

Intractable Conflict in North East India: Locating the Evolving Dynamics of Conflict

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Abstract:

This paper is an attempt to locate the evolving dynamics of the intractable conflict in North East India since the colonial era. It critically analyses and describes the trajectory of conflict through the lens of the colonial and post-colonial experience, ethnic group formation, inter-ethnic relations and border issues. The paper maintains that the processes of colonialism, identity group formation and consolidation and the approaches of the (nation-) state building of the post-colonial Indian State are the key determinants of the emergence of conflict in the region. It concludes that the conflict in the region largely stemmed from the imposition of forms of administrative system be it under the British colonial rule or Independent India which are stark contradiction to the organically or traditional evolved systems. In response, varying genres of the consolidation groups' identity mostly based on ethnicity ensued to safeguard the interest of the group.

Introduction

North East India¹ is consisting of eight states viz. Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura.² The region is circumscribed by the neighbouring countries on all sides: China (Tibet) in the North and North-East; Bhutan in the North-West; Myanmar in the South-East and Bangladesh in the South and South-West, except for a narrow land corridor consisting of a mere 22 km in Siliguri that connects the region with the rest of the country (Rao, 1972, pp. 123-144). To put it in another way, the 98% of the region's borders shares with other neighbouring countries and the rest of the country is connected by merely 2% of landmass. According to Census 2011, the region constitutes about 8% of the total geographical area of the country with an area coverage of 262,179 sq. Km and population of 45,587,982 which is about 3% of the country's population (North Eastern Council, 2015, p. XXVII). The region is extraordinarily diverse in terms of ethnicity, language, culture and religion and is home to about 475 ethnic groups and sub-groups who speak over 400 different languages

and dialects (Bhaumik S. , 2009, p. 1). Diverse compositions of the inhabitants in the region are drawn from primarily from the Mongoloids, the Indo-Aryans, the Austric or Austro Asiatic and the Dravidians racial stocks (K R Dikshit and Jutta K Dikshit, 2014).

Early History of the Region

The historical evolving dynamics of the term *North East* as a geographical concept or indication shows drastic transformation over the centuries. The expansive Pragjyotishpur or Kamarupa kingdom established by the Varman dynasty in the third Century CE is the earliest historically recorded kingdom of the region. In 642-43 CE, during the reign of Bhaskara Varman, Hiuen Tsang a Chinese traveller³ visited the kingdom. Tsang recorded that the extent of the kingdom covers the whole plain areas of the present-day Assam (with exception to the adjoining hills and Manipur), North Bengal, parts of Bhutan and Bangladesh (Gait, 1906). After the Varman dynasty, no other power could consolidate its strong foothold in the region⁴ until the arrival of the Ahoms in the early 13th Century

CE. The Ahoms established its rule in Assam by subverting a host of the native rulers and continued its rule till the early 1800s. Nonetheless, the Ahoms could not replicate the grandeur of the Varman dynasty. This was indicated by the fact that the Ava king of Burma overran the major powers of the region such as Manipur, Cachar and Assam by 1821 (Baruah S. L., 1983). It is observed that the Burmese initially had no intention to rule over Assam but the political situations within Assam was such that they were necessitated to invade the region in 1819 (Kalita, 2013). However, their rule in the region was short-lived as they were defeated in the first Anglo-Burmese war during 1824-26 and subsequently relinquished by signing of the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826.

Like any other history across the world, the history of North East India is laden with accounts of wars and conflicts. Several kingdoms and dynasties ruled different parts of the region, independent of one another yet marked by intermittent conflicts amongst them as well as maintained trade, tributary, matrimonial and strategic relations. Instances of certain kingdoms been completely annihilated by the more powerful ones are also recorded. Nonetheless, before the advent of the British not a single kingdom was able to bring the entire if not greater part of the region under its control. Exception can be drawn from the Ava king who successfully subverted most of the major powers of the region such as the Kings of Ahoms, Manipuri, Cachar and Jyntia on the eve of the arrival of the British. But, even the Avas failed to consolidate its control over the region as within a short span of time they were defeated and driven out from the region by the British and signed the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826. Factors like the inclement weather condition, difficult and unfamiliar geographical terrain, and others have thwarted the attempts made by the Nawabs of Bengal and the Mughals to expand their power in the region (Gait, 1906).

In the early thirteenth centuries the Ahoms established and consolidated their power starting from Upper Assam gradually obliterated the Chutias, further expanded towards other parts of the region but couldn't go much beyond the present day Assam (Sarma, 2010-2011). Correspondingly, part of the kingdoms of Koch, Kachari, Rabha and the whole of the Tripuri, Manipuri, Khasi, Jyntai and other petty tribal principalities including the Nagas, Mizos, Abhors, Mismis, Bodos, Khamtis, Mikhirs, etc. continued their sovereignty or autonomy till the advent of the British.

The notion of territoriality in the region was quite vague for the period before the arrival of the British due to the paucity of historical records coupled with limited research on the particular phases of the history of the region. Also, the paltry availability of historical resources in this regard indicated that the research on the nature of territoriality in the region is under researched from the perspectives of the traditional or indigenous (Kapai, 2020). The Ahoms were an exception since they were the last major ruler of the region till the arrival of the British. Moreover, they also built robust administrative structures during their heydays and elaborately recorded details of their rule. Consequently, the understanding of the notions of territoriality and indigeneity prevailing today of the region are generally relying on the colonial construct of random ethnic categorization and the spatial order that dominate both the official policy discourse and the political imagination of indigenous people.

British Colonialism and the North East

Analysis of conflict history in the region shows that the colonialist adopted policies to sabotage the existing native rulers with the sole intention to colonise and extract the resources to the extreme possible (Sinha, 2022). This was executed through multiple tactics for instance, by drawing and redrawing the boundaries to accentuate the administration and accelerate the

imperial processes of land, resources, labour acquisition, and appropriation of the indigenous forms of production and consumption as well as to protect its subjects with utter disregard to the concerns of the native people. This had for various reasons in some ways laid the foundation for the future intractable conflict in the region.

The consequences of the British political expansionist, exclusionary, segregationist and the non-interference (towards the tribals) and exploitative economic policies have not only destabilised the existing equation of the politics in the region but also effectuated massive demographic transformation with long-term socio-cultural and political implications.⁵ This transformation of the *North Eastern Frontier* as a geographical space bereave of clearly demarcated boundaries into a variety of spatial arrangements within the North East in line with the colonial interest were also in consonance with the changing perception and description of people. In this regard, Marcus Franke, dispelled the myth that “the British never intended to conquer the Naga Hills and that this was forced on them by the Nagas themselves...” (Franke, 2002, p. 5), He argues that the British initially planned to reinstall the native governments in between as a buffer zone and made the people of the surrounding hills as potential allies, dragged into the war and used them as tools of war in order to drive out the Burmese (Franke, 2002). However, on realising the prospects of economic profit and strategic value of the surrounding hills of Assam the perception of the tribes including the Nagas changed from the sensible and potential allies to irrational and barbarous savages from whom the civilised Assamese had to be saved (Franke, 2002).

Accordingly, to usher the colonial expansion while consolidating the control over the space and regulate the activities of the people a series of Acts were passed such as the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873, Scheduled Districts Act of, 1874 and Frontier Tract Regulation Act,

1880. The first legislation of the British within the region, the Inner Line system under the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation Act, 1873, delimited the population and territory between the hills and the plains. This legislation not only disrupted the existing interdependence between landscapes and livelihoods which were intimately connected for the people who lived there and abruptly altering their lives but also introduced a different governance systems (Pachau, 2019). The process of re-territorialisation and the introduction of the new notions of spatial identities were not incongruent with the traditional territorial understanding of the people through which their sense of identity and belonging are defined or derived. The societal and spatial consequences of these legislations were further peripheralisation or marginalisation and isolation from the *Frontier*⁶ of the areas which fell beyond the *Inner Line* and consolidating of the economic viability of the plains. To regulate the unregulated activities of the subjects and also to police the intervention of the tribes these special legislations were enforced segregating the hills and plains, classifying the tribes outside of the line as wild and savage while categorising the hills as a site of non-normative and empowering the Executive Government to govern with summary legislations (Pachau, 2019). Thus, started a multitude of punitive expeditions into the hills and summary executions were enforced against the tribals.

The British in order to ensure smooth transaction of economic activities and to check on the tribal's interference had unleashed protracted conflict broadly between the so called civilized plain dwellers and savage hills people and also between the Kukis and the Nagas; Meiteis and Nagas in Manipur (Thomas, 2005); Abhors and Khamtis & Mishmis; Abhors and Miris & Beahs in Arunachal Pradesh; Khasis and Garos (the divide between the urban and rural Khasis is also blamed on the British) (Meetei, 2014) in Meghalaya; between different communities and tribes in Assam, Tripura and Mizoram. The

reasons range from broad and often random ethnic categorizations (Wettstein, 2012) and segregations for administrative convenience⁷ contrary to the historically or organically evolved demarcations, boundaries and structures, to inductions of a large number of population from outside of the region initially to man the administration mainly from the erstwhile East Bengal and later from the then composite Bihar and its adjoining areas and Nepal to catalyst the economic output and maximise the profit (Guha, 2006). Further, imposition of Bengali as the official language for Assam Province had created apprehension and fear particularly to the educated Assamese and others in general (Majundar, 2006-2007). All these accounted in some ways or the other in strengthening the community consciousness of the natives against the *other*.⁸ However, it is also important to note that there are communities such as the Adivasis or Tea Tribes and Nepalis (with some exception) who until the late 1990s were not considered as threat to the natives as they were not seeing as competing with the natives in terms of job, power, resources and land unlike the more educated, socio-political and culturally sophisticated Bengalis. What followed was the introduction (rather imposition) of the liberal democratic form of Government by post-colonial Indian State had nurtured the saplings of intractable conflict in the region. In other words, the advent of the British marked the beginning of a paradigm shift in the nature of conflict in the region which was further exacerbated by independent India.

The Government of India Act, 1919 and the Government of India Act, 1935 are also intrinsically linked to the Line system and therefore are extremely relevant to the region. The first Act identified the tribal areas as *Backward Tracts* to be kept out of the legislature and placed under the direct charge of the Governor. The Act of 1935, bifurcated the Backward Tracts into *Excluded* and *Partially Excluded* areas, where districts fell in the latter

category, had representatives in the provincial government but laws enacted by it are applied with the approval from the Governor. So, as the economic activities commenced, frequent conflict ensued between the British subjects such as speculators and tea planters and the tribes living beyond the *line* who often raided the plains. These special legislations were enforced segregating the hills and plains, classifying the tribes outside of the line as wild and savage while categorising the hills as a site of non-normative and empowering the Executive Government to govern with summary legislations (Pachau, 2019). Thus, a multitude of punitive expeditions into the hills and summary executions of the tribals followed in attempt to regulate the subjects while policing the intervention of the tribes.

Furthermore, the conflicts had expanded between the Kukis and the Nagas; Meiteis and Nagas in Manipur (Chaube, 1973, p. 7) (Thomas, 2005); Abhors and Khamtis and Mishmis; Abhors and Miris and Beahs in Arunachal Pradesh; Khasis and Garos (the divide between the urban and rural Khasis is also blamed on the British) (Meetei, 2014) in Meghalaya; and between the different communities and tribes in Assam, Tripura and Mizoram. The reasons ranged from broad and often random ethnic categorizations (Wettstein, 2012) and segregations for administrative convenience⁹ contrary to the organically evolved demarcations, boundaries that funnels down to the inductions of a large number of people from outside of the region initially to man the administration mainly from the erstwhile East Bengal and later from the then composite Bihar and its adjoining areas and Nepal to catalyst the economic output and maximise the profit (Guha, 2006). Further, imposition of Bengali as the official language for Assam Province created apprehension and fear particularly amongst the educated Assamese and others in general. All these have contributed in some ways or the other in heightening the community consciousness of the natives against

the *other*.¹⁰ Communities such as the Adivasis or Tea Tribes and Nepalis (with some exception) were not considered as threat to the natives till the 1990s, as they were not seen as competitors for job, power, resources and land unlike the more educated, socio-political and culturally sophisticated Bengalis. The introduction (rather imposition) of the liberal democratic form of Government by post-colonial Indian State nurtured the saplings of intractable conflict in the region. In other words, the advent of the British marked the beginning of a paradigm shift in the nature of conflict in the region which was further exacerbated by independent India.

The advent of the British into the region was initially facilitated by some bigger native players but it was not without persistent resistance from the myriad native powers.¹¹ The nature of these tribal resistances was quite insignificant from the larger perspective of the colonial rule in the subcontinent, but almost every tribe have at least a hero or two who had bravely fought and resisted against the British to protect their autonomy or independence. This particular timeline of the region's history has transformed the pattern of conflict which marked the early encounters especially of the tribes with the larger and greater powers. The region in its entirety has never been under any single consolidated power prior to the advent of the British. In other words, the inhabitants (both big and small) of the region co-existed maintaining the autonomy or independence of their own entities with exceptions to intermittent wars and some forms of tributary relations they shared before the British colonial rule. Even though, the entire region literally did not come under the colonial British rule as many tribes in the region were never brought under its direct administrative control for reasons such as to maintain buffer zones with China, economic non-viability, cost of administration, difficult terrain etc..

The colonial experience of North East India would have been very different had tea, oil, rubber and elephant among others were not

discovered in the region. Similarly, the socio-economic, cultural and political scenario of the region in the post-colonial period also would not have been as how it has been unfolding today, had it not been for the above mentioned historical reasons. The processes of transformation of the region from what was considered as *terra incognita* till the early nineteenth century (Bora, 2022) to the rich *resource frontier* (Tsing, 2003) by mid of the same century had transformed the colonial British's perception of the native people as well as the policies through which they were governed. Accordingly, different sets of laws were formulated that separate "...the inside and the outside, the plains and the hills, the settle and the mobile, the field and the forest, the normal and the exceptional" (Pachau N. B., 2019, p. 4). This segregation as discussed earlier has not only disrupted the relationship between the hills and the plains but has also fostered antagonism between different communities, tribes and sub-tribes within the tribes of the region. Besides various other ethnic, historical, social and political factors, segregation of the region by adopting different modes of administration between the hills and plains has also significantly contributed to limiting the reach of the Indian nationalist movement (Jafa, 2006) leaving the hills of the region virtually untouched. In addition, the role played by the Christian missionaries (who did not approve of the majority of the plains people's customs) (Franda, 1961) among the tribals has also contributed in augmenting the religious and cultural gap between the two. Consequently, this has created a massive schism both physically and psychologically between the people of different categories on the one hand, while strengthening the bond within the ethnic group on the other particularly with the tribals.

Conflict and Independent India

If a dichotomy existed between the hills and the plains in the region, and the region and the rest of India actuated by the colonial mode of governance, then the same has been accentuated

by independent India. Undeniably, drastic transformation of the geopolitical landscape in the Indian sub-continent caused by the process of decolonisation has also prominently contributed to this end. However, in terms of the divide within the region, the post-colonial Indian state adopted similar forms of governance system of the colonial rulers in the region particularly in the *Tribal Areas* through the incorporation of the region's specific provisions such as the Sixth Schedule and Articles 371 A, B, C, G and H in the Constitution of India and promulgation of several special laws including the Armed forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA), 1958 and Disturbed Area (Special Court) Act, 1976. It must be noted here that AFSPA was initially enacted to suppress the Naga movement that resisted integration within the Union of India. These provisions enabled the Union of India to supersede the authority of the states on certain aspects such as the centre-state relations to protect and promote the interest of the tribals (though in reality implementation of these special provisions has led to the emergence of more conflicts). Further, these acts empower the Central Government to arbitrarily declare any part of the region or the federal units (later partially extended to Punjab and undivided Jammu and Kashmir as well) as *the state of exception* and to treat the people within such areas as *rights-deprived* subjects who are *killable* legally (Wouters, 2022). Bhagat Oinam, while questioning the quasi-federal structure of the Indian state argues that the legitimate power structure is concentrated with the Central government, citing the case of the Armed Forces (special) Powers Act (AFSPA), on how the Central Government through the Governor can declare a part of or the whole of a state as *Disturbed Area* bypassing the state legislature to implement the act (Oinam, 2008, p. 13). Further, he argued, this as a result of when the "state policies are framed based on (such) a perception or an imagination, violence is bound to follow, for violence constitutes the structure of the imagination or perception" (Oinam, 2008, p. 13).

The states in the region merely function as machineries for governance but not as sites of power. The enactment and continuing existence of the AFSPA indicates that violence is well entrenched in the structure and imagination of the Indian State. The national security based narrative propagated by the Indian state justifies and legitimizes the concentration or monopoly of violence by the Central government over the states in the region.

Subsequently, in an attempt to address and accommodate the demands of various dominant ethnic groups, new states were created out of the then composite Assam-state through the North-Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act, 1971 and a host of autonomous and development (district) councils. However, there are many instances where these approaches of accommodation and appeasement to manage the existing conflicts have emerged as force multiplier of the conflict given the heterogeneous ethnic composition of the region with disparate and often overlapping and competing aspirations and claims. In this regard, Subir Bhaumik has summed up the whole exercise as opening the *Pandora's Box* (Bhaumik, 2009). Visibly the scenario of the region in the post-colonial India is marked by the emergence of a succession of conflicts questioning not only the legitimacy of the centralised authority of the Indian State, but also, raising issues such as uneven development, negligence and apathy towards the problems faced by the region,¹² assimilation, domination, and demand for greater autonomy among others.

Situating the Conflict in North East India

Like any other history of conflict (communities) in the world, from time immemorial there have been intermittent conflicts and wars between different ethnic communities and different villages within a community in the region. As Peter Robb argues, "...identities are always multiple, contingent and continuously constructed, so that traditions, also continually reinvented, are shared and reiterated practices

and beliefs which reflect the memories of the previous constructions” (Robb, 1997, p. 245). The processes of construction, reinvention and reiteration of identity have the tendency of being conflictual as it involves *othering* of certain individuals or groups and overlapping claims and contestations over material and non-material goods with other group/s. Thus, the genesis of some of the contemporary conflict in Northeast India can be traced back beyond the resistance effort made by the natives of the region against the British colonial expansion to their territories. As the processes of identity formation is always dynamical and fluid (Barth, 1969). In the post colonial period, right from the nascent years of independent India particularly in the mid 1950s the Nagas started an armed struggle against the Indian state for independence. Since then, the legitimacy of the latter has been continuously challenged from various quarters though mostly rhetorical in nature. The most recent cases being the formation of the Dimas National Liberation Army (DNLA) in 2019¹³ and the declaration of independence of Manipur in 2019 from Britain by Narengbam Samarjit, external affairs minister in the self-declared Manipur State Council (Aljazeera, 2019).

The entire Northeast has been embroiled in several forms of conflicts (both violent and non-violent) and most of which are drawn along ethnic lines. The causes for the emergence of these ethno-political conflicts are numerous and their demands vary ranging from sovereignty or outright secession, autonomy, resistance against the intrusion and dominance of the larger neighbouring groups, against immigrants from other Indian states and from the neighbouring countries like Bangladesh and Myanmar, to intra-tribal feuds and inter-state conflicts. Besides, Indo-China conflict also often continues to play out in Arunachal Pradesh.

From the perspective of the broader classification of conflict in the contemporary conflict studies, most of the conflict in North East India is

officially viewed as *intra-state* (local) conflict but are linked to the processes of state (nation)-building of the post-colonial Indian state.¹⁴ However, almost all of the conflicts in the region are internationalised (though uniquely in its own context) not only because of the fact that the communities inhabiting the region particularly the borderland communities share very close ethnic affinity and geographical proximity with the communities from across the border but also importantly because of the linkages and strategic arrangements between the non-state armed groups (NSAGs) operating within and outside the region. For instance, the ethnic categories of the Nagas and the Chin-Kuki-Mizo groups have considerable population both in India and Myanmar. Similarly, the Tripuris, Bengalis, Khasis, Garos, Bodo and Chin-Kuki-Mizos are found both in India and Bangladesh. Also, the presence of different non-state armed groups operating in the proximity across the border increases the possibility for different groups to find common grounds to pursue their respective endeavours collectively by forming alliances such as United National Liberation Front of Western South East Asia (ULFW)¹⁵ (Bhattacharyya, 2015) Self-Defence United Front of South East Himalayan Region (SDUF), United Liberation Front of Seven Sisters (ULFSS), Indo-Burma Revolutionary Front (IBRF) and All Muslim United Liberation Forum of Assam (AMULFA) (Vashum, 2000) (Bhattacharyya, 2015).¹⁶ In addition, different parties to the conflict in the region have received support from the neighbouring countries as well as the NSAGs from those countries in different periods of the history.

The study emphasise on the centrality of the group as the main actor in contemporary conflict in the region. It acknowledges the role of the group and the NSAGs that claim to represent the group as the key determinant for mass mobilisation to support the conflict. With understanding that conflicts as complex social phenomena that stimulate interaction between

actors with distinct identities, needs and aspirations. Accordingly, the processes of group formation, dynamics of interaction and collective action will be examined.

Who are the parties in conflict?

The parties in conflict in the region can be broadly identified at nine levels: First, the Government of India or the Indian State through its various agencies such as the Indian Army, Central Armed Police Forces and Indian Air Force (occasionally); Next, the seven state governments through the state police, state rifles, state armed police and special state forces such as Indian Reserve Battalions (IRBs) and commandos; Third, the various NSAGs against the Central and state forces; Fourth, different ethnic groups against each other including both armed groups and civilians; Fifth, different factions within a particular group across the non-state armed groups; Sixth, police forces of the Indian states against another state forces i.e. the state police and Special Forces; Seventh, sub-tribes and clans within ethnic groups; Eighth, neighbouring countries such as China and Bangladesh with India over border issues; and lastly, neighbouring countries like Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar that assist India from time to time against the non-state armed groups from the region. So, out of these nine categories of party to the conflict the first four levels are directly relevant to the present study. It is beyond the purview of the present study to delve into each details of conflict between different ethnic groups, internecine or factional conflict, conflict between different Indian states in the region, conflict at the level of sub-tribes and clans' level and conflict between India and other neighbouring countries. However, references will be made to other conflicts as and when necessary and relevant.

What makes a group?

Sociologically, a social group is a collection of individuals who are conscious of a joint interaction with mutual expectations and

obligations thereby creating a common identity. Thus, according to Maciver & Page (1990) a group is "any collection of social beings who enter into distinctive social relationships with one another. A group, then, as we understand it, involves reciprocity between its members" (Page, 1990, p. 10). Likewise, for Bottomore a social group is "an aggregate of individuals in which definite relations exist between the individuals comprising it, and each individual is conscious of the group itself and its symbols" (Bottomore, 1976, p. 99). Thus, a social group is an organised group characterised by a sense of reciprocal behaviour, we feeling, common interests and its norms. It is an artificial creation based on voluntary membership usually for a specific purpose.

The fact that the region has been plagued with violent conflict until recently is undisputable. Most of the ethnic communities in the region until recently have atleast one or more non-state armed group/s claiming to represent the interest or to safeguard the interest of the communities concerned. This is irrespective of whether they have the mandate and recognition of the communities they claimed to represent. But in the context of the region, it can be safely argued that most of the non-state armed groups enjoyed the mass support or atleast the support of the elites of the concerned communities at certain point of time in the past and with some groups it is continuing till date.

Other than the Central, state governments and the neighbouring countries which are party to the conflict, the other groups consisted of diverse ethnic groups which are close knitted based on the elements emphasised by the constructivists such as shared common myths of origin, migration and shared historical memories of collective experiences and the members of the group are deeply attached to these cultural values. Historical antecedents including the colonial experience and the upsurge of different non-state armed movements on India's

independence have further consolidated the ethnic affinity among the different ethnic groups. The concept of ethnicity akin to that of the Weberian understanding that ethnicity as the belief of social actors in common descent based on racial and cultural differences, among other factors (Max Weber, 1968) has been employed extensively in the region as a mode of drawing boundaries between individuals and hence group making *vis-à-vis* the out-group. For instance, the Naga ethnic group is a construct popularised during the British colonial rule that has enabled them to consolidate their ethnic identity and had assumed a position where without mentioning or referring to the group discussion on the conflict in the region will be incomplete. Prior to the advent of the British, anthropological studies divulged that many of the tribes that identify themselves as Nagas now were unknown or remotely in contact with one another, having different dialects non-intelligible to one another (absence of lingua franca), practicing different culture and tradition (Wettstein, 2012) (Micheal Oppitz, 2008) and were intermittently fighting amongst themselves. But at the same time, they shared several common myths of origin, migration and traditional and cultural practices. Though the origin of the term *Naga*¹⁷ an exonym, is in obscurity, yet it has been successfully capitalized to build the *Naga identity*. Sanjib Baruah in this regard put it as "...there is little doubt that in the eight decades (in fact now it has been a century) since Hutton wrote his article (on the Nagas in 1921 & 22) Nagas have developed a strong sense of themselves as a collectivity" (Baruah S. , 2003, p. 323). The nature of ethnicity in the region has been conspicuously exhibiting that ethnic group boundaries are permeable and changeable as argued by Barth and Moerman (Fedrik Barth, 1969) (Micheal Moerman, 1965).¹⁸ The processes of group formation at least among the tribals in the region exhibited similarity with that of the *Rütli-Oath*¹⁹ in Switzerland. The processes of ethnic consolidation began among the tribals when they encountered with the overwhelmingly

formidable power of the colonial British who were much more powerful than the neighbouring kingdoms.²⁰ Subsequently, the experience of the tribes with the First World War in which five Labour Corps from the region participated in the war namely, Garo Labour Corps, Khasi Labour Corps, Lushai Labour Corps, Manipuri Labour Corps and Naga Labour Corps (Noble, 2016) has somewhat awakened the political consciousness in modern term. The formation of the Naga Club in 1918, at Kohima by the returnees of the Naga Labour Corps backs the argument as it played a critical role in the Naga identity formation.

The other dimension is that when larger groups like the Nagas consolidated their identity and the movement, other ethnic groups were either inspired or threatened which led to the subsequent consolidation of other respective groups. In the post-colonial context, the Meiteis who had enjoyed a considerably better position under the British felt betrayed when the full-fledged state of Nagaland was created in 1963. Since the Merger Agreement 1949, the state of Manipur remained as a Part C state (then Union Territory in 1962) of the Indian Union till 1972. Thus, in the following year i.e. 1964 the first Meitei non-state armed group United National Liberation Front (UNLF) was formed. It may be noted that simultaneously dissent voices amongst the Meiteis were building up in due course of time against the Merger Agreement of 1949. Similarly, many smaller groups across the region have form their own NSAGs to protect and safeguard their respective interest from the larger groups such as the Nagas, Mizos, Meiteis, Tripuris, Ahoms and Bodos. Also, to bargain or negotiate with the Central and state governments for greater recognition, autonomy and special constitutional provisions of their respective group. In other words, smaller ethnic groups which were loosely organised before and during the colonial period started to solidify their identity as the larger groups intensified their demand/struggle aggressively.

It can be theoretically delineated that the *gaol incompatibility* to use the term of Johan Galtung (Galtung, 1996) and Christopher Mitchell (Mitchell, 2014) become more pronounced among the smaller groups when the larger groups intensified their struggle against or demand from the Indian State which gradually led to the interaction of the three components of conflict between different ethnic groups. To deduce this from Durkheimian perspectives, it can be argued that the *forces of integration* took precedence over the *forces of disintegration* within different ethnic groups with the exposure to the outside world initially through the encounter with the British, the First & Second World Wars and the entire processes of de-colonialisation and (nation) state building of the Indian State. This has ultimately enhanced the *shared or collective consciousness* of the people within the ethnic group and further created rippling effects among the smaller groups as well.

Why and how do groups resort to violent conflict?

Accordingly, when the struggle or demands of different ethnic groups through non-violent or democratic means were not met they resorted to violent conflict to achieve their goal or demand. The conflict dynamic process in which *incompatibilities, attitude and behaviour* are not only consistently changing and influencing each other (Mitchell, 2014) but has also brought in a host of new actors into the theatre of conflict in the region. Classification of the nature of struggle or demand is imperative not only to address the magnitude of conflict presented before the region but also explains why and how group resort to conflict. It will be naive to take an exclusive view on the conflict in the region of being over political, religious, cultural and economic as the following sections will show how diverse and interrelated these conflicts are. Thus, multi causal approach will be applied to examine the conflict in the region. Based on the nature, context and characteristics of the conflicts in the region they are broadly divided into six categories;

- a. Challenging the legitimacy of the Indian state
- b. Inter-ethnic conflict
- c. Intra-ethnic conflict
- d. Conflict against (illegal) immigrants
- e. Inter-state (between federal units) conflict
- f. International border conflict

Challenging the legitimacy of the Indian state

The conflict settings in the region squarely fits into the proposition of Edward E Azar's *initial condition* or *preconditions* for protracted social conflict (Azar, 1990). The region is not only ethnically diverse but most of the communities in the region have at least one or more non-state armed group/s in its name irrespective of the legitimacy, mandate and recognition accorded by the concerned communities. As a result, the conflict in the region is so pervasive that it leaves only a limited area untouched and the number of the parties in conflict numerous. Nonetheless, the focus of the present study is concentrated on one of the major intractable conflicts in the region, specifically, the case of the Naga conflict. The major groups and the most protracted conflict in the region can be located to the first category of conflict categorised above i.e. *challenging the legitimacy of the Indian state* though the origin, cause and background of each of these conflicts vary to a great extent from one another. However, the basis of the selection or classification of intractable conflict in the present context is done considering the *protractedness*,²¹ violent nature, perceived as irresolvable, demand for extensive investment (Kriesberg, 1998), total, perceived as zero sum in nature and central (Tal, 2007) or mass participation or implications affecting majority of the society. Most of the conflicts in the region— have been lingering for a minimum of over a generation or were violent in nature from late 1960s to early 2000s. These were widely perceived as irresolvable. Vast investments both material and psychological

have been made by the conflicting parties. These categories also perceived the conflict as essential for the existence or survival of the community. Thus, rigidity of stance or goals characterised these groups. Inevitably conflict occupies a central place in the lives of the individual members as well as the society at large. Hence, most of the conflicts in the region fulfil at least one or the other of these characteristics of intractable conflict. Therefore, for selection of cases it is emphasised more on certain characteristics such as *protractedness*, extensive investment, rigidity of stance, violent nature (at a particular extended point of time), and an additional characteristic i.e. *pervasiveness*²² to the above mentioned features. Accordingly, five cases of intractable conflicts in the region have been located under the first category of the above categorisation namely, the Nagas, Meiteis, Mizos, Ahoms (Assamese) and Tripuris.

Coming to the specifics of the question on why and how these groups resorted to violent conflict, there are a number of factors. First, the demands and claims of the major ethnic groups through democratic means were either deliberately ignored or misunderstood. Such is the case of the Nagas the Indian State dishonouring of the Akbar Hydari Agreement of 1947 with the demise of Sir Akbar Hydari in 1948. Though controversy or disagreement over the interpretation of the Clause 9 of the Agreement emerged but with his untimely death India did not pursue further to resolve the issue along the line of the Agreement. This was followed by a plebiscite to decide the future of the Nagas where they claimed that 99 percent voted not to be a part of the Indian union. As the stalemate continued, the Nagas boycotted the first general elections of India held in between 25 October 1951, to 21 February 1952, and gradually the movement turned into a violent one. The Nagas argued that, their movement is a resistance movement against the annexation of the Indian state. This can be interpreted as the outcome of arbitrary structural imposition of the post-colonial Indian State as the processes of the

articulation of the Naga ethno-nationalism preceded India's independence. The emphasis here is on the *political* in terms of the nature and cause of the conflict, in the sense that the Nagas considered the conflict to be between two independent political entities. This can also be explained, particularly the intractable aspects of the conflict specifically by applying the notion of *incommensurability situation* of Guy and Heidi Burgess as one of the key factors for the source or cause of the intractable conflict (Mitchell, 2014). The denial "...of respect and recognition on the basis..." of the Naga nationality or as an independent political entity has set the ground for an intractable conflict as they "...seek different attitudes, reactions, treatment or behaviours..." (Mitchell, 2014, p. 35) from that of the imposition of the Indian state.

In the case of the Meiteis too, the delay in granting a full-fledged statehood and the non-recognition of the continuous democratic movements in the Imphal valley by the Government of India can be viewed as factors leading to violent conflict in Manipur.²³ The way the Mizo National Famine Front (MNFF) had transformed into a secessionist movement by rechristening to Mizo National Front (MNF) explained the indifferent attitude or negligence shown towards the suffering of the Mizos by the then Government of Assam in particular and the Indian Government at large. Similarly, due to the Government's irresponsive attitude towards the Assamese demand led by All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) to detect, disenfranchise and deport the illegal immigrants from Bangladesh has triggered the initial violent conflict in Assam. State facilitated and sponsored resettlement of the Hindu Bengali refugees coupled with development induced displacement of the native tribal Tripuris in Tripura has led to the protracted conflict in the state.

Inter-ethnic conflict

The crux of most of the conflicts in the region centre around the issues of majority-minority relations and the conflicting groups are drawn particularly along ethnic lines. The failure of the Indian State mechanisms to address the initial conflicts in the region has further triggered more conflict. Galtung's views on structural violence can be inferred here to explain how the smaller ethnic groups viewed the structure of the Indian state as unequal, unjust, unrepresentative or under represented which restraint them from realizing their actual potential as human beings by way of according preferences and opportunities to the larger groups (Galtung, 1969). In general, it can also be argued from Gramscian's perspective that the Indian State approach of *mainstreaming* the hegemonic cultural values as common values to all had a cascading effect leading to the emergence of more conflicts (Demmers, 2012, p. 60). Walter Fernandes' classification of conflict in the region into categories viz. one born out of non-recognition or non-acceptance of the Indian State and the other growing out of the resentment against the local dominant groups suffices the explanation of the two forms of conflict discussed above (Fernandes, 1999). Ethnic conflict in the region for decades has been intertwined with resistance against the dominance of the Indian state, resistance against the expansion of the dominant ethnic groups over the smaller ones and the conflict between the immigrants, migrants and the natives.

Besides, the major ethnic groups discussed above, there are several smaller NSAGs scattered across the region claiming to represent their respective ethnic group such as the Dimasas, Karbis, Tea Tribes, Kuki-Chin-Mizos, Garos, Rabhas, Koch Rajbhonsis, Pangals, Brus, Bengalis and Hmars (including the Bodos). In rhetoric, many of these groups and their multiple factions assert for the creation of their independent sovereign homeland but with the ultimate goal for greater autonomy in the form of

either separate state or autonomous district council or recognition as Schedule Tribe. The inequality between different ethnic groups is apparent with the larger ones having (or exhibiting) homogenising or chauvinist tendency over the smaller ones as seen in the cases of the Assamese against the smaller ethnic groups in the state, Bodos against the tea tribes and other minor groups. Myron Weiner (Weiner, 1978, p. 28) observations that "inequality between ethnic groups is a necessity but is not sufficient ground for conflict to emerge but competition for control over, or access to, economic, political and social resources, power and status" is critically relevant here.

The larger ethnic groups such as the Nagas, Assamese, Meiteis, Bodos, Bengalis in Tripura (though initially promoted by the then ruling monarchy) and Mizos in pursuit of consolidating their group identities or nationalism against the overarching Indian identity, embarked on the expansionist, assimilationist and hegemonic stratagems akin to that of the Indian state. Similarly, when the smaller ethnic groups are faced with the larger groups they are compelled to fend for themselves by replicating the approaches of the former. To used the terms of Mohammed Ayoob, the state (both the state and central governments) was 'incapable of ensuring security' (Ayoob, 2007) to the minority groups. Thus, the situation of 'competition over, or access to, economic, political and social resources, power and status' as well as for survival arose between different ethnic groups. The decade, starting from the early 1990s to early 2000s witnessed widespread ethnic conflict that has engulfed the entire region. Ethnic conflict peaked in the region in these ten years as most of the major ethnic conflicts broke out in this period namely: Naga-Kuki 1993-1997; Bodos-non-Bodos (including the Muslim peasants of Bengali descent, Hindu Bengalis and Adivasis) 1993-2002; Meitei-Pangal 1993; Tripuris-Bengalis 1988-2002; Assamese (ULFA)- Hindi speaking settlers 2000-2008,

Mizos-Brus (Reangs) 1998-2001; native settlers of Arunachal Pradesh under the banner of All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union (AAPSU)-Chakmas 1990-1996; Khasis-Bengalis (later Biharis, Marwaris, Nepalis and most recently the Sikhs) 1980-early 1990s; Karbis-Kukis 2003-04; Dimasas-Hmars 2003; Dimasas-Karbis 2005-06; Garos-Rabhas 2003; and Nagaland witnessed substantial flow of migrants particularly the *Miyas* (the Muslims peasants) and other Bengalis who fled from Assam into the state during this period has been officially acknowledged as a threat to the demography of the state and as possible source for future conflict (though there was no large scale conflict as such at that point of time in the state).

Intra-ethnic conflict

In spite of notable advances in the disaggregation of the study of civil conflict, intra-ethnic and fragmentation within the ethnic group in conflict comparatively received little attention (Troy, 2015). Unlike other conflicts discussed in the earlier sections, the intra-ethnic conflicts are sporadic in nature barring the factional conflicts of the armed groups. But intra-ethnic conflict is not uncommon in the region.²⁴ The inherent multiple fragmentation and factionalism within the non-state armed groups from the region is indicative through the existence of this pervasive phenomenon. For instance, several factions that have emerged over the period of time within the Naga non-state armed groups and civil society organisations can be attributed largely to the divide within the group along tribal line as discussed above.

Though other factors like ideological and tactical differences, differences over strategies to pursue and succession of leadership and exogenous pressure also contribute to the fragmentation within the group. Similarly, examples can be amply drawn from other cases too, including the multiple factions among the groups representing the Meiteis, Kukis and Bodos amongst numerically larger ethnic communities. Even

groups representing the smaller ones such as the Khasis, Garos, Dimasas, karbis, Adivasis etc. are not immune to this phenomenon as evident in the number of factions within their respective NSAGs. Another broad variant is also visible through demand for greater access to power and resources. The demand of the people from eastern Nagaland for a separate *frontier state* from Nagaland state fits in this variant of intra-ethnic conflict amongst the Nagas. Though non-violent in their assertion it can be invariably explained as the existence of layers of conflict within the larger ones. Several other intra-ethnic conflicts between the sub-tribes within the larger Naga tribes such as Southern Angamis-Maos, Maos-Poumais, Poumai-Chakheshangs-Tangkhus, Angamis-Sumis, Zelieng-Sumis, Marams-Poumais, Poumais-Tangkhus, Kukis-Paites, Adi-Galo, Garos-Rabhas, etc., differed from that of the factional conflicts within the larger organised armed groups.

Conflict against (illegal) migrants

Myron Weiner (1978) in his studies of migration in the developing countries argues that migration has a serious destabilising effect which can cause acute conflict in multi-ethnic societies. Recognising the factor of migration as a part of the processes of modernisation which provide incentives and opportunities for mobility and at the same time nurtures the growth of ethnic identification and ethnic cohesion (Weiner, 1978). His concepts of *territorial ethnicity*, *dual labour markets* and *ethnic division of labour* and the framework of the conditions under which competition between migrants and non-migrants emerge will be pertinent to understand the conflict arising out of the huge influx of population from across the border in the region (Weiner, 1978). *Territorial ethnicity* is understood as the perception that certain ethnic groups have entitlement to claim a larger share due to their deep rooted attachment by way of residence as a group over a certain territory. The notion of *territorial ethnicity* explains the difference of conflict between migrants and non-

migrants and other conflict among the non-migrant or the natives. *Dual labour markets* may be simply explained as the duality of labour types as traditional and modern, skills and unskilled or formal and informal which are often ethnically stratified or *ethnic division of labour*. He further argues that inequalities between ethnic groups are a necessary but not a sufficient condition for ethnic conflict but competition for control over resources to economic wealth, political power, or social status is under certain conditions created by the ethnic division of labour (Weiner, 1978). The conditions includes when ethnic division of labour between migrants and non-migrants parallels class relationships; when the existing ethnic division of labour is questioned by the indigenous population due to changes in the ability and aspirations as a result of having access to modern education or due to the decrease of income in their traditional professions; and when a change in power structures enables the indigenous population to strengthen their political, economic and social positions (Maruyama, 2006). Issues related to (illegal) migrants are the root cause of conflicts in Assam and Tripura to be specific and partially in the case of Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Manipur and Meghalaya.

Since the colonial times, the region has been experiencing the influx of both migrants and immigrants which was facilitated by the colonial rulers to run the colonial administration as well as to implement the profiteering commercial policies. Scarce labour in the resource rich Assam coupled with the colonial British interest in the resources such as tea, oil, timber, coal and the development of infrastructure such as railways and roadways to facilitate and exploit resources had prompted the initial influx of a massive immigrant population in Assam. Despite having facilitated the movement of a huge migrant and immigrant population into Assam from different parts of India and neighbouring countries to serve the colonial interest, the British also noted the danger lying ahead due to

unchecked continuous inflow of people in large number from Eastern Bengal in Census 1911 and 1931.²⁵ The Partition of India, 1947 led to another massive influx of population into the region from then East Pakistan and further exacerbated when Bangladesh was liberated from Pakistan in 1971. In the last two events the immigrants were mostly consisted of the Bengali Hindus who were settled in Tripura and the Barak valley of Assam but migration prior and later to these two were mainly Bengali Muslims of peasantry class. However, it would be naive to assume that there has been conflict between the migrants and the natives since the early phases of migration in Assam. In the early stages of large-scale immigration into Assam, immigrants were welcomed by atleast the educated middle class Assamese in contrast to Weiner's view discussed above. Taking into account their productive and skilled labours which are essential for growth and development as Assam was then underpopulated the colonial and the elite Assamese facilitated the influx of labours (Guha, 2006). Similarly, the royal family of the Tripuri kingdom has the tradition of employing the Bengalis to run its bureaucracy also encouraged the Bengali Muslim peasants to tilt the land in the plains areas to augment the revenue of the royal treasury. However, in the later phase due to the enormity of the scale of immigration, demography of the region particularly in Tripura and Assam have been dramatically altered and the resultant issues become more complicated over the years.

Inter-state Conflict

This particular set of conflict can be largely attributed to the failure of the processes of nation-building of the Indian state which followed a succession of redrawing the boundary of the then composite Assam. These exercises were executed without taking into account the traditional forms of boundaries prevalent among the locals from both sides of the boundary. In attempts to accommodate different aspirations and the demands of various ethnic groups in the

region new states have been carved out but failed to demarcate the boundaries which are mutually agreeable to the parties involved. Conflicts between different Indian states are part of regular news in the country. However, one of the unique and unusual features of conflict in the region is the conflict between two states police forces engaging in gun battles. In 1979 and 1985, the state forces of Assam and Nagaland fought over the border dispute between the two states at Doyang Reserve Forest Area and Meerapani area respectively (Misra, 2014). Most recently, the conflict between Assam and Mizoram on 26 July, 2021 which resulted in killing 6 Assam Police personnel and injuring several civilians from both sides. Similarly, border dispute between, Assam and Meghalaya and Assam and Arunachal Pradesh over allegations and counter-allegations, claims and counter-claims of encroachments resulted in multiple disputes and violence. However, unlike in the case of Assam-Nagaland and Assam-Mizoram there were no direct confrontation between the states forces in the other cases but often the state forces are reported to be perpetrators of violence against the civilians in the dispute areas.²⁶

International Border Conflict

The region shares 98 per cent of its border with other countries as discussed above. However, the areas bordering Bangladesh, Myanmar and Bhutan are largely peaceful barring a few minor skirmishes with Bangladesh and Myanmar. The immigrants' issue mostly emanates from Bangladesh has been persistent but without much implication at the bilateral relations between the two countries. Bangladesh, Bhutan and Myanmar (with some exception) have played critical roles in aiding India to tackle the non-state armed groups in the North East region and the former remain to be a close strategic and development partner to India. However, the areas bordering China has a total of 3488 kms out of which 1126 kms is in Arunachal Pradesh and has been the hotspot of dispute between the two countries since the 1962 Indo-China war. Considering the

escalation of conflict between the two countries in the recent times, the focus seems to be shifting towards the eastern front i.e. Arunachal Pradesh, as the stake is higher than that of the western front. Detail discussion on the bilateral relations will remain out of the purview of the present study. Nonetheless, a brief account of the Indo-China relations will be highlighted below.

The two countries in the initial few years of India's Independence in 1947 and the united China under the Communist in 1949 shared a mutually reciprocal relation. There were diplomatic exchanges wherein the two Prime Ministers Jawaharlal Nehru and Chou En-lai visited each other's countries between 1954 to 1956. However, differences arise over the McMahon Line that demarcates the boundary between the two countries in the colonial era. India, on its independence has accepted the McMahon Line as the boundary between India and China but the same was not reciprocated by the Chinese by interpreting it as illegal and a legacy of British imperialism. The two countries share a stretch of 3488 kms border out of which 1126 kms is in Arunachal Pradesh and the rest is in Sikkim, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Ladakh. It must be mentioned here that in 1913-14 the McMahon Line was drawn in a meeting in Shimla convened by the then Indian government which was attended by Chinese and Tibetan representatives (Guha, 2011). Gradually, the tension between the two countries became visible when Nehru was denied permission to visit Tibet in 1958, and in the same year the Chinese came out with a map showing the Ladakh area of India as under its control. The bonhomie relations between the two countries came to a halt when the Dalai Lama fled Lhasa, Tibet and was given refuge in India. Following this event, both the countries stepped up their respective positions in the disputed areas and full blown conflict ensued in the mid of 1962, continued till October the same year until the Chinese unilaterally declared ceasefire and retreated from areas they had occupied. But India suffered a humiliating defeat

as the Chinese troops captured as far as Tezpur in Assam. What is of importance in the context of the present study is that, the Chinese supported the Nagas, Mizos and Meiteis armed groups in the form providing training and logistics followed in the succeeding years.

In 1967, conflicts broke up again in Sikkim Nathu La in September where the Chinese suffered humiliating defeat from India and in Cho La in October again the Chinese were defeated but both sides suffered massive loss of its army. Deadlock continued for the next over a quarter of a Century relations between the two countries till the 1988 visit of China by Rajiv Gandhi which marked the beginning of the normalisation processes of bilateral relations by constituting a Joint Working Group to resolve boundary disputes. However, conflict escalated in Sumdorong Chu in Arunachal Pradesh in 1986 soon after the state was granted full-fledged statehood as both sides built up troops and infrastructure in the surrounding areas. High level exchange of visits between the two countries followed and in 1993 an agreement on the Maintenance of Peaceful and Tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China border was signed. Subsequently, a number of bilateral agreements on trade and strategic cooperation were signed²⁷ and trade between the countries increased over a period of time. However, patterns of industrialisation and infrastructure development at the border continue unabated on both sides which ultimately led to the two major standoffs in the recent years Doklam in 2017 and at Galwan valley in 2020 (Rathore, 2021). Much of the past border tension between India and China has been on the western end in Ladakh specifically but the recent trend seems to be suggesting that it is moving towards the Eastern end of the shared border. Both sides desire to fix the border are impeded by the physical geography, cultural landscape, and political history of the world's greatest mountain range (Gardner, 2021). The shift is palpable as the Eastern front is strategically important and

resource rich with inhabitants who were historically independent unlike the western front which is barren with no valuable natural resources and permanent inhabitants.

The conflict over the border particularly in the Eastern is likely to continue in the years to come as both the countries are energy scarce and the river Tsangpo-Brahmaputra holds huge power generation potential. At the same, both the parties are interested in the succession of the Dalai Lama for controlling the Tibetan Buddhists as the dispute is not only on territory but also on authority over the people inhabiting the Eastern Himalayas (Gardner, 2021). A peaceful Indo-China relation is not only important for India's strategic and diplomacy in the global scenario but also particularly critical for the future of the conflict in North East India considering the presence and influence the Chinese have in Myanmar.

Why and how do they stop or continue?

The Indian State response to the conflict in the region has been conceived along the ideas of statecraft propounded by Kautilya or Chanakya, a combination of force, monetary inducements, engineered split within dissenting groups, political negotiations and peace talks and regional diplomacy with neighbouring countries (Bhaumik S. , 2007). Many of these efforts have proven to be effective in a few cases but it turned out to be counter-productive in most cases due to gross violation of human rights perpetrated by both state forces and the NSAGs. The absence of credible democratic institutions coupled with severe undermining of the civilian authorities in the processes of heavy militarisation and enforcement of draconian laws which have contributed immensely to the deteriorating situation in the region.

Similar to the case of the Nagas, the Mizo National Front (MNF) initially attempted to present their demands through non-violent means by holding talks with and submission of a series

of memorandums to both the then Assam Chief Minister and Prime Minister of India in between 1963-65. As these efforts yielded no desirable result, the MNF started the two decades of violent conflict by resorting to violence undertook the bold *Operation Jericho* from the night of 28 February, 1966 to seize all government establishments and to expel the Indian forces from Mizo District (Hnamte L. , 2020). On 1 March 1966, the MNF declared the independence of Mizoram and a parallel government called *Mizoram Sawrkar* or Provisional government of Mizoram with executive, legislature and judiciary was established (Hnamte, 2020). However, the very next day the District was declared as Disturbed Area under Assam Disturbed Areas Act, 1955 and subsequently Armed Forces (Special) Powers Act, 1958, was enforced. This was followed by intense military combing operations by Indian Army on the ground and along with a series of airstrikes in different places in the district by the Indian Air Force for two successive days.²⁸ Numerous draconian measures such as the Protected and Progressive Villages (PPVs), New Grouping Centres (NGCs), Voluntary Grouping Centres (VGC) and Extended Loop Areas (ELAs) were adopted to tackle the activities of the MNF (Nag, 2012). This was preceded by enforcing strict prohibition of the movement of people and burning down of villages to completely cut off the contact and support to the MNF. After intensive military operations which resulted in causing severe humanitarian crisis and gross violation of human rights particularly to the general public, general amnesties were offered wherein many cadres of the MNF surrendered and the formal peace talk was initiated from 1971 (Hnamte, 2020). The series of peace talks through active involvement the civil society organisations and the Church have finally culminated in the Mizo Peace Accord of 1985, leading to the formation of Mizoram state.

Likewise, in Tripura and Meghalaya the approach of the state followed the lines as discussed above: initial unresponsiveness, then start negotiations when ethnic protests turn violent; the massive use of force against insurgents; and a return to negotiations and electoral politics when the rebels tire (Bajpai, 2010). The difference in these two cases with other cases in the region is the limited or non-involvement of the Indian army and was largely tackled by the state police forces with occasional aids from the Central Armed Police Forces. In the case of Meghalaya, mass support was negligible as compared to other cases in the region also akin to other militant groups multiple splits in the groups had further weaken their existence. So, different groups in the state failed to establish themselves as a formidable force against the state.

After the failure of two successive peace accords signed between representatives of the Bodos and both the Government of India and Government of Assam in 1993 and 2003 which led to the creation of Bodo Autonomous Council (BAC) and Bodo Territorial Council (BTC) under Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution respectively. The recent and the third Bodo Accord was signed on 27 January 2020, between the Bodos represented by the representatives of the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU), BTC, all factions of NDFB and the Central and state governments representatives. Despite all the apprehensions and lacunas pointed out by experts and commentators²⁹ having all armed factions on board in the latest Accord and importantly de-arming of all the cadres exudes optimism.

The signing of the ceasefire agreement between the Government of India (GOI) and the largest non-state armed group in the region i.e. National Socialist Council of Nagalim— Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM) in 1997 has been a significant landmark in the region's conflict history. As in the following years, several peace agreements were signed by both the Central and state

governments and other Government agencies with different non-state armed groups which resulted in massively reducing the number of violent conflict between the non-state armed groups and the government forces. However, factional fights, communal and inter-ethnic conflict continue to persist. So, at this juncture it is too early to assume that sustained peace has been achieved in the region.

Conclusion

Thomas Paine's notion of the society as given and government (read as state) (Paine, 1776) as imposed, reflects the nature of the emergence of intractable conflict in North East India. Challenging the legitimacy of the state has been the main source or the root cause of most of the intractable conflicts in the region. This has been the case with most of the post-colonial (nation) states (including India) as they are constituted along the line of the imported or borrowed systems or systems born out of resistance movement against external colonial forces without or with very little organically evolved principles or practices. Often, the lack of cohesion or the existence of conflict among the constituents is one of the major common

characteristics of the developing/post-colonial states as not only the structure of the state is imposed upon them but also the systems that govern them are alien to them. Nonetheless, almost all these (nation) states are categorised/identified under the very rubric of the broad and glossy concept of *democracy* irrespective of whether democratic principles are translated into real practices or not. The existence of the conflict in one form or the other, and legal sanction of the use of coercive measures or force on its citizens are part of universal features of the modern (nation) state. Time and again the same question is been raised at least rhetorically or in the form of counter narratives for the past seven decades despite massive transformation in terms of the nature and context of the conflict. Sanjib Baruah made a similar argument on the problematic concept of nation-state as a political institution in this context with specific reference to the partitions and its impact on the region (Baruah S. , 2020). Many of the conflicts that have emerged over the decades are inextricably linked to this question. Though in reality, during the course of time many, if not all of the non-state armed groups have wavered from their founding principles, goals and objectives.

¹The region is referred to as North Eastern Region (NER) in the lexicon of the Government of India. For the purpose of the present work the North Eastern Region will be referred to as North East India or the region synonymously.

²Sikkim will be kept out of the purview of the present study considering the territorial non-contiguity with other states, different colonial experience and integration into the Indian Union and importantly for being one of the most peaceful states in the country.

³A Chinese traveller who toured India in the first half of the seventh century and visited Kamarupa during 643 AD at the invitation of emperor Bhaskarvarman.

⁴Though there were petty kingdoms existed in between the period of the Varmans rule to the Ahoms but they were not as overwhelming or significant as the said reigns. Also, demarcations of the boundaries of those kingdoms are vague due to paucity of historical records.

⁵The whole issues over language in Assam can trace its root to the colonial policy of bringing in people from then East Bengal the literate Bengalis to man the colonial administration.

⁶As prior to this the entire region is known or referred to as the Northeast Frontier.

⁷ Imposition of the colonial policies such as Inner Line Regulation of 1873, is an example how the division between hills-plains people in the region. Moreover, this was substantiated by the introduction of the Backward Tract under Government of India Act, 1919, and Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas under Government of India Act, 1935 in the region are exclusively aimed at protecting the commercial interest of the Colonial Rulers in the guise of protecting the tribes in the hilly areas which have direct repercussion in the existing relationship between the hills and the plains.

⁸ The word 'other' has to be understood contextually as it varies from case to case.

⁹Imposition of the colonial policies such as Inner Line Regulation of 1873, is an example how the division between hills-plains people in the region. Moreover, this was substantiated by the introduction of the Backward Tract under Government of India Act, 1919, and Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas under Government of India Act, 1935 in the region which were exclusively aimed at protecting the commercial interest of the Colonial Rulers in the guise of protecting the tribes in the hilly areas which have direct repercussion in the existing relationship between the hills and the plains.

¹⁰The word ‘other’ is referred to the ‘outgroup’ has to be understood contextually as it varies from case to case.

¹¹The British came to the region on the invitation of the Ahom King Gaurinath Singh in 1793 to help the latter tackle the Maomorais rebellion.

¹² The response of the Central government towards immigration issues in Assam and Tripura, and also the response of both the then Central and Assam governments during the *Mautam* famine in Mizoram are pertinent here.

¹³DNLA was formed in 2019 to establish a sovereign nation of the Karbi tribe in Assam and Nagaland but surrendered en masse on 16 February, 2022. <https://nagalandpage.com/52-dnla-militants-lay-down-arms-in-assam/?fbclid=IwAR3hUjLHV5OPvthcvisoFQmZqCJetuUrqd3XXGR30TBAtXxMgfGIc5Nko5I> Accessed on 19 February, 2022.

¹⁴ As officially, India appears to have associated the term *armed conflict* with regimes of external intervention in which the foreign powers, international humanitarian and human rights organisations meddled internal affairs of states (Baruah S. , 2020)pp.9-10).

¹⁵The UNLFW a conglomerate of ULFA(I), NSCN-K, NDFB (Sonbijit) and KLO was formed on 17 April, 2015 the latest of the collaborative groups which claimed responsibility of the ambush on Indian Army in Chandel district of Manipur and Assam Rifles in Mon district of Nagaland in the following months of the same year. Simultaneously, different Meitei groups including Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP), Kanglei Yahol Kanna Lup (KYKL), People’s Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK-P) (Progressive), Revolutionary People’s Front (RPF) and United National Liberation Front (UNLF) came under an umbrella organisation called Corcom (Coordination Committee) in the same year.

¹⁶This kind of strategic and tactical arrangements and forums enabled the smaller groups to get access to the resources which are otherwise beyond their reach. Most of these formal forums have become inactive but certain operational, training and tactical are still prevalent.

¹⁷There are a couple of theories with regard to the etymology of term. Some believed that it originated from the Assamese word ‘Noga’ meaning naked, others are of the view it as derived from Burmese word ‘Naka’ which is referred people with large ear lobes piercing. Some even tried to link it with Sanskrit words *Nanga or Naaga* (naked) and *Nag* (snake). For details see Inaka Yekhetto Sikhu (2007) ‘A Rediscovery and Rebuilding of the Naga Cultural Values: An Analytical Approach with Special reference to Maori as a Minority Group of People in New Zealand’, Daya Books, New Delhi.

¹⁸The claims and contestations about the origin and affiliation of tribes in Manipur such as the so called ‘old Kuki tribes’ who are now identified themselves as Nagas namely, Anal, Chiru, Terao, Monsang and Lamkang. In contrary, the Kukis still considered them as part of the larger Chin-Kuki-Zomi group. Similarly, in Nagaland there is a contestation over who constitutes the Tenymei Group. Part of the Sumi, Lotha and Chang tribes claimed that they are also part of the group but the Angamis in particular refuted the claims of the former or at least officially not recognised. Many such instances can be drawn from region, the most recent one being the granting of permanent resident status to six minority communities—Ahoms, Sonowal Kachari, Moran, Adivasi, Doeri and Mising in Arunachal Pradesh.

¹⁹According to legend of William Tell, representatives of [Uri](#), [Schwyz](#), and [Unterwalden](#) met in 1307 to swear the **Rütli Oath**, on which Swiss freedom was founded. Rütli (rüt’lē) or Grütli (grüt’lē), meadows, Uri canton, central Switzerland, is located on the shore of the [Lake of Lucerne](#).

²⁰Ethnic or identity group consolidation amongst the Angami Nagas intensified when they fought the British in 1879 at Khonoma village where the latter suffered maximum casualty where a British Political Agent GH Damant along with 35 soldiers were killed. In the subsequent encounter the Khonoma village was crushed and villagers flight into the jungle. Eventually, a peace treaty was signed between the village and the British but the Angami villages came together to fend themselves from the threat posed by such an overwhelming power. The tribe went on to play a critical role in consolidating the Naga identity.

²¹Here *protractedness* is defined or qualified by the extent time of conflict for over a generation.

²²The term *pervasiveness* implies the coverage of influence and implications of the conflict.

²³It is informed that educated Meitei middle class initially supported the Merger Agreement, 1949 as they wanted to end the monarchy in the state.

²⁴For example, the ethnic conflict between the Kukis and Paites in the mid till late 1990s, also between the Angamis and Sumis in Nagaland, between the Southern Angamis in Nagaland and Maos, Poumais and Marams from Manipur.

²⁵As mentioned in Census Report of Assam, 1931 written by C S Mullan, ICS, Superintendent of Assam

²⁶Following are a few newspaper reports on the border disputes in North East India

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/violence-reported-on-disputed-assam-mizoram-border/articleshow/80794886.cms#:~:text=Incidents%20of%20violence%20on%20the,Assam%20and%20Mizoram's%20Kolasib%20district.>

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/tension-returns-to-assam-mizoram-border/article34744430.ece>

<https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/assam-mizoram-and-the-other-boundary-issues-in-northeast-6793275/>

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/why-is-border-dispute-so-frequent-in-the-northeast/assam-meghalaya-border-row/slideshow/78803174.cms>

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/assam-meghalaya-border-dispute>

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/tension-on-assam-arunachal-border-eases/article33151702.ece>

²⁷ Including the Declaration on the Principles and Comprehensive Cooperation in China-India Relations, 2003, Joint Statement for Establishment of the Strategic and Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Prosperity, 2005, Agreement on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question, 2005, Joint Declaration to formulate the ten-pronged strategy and cooperative partnership, 2006.

²⁸The event of airstrikes to its own citizens in the Mizo District on 5-6 March, 1966 by a democratic nation has been one of the most brutal and unique (re-)action from the Indian State.

²⁹Wasbir Hussain is apprehensive of the absence of a clause to abstain from raising the demand for statehood again as happened in the prior two Accords. Sanjib Baruah observed that the process of delimitation of villages will be very critical as the Bodos constitute only about 30 per cent of the population in the BTR also many villages are not contiguous.