



## Relocating Colonialism and postcolonial Challenges in North East India

Dr. Maibam Nilakanta Singh <sup>1\*</sup>, Karam Bidyanath Khuman <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> PhD, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India

<sup>2</sup> Chanambam Ibomcha College, Bishnupur, Manipur, India

\* Corresponding Author: Dr. Maibam Nilakanta Singh

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### Abstract

The paper will examine the role of colonialism and its consequences in North East India. The intricate geography, diverse ethnicities, and vibrant culture presented a considerable challenge for the British in establishing firm boundaries for their regime. Consequently, they created and redefined these borders multiple times. This indicates that to effectively govern the region, a deeper comprehension of its dynamics is essential. This paper will revisit colonial methods, strategies, and designs used to administer the area. Additionally, it will explore how the tribes in the Hills of Northeast India began advocating for regional autonomy and engaged in insurgency movements immediately after gaining independence.

**Keywords:** Colonialism, North East India, British Annexation, Inner Line Regulation, Insurgency Movements

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### Introduction

North-East India is the farthest eastern region of the Indian Subcontinent. It serves as a meeting point for numerous communities, faiths, beliefs, religions, and cultures. North-East India consists of eight states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura—collectively known as “The Seven Sisters”—and Sikkim, often referred to as the “Brother” of these seven states. This region is officially part of the North Eastern Council (NEC), established in 1971 to act as the central agency for the development of the northeastern states. The entire area is connected to the mainland by a narrow land corridor known as the “Chicken Neck,” which was formed in 1947.

The colonial administration referred to this area as “North-East India, the frontier region, or borderland.” Prior to British rule, the territories of the northeast were comprised of various kingdoms, each governed by different rulers and chiefs. Unfortunately, the existence of written documentation in this region before British control is extremely limited. This scarcity is primarily due to the absence of a written script among most tribes, with a few exceptions, such as the Ahoms of Assam and the Meiteis of Manipur. The Buranjis of Assam—historical records and manuscripts associated with the Ahom Dynasty—chronicle 600 years of their continuous reign in Upper Assam and the rule of the Koch Dynasty in the western and southern areas of Assam. In Manipur, the history of the Meiteis is captured in various texts, including the *Ningthorol Lambuba* and the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*. The Manikya Dynasty governed the Twipra Kingdom (now known as Tripura) from the 15th to the 20th century CE. In Mizoram, the Chiefs of various clans oversaw administration and political matters, regarded as the absolute owners of all land within their jurisdiction. Meghalaya was under the rule of both kings and local chieftains. In Khasi and Jaintia societies, governance was led by the king or Syiem and his ministers, while Garo societies were managed by local leaders known as Nokmas. Similarly, the villages in Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh were administered by their respective chiefs, while Sikkim was ruled by the Namgyal-Chogyal dynasty from 1642 to 1975.

The extended dynastic governance in the northeastern regions of India played a significant role in repelling invaders for an extended period, including the Delhi Sultanate, the Mughals, and the British, until Burma launched an invasion and asserted its dominance over Assam and Manipur. This incited a power struggle between the Burmese and the British. Ultimately, the British succeeded in annexing Burma after a series of conflicts known as the Anglo-Burmese Wars.

By the conclusion of the first war (1824-1826), the British had seized control of Assam and Manipur. This led to the establishment of a peace agreement between the British and the Burmese, referred to as the 'Treaty of Yandabo' on 24 February 1826. Subsequently, the British began to annex various territories in the area to broaden their influence. This included the kingdom of Cachar, home to the Kachari tribe, followed by the annexation of the Jaintia and Khasi hills, the takeover of Assam, which ended the Ahom rule, and ultimately the annexation of the Naga Hills and the Lushai Hills. During this time, North-East India became incorporated into the Bengal province.

### Research Questions

1. What does colonialism mean in relation to North East India?
2. What were the difficulties or challenges faced in North East India immediately after Independence?
3. How do demands for regional autonomy and insurgency movements emerge?
4. How can we gain a deeper understanding of North East India?

### Research Objectives

1. To examine the concept of colonialism concerning to North East India.
2. To investigate the challenges encountered in North East India immediately following independence.
3. To explore the emergence of regional autonomy demands and insurgency movements.
4. To enhance understanding of North East India.

### Methodology

This study primarily utilizes qualitative methods. It heavily relies on secondary sources, with some primary sources used to substantiate the arguments. The research also aims to analyze the nature of colonialism and the issues faced in North East India from a historical viewpoint.

### Colonialism in North East India

"Colonialism is a relationship between an indigenous (or forcibly imported) majority and a minority of foreign invaders. The fundamental decisions affecting the lives of the colonised people are made and implemented by the colonial rulers in pursuit of interests that are often defined in a distant metropolis. Rejecting cultural compromises with the colonised population, the colonisers are convinced of their own superiority and their ordained mandate to rule". (Osterhammel, Jürgen (2005). *Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*. trans. Shelley Frisch. Markus Weiner Publishers. p. 16)

The emergence of British dominance in India coincided with the rise of capitalism, initially driven by mercantile ambitions for trading rights. The Industrial Revolution escalated British industries' need for raw materials and new markets, leading to territorial acquisitions in Northeast India. Assam,

especially the Brahmaputra valley, became a focal point due to its fertile land and resources, prompting the colonial government to establish commercial operations there. The control expanded through the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, resulting in British seizure of Assam's plains and the protection of Manipur and Tripura, which facilitated the East India Company's tea plantation activities beginning in the 1830s<sup>[1]</sup>.

Changes in land management during the colonial era in Northeast India must be understood in the context of colonial state-building. The region is characterized by diverse ecosystems and includes the kingdoms of Assam, Manipur, and Tripura, as well as tribal hill areas. Before the mid-nineteenth century, British provinces were limited to hilly regions occupied by tribes. The East India Company acquired Chittagong in 1760 and expanded its control over Cachar by 1830, subsequently annexing additional territories including Lakhimpur and Sylhet. Manipur and the Khasi Hills remained independent, while the Jaintia Hills became part of British rule in 1835<sup>[2]</sup>.

The primary challenge to British Crown authority in Northeast India came from the Nagas<sup>[3]</sup>, Garos, and Lushais, who engaged in persistent raids and conflicts. The Naga Hills were annexed in 1866 and Garo Hills in 1869, while the Lushai Hills were among the last regions to succumb to colonial control (Chin-Lushai Expedition of 1889-1890).

### Annexation and Alienation Policy

Despite strong opposition from the local populations, the British soon began annexing hill kingdoms such as the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Garo Hills (Meghalaya), Lushai (Mizo) Hills, and Naga Hills, merging them into Assam Province. Between 1829 and 1833, the Khasis under U Tirat Sing engaged in intense combat with the British<sup>[4]</sup>. Following the Anglo-Khasi conflict of 1823–1833, the Khasis, who live in the Khasi Hills of modern-day Meghalaya, were sent to Assam. When Meghalaya's Jaintia Hills were combined with Assam in 1835, the Jaintias came under British rule (Robert Reid, 1994). The hill tribes, including the Singphos, Khamtis, Nagas, Garos, and others, fiercely opposed British control and assimilation into the Assam Province between the 1830s and the 1860s<sup>[5]</sup>.

The Garo Hills in 1866, the Naga Hills in 1878, and the Lushai Hills in 1895 were the locations of administrative headquarters. For the unique hill communities residing in separate village arrangements, this resulted in a profound sense of loss. The British did not envision a modern state with political structures like the informal confederacies of villages.

In the book, *In The Name Of Nation*, author and scholar Sanjib Baruah states, "Certain regions of the world may have roots in deeply historical context of ethno-nationalism than others." writes geographer Anssi Passi, are 'ad-hoc spatial units', put together for mundane administrative reasons or for purposes of economic planning. Northeast India belongs firmly to the latter category: regions that emerge "rapidly

<sup>1</sup> Alexander Mackenzie, *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North-east Frontier of Bengal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) pp. 4- 6

<sup>2</sup> B. B. Dutta and P. S. Datta, *Land Holding Pattern Among the Khasi-Jayantias: The Tradition and Deviation* (Guwahati, India: Alienation of Tribal Land and Indebtedness, 1986) Op cit.

<sup>3</sup> Captain, Sir John F Michel, *The North East Frontier of India- 1883* (Topography, Political and Military Report) (Calcutta: The Superintendent of Government Printing Calcutta, 1883, reprint 1973) pp. 209-212

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Mackenzie, *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North-east Frontier of Bengal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) Op cit.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Reid, *The Excluded Areas of Assam* *The Geographical Journal* 103, no. 1/2 (1994) pp.20-21

from the desks of planners, politicians and business coalitions, not from long historical regionalisation processes and the daily struggles of citizens" [6].

### Formation and Reformation of Boundaries in the North East

During the early 13th century, the Shans originating from Upper Burma founded the Ahom kingdom in the Brahmaputra valley. By the 17th century, though, continuous invasions by the Burmese military from what is now Myanmar weakened the kingdom that had remained resilient against the Mughals for six centuries. The initial expedition of the Ahom Kingdom occurred when King Gaurinath Singha requested help from the British to protect the kingdom from ongoing Burmese assaults. He had no idea that this action would ultimately determine the future of the state in the North Eastern Region [7].

In response to the king, Governor-General Lord Cornwallis dispatched a group of British officials led by Captain Welsh during the initial expedition in 1792. The British triumphed in the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26). In 1826, via the Treaty of Yandabo, Welsh gained full authority over Assam, Manipur, Cachar, and Jaintia, in addition to Arakan province and Tenasserim in present-day Myanmar [8]. "Even though the name of Captain Welsh is scarcely known among Englishmen, he is still remembered with respect by some Assamese who have kept the story of his journey alive. It is likely that their recollection of his gentle and fair leadership (since he essentially ruled the area for 18 months) led the Assamese to embrace us as genuine allies when we integrated the province 31 years following his departure," [9] noted Lieutenant Colonel J. Johnstone, Political Agent, Manipur, in his book *Captain Welsh's expedition to Assam in 1792, 1793, and 1794*. Nonetheless, the intricate geography, diverse ethnic groups, and vibrant culture presented a considerable obstacle for the British in establishing a clear boundary for the territory they aimed to acquire from the Ahom Kingdom. Significantly, the Treaty of Yandabo referenced only four kingdoms—Assam, Manipur, Cachar, and Jaintia. It excluded the tribal communities impacted by the Burmese occupation. To preserve harmony between the hills and the plains, and prevent attacks from hill tribes on plain settlements, Ahom rulers adopted a policy of appeasement. The Nagas, who frequently descended from the Naga Hills, were allotted revenue-exempt land known as 'khat' and fishing areas referred to as 'bheel' in the lowlands. The Adis of Arunachal Hills were awarded rights to the fish and gold found in the Dihong river, an upper tributary of the Brahmaputra. Similarly, the Bhutias, Akas, Nyishis, and Miris tribes received 'Posa' [10], a type of yearly revenue payment from villages situated in the plains.

The British Raj, nevertheless, lacked understanding of the area's political fabric and weakened these systems post-1826.

Stripped of their resources, the hill people conducted regular raids. The British authorities stationed in the area reacted to these attacks with counteractions. They set up outposts, dispatched expeditions, and even intervened in the internal conflicts of the tribal communities. The hill tribes, unaware of the newly established borders and the constraints they imposed, sought to defend their lands, territories, and resources by attacking the plains. The tribes' existence, rooted in their land and territory and the intricate fabric of their language and culture, was overlooked by the British as they defined their territory and established the physical boundaries of their governance.

### The Policies and Practices of Tea, Inner Line and the process of Alienation

In 1837, the colonial officer established the initial tea plantation in Chabua, located in the Dibrugarh district of eastern Assam. In 1840, the Assam Tea Company started the commercial cultivation of tea on extensive areas of land in this region adjacent to the Naga hill [11]. The jungles were cleared by the tea planters so that tea could be grown. The majority of Assam's forest cover was destroyed in the process. The widespread destruction was mostly caused by the tea and timber industries, which permanently changed the terrain of Assam [12].

Historian Amalendu Guha observes that by 1901, tea estates covered 'a quarter of the total settled expanse (equating to five percent of the overall area) of Assam Proper (a region in Assam formed by the five colonial districts that were initially part of the Ahom kingdom) under their sole ownership rights [13]. Sanjib Baruah contends that the land takeover by British tea planters interrupted the Nagas' hunting and gathering economies.

To stop hill tribes from invading the newly established tea gardens, the British implemented an exclusion policy that caused greater separation between the hills and the plains. In 1873, colonial authorities established an Inner Line permit to control the access of outsiders to various areas within the region, a practice that persists today in the four northeastern states. The Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873 also authorized the British to 'define, and periodically modify by notice (...a boundary referred to as the Inner Line.)'. The Inner Line would supposedly establish a territorial boundary in the region, encroaching upon lands designated for the traditional livelihoods of the tribal communities [14].

In 1834, slavery was outlawed in the British colonies; yet, "indentured labor" was introduced. An economically motivated migration coupled with coercive contractual commitments is commonly referred to as indenture. The immigrant, According to Das Gupta, Adivasi laborers actually became indentured laborers as a result of their compliance with the labor contractors' demands. During this time, South Asian plantations and other colonial businesses

<sup>6</sup> Sanjib Baruah, *In the Name of Nation*, (Stanford University Press, 2020) p. 25, Anssi Passi, *Region and Place: Regional Identity in Question*, *Progress in Human Geography* 27, No 4, 2003, p.447

<sup>7</sup> Captain, Sir John F Michel, *The North East Frontier of India- 1883 (Topography, Political and Military Report)* (Calcutta: The Superintendent of Government Printing Calcutta, 1883, reprint 1973) pp. 31-32

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, pp. 33-35

<sup>9</sup> Lt Col, Johnstone, *Captain Welsh's expedition to Assam in 1792, 1793, and 1794*, Foreign Department Press, Calcutta, 1877, Introduction part.

<sup>10</sup> E A Gait, *History of Assam*, second edition, (Calcutta and Shimla: Thacker, Spink and Co, 1926), pp. 338-346

<sup>11</sup> Francis T R Deas, *The young tea-planter's companion: a practical treatise on the management of a tea-garden in Assam*. (London : Swan Sonnenschein Lowrey. 1886). Introduction.

<sup>12</sup> Saikia, Biswajeet. 2008. 'Development of Tea garden community and Adivasi identity Politics in Assam', *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, Vol. 51, No. 2. pp. 307-322

<sup>13</sup> Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity, Economy* (Calcutta, India: Published for Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, by K. P. Bagchi, 1991). pp. 198-200

<sup>14</sup> David Ludden, *The First Boundary of Bangladesh on Sylhet's Northern Frontiers*, *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh* 48, no. 1 (2003) pp. 1-49



adopted the "coolie" typology that had been developed outside of India <sup>[15]</sup>.

In the piece, *When did Postcolonialism occur? A History of Policing Impossible Lines*, 2009 by Bodhisattva Kar asserts that the Line was 'essentially a malleable, shiftable, and adaptable boundary' and demonstrates how 'well into the second decade of the twentieth century, the Line was consistently redrawn to accommodate the expansive pressures of plantation capital, the acknowledgment of inaccuracies in survey maps, the state's security concerns, and the flexible practices of locally diverse communities. Kar states that 'the British often modified the Inner Line in response to their requirements for expanding tea plantations or finding natural resources such as coal beyond the Line' <sup>[16]</sup>. Under the government of India Act 1935, the British implemented another alienation policy by categorizing the hill regions as *Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas* <sup>[17]</sup>. The Excluded Areas, which encompass the Naga and Lushai Hills districts, were brought under the administrative authority of the governor of Assam. British subjects were prohibited from entering this area due to the implementation of the Inner Line Regulation <sup>[18]</sup>. Consequently, these regions stayed excluded from the development process. Following Independence, these regions sought self-governance. For example, Nagaland has experienced one of the lengthiest insurgencies in India due to the demand for a Greater Nagalim encompassing Naga-populated regions like Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, and portions of Myanmar, lands they assert as their own from the pre-British period.

### The Challenging Seven Sisters

Immediately following Independence, tribal groups in the Hills of Northeast India began to seek regional autonomy, referencing their incorporation into the Undivided Assam via annexation and expansion policies. In response to these demands, the Interim government of India added the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution, which established councils at both regional and district levels to manage the former 'Excluded Areas.' After gaining independence, Nagaland became the first state in Northeast India to attain statehood in 1963, separating from Assam. Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, and Meghalaya did the same. Many political factions began to challenge Assam's borders, referencing pre-British records that assert claims over areas currently within Assam.

The boundary conflict between Assam and Mizoram in 2021 escalated violently when the police from both states participated in a gun battle. The origin of the conflict dates back to the British delineation of the Lushai Hills from the Cachar plains in 1875. Cachar district administration managed the Lushai Hills and nearby areas until the conclusion of colonial rule. Mizoram was designated a Union territory in 1972 and subsequently attained statehood in 1987 <sup>[19]</sup>. The Mizos assert that they adhere to the 1875 boundary established by the British to entirely restrict the movement of the Lushai Tribes.

For Arunachal Pradesh, the previous Northeast Frontier Agency (NEFA) managed by New Delhi, the fundamental

issue of border disputes with Assam is rooted in the 'Inner line'. Following Independence, the Assam government took over administrative control of the region that became a separate state in 1987. Nonetheless, a report from 1951 by the Assam chief minister at the time, Gopinath Bordoloi, became the source of dispute. The report indicated that an area of 3,648 sq km was handed over to Assam from Arunachal Pradesh (formerly NEFA), without any consultation with the state's tribal organization <sup>[20]</sup>. The 884-kilometer border between Meghalaya and Assam is divided in 12 places. Assam and Meghalaya's border negotiations have reached an agreeable resolution on several issues, but the recent conflict in Murkoh village has created uncertainty for future border negotiations.

### Factors Behind the Insurgency Movement in the North East

In the particular context of the Northeast, secessionism developed as an alternative to the pan-Indian nationalist narrative, envisioning its own territory and seeking backing from each ethnic community residing in the conceived territory. The ethnic communities' subjectivity, although shaped by colonial logic, resulted in the rise, expansion, and strengthening of secessionism. The Indian state's most effective method for countering secessionism was to introduce dependent political classes loyal to the centralized government and to enhance their influence through the autonomous district councils and union territories established right after independence. Utilizing their political insight, the political elite in the remote hills consolidated their political power to negotiate more effectively with the Indian state by showcasing their strength and closeness to secessionist armed groups when necessary, while expressing their distinctions. Due to the differences and shared subjectivity of the communities, bolstered by colonial thinking, these elements served as a common source of strength for both the secessionists and the emerging political classes, which were deliberately safeguarded from the influence of statist democratic ideals. This necessitates cultural isolation, stopping any challenge to the colonial rationale of the Inner Line.

Ethno-national groupings are confronting the state all over the world, over issues of political representation and language, right, self-governance, resource control, and internal migration. The first ethnically organized and mobilized movement in Northeast was the Naga movement contesting the status quo. On August 47, 1947, the Nagas, under the leadership of the Naga National Council, declared their desire for independence. In a vote held in 1951, the NNC declared 100% support for independence. The Indian administration wrote off the problem as a simple law and order issue. In order to put an iron grip on rebellion, it passed a number of harsh laws and dispatched military troops to the Naga Hills in 1953. Despite these political gestures, the Indian state's current stance to the insurgency activities in the northeast India's strategy is essentially security-based or

<sup>15</sup> Sharma, Jayeeta. 2006. Growing Tea: Lazy Natives and Colonialism's Coolies, *Agrarian Studies Colloquium*, April 14.

<sup>16</sup> Bodhisattva Kar, *When did Postcolonialism occur? A History of Policing Impossible Lines*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009) p. 52- 53 Also, Mackenzie, 1884: 56

<sup>17</sup> Robert Reid, *The Excluded Areas of Assam* *The Geographical Journal* 103, no. 1/2 (1994), pp- 18 -19

<sup>18</sup> Bodhisattva Kar, *When did Postcolonialism occur? A History of Policing Impossible Lines*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009) p. 52- 53

<sup>19</sup> Sajal Nag *The Uprising: Colonial State, Christian Missionaries, and Anti-slavery Movement in North-east India (1908-1954)*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2016.

<sup>20</sup> J. N. Chowdhury, *Arunachal through the Ages, from Frontier Tracts to Union Territory* (Shillong, India: Jaya Chowdhury, 1982) op cit.

militaristic.<sup>[21]</sup> The claim for Naga sovereignty is based on the argument that they were not conquered or governed by any power, which can be linked to the Naga areas being categorised under excluded thereby not under direct British rule during the colonial period.<sup>[22]</sup>

Political mobilization in the Lushai Hills became violent with the emergence of the Mizo National Front (MNF) in the early 1960s, explicitly demonstrating its secessionist aims. To proclaim Mizoram as an independent state, the MNF initiated a military offensive in February 1966, involving approximately 800–1,300 armed MNF members engaged in coordinated assaults in Aizawl, Lunglei, Vairangte, Chwngte, Chimluang, Kolashib, Champai, Saireng, and Dmagri districts. The MNF plundered the treasury, abducted government officials, murdered security forces, and ignited fires in markets. They obstructed communication channels and closed off roads to hinder the Indian Army's access to the Mizo Hills. Just hours after these violent acts, on March 1, 1966, the MNF proclaimed unilateral independence and established a parallel government in exile with Laldenga as its president.

The elements that contributed to the rise of various insurgent factions in the area are as follows:

a) In their early stages, militants expressed the real concerns of the populace. Certain regional challenges like youth unemployment, illegal migration resulting in job competition, and business acquisition by migrants, along with resource and land competition, underdevelopment, and indifference from the central government, have caused numerous conflicts and calls for secession or autonomy. The feeling of estrangement within the indigenous community is another reason for the push for secession.

Mass migration has instilled a fear among individuals that they will become a minority in their own states or areas. Migrants endanger their customs and heritage while also taking up scarce job opportunities. The movement of Muslims has also given it a communal hue.

b) Insufficient economic prospects and shortcomings in governance contribute to feelings of alienation and exclusion among people, thereby fostering support for insurgency. Geographical division and racial distinctions have consistently led the indigenous population to feel detached from other Indians, resulting in a desire for secession. Over time, and due to the interests of different factions, these have evolved into insurgencies throughout the area. Over 50 insurgent factions/groups are established in the region. Certain groups desired to establish their own distinct identity, while numerous ethnic groups focused on making easy money without any political beliefs.

Recommendations to halt insurgency in the Northeast require several actions to be implemented. Steps must be taken not only to reduce militancy through joint military operations, but also to connect the northeast with the mainland as soon as possible, while addressing the native population's sense of alienation through good governance, development, and job creation.

Several specific actions that must be implemented to restore normalcy in this area are listed below.

1. Enhancement of communication and connectivity,

development of infrastructure for improved integration of the region with the mainland.

2. Improved collaboration between central and state forces to enhance tactical response.
3. A framework will be established for cultural engagement with the mainland and broader, more inclusive holistic development.
4. Decentralization that grants increased administrative authority to the states to address regional needs, enhance administrative effectiveness, and promote good governance, among other things.
5. The judicial system in the states needs to be enhanced for the rapid resolution of cases concerning insurgency and militancy.
6. A vigilant eye on the permeable borders linking the neighboring nations that back insurgency must be maintained.

## Conclusion

The colonial government began ascending the hills, instilling a concept of territoriality that disrupted the ethnic landscape. The hills were structured into administrative districts to be managed by colonial agents, authorized for brutal enforcement using armed police made up of local youths. By defining the administrative boundaries, the districts were split into smaller units like subdivisions, circles, etc., allowing the administrative system to reach further into the control area of the individual chiefs. The institution of chieftainship was preserved for governance; however, the chiefs were held responsible and answerable to the essence of colonial authority, effectively compelling them to advance colonial objectives. The integration of the traditional power structure into the colonial governance system facilitated subjugation through a compromise where chiefs were instructed not to overstep into others' territorial boundaries and were tasked with tax collection and ensuring peace in their own areas. Undoubtedly, the process resulted in significant erosion of conventional judicial authority and alternative forms of control, along with the independence they typically possessed. Nonetheless, they received compensation both materially and in terms of power within the developing social relations. In the Naga Hills district, certain chiefs were not only free from paying the annual house tax but also permitted to keep a portion of the house tax they gathered. In the Lushai Hill district, chiefs were granted permanent leases for land they possessed.

Secessionism in the Northeast emerged as a counter to pan-Indian nationalism, focused on creating a distinct territory supported by various ethnic communities. Influenced by colonial ideologies, these communities fueled secessionist movements while the Indian state countered this through loyal political classes and autonomous councils established post-independence. Local political elites used their connections with secessionist groups to negotiate with the state, highlighting community differences and shared colonial legacies that bolstered both secessionist and political ambitions, thereby maintaining cultural isolation against the challenges posed by democratic ideals.

Political mobilization in the Lushai Hills escalated into

<sup>21</sup> Sanjib Baruah, *In the Name of Nation*, (Stanford University Press, 2020) pp. 105-118

<sup>22</sup> Kamal Mitra Chenoy, *Militarism, Civil Society and Intergroup Relations in North Eastern India* in Kailash S. Aggarwal, *Dynamics of Identity and*

*Intergroup Relations in North East India*. (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1999), A Yonuo, *The Rising Nagas: A Historical and Political Study* (New Delhi, India: Vivek Publishing House, 1974)

violence with the Mizo National Front (MNF) in the early 1960s, which aimed for secession. In February 1966, the MNF launched a military offensive engaging 800–1,300 armed members in coordinated attacks across multiple districts, including Aizawl and Lunglei. They committed acts of theft, abduction, murder, and arson while obstructing communications and access for the Indian Army. Following these assaults, the MNF declared unilateral independence on March 1, 1966, and established a government in exile led by Laldenga.

The ethnic conflict between the Meitei and Kuki communities in Manipur traces back to colonial policies, particularly the British demarcation efforts that created divisions between the valley and the hills. This policy intended to protect the centralized state from external threats, led to significant social changes, including land tax monetization, judicial framework and the establishment of colonial administration. While the centralized state in the valley, founded by the Meiteis, covered merely one-tenth of the entire geographical area of present-day Manipur, whereas the adjacent hills populated by the Nagas and Kukis comprised the other portion of the territory deemed non-Manipuris due to cultural differences, were excluded from governance structures. This colonial legacy has deepened ethnic divisions and has lasting political implications for Manipur.

To conclude on a brighter note, India's regional economic integration policy with its eastern neighbors, manifested through the Look East Policy and the easing of national borders, can mitigate the marginalization and isolation of the Northeast Indian population. Improved international relations, particularly economic ties between India and its eastern neighbors in the Asia Pacific, may lead to a gradual demilitarization in the region in the future. Bimol Akoijam, Lok Sabha MP and JNU professor states that due to the economic growth many Southeast Asian countries have enjoyed since the nineties and the necessity to focus eastward, the northeastern states of India are expected to receive increased attention from the national mainstream awareness in the future. The prolonged period of seclusion is expected to conclude as the Indian economy becomes increasingly interconnected with the economies of the Asia Pacific region. Nations such as Singapore and South Korea have recently expressed significant interest in India and its economy. Since 2000, China has played a significant role in enhancing India's infrastructure, leading to the idea of 'Chindia', signifying two distinct yet interconnected economies. With Narendra Modi's current leadership, relations with Japan are expected to grow stronger in the future.

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