

Chapter 10

Indigenous People's Struggles for Dignity and Peacebuilding in Northeast India

Leban Serto and Mhonyamo Lotha

Abstract Northeast India (NEI) is inhabited by a large number of tribes. It remained isolated during the British colonial era beginning in 1826 until India achieved independence in 1947. In the exercise of parliamentary democracy, the Indian Constitution provided special provisions and status for the tribes. Struggle for self-determination, including armed struggles, has been asserted by ethno-nationalist movements such as the Nagas, Mizos, Meiteis, Garos and Assamese. This paper will give a brief history of these movements along with the narratives and uniqueness of the indigenous people of NEI. It will focus on the Indian constitution and International concerns regarding the situation of Indigenous people of NEI. The historic peacebuilding processes and outcomes will be outlined, whilst also highlighting the women's movements within the peace process. This chapter will conclude with proposals on building sustainable peace in the region.

Keywords Northeast India (NEI) • Labour Corps • Insurgency • Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA) 1958 • Scheduled Tribes • Peace Counts • Indigenous women • Parliamentary democracy • Sixth Schedule • Autonomous District Council (ADC)

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10.1 Introduction

This chapter charts the often contradictory processes that have been pursued in Northeast India (NEI) by the significant population of Indigenous People, defined in India as Scheduled Tribes (ST), towards the maintenance of political and cultural independence. Greatly impacted by British colonialism, and later events of World War II, since Indian independence in 1947, the Indigenous groups of the region have been forced into on-going struggles against twin pressures: the Indian National Government and the predatory forces of modernisation and development. This chapter outlines the historical context, focused on both the agencies of peaceful strategies and armed struggles employed by Indigenous peoples in this tumultuous region. Our analysis shows that this region has been established as a governmental system of structural violence against Indigenous Peoples and presents a complex challenge without easy solutions. However, the influence of nonviolent campaigns has been a persistent presence, which continues to expand and pave the way towards recognition of the rights of Indigenous Peoples and the establishment of legal and political frameworks to secure those rights.

10.2 Indigenous Population in NEI

With over a hundred million people belonging to the so-called Scheduled Tribes (ST), India has the largest indigenous population of nations in the world. Over ten million of these people reside within the central belt of NEI, making it the most concentrated region of Indigenous People in the nation. The history and cultural practices in the region have been recorded in numerous accounts such as colonial reports and ethnographic monographs, diaries, (Barpujari 2003; Ellen et al. 2012), accounts of World Wars I and II (Chetri 2014), narratives from the insurgent movements, reports of human rights perspectives like Naga Peoples Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR 1978), Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP 2015) and contributions of women's movements (Bhuyan 2006; Mukhim 2009; Subhram 2009). There are also materials from nonviolent Peace Movements and Peace Counts approaches, using posters and multimedia for peacebuilding in Northeast India (Buttry 2005; Serto 2013; Jager et al. 2015) and reports from international Indigenous support organisations such as International Working Group on Indigenous Affairs (IGWIA 2015).

The NEI covers an area of about 262,230 km² and comprises eight states, within the Republic of India. Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland are among the States with highest ST population. NEI has over 220 ethnic groups and an equal number of dialects. The hill states in the regions like *Arunachal Pradesh*,

Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland are predominantly inhabited by diverse tribal people groups. The Indigenous Peoples include people from *Tibet, Burma, Thailand, West Bengal and Bangladesh* who have migrated into the region at various periods of history (Walter et al. 2008).

The ST in India are accorded special status in the Indian Constitution under Article 366(25) and have come to be treated as Indigenous peoples for legal, constitutional and administrative purposes. They are the tribes that have been declared by the President under Article 342 of the Constitution of India through a public official gazette notification. They each have distinct characteristics which are well accepted and widely used in academic discourses, and for administrative purposes and policy-making. These characteristics include geographical isolation, distinct cultures, cautious contacts with communities at large, and economically regressive. These characteristics find roots in the 1931 Census and in the Report of the first Backward Classes Commission (Kalelkar Commission 1955), the Advisory Committee on Revision of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes lists (Lokur Committee 1965), the Joint Committee of Parliament on the Scheduled Castes and Schedule Tribes Orders Amendment Bill (1967), and the Chanda Committee (1969). The Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes Commission (1960), also known as the Dhebar Committee, referred to the tribes as “indigenous” (Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact 2015) (Fig. 10.1).

10.3 Historical Background

The British rule ushered in an era of cultural, economic and political changes in Northeast India. In the words of Haolai (2006: 124–125):

Until the coming of the British the polity in the hill areas consisted of village states that recognised no sovereign power at the higher level. The isolation of the cultures of the region was broken by the advent of the British in 1826. For the first time, they were brought under the authority of an alien political power and old village polity was undermined. A money economy was introduced with new material options such as mill cloth, and kerosene lanterns and tea which replaced the largely self-sufficient traditional economy. The process of modernisation, of cultural change had begun, and the old isolated cultures began a slow process of disintegration.

After Indian independence from British rule in 1947, the NEI region consisted of Assam and the two states of Manipur and Tripura. Eventually other states were also formed: Nagaland in 1963, Meghalaya in 1972, Arunachal Pradesh in 1975 (but legally formed on 20th Feb, 1987), and Mizoram in 1987. Manipur and Tripura remained as Union Territories of India between 1956 until 1972, when they attained a fully-fledged statehood. Sikkim was integrated as a member of the Northeast Council (NEC) as recently as 2012.



Fig. 10.1 Map showing Northeast India. *Source* www.mapsofworld.com. This map is in the public domain

10.4 The Impacts of Two World Wars

The year 2014 marked the centennial year of the start of World War I (WWI). Chetri (2014: 45) writes about the contributions of the North-eastern Indigenous people to the war effort:

The thousands of men who went to serve as paid volunteer labourers as part of the Indian Labour Corps during 1917–18 in France on the Western Front. These

Labour Corps were christened from the regions that they came from Garo Labour Corps, Khasis Labour Corps, Lushai Labour Corps, Manipuri Labour Corps, Naga Labour Corps and even the Chin Labour Corps from today's Chin state of Myanmar, which was then still a part of British India. Each of the Labour Corps had a number of units, roughly made of 500 men commanded by British officers and even sometimes by British missionaries who performed an important role that of interpreters, as these men would not have understood English, and also acted as their chaplains.

After WWI, the Nagas were the first community to realise the need to organise and unite, subsequently forming a socio-political association called the Naga Club. In 1928, the Naga Club sent a representation to the Simon Commission, to consider the rights of the Naga for when the British left India (Jamir 1993: 21–22). However, nothing productive came from this. In 1944, the Japanese attacked India through the Northeast region. They travelled through Burma but were stopped at Kohima and Imphal by British troops. This marked the furthest western expansion of the Japanese Empire and presaged the Allied victory. World War II had a great impact in the whole of Manipur hills and valley and displaced almost the entire population during the months that followed in 1944.

10.5 On-Going Armed Struggles

The Indigenous movement in NEI is marked by a long history of armed conflict, violence and militarisation. Following India's Independence in 1947, the Naga tribes commenced the first armed movement in the NEI, and this continues. Presently, almost all communities in the NEI have armed movements against the state. These conflicts are a by-product of Indigenous communities struggling for their rights for sovereignty, autonomy, and control of natural resources to be recognised. Recently the Ministry of Home Affairs limited the tag of terrorist to only two organisations in NEI, the Kamtapur Liberation Organisation (KLO), and the Garo National Liberation Army (GNLA) (Ministry of Home Affairs 2015).

10.6 Non-armed Actions for Peace

After the initial post-independence conflicts, peace efforts were taken up in 1964 in Nagaland. This began a new era within the human rights movement, initially started by the Naga Peoples Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR) in the 1990s. Women's movements for peace became more prominent in the 1990s, along with pacifist writings and assertions for nonviolence becoming visible. One outcome of this movement has been the Peace Counts actions, adopted since 2009, for teaching and learning for Peacebuilding (Peace Counts 2015). These initiatives underscore Goswami's analysis that the peace process in the NEI is very complex, due to the

multiple narratives, and ethnic compositions, requiring a framework of “transformational peace building” that addresses the “structural issues” underlying the conflict (Goswami 2014).

10.7 Constitutional Provisions for Northeast India

The legal status for Indigenous people in NEI is complex and contradictory. Some Northeastern states have special provisions in the national constitution, intended to provide additional security to the people. There are such provisions for Nagaland, Manipur, Sikkim, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh, as well as the general provisions for scheduled tribes under Articles 244(2) and 275(1) of the Constitution. These protections relate to land and resources, as well as customary practices of communities in these states. For instance, Article 371-F:4 which incorporates Sikkim as a state of India, includes the vesting of discretionary powers to the Governor to facilitate peace and for an equitable arrangement for ensuring social and economic advancement of different sections of the population. However, these national provisions will not apply in these states, unless they are specifically extended to the Indigenous People by the concerned State Assembly.

The Indian Constitution under Article 244 provides for the administration of Scheduled Areas and Tribal Areas. The so-called Sixth Schedule provides partial autonomy to certain Tribal Areas in the four Northeastern states of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura. It provides for the creation of the Autonomous District Councils (ADC), Regional Councils, and accords certain legislative, executive and judicial powers to these autonomous bodies. The Sixth Schedule further provides that no Act of the state legislature shall apply to any Autonomous District unless approved by the Autonomous District Council.

However the Governor of these states can decide to either apply, or not apply, any Act of Parliament or the Legislature in these autonomous areas. At the same time, the Governor has the power to annul or suspend any act or resolution of ADC's deemed likely to endanger the safety of India, or to be prejudiced to public order. The Governor has the power to monitor, order commission inquiries, suspend, and to dissolve ADCs. Thus the legal framework allows for specific provisions of autonomy, but in every case, the implementation (or withdrawal), of these provisions is at the discretion of the state Governors.

10.8 Indigenous Women's Issues in NEI

A research report conducted by the Asian Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP 2015) stated that the Indian Constitution asserts that all citizens are equal, but the research showed that Indigenous women are discriminated against because of their ethnicity and gender in Indian society. In India, as per the 2011 census, women account for

586 million and represent 48.46 % of the total population. In NEI, women represent 48.86 % of the total population.

Historically, this region has witnessed a strong women's movement, and this has given rise to local groups that have successfully changed policies of the past, and spoken for the rights and roles of women in strife-torn areas. Some of these groups are the Assam Bodo Women's Justice Forum (Assam), Naga Mothers Association (Nagaland), Naga Women's Union (Manipur), Hmar Women's Association, R.K Monsang Memorial Society (Arunachal Pradesh), Borok Women's Forum of Tripura (Tripura), Dimasa Women's Society, (Assam) Zomi Mother's Association (Manipur), All Tiwa Women's Association (Assam), Rabha Women Council, MizoHmeichheTangrual, and KaSynjukKynthei.

These women's groups have assisted women to deal with the on-going trauma and agony arising from armed conflicts and their economic disempowerment (Bhuyan 2006). Reducing violence is a common issue that the women's groups work on. They have collectively appealed to the Indian Government for the withdrawal of the AFSPA (1958). Other issues are political empowerment, requesting educational facilities for girls and a campaign to stop Violence against Women (VAW). In recent times, there has also been an advocacy appeal to the Government, to abide by the United Nations Security Council Resolution (1325).

Since its first State election in 1967, the Nagaland Legislative Assembly has never had a single woman legislator. With the exception of a few tribes structured around matrilineal descent (such as the Garos, Pnar and Khasis tribes) most of the 139 officially recognised tribes, have patriarchal structures, indicating that women have minimal roles in the decision-making process and have no rights to inheritance or hereditary property. Women are also vulnerable to direct assault. With sweeping powers to search and destroy houses, to detain people on suspicion and to kill with impunity, military personnel have been perpetrators of violence against women in the NEI (MangyangIm song 2000).

10.9 Insurgency, Interlocutors, Dialogues and Peace Processes in Northeast India

Since India's independence, the earliest and longest lasting armed insurgency has been present in Nagaland, where separatist violence commenced in 1952 under AngamiZapuPhizo. Conflicts leading to loss of innocent lives, and the burning of villages, have proliferated since the late 1970s (Imliyangerjamir 1993). Every State in the region is currently affected by insurgency and violence and four of these—Assam, Manipur, Nagaland and Tripura, have witnessed intense conflicts. Even with several governmental peace initiatives, multi-track diplomacy and non-governmental organisations (NGO), peace activities are at an incipient stage. Government policies do not encourage international interventions in any Indian NEI conflict resolution processes, though mediated developmental interventions are sanctioned.

Most of the conflicts have been waged to assert distinctive ethnicity, culture, identity, political empowerment, optimal utilisation of resources and to ensure protection of ethnic minority rights. The political goals of the armed conflicts have differed, ranging from demands for greater political autonomy, more transparent political rights, and institutional structures, to outright secession from India. Over the years, the state has dabbled within the framework of negotiations, with the Nagaland Peace Mission established in 1964, after the appeal made by the Nagaland Baptist Church Council (NBCC) in Wokha, which was one of the most serious and visible efforts to peacefully resolve issues. Negotiations were also utilised with the Mizo National Front (MNF) of Mizoram State, after twenty years of bloody conflict, that witnessed painful displacement and grouping of villages, uprooting the local Mizos from traditional villages, and creating memories of deep social hurt with no apologies offered.

The longest continuous negotiation has been between the Indian state and the National Socialist Council of Nagalim/Isak-Muivah, (NSCN-IM), regarding demands for territorial unification of the Naga inhabited areas in Assam, Manipur and Nagaland as well as Naga sovereignty. The Indian state is willing to offer greater political rights, but only within the Indian Union. Moreover, uniting Naga inhabitants areas across Assam, Manipur and Nagaland, is politically risky due to the deep-resistance of the Assamese, the Meities and smaller ethnic communities like the Dimasas or the Kukis.

The use of Interlocutors for the Peace Process in India has become a rule more than an exception. The Chief Minister of Meghalaya, Mukul Sangma, endorsed the appointments of Interlocutors, who act as peace mediators between the government and Indigenous insurgents. Terming the militancy as complex, he stated, “all north-eastern states should come together to resolve the issue with co-ordinated and comprehensive approach designed to understand the root cause of the problem” (*Telegraph India* 2014). The occasion of the speech was a disbanding day, of weapons being surrendered by insurgents on condition that the peace and development process can proceed, with promises of short and long-term benefits to the people of the Garo Hills region. While the Chief Minister’s promises are positive, including special programmes for education and opportunities for youth in the Garo Hills, they must be followed with changes to historic and structural conditions that caused the violence. As Namrata Goswami remarked in an article for The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy, “in a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic NEI, talking peace requires to be more transformational than mere negotiatory. Conflicts as longstanding as these will not get resolved unless the conditions that gave rise to them are dealt with” (Goswami 2014). She also signalled the importance of addressing the “collective narratives”, and that a peace process can lead to both empowerment and disorientation.

Within the many ethno nationalist movements in the Northeast region, the initial aim should be to deeply understand and study the narratives that led to the conflicts. This should be followed by engagement with major issues. Firstly among these is engaging with the preferences of the Indigenous communities. Also important is devising appropriate exit strategies for combatants. It is important to acknowledge

that these preferences and frameworks might neither be optimal nor the only way through which the conflict situation can be understood.

Goswami (2014) is of the opinion that it is a shallow proposition for the Indian state to assume that once it signs a ceasefire, or Suspension of Operations (SoOs), with armed groups, that everything else will fall in place. In reality, dealing with divisive issues, establishing solid institutional mechanisms that promote a level playing field, and promoting liberal education at the school level are policy choices that will herald a more hopeful future for states like Assam, Manipur and Nagaland.

In the first Universal Periodic Review (UPR) National Report the government of India recognised the need to empower the ST and established committees to tackle discrimination against them (AIPP 2015). On 3rd August, 2015 the NSCN-IM represented by Thuingaleng Muivah, and the Government of India representative R.N. Ravi, signed a new Peace Accord in the presence of the Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and Home Minister Rajnath, to move ahead with some framework agreement. The final outcome is still awaited, and this will mark a new dawn in the peace processes in the NEI. The challenge now remains as to how they will carry forward the essence of this new Peace Accord with the other groups in the region.

10.10 The Way Forward

Indigenous Peoples in NEI are confronted with the issue of militarisation, alongside confining constitutional regulations such as the AFSPA. Legal concessions for extractive industries to exploit natural resources remain a constant threat to indigenous communities, increasing on-going resource conflicts between Indigenous Peoples and immigrants in the Assam area. Added pressures are the condoned encroachment into Indigenous Peoples' lands and resources, by settler communities in Tripura, and grand development schemes in Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and most of the seven sister states. These demands will continue to have an impact on the personal lives, land, resources and food security of Indigenous Peoples.

Crime and violence against women, and human trafficking in the NEI, is expected to increase sharply, with development activities such as the Trans Asian Railways, and the Asian Highways, both of which are part of India's current "Look East" Policy. Patriarchal traditions, and gender inequity in India, have resulted in the feminisation of poverty, exacerbating women's vulnerability to labour and sexual exploitation. Thus, without improvements in women's socio-economic conditions, and their effective participation, peaceful development of the region cannot proceed effectively. Women's empowerment should be coordinated with the social sectors, such as the male gentry, religious heads, and political leaders who must surrender their personal interests, to re-order men and women as equal citizens in a civil society. Peacebuilding, along with components of mediation, and conflict transformation training, must become important curricula within the formal and non-formal educational sectors among the Indigenous population in NEI.

The provisions ensured in the Indian Constitution for the ST's population, must be implemented in its true spirit, inclusive of the ideals of participatory democratic process. The Indigenous Peoples of NEI must develop a shared future in the region whilst at the same time be able to reach out and engage with the world around them. "Only then will this diverse population, be able to transcend into a more egalitarian society, versus remaining in isolation". These comments of journalist Victoria Corpus Tauli writing in the *International Herald Tribune* (2007: 4) in respect to the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples apply exactly to the Indigenous Peoples of NEI.

The Declaration (UNDRI 2007) set the minimum international standards for the protection and promotion of the rights of the Indigenous Peoples, providing for the survival, respect for distinct identity, well-being and rights of the Indigenous Peoples.

The Declaration has occasioned the need for redesigning and reshaping existing and future laws, policies and programmes on Indigenous Peoples on the basis of the set standards. Most of the provisions of the Declaration, though existing in other Human Rights, instruments could not be availed of by the Indigenous Peoples. Now that the Declaration has been adopted, these rights have come to be specifically recognised as their basic Human Rights. These important principles will continue to provide guidelines and aspirations for the Indigenous people of Northeast India in their peacebuilding efforts for equality and justice in the nation-state of India.

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