desirable at first glance. But the larger issue is whether or not these can solve ethnic conflicts? Since the integration of ethnic groups and identity formation in the region have primarily been based on economic and political interests, it is likely to cause more conflict in the post-integration period (Singha 2013). Similarly, a study by Montalvo and Reynal-Querol (2005) found that an increase in ethnic polarization led to the probability of a conflict happening. Therefore, ethnic identity formation based on economic and political interests may not last long. Naga integration across the Naga Hills district of the then undivided Assam was on tribal matters, not on any empathy with other tribes and not on linguistic lines (Nag 2003). This led to a dreadful ethnic conflict since the 1990s in Manipur. Secondly, there is no guarantee that the present movement for ethnic integration and demands for greater autonomy will not lead to a further split (Singha and Singh 2016a, 1–20). In Assam, two major sub-tribes, the Sonowal and Thengal Kachari, who had jointly revolted against the Assamese, drafted the Sonowal-Thengal Kachari Satellite Autonomous Council (SAC) Bill[9] in 2005 and formed two separate SACs (Prabhakara 2005). The Bishnupriya/Kalachaya community was recognized by the Assam government as Manipuri in 1983 (now identified as Bishnupriya Manipuri),[10] but when the Development Council (DC)[11] was about to be granted in 2007, they did not want to go with the Meitei (original Manipuri) living in Assam. Finally, two DCs were granted in 2011 as Manipuri DC and Bishnupriya Manipuri DC. The Bodo who initiated a movement against the Assamese under the banner of PTCA for a separate plain tribal state in the 1960s moved ahead alone when the organization did not benefit them. The Nagas of Nagaland then tried to distance themselves from the Manipuri Nagas due to the fact that the latter's integration did not benefit the former. The two separate hill districts of Mikir and NC Hills had merged into a united Mikir-NC Hills district in 1951 and then bifurcated in 1970 into two separate districts, (Deori 2013). Also, these two tribes, living closely with the Khasis and Garos decided not to join the newly formed Meghalaya in 1972, preferring to stay with the Assamese. But, they are now demanding two states separate from Assam (Gohain 2014; Hussain 1987). In the 1940s, the Naga ethnic group encompassed the Kuki, Karbi, and Nepalese, but not the present day Naga tribes of Manipur (Nag 2002, 2003). When ethnic identities are constructed merely on the fiction of a common enemy, there is a high possibility of defecting when the objectives are not met. For instance, on 20 November 2015, in the Chandel (bordering Myanmar) district of Manipur, the Aimol tribe who had merged with the Naga-fold a few years back organized a mass agitation and rally to show their discontent with being Naga and demanded to withdraw their affiliation from the Naga-fold. Similarly, the Zeliangrong United Front was formed in 2011 to protect the socio-economic and cultural rights of the Kabui-led Zeliangrong group from the NSCN-IM's Naganization (S. K. Sharma 2015). In this manner, in NER, ethnic tensions have mainly been incited by their ethnic elites. In Manipur, thousands of innocent tribal people have been killed in the Naga-Kuki ethnic cleansing, followed by the Kuki-Paite ethnic conflict in the 1990s impinged primarily by the ethnic leaders for their political and economic interests. In the same manner, in the late 1990s and 2000s, in Assam, a large number of Adivasis and Bengali Muslims were massacred and hundreds of villages were burnt down by the Bodos.

When the long-running armed movement turned out to be a self-destructing mission for the Nagas in Nagaland, they tried to distance themselves from the new Nagas outside Nagaland (George 2012). The GoI also understands it well, and this may be the reason why the demand for "Naga integration" propelled in the 16-point agreement in 1960 was not fructified as far as the Nagas of Manipur (Suan 2009). The Manipuri Nagas were neither a signatory of the memorandum submitted to the Simon Commission nor did they take part in Phizo's Naga referendum in 1951 (S. K. Sharma 2015). In this regard, Ravi (2014) said, "a gun-inspired political enterprise to forge a collective political identity on a desperate sociological base merely on the fiction of a common enemy was fraught and foredoomed." This is the reason why the Nagas of Manipur welcomed the "Framework Agreement" signed between NSCN-IM and the GoI on 3 August 2015, not by the Nagas of Nagaland (S. K. Sharma 2015). On the other side, to defend Kuki-inhabited areas from the NSCN-IM, the KNF launched counter-attacks (CDPS 2015), and started Kukinization movements in the 1990s. At the same time, the Paite community-led ZRA intensified the Zomiland movement against the pressure of the Kukis in the southern hills. All of these internal movements created a fear of reducing the state's territory (Baruah 2003; Robinson 2005). Nevertheless, this fault-line between the valley and hill, according to Suan (2009), is an outcome of the Meitei's failure or unwillingness to give recognition to the tribes. S. K. Sharma (2016) blamed the British policy of the division of the hills from the valleys for administrative convenience and bringing Christianity to the hills. Similarly, Singha (2012) also claimed that the Meiteis' embracement of Hinduism in 1710 and the labeling of the hill communities as Hao (untouchables or backward) are the genesis of this rift between the two. In Assam too, when the ULFA intensified the secessionist movement in the 1980s, the Bodoland movement was also resurrected in 1986 and followed by other smaller groups. This led to the balkanization of the internal political process. But the state failed to resolve it due to two factors. One, ethnic conflicts and greater autonomy movements of the smaller communities in the region do not pose any territorial threat for the GoI. For instance, the NSCN-IM's recent "Framework Agreement" does not affect the territorial boundary of the country, but it definitely balances demands of the Meitei and Kukis in Manipur (S. K. Sharma 2016). Similarly, Bodos atrocities over the non-Bodos living in Bodo areas seemed like no problem for the GoI as long as the Bodos did not demand secession from India, thus evading armed confrontation between the state and insurgent groups. The secessionist movement of Meiteis in the 1980s has died down with the upsurge of internal autonomy by hill groups. The state, rather, prefers to engage the insurgent groups through peace accords.

Though the peace accords signed in the 1990s helped subside armed confrontation with state forces, they failed to resolve internal feuds. Even the acclaimed Mizo Accord is turning out to be negative (Singha and Amarjeet Singh 2016b, 86–101). After a prolonged armed conflict for varying demands, most of the insurgent groups have now entered into peace accords. Up to the present day in Assam, 13 militant groups[12] have signed peace agreements. In Manipur, barring the Meiteis, almost all the hill-based insurgent groups have entered into formal peace agreements with the GoI. According to Kotwal (2000), the smaller ethnic insurgent groups easily enter into peace accords because they are not based on the ethno-political movement and they do not have any determined political agenda and are not rooted into society. As for the bigger insurgent groups, Zartman (2001) opined that after a long-armed struggle the parties get themselves locked in a conflict from which they cannot escalate to victory and the current deadlock is painful to both of them. As such, both parties seek an alternative policy or a way out. This is how two parties (state and insurgent group) enter into a peace accord. The rigid Meitei insurgent

groups have already been locked into a conflict stalemate. The peace agreements of the NSCN-IM and the BLT signed with the state in 1997 and 2003, respectively, have been the most controversial ones. Since then, the region has been mired in a series of ethnic conflicts. When the protagonists of the peace accord are in mutual comfort, sharing political opportunities, the general public is caught in the middle of insurgency and counterinsurgency operations (Ravi 2014). In this manner, most of the peace accords in the region turned out to be failures, due to the state's exclusionary policy of the major stakeholders and giving armed groups (with whom accords have been signed) a free hand (Ravi 2012). During the 2007 ceasefire period, the ULFA reorganized its units in the traditional strongholds and formed new battalions (Goswami 2011). The Bodo peace accords (in 1993 and 2003) gave a free hand to the Bodo insurgent groups and the non-Bodos living in the BTC have been made scapegoats. After two Bodo peace accords, a number of dreadful atrocities have been perpetuated by the Bodo insurgent groups against the Muslims and Adivasis in 2014. Over 1800 Nagas have been killed in around 3000 factional clashes since the 1997 ceasefire agreement between NSCN-IM and GoI (Ravi 2014). Gaikhangam, the deputy chief minister of Manipur, informed the state assembly on 18 July 2014 that the NSCN-IM had committed 400 serious crimes in the state during 14 years of peace talks with the center (*The Hindu*, July 19, 2014). It is the politics of economics that led to the upsurge of different ethnic movements in the region. The state has instigated and pampered a number of ethnic insurgent groups for a temporary solution. One insurgent group is used to weaken another emerging group. For instance, the Kuki National Army was used to weaken the NSCN-IM (Rammohan 2011, 114); the same NSCN-IM was given a free hand to exploit other groups (Ravi 2012) and the BLT was created to counter the NDFB (C. K. Sharma 2012).

Conclusion

Soon after India's independence, armed movements for secession from India emerged from the Naga Hills and slowly engulfed the entire region in the 1970s and 1980s. However, in the 1990s, following the emergence of ethnic identities, the conflicts slowly turned into internal feuds. Unfortunately, the state failed to contain these due to its half-hearted efforts, and it rather compounded the situation. In reality, the drawing and redrawing of state boundaries is not a new issue. Similarly, the grouping and regrouping of ethnic groups is also an age-old practice. But, the present varying movements for autonomy by different ethnic groups is based neither on a linguistic basis nor on a cultural ground. Though the issue of tribes is very important and urgent, it has not reached the point of violence. Perfect distribution of economic resources between the majority and minority is not possible in any case and the center-periphery imbalance cannot be ruled out completely. But, it does not mean that smaller communities are neglected in the multi-ethnic society. The Meiteis and Ahoms/Assamese should recognize the rights and entitlements of the smaller groups or tribes in Manipur and Assam, respectively. Mere calls for territorial integrity without a consociational principle is quite futile. On the other hand, their demands for secession will be a distant dream unless and until the internal differences are sorted out and the greater autonomy within the state can be imagined, at least, after the communities are socio-politically, culturally, and linguistically integrated.

The conflict that has been afflicting the region, at present, is not cross-border terrorism such as in Kashmir. It is mainly ethnically driven, propelled either by predatory elites or insurgent groups, for economic and political resources. But, the center prefers to keep the present ethnic conflict in the region alive. Bitter infighting among ethnic groups

continues either to avoid direct confrontation with the emerging insurgent groups or to keep the country's eastern frontier boundary unchanged. This is the reason why so many ad-hoc measures and multiple peace accords have been signed without considering the interest of the major stakeholders. Unfortunately, these proliferations of identity movements have pushed the development agenda of the region to the back seat. Popular mandates are sought and based on the performance of the political managers in conflict management rather than their ability to deliver basic services and the well-being of the people. Therefore, leaders of the ethnic groups in the region should strive for unity in diversity so as to recognize different socio-cultural rights. It is a fact that the division of a state is not a solution; rather development of the people should be the prime objective.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. The NER consists of eight states – Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. In fact, Sikkim was grouped in the NER only in 2002. In 1971, the North Eastern Council was formed and it acts as an agency for development of the region. To strengthen the council, a separate ministry called the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region was set up in September 2001.
2. Agitators wanted 1950 as a cut-off year for immigration while the minority students' union/ Muslims preferred it to be fixed at 1971.
3. During presidential rule, the state legislature is suspended and administered directly from Delhi.
4. The Sixth Schedule relates to administration of tribal areas of NER where there have been traditional tribal councils and its provision was not extended to Nagaland though it was constituted primarily for them.
5. The first Bodo accord was signed in February 1993 and that led to the formation of a Bodo Autonomous Council. However, due to the non-inclusion of all Bodo areas, the accord triggered violence and finally had to be scrapped.
6. The ADC is the administrative and judicial powers provided to a particular tribal community under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution.
7. As per India's 2001 population census, the Thadou was the largest with a population of 180,000 representing 24.6% of the state's total ST population (34.4% of ST population), followed by Tangkhul (19.7%), Kabui (11.1%), Paite (6.6%), and Hmar (5.8%).
8. The Greater Nagaland mission is to integrate the Nagas of the neighboring states: Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and Manipur with the present Nagaland. However, the objective of the NSCN-IM is to slice off Southern Nagaland into four hill districts, Manipur-Senapati, Ukhrul, Tamenglong, and Chandel, to form a separate state for them.
9. The Satellite Autonomous Council can be formed in contiguous revenue villages each having more than 50% of a particular community's population.
10. According to a Bengali scholar Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, the Bishnupruyas are the low-caste Bengalis, living closely with the Bengalis. They were taken by the Meitei/Manipuri king for supplying grass for the royal stables. This is the only association that they had with the Meiteis/ Manipuris; otherwise, they are different from the Meitei linguistically, socially, and culturally. Most of the Bishnupriyas are now concentrated in Assam and Tripura. In Assam, Manipuris are categorized as Other Backward Classes. Bishnupriya also got this opportunity after rechristening as Manipuri, but it was vehemently opposed by the latter.
11. As of now, in Assam, 19 DCs have been granted support for all-round development of the minority communities. The DC does not involve territorial issues unlike ADC.
12. Assam Assessment 2016, http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/index.html.

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Appendix 1

Table A1. NER state formation.

August 15, 1947	Undivided Assam					Kingdoms (Princely States)		
	Assam State	NEFT	Naga Hills District	Khasi and Jaintia, Garo Hills District	Lushai Hills District	Tripura	Manipur	Sikkim
1949						Annexed to India	Annexed to India	
1950 (Constitution)		NEFA				CGAA*	CGAA*	Protectorate
1954		NEFA			Mizo Hills District			
1956 (State Reorganization)							Union Territory	
1957			Merged Tuensang Area (CGAA)					
1963			Nagaland State			Union Territory		
1970		Union Territory		Autonomous State				
1972		Union Territory		Meghalaya State	Union Territory	Tripura State	Manipur State	
1975		Arunachal Pradesh State						Merged to India
1987					Mizoram State			
As of 2015	Assam State	Arunachal Pradesh State	Nagaland State	Meghalaya State	Mizoram State	Tripura State	Manipur State	Sikkim State

Source: Modified from Inoue (2005).
Notes: NEFT – North East Frontier (Assam) Tribal; NEFA – North East Frontier Agency; Union Territory – the area having assembly and government, but directly comes under the central government jurisdiction; CGAA – Central Government Administrative Area
*Constitution classifies Manipur and Tripura as "Part C states," and puts them under the administration of the central government.
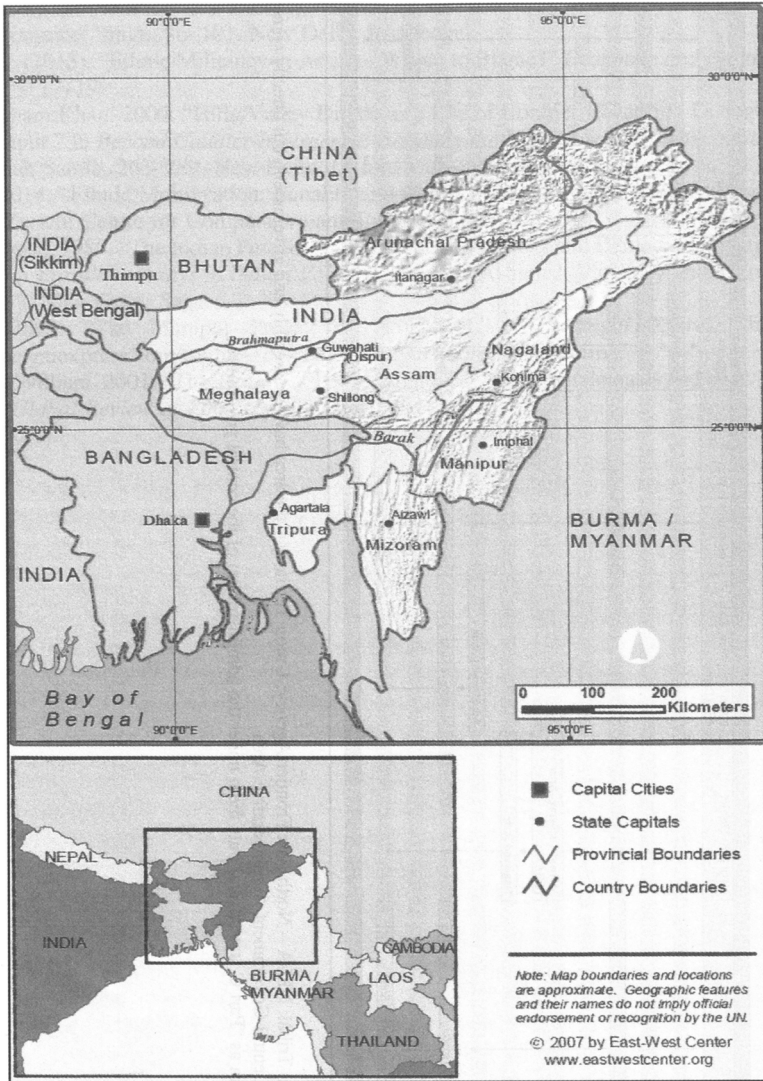
Appendix 2

Figure A1. Political map of NER.
Source: Oinam (2008).