

Ethnic Nationalism and Insurgency in Northeast India: Historical Origins, Political Dynamics, and Contemporary Challenges

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Abstract: Northeast India represents one of the most ethnically diverse and politically sensitive regions of South Asia. Since India's independence, the region has experienced multiple insurgent movements rooted in ethnic nationalism, political alienation, historical grievances, and socio-economic marginalization. The emergence of armed resistance movements among various ethnic communities reflects a broader struggle for identity, autonomy, territorial rights, and political recognition. This paper critically examines the historical evolution of ethnic nationalism and insurgency in Northeast India by exploring colonial legacies, postcolonial state formation, identity politics, and uneven development. The study further analyses the changing nature of insurgent movements, the role of the Indian state, and the impact of militarization and peace negotiations. While several insurgent groups have entered into ceasefire agreements and peace accords, the persistence of ethnic tensions, governance deficits, and developmental inequalities continues to challenge sustainable peace in the region. The paper argues that a long-term resolution requires democratic accommodation, inclusive governance, socio-economic transformation, and culturally sensitive peacebuilding approaches.

Keywords: Ethnic Nationalism, Northeast India, Insurgency, Identity Politics, Armed Conflict, Peace Process, Political Marginalization, Security, Ethnic Conflict, Governance.

1. Introduction

Northeast India is a region marked by extraordinary ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity. Connected to mainland India through the narrow Siliguri Corridor, the region consists of eight states: Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim. Despite its strategic importance and rich natural resources, the region has remained politically fragile and economically underdeveloped for decades. Since independence, Northeast India has witnessed prolonged insurgencies and ethnic conflicts that have significantly influenced the political landscape of the region.

The rise of ethnic nationalism in Northeast India is closely associated with questions of identity, self-determination, autonomy, and historical origin. Various ethnic groups perceived the integration of the region into the Indian Union as politically imposed and culturally insensitive. Consequently, several insurgent organizations emerged with demands ranging

from greater autonomy to complete sovereignty. These movements include the Naga insurgency, the Mizo uprising, Assamese nationalism, and Meitei insurgent movements in Manipur.

The persistence of insurgency in Northeast India cannot be understood merely as a law-and-order problem. Rather, it is deeply linked to colonial administrative practices, economic exclusion, political negligence, and contested notions of nationhood. The region's geographical isolation and cross-border ethnic affiliations further complicated the security and governance framework.

This paper seeks to examine the historical roots of ethnic nationalism and insurgency in Northeast India and analyses the socio-political factors responsible for their growth. It also evaluates the contemporary challenges confronting peacebuilding and democratic governance in the region.

A. Objectives

1. To examine the major causes responsible for the emergence and growth of insurgency movements in the region, including political exclusion, economic underdevelopment, cultural marginalization, and territorial disputes.
2. To study the relationship between ethnic nationalism and insurgency among various communities such as the Nagas, Mizos, Kukis, Assamese, Bodos, and others.
3. To investigate the role of the Indian state, security forces, and constitutional arrangements in managing ethnic conflicts and insurgency.
4. To evaluate the socio-economic and political consequences of insurgency on peace, development, governance, migration, and inter-ethnic relations in Northeast India.
5. To analyze contemporary challenges such as globalization, illegal migration, identity politics, resource competition, militarization, and peace negotiations affecting the region.
6. To suggest possible policy measures and conflict-resolution strategies for sustainable peace, ethnic

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accommodation, and regional integration in Northeast India.

2. Methodology

The study is qualitative and analytical in nature. It focuses on understanding the historical evolution, political processes, ethnic identities, and insurgency dynamics in Northeast India through interpretative and descriptive analysis. The study is primarily based on secondary sources of data, including books, journal and research articles, government records and official documents, newspapers and mass media.

A. Statement of the Problems

Northeast India has long been one of the most politically sensitive and conflict-prone regions of India. The region is characterized by immense ethnic diversity, cultural plurality, linguistic variations, and distinct historical experiences. Despite its rich cultural heritage and strategic importance, the region has witnessed persistent ethnic tensions, separatist movements, armed insurgencies, and political instability since the colonial period and particularly after Indian independence. The roots of ethnic nationalism in Northeast India are deeply connected with colonial administrative policies, territorial segregation, identity construction, and uneven political integration. The British policy of isolating hill tribes from the plains, coupled with post-independence centralization and perceived political neglect, contributed to the emergence of ethnic consciousness and demands for autonomy and self-determination. Over time, these demands transformed into organized insurgency movements among several ethnic groups such as the Nagas, Mizos, Bodos, Kukis, and Assamese nationalists.

The persistence of insurgency has created serious challenges including violence, militarization, human rights concerns, economic underdevelopment, displacement, distrust between communities, and weakened governance structures. Simultaneously, issues such as illegal migration, inter-ethnic competition, border disputes, resource conflicts, and identity politics continue to intensify ethnic nationalism in the region.

Although the Government of India has undertaken various constitutional, political, and military measures including peace accords, autonomous councils, and development programs, many conflicts remain unresolved or continue in new forms. Therefore, there is a need to critically examine the historical origins, political dynamics, and contemporary challenges of ethnic nationalism and insurgency in Northeast India in order to understand the causes of conflict and explore pathways toward sustainable peace and regional stability.

3. Literature Review

Scholars have extensively studied the complexities of ethnic nationalism and insurgency in Northeast India. Sanjib Baruah emphasizes that the region's political unrest emerged from the failure of the Indian nation-state to accommodate diverse ethnic aspirations. According to Baruah, the postcolonial state reproduced colonial patterns of exclusion and administrative control, thereby intensifying alienation among indigenous communities.

Udayon Misra highlights the role of migration and demographic transformation in shaping Assamese nationalism. He argues that fears of cultural displacement and economic competition generated strong anti-outsider sentiments, ultimately contributing to insurgent mobilization.

B. G. Verghese examines the developmental challenges of the region and argues that inadequate infrastructure, poor governance, and geographical isolation strengthened perceptions of neglect. Similarly, Sajal Nag points out that colonial ethnographic classifications institutionalized ethnic divisions and contributed to the politicization of identity.

Several scholars have also examined the security dimension of insurgency. K. S. Subramanian critiques the militarized response of the Indian state and argues that excessive dependence on armed forces undermined democratic legitimacy and aggravated human rights concerns. Studies by Paula Banerjee and Samir Kumar Das emphasize the importance of civil society, dialogue, and participatory peace processes in conflict transformation.

Recent literature increasingly focuses on peacebuilding, governance reforms, and regional integration. However, scholars continue to debate whether existing peace accords adequately address the structural causes of conflict, including political exclusion, economic inequality, and ethnic insecurity.

4. Historical Origins of Ethnic Nationalism: Colonial Administrative Policies

The emergence of ethnic nationalism in Northeast India cannot be understood without examining the colonial administrative policies introduced during British rule. The British colonial state fundamentally transformed the political, social, economic, and cultural structure of the region. Through policies of territorial segregation, indirect administration, missionary intervention, economic extraction, and identity classification, the colonial administration laid the foundation for ethnic consciousness and later nationalist movements among various tribal and ethnic communities. The British entered Northeast India gradually after the signing of the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826 following the First Anglo-Burmese War. This treaty brought Assam under British control and opened the gateway for colonial penetration into the hill regions inhabited by numerous tribal groups such as the Nagas, Kukis, Mizos, Garos, Khasis, and others.

Initially, the British objective was strategic and economic:

- To protect the eastern frontier of British India from Burma and China,
- To exploit natural resources such as tea, oil, coal, and timber,
- To establish political control over trade routes and frontier areas.

However, the colonial administration soon realized that the hill communities possessed distinct political systems, customs, languages, and social organizations which differed greatly from the plains population. As a result, they adopted separate administrative arrangements for hill and plains areas. One of the most significant colonial policies was the deliberate separation

of hill tribes from the plains population. The British considered the hill tribes “primitive,” “warlike,” and culturally different from caste-based Hindu society in the plains. Under the Government of India Act of 1935, many tribal areas in Northeast India were declared:

- Excluded Areas
- Partially Excluded Areas

These regions were administered directly by the Governor rather than elected provincial governments. This policy had several consequences, as the hill tribes remained politically isolated from mainstream Indian political developments. They had limited participation in democratic institutions and nationalist politics emerging in the rest of India. Separate laws and regulations created a sense that hill communities were politically distinct peoples rather than part of a larger Indian identity. Over time, communities began to perceive themselves as separate nations with unique historical and territorial rights.

For instance:

- The Nagas increasingly developed the idea of a distinct Naga homeland.
- The Mizos began to articulate a common Mizo identity transcending clan division.

Thus, colonial isolation strengthened ethnic boundaries rather than integrating communities.

5. Inner Line Regulation and Restricted Contact

The British introduced the Inner Line Regulation of 1873 in Assam to restrict the movement of outsiders into tribal areas. Its objectives were:

- To protect tribal communities from exploitation,
- To safeguard British commercial interests,
- To prevent conflicts between hill tribes and plains settlers.

Although the regulation aimed at administrative convenience, it unintentionally reinforced ethnic exclusiveness. Tribal communities began identifying specific territories as ancestral homelands deserving protection from outsiders. The restriction created a long-term perception that outsiders threatened indigenous culture, land, and identity.

Modern movements demanding autonomy, self-determination, and protection of indigenous rights often trace their roots to these colonial territorial arrangements. The Inner Line system still exists in several northeastern states today, showing the long-lasting legacy of colonial administrative policies.

6. Policy of Indirect Rule

The British often governed tribal areas through traditional chiefs, village headmen, and customary institutions rather than direct administration.

A. Characteristics of Indirect Rule

- Recognition of tribal chiefs,
- Preservation of customary laws,
- Minimal interference in local social practices,
- Use of local leaders for tax collection and

administration.

B. Post-Independence Integration

After India achieved independence in 1947, many communities in Northeast India expressed apprehension regarding integration into the Indian Union. The Naga National Council, led by A. Z. Phizo, rejected Indian sovereignty and initiated one of the earliest insurgencies in independent India. Similar movements emerged in Mizoram, Manipur, and Assam in subsequent decades. The creation of new states and autonomous councils partially addressed ethnic aspirations but also intensified competition over territory and political representation.

C. Identity and Nationalism

Ethnic nationalism in Northeast India developed around issues of language, culture, land, and historical identity. Many communities feared assimilation into dominant political structures and viewed insurgency as a means of preserving their distinct identities. Migration from neighboring countries further intensified anxieties regarding demographic imbalance and cultural survival, particularly in Assam and Tripura.

7. Political Dynamics of Insurgency in Northeast India

The political dynamics of insurgency in Northeast India are deeply intertwined with questions of identity, autonomy, state formation, ethnic competition, and political representation. Insurgency in the region cannot be understood merely as an armed rebellion against the Indian state; rather, it is a complex political phenomenon shaped by historical grievances, competing nationalist aspirations, socio-economic inequalities, and the changing relationship between the state and ethnic communities. The insurgent movements in Northeast India emerged not only from demands for sovereignty but also from perceptions of exclusion, marginalization, and cultural insecurity. The rise of insurgency in Northeast India was preceded by the growth of ethnic political consciousness during the colonial and postcolonial periods. Colonial administrative policies separated hill communities from the plains population through the “Excluded Areas” and “Partially Excluded Areas” system. This isolation prevented political integration while strengthening ethnic distinctiveness among tribal communities.

After Indian independence in 1947, many ethnic groups feared the loss of their traditional autonomy and cultural identity within the newly formed Indian nation-state. The political integration of princely states and tribal regions into India generated anxieties regarding domination by larger ethnic groups and centralized governance. As a result, several communities began mobilizing around the idea of ethnic nationalism and self-determination. The Naga movement became the earliest and most influential insurgent movement in Northeast India. Under the leadership of A. Z. Phizo and the Naga National Council (NNC), the Nagas rejected accession to India and demanded complete sovereignty. This movement later inspired similar assertions among other ethnic communities across the region.

Thus, ethnic nationalism became the ideological

foundation of most insurgent movements in Northeast India. Communities defined themselves through shared language, culture, history, territory, and customary traditions. Political mobilization occurred around the belief that ethnic identities were threatened by external political domination and demographic changes. For many insurgent organizations, the Indian state was perceived as an instrument of cultural assimilation and political control. Consequently, insurgency was framed as a struggle for the protection of indigenous identity and historical rights. Groups such as the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN), United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), People's Liberation Army (PLA) of Manipur, and National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) articulated their movements through nationalist narratives. Identity politics also intensified due to migration from neighboring countries, particularly Bangladesh. Indigenous communities in Assam and Tripura feared demographic marginalization and loss of land, employment, and political representation. These fears strengthened ethnic mobilization and anti-outsider movements.

8. Role of the Indian State

The Indian state played a significant role in shaping the political dynamics of insurgency. In the early years after independence, the government largely approached insurgent movements as security threats rather than political grievances. This resulted in the deployment of military forces and the introduction of extraordinary laws such as the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) in 1958. The militarized approach aimed to suppress insurgent activities through counterinsurgency operations. While these measures weakened several armed groups, they also generated allegations of human rights violations, arbitrary arrests, disappearances, and extrajudicial killings. Such experiences deepened mistrust between local populations and the Indian state. At the same time, the government adopted strategies of political accommodation by creating new states and autonomous councils. Nagaland attained statehood in 1963, Meghalaya in 1972, and Mizoram in 1987. Autonomous councils under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution were also established to provide limited self-governance to tribal communities. Although these measures partially addressed demands for autonomy, they also produced new political contestations. The creation of states based on ethnic identity encouraged other groups to demand separate homelands, thereby contributing to further fragmentation.

One of the defining features of insurgency in Northeast India is the fragmentation of insurgent organizations. Many movements split into rival factions due to ideological differences, leadership conflicts, tribal loyalties, and competition over resources. For example, the NSCN divided into NSCN (Isak-Muivah) and NSCN (Khaplang), while ULFA also experienced internal divisions. Fragmentation weakened unified political objectives and transformed some insurgent groups into localized armed networks involved in extortion, kidnapping, and illegal trade. Factionalism complicated peace negotiations because governments had to engage with multiple

groups claiming representation of the same ethnic community. In several cases, ceasefire agreements with one faction led to the emergence of splinter groups opposing negotiations.

9. Inter-Ethnic Competition and Territorial Politics

The political dynamics of insurgency are also shaped by inter-ethnic competition over territory, resources, and political power. Northeast India is inhabited by numerous tribes and communities with overlapping territorial claims. Demands for separate states, autonomous districts, and homeland territories often generated conflicts between neighboring ethnic groups. For instance, the demand for "Greater Nagalim" by Naga nationalist groups created tensions with Manipur, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh because the proposed territory includes areas inhabited by other ethnic communities. Similarly, Bodo demands for autonomy in Assam generated conflicts with non-Bodo populations. Territorial politics became central to insurgent mobilization because land is closely linked to identity, history, and economic survival in tribal societies. Consequently, political negotiations over autonomy often intensified ethnic polarization.

10. Economic and Developmental Dimensions

Economic underdevelopment significantly influenced the political dynamics of insurgency. Despite possessing rich natural resources, Northeast India remained economically marginalized due to inadequate infrastructure, limited industrialization, unemployment, and weak connectivity. Many insurgent groups capitalized on public dissatisfaction regarding corruption, poor governance, and uneven development. Youth unemployment became a major factor driving recruitment into insurgent organizations. In several areas, insurgent groups emerged as alternative power structures providing employment, protection, and social influence. At the same time, economic projects such as dams, mining, and infrastructure development generated new tensions because local communities feared displacement and exploitation of resources without adequate compensation.

11. External Influences and Cross-Border Politics

The geographical location of Northeast India made insurgency vulnerable to external influences. Porous international borders with Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and China enabled insurgent groups to establish training camps, acquire arms, and seek shelter across borders. During the Cold War period, several insurgent groups reportedly received support from foreign actors. Cross-border ethnic affiliations also strengthened insurgent networks, particularly among the Nagas and Mizos whose communities extend beyond Indian boundaries. Regional instability in neighboring countries further affected insurgency dynamics. Weak border management and transnational criminal networks facilitated arms trafficking, narcotics trade, and illegal migration.

12. Peace Processes and Political Negotiations

Over time, the Indian state gradually shifted from purely

military responses toward negotiation and peacebuilding. Peace accords and ceasefire agreements became important mechanisms for conflict management. The Mizo Peace Accord of 1986 is widely regarded as one of the most successful peace agreements in India. It transformed the Mizo National Front from an insurgent organization into a democratic political party and brought long-term stability to Mizoram. Similarly, ongoing negotiations with Naga groups seek to address issues of autonomy, cultural recognition, and political integration. However, peace processes remain complicated due to factionalism, territorial disputes, and differing interpretations of sovereignty. In many cases, peace accords failed to fully address structural grievances such as unemployment, corruption, and ethnic insecurity. As a result, low-intensity conflicts and new insurgent formations continue to emerge.

13. Contemporary Political Dynamics

In recent years, insurgency in Northeast India has undergone significant transformation. Several insurgent groups have weakened due to military pressure, internal divisions, and declining public support. Democratic participation has increased, and many former insurgent leaders have entered mainstream politics. However, new challenges have emerged in the form of ethnic polarization, citizenship debates, migration anxieties, and competition over resources. Social media and digital communication have also reshaped political mobilization and identity assertion among youth. The contemporary political landscape of Northeast India reflects a transition from large-scale separatist insurgency toward identity-based political contestation within democratic frameworks. Nevertheless, unresolved historical grievances and developmental inequalities continue to threaten long-term peace and stability.

14. Contemporary Challenges

Ethnic Fragmentation: The increasing fragmentation of ethnic identities has generated new demands for autonomy and territorial recognition. Inter-ethnic conflicts often emerge over land ownership, political representation, and resource distribution.

Governance Deficit: Corruption, weak institutions, and limited administrative capacity hinder effective governance in the region. Many communities continue to perceive state institutions as distant and unresponsive.

Developmental Imbalances: Despite economic initiatives, Northeast India continues to face infrastructural deficits, unemployment, and limited industrialization. Economic inequality contributes to frustration among youth and reinforces political instability.

Cross-Border Dimensions: Porous international borders facilitate illegal migration, arms trafficking, and insurgent mobility. Cross-border ethnic affiliations further complicate regional security dynamics.

Human Rights and Militarization: The prolonged deployment of security forces and the continuation of AFSPA have generated debates regarding civil liberties and democratic

accountability. Human rights concerns remain central to public discourse in the region.

15. Findings and Discussion

The study reveals that insurgency in Northeast India is rooted in a complex interaction between history, identity, politics, and development. Colonial administrative isolation and postcolonial governance failures significantly contributed to the rise of ethnic nationalism.

The persistence of insurgency demonstrates that military solutions alone cannot resolve deeply rooted political conflicts. While security measures may suppress violence temporarily, sustainable peace requires addressing structural grievances related to identity, representation, and development. The research further indicates that successful peacebuilding depends on inclusive dialogue, decentralization, and participatory governance. The Mizo experience demonstrates that political accommodation and democratic integration can effectively transform insurgent movements.

However, unresolved issues such as territorial disputes, ethnic polarization, and socio-economic inequality continue to threaten long-term stability. Therefore, conflict resolution strategies must balance security concerns with democratic rights and cultural recognition.

A. Suggestions

1. The government should promote inclusive political dialogue involving ethnic organizations, civil society groups, women, and youth representatives.
2. Greater autonomy and decentralization should be provided to local governance institutions to ensure effective representation of diverse communities.
3. Economic development programs must prioritize employment generation, infrastructure, healthcare, and education in rural and border areas.
4. Human rights accountability mechanisms should be strengthened to improve trust between civilians and security institutions.
5. Inter-ethnic reconciliation initiatives should be encouraged through educational, cultural, and community-based programs.
6. Regional cooperation with neighboring countries should be enhanced to address cross-border insurgency and illegal trafficking.

16. Conclusion

Ethnic nationalism and insurgency in Northeast India represent some of the most enduring challenges to India's democratic and federal structure. The conflicts in the region are deeply rooted in historical experiences of exclusion, identity assertion, and uneven development. Although the intensity of insurgency has declined in recent years, many structural causes of conflict remain unresolved. Lasting peace in Northeast India requires a multidimensional approach that combines political accommodation, economic justice, cultural recognition, and democratic participation. The future stability of the region depends not merely on military control but on the ability of the

state to build trust, strengthen institutions, and recognize the diverse aspirations of its peoples. Sustainable peace can only emerge through inclusive governance and meaningful engagement with the historical and political realities of Northeast India.

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