CHAPTER IV: States of Conflict

Since its inception as a republic, the Indian state has been dogged by the debate on minority rights- multiculturalism on one hand and citizenship- civic virtue on the other (Samaddar 2004). The tensions between the two are palpable. The minority rights-multiculturalism proponents are suspicious of notions of ‘good citizenship’, as it seems partial to majority rule, while the citizenship- civic virtue proponents are wont to view minority rights as an appeal to narrow self-interest. Nevertheless, it remains to be stated that both debates developed independently of each other.

The minority rights debate refers to issues dealing with public policy, legal rights and constitutional provision inasmuch as (a) they go beyond a familiar set of common civil and political rights of individual citizenship which are projected in liberal democracies; and (b) are adopted with the intention of recognising and adopting the distinctive identities and needs of ethno-cultural groups (Kymlicka and Norman 2000: 1-41). In a context where there is greater politicisation of ethnicity and the weakening of norms of citizenship, as in Northeast India, McGarry and O’Leary point to a taxonomy where ethnic conflicts can be managed by regimes (McGarry and O’Leary 1993: 1-40). Second and third generation immigrants in Nagaon would definitely consider themselves to be national minorities, within a larger political context, while the Karbi could be classified as indigenous peoples within a national framework. Yet, neat classifications are not very useful to understand the politics of representation in Nagaon and Karbi Anglong. The policy framework it would seem does not encourage dialogic processes. It is at the
level of accommodating peoples' access to resources and altering existing land use systems that the Indian state has made many of its interventions.

Much has been said already about the colonial genealogical tradition within Indian law and administration. To wit, the current administrative structures in the case study areas are markedly different. Nagaon district, like all other non-restricted parts of India, is open to migration from other parts of the country. Most of the migration occurs from east India, especially the Gangetic belt. This complicates the ability of local people and district authorities to regulate the inflow of people. In addition to this, lack of any bilateral mechanisms between India and neighbouring (densely populated) nations and between the state of Assam and the federal government of India, leave a large vacuum for political initiative on migration into Assam. The Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunal) Act of 1983, a highly contentious act exists ostensibly to "expel" illegal migrants. The act provides for the establishment of tribunals for the determination, in a fair manner, of the question whether a person is an illegal migrant to enable the central government to expel illegal immigrants from (the territory) of India and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto. The preamble to the Act states: "...whereas a good number of the foreigners who migrated into India across the borders of the eastern and north-eastern regions of the country on and after the 25th day of March, 1971, have, by taking advantage of the circumstances of such migration and their ethnic similarities and other connections with the people of India and without having in their possession any lawful authority so to do, illegally remain in India; and whereas the continuance of such
foreigners in India is detrimental to the interests of the public of India; and whereas on account of the number of such foreigners and the matter in which such foreigners have clandestinely been trying to pass off as citizens of India and all other relevant circumstances it is necessary for the protection of the citizens of India to make special provisions for the detection of such foreigners in Assam and also in any other part of India in which such foreigners may be found to have remained illegally..." (emphasis added).

Many people argue that the act itself is loaded against the indigenous people of Assam. In letter, it overrides other acts such as the Passport (Entry into India) Act; Foreigners Act, 1946 and Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act, 1950. Several tribunals of two persons each were set up since the act came into effect on October 15, 1983. The act requires a person to literally accuse someone of being an illegal immigrant; produce two witnesses to corroborate the story, produce documentary evidence to the same and at the same time; pay a fee to make the complaint. Needless to add, the act seems to put the onus of detection and determination of who is an illegal immigrant on the subject making the accusation. From an ethical point of view, this is highly contentious as it completely devalues the need for nation-states to have progressive work-related policies for migrants. Secondly, it reiterates the position of "citizens as competing individuals" by putting one against the other in a situation where it can lead to further conflicts. Student leaders in Assam also argue that this act fundamentally works to the advantage of illegal immigrants, as it is very difficult for the complainant to produce documentary evidence to bolster his claim. A student leader from Nagaon says: "When the Indian state freely distributes ration cards and treats that as bona-fide credentials of
citizenship, what chances does the tribunal have to detect and deport?" This just serves to underline the ease with which one can acquire residence status if the conditions are right.

It is evident that important voices from within native Assamese civil society do not have much affinity with radical civic discourses espoused by ULFA when it comes to identifying the "other". While ULFA sees a national enemy in Indian colonialism, sections of native Assamese civil society frame it against a wider discourse of citizenship, based on religion (Barua 1944). The fact that old settlers now send their children to Assamese-medium schools and speak the language is not seen as a positive assimilative trait, but rather as a "loss of the mother-tongue" to outsiders. While the logical end to this debate cannot be concluded outside the realm of real-politics, native Assamese respondents in the village (in the discussion on Srimala and Kacharigaon that follows) will be distinguished from Assamese Muslims, who are still perceived as settlers by the dominant community. In no way is this an endorsement of the native Assamese response, nor is it sociologically correct to assume that this is the only position there is. As mentioned earlier, native Assamese responses are regulated by the respondents' political persuasion. What this matter of distinguishing the native Assamese from Assamese Muslims (in Nagaon) does acknowledge however, is the persistence of twentieth century cleavages along lines of religion in present times.

128 Interview with local All Assam Students Union (AASU) activist who did not want to be named. December 29, 2003; Nagaon.

129 I am grateful to Sanjib Baruah for highlighting this point. In a personal discussion (January 30, 2005, Guwahati), he sees a parallel for this among Boer nationalists in South Africa and draws attention to the fact that the spread of Afrikaans was seen as a threat by white Afrikaans-speaking Boers during the period leading up to the dismantling of the apartheid regime in the country.
The situation becomes all the more precarious when there are few laws that protect the lands of the indigenous people in the district. There are laws that prevent the sale of agricultural land for commercial purposes but these are regularly flouted. Hence, a limited resource base—land—becomes the basis for contests. The generation of incomes from this limited resource is a matter that is tackled by various departments of the government of Assam, notable the agricultural department. In one of the case study area (Juria), the Assam government’s local Agricultural extension unit showed little innovations other than extending high-yielding variety rice and encouraging jute cultivation. This state of affairs is compounded by the lack marketing opportunities in the district. Nagaon however is one of the most fertile areas in Assam but the marketing facilities are negligible. It is left to private entrepreneurship to take care of such matters. In the past few years Assam’s industrial and developmental policies are increasingly being implemented by central government run agencies and departments such as North East Council (NEC) and Department (Development) of the North East Region (DONER). No other region of India has such officious adjuncts to government bureaucracy that is meant to only cater to issues of development. Obviously, there is a whole developmentalist logic attached to the creation of such departments. The immense faith attached to the capabilities of departments as the vehicles that launch the great leap towards development, as they are seen to be lagging behind other parts of

Incidentally, few of the Assamese farmers in Juria grow Jute. Most of it is grown by second generation migrants. In Raha block (Srimala/ Gospara) area, the Assamese farmers have experimented with every crop possible as part of the “scientific socialist land use programme” encouraged by radical nationalists in the 1990s. While there were very little “scientific” inputs, it still allowed farmers to experiment with growing crops other than paddy. For example, fisheries were seen as lucrative alternatives that would help in the “formation of national capital for a Xunor (Golden) Assam”. (Arun Borah, February 4, 2004; Srimala/ Gospara).

For more details see: http://www.northeast.nic.in (Accessed 20 October 2004).
India is best gauged in the following quote from an ex-prime minister of India: “…one of the reasons why these states are seen to lagging behind-and therefore, need a helping hand- is that many of them became a part of the planning process much after the other states. Bearing this in mind…(outlay) increased to Rs. 25,283.52 crores”.\textsuperscript{132} In the same speech, the prime minister also acknowledges that much of the money earmarked for expenditure do not find their way to the projects for which they are intended, as the people are not involved in their implementation.

The plural legal system in Karbi Anglong is an interesting factor in panning out the state’s strategies for developing the district. In the previous chapter, there was a detailed discussion on how indigenous Karbis felt marginalised in the transition from traditional law (of land use and ownership) to a modern administrative system of permanent land titles. The settlers in Karbi Anglong, especially those that migrated during the post-1947 period have stories of dispossession and oppression as well. They see themselves as the victims of an unfair policy that allows settlers access but denies them any legal rights over resources. The reasons why they settled in Karbi Anglong are complicated to say the least. Some like Ramesh C, a student from Kheroni (in Hamren sub-division) said they were there because:

“…The land was going waste and was not being cultivated when our families came here. My forefathers were told that our people could go to any part of the country where land was

available and Assam was one such place. We cleared the forests
and made this land prosperous”\textsuperscript{133}

Land, or rather the unrestricted availability of it in what constitutes a national space covered by wilderness, is the prime “pull” factor in this case. Notions of wilderness and availability of land still play a major role in determining the flow of new migrants into the hills. One can understand that in Ramesh’s case, the region was actually densely forested and land grants were unheard of. Since he (Ramesh) belongs to the second generation and was born in Karbi Anglong, his parents, who came to the area in late 1960s, did encounter vast expanses of jungle that were waiting to be cleared. However, as the rules of ownership and notions of “territory” and/or “homelands” gained ground through the 1970s and 1980s in Karbi Anglong as well, one can only contribute the increased inflow of people from the same region (Gangetic plains) to the reiteration of myths about frontiers and the availability of land. Some would argue that the situation in the Gangetic plains- no restructuring of landholdings, agrarian impoverishment etc- are push factors driving people into urban areas and into more affluent parts of the country.

It is the perceived availability of land that adds to the contests over resources in Karbi Anglong. In section 5, we also discuss at length the policy framework within which this contest occurs. The plural legal context, where land can either be community property, privately owned, or controlled by the autonomous council and the state (reserve forests etc) create a different context from neighbouring Nagaon. Under such conditions,

\textsuperscript{133} Ramesh C. is an important student leader among the settlers in Kheroni sub-division. He was born in Nagaon, Assam and his parents had migrated from the eastern sector of the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. He still tries to visit family and relatives in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar once a year. Brajesh is an upper caste Hindu, a traditional land-owning class during feudal and colonial times in India, many of whom migrated after losing their lands due to land ceiling acts and fragmentation of land holdings.
the entry of new ethnic groups is an event charged with political implications, specifically on the issue of competition over land.\textsuperscript{134} The entry of a new group in turn raises public and political debate among different groups within Karbi Anglong, each accusing the other of being party to unscrupulous pacts with migrants.\textsuperscript{135} Discussions by public intellectuals and opinion makers are often acrimonious and accusatory, focusing more on the adverse effects of migration to places where the plural system of land ownership creates problems for power sharing and resource allocation (Kikon and Das 2005).

The limited scope of the autonomous council to create jobs or even to effect changes in the land-holding and settlement structures is partially responsible for the conflict (Barbora 2004). The council, as it exists, is dominated by ethnic Karbi political persons.\textsuperscript{136} Non-Karbi groups argue that this skewed representation in the council is detrimental to their growth and development and that this remains one of the main causes of conflict.\textsuperscript{137} The district council’s capacity to create jobs or to defuse ethnic tensions among the various groups is minimal. Given the pressure of engaging in political mobilisation to control the council, various (political) groups are alleged to have made promises to different ethnic communities, guaranteeing them access to land, political


\textsuperscript{136} For more details see: “Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council”, URL: http://karbianglong.nic.in/kaac.htm (Accessed October 12, 2004)


143
power and resources. In reality, political groups are seldom able to deliver on their political promises and the council remains tied to the state government and central government for a financial plan to implement development programmes. As section 5 explores the intricacies of the council and its structure, it suffices to mention here that land alienation and bottlenecks in creating occupational alternatives are almost systemic in Karbi Anglong.

Against such a backdrop, it is pertinent to point out that inter and intra-ethnic stratification in Karbi Anglong is not just an outcome of lack of powers of the district councils. Events in neighbouring regions and states often assume serious political proportions within local politics. The villagers of Hemari-Timung Gaon, for example, were implicated in the ongoing conflict involving Kukis in 2004. The village itself was not targeted by ethnic militia (from either side), but the inhabitants had relatives and friends in refugee camps in Manjha (approximately 15 kilometres away) and were constantly in touch with them. The oft-repeated lines following the tumultuous events of March 2004 was:

"...(We) are not against anyone. But how can we allow others to come to our land and take what belongs to us and then fight us. They (the

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138 Bey alleges that the Karbi-Kuki clashes of 2004 had its genesis in one of the factions of the ASDC promising "political power" to the Kukis who had settled in Karbi Anglong, in exchange for support during the District Council elections. For more details see: Selawar Bey, 2004. "The Recent Karbi- Kuki Clashes in Assam" in Liberation, Central Organ of CPI (ML), (January), URL: http://www.cpiml.org/liberation/year_2004/january/The%20Recent%20Karbi-Kuki%20Clashes%20in%20Assam.HTM (Accessed October 12, 2004).
Kukis) have called people with guns from outside and we have to defend ourselves  

While such sentiments allude to inter-ethnic stratification within the district, it does not merely gloss over intra-ethnic divisions. Even during the tragic clashes between Dimasas and Karbis in Hanlokrok in 2005, where all the Dimasa families were displaced, there was much bickering about the role of political parties. The political discourse in Karbi Anglong is deeply divided along party lines, a feature that is often played out within the dominant Karbi community as well. Functionaries of one faction of ASDC, or of other political players like the Congress and the pro and anti-talk factions of the armed opposition group (UPDS), periodically engage in bitter polemics that divide households along part-affiliated lines.

In districts like Karbi Anglong, where plural land titling systems are in place, the administration has made a concerted attempt to change land use practices towards settled cultivation. This is in tune with Baruah’s notion that mobile, swidden cultivators in the hills are seen as a security threat by the authorities (Baruah 2005: 95-96, 102-105). The North East Council, a centrally constituted think tank for development of the Northeast

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139 Ms. R. Terongpui. Interview held near Gita Ashram, Diphu on July 28, 2004. This quote is not taken out of context. The interviewee had relatives the Manjha relief camp and had just returned after providing them ration. She had voted for the ASDC and said she would continue to do so. The problem, for her, was not the party or the institutional bottlenecks of the council but the presence of outside elements who were “stirring up trouble”. Most interviewees within the village reflected similar sentiments with none expressing faith in the established rule of law and the police, especially when it came to keeping the peace in the district.

140 Following a split in the rank and file of the armed (and exclusively Karbi) United Peoples Democratic Solidarity militia, factional allegations soon turned to fratricide with one group targeting the other. A faction of the armed group also accused political organizations like the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC), Holiram Terang faction, of entering into unholy pacts with migrant Kukis. For more details see: South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP), URL: http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/terroris:unholy.htm (Accessed May 10, 2005)
region has often described the existing shifting cultivation practices in the region as being detrimental to the environment (NEC 1990). The following table shows the extent of such practices in the region.\(^{141}\)

Table 8: Shifting Cultivation in the Northeast region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Area under shifting cultivation (sq. Km.)</th>
<th>Fallow period (in years)</th>
<th>Minimum area under shifting cult. At one time or another (sq. Km)</th>
<th>No. of families</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arunachal Pradesh</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>3 to 10</td>
<td>2100</td>
<td>54000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>696</td>
<td>2 to 10</td>
<td>2650</td>
<td>58000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manipur</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>4 to 7</td>
<td>3600</td>
<td>70000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meghalaya</td>
<td>530</td>
<td>5 to 7</td>
<td>1913</td>
<td>52290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mizoram</td>
<td>630</td>
<td>3 to 4</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>50000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagaland</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>5 to 8</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>115046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tripura</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>5 to 9</td>
<td>1115</td>
<td>43000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>3869</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>14660</strong></td>
<td><strong>443336</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Percentage</strong></td>
<td><strong>2%</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>6%</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Basic Statistics of the North Eastern Region, 1990, NEC Shillong.

Assam’s total area under shifting cultivation has been computed to include only the hill districts of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills. Nevertheless, one can gauge that in a sparsely populated area, the number of families- 58,000- that are dependent on this form of agriculture is relatively high. The length of the fallow period, nature of crop produced (i.e. proportion between domestic consumption and sale) and standard of living of the dependent population, are factors that affect the carrying capacity of the land (Majumdar 1990: 28). As can be seen from the table, the fallow period is extremely varied in the case of Assam. In higher altitude areas, the fallow period is longer; while in Karbi Anglong one could assume that the fallow period would be between 2- 4 years. In

\(^{141}\) The figures are true for the period 1989- 1990.
the case study area, the crops produced are for domestic consumption and the cash crops producing areas are under control of local (often urban) elite.

In Karbi Anglong, 60% of the total area is hilly where there are (a) state reserve forests, (b) district council reserve forests and (c) unclassified low-lying and hilly forests. Plains areas constitute 40% of the remaining land area of the district where there are (a) wet rice cultivating areas, (b) state and district council reserve forests and (c) permanent grazing reserves. Technically, the village council plays an important role in managing the shifting cultivation lands (Sharma Thakur 1998: 9-17). The traditional sequence of swidden cultivation starts in February with the selection of a suitable plot of land being selected on a hill slope. This is known as Thang Thang in Karbi. For a few weeks after the selection, shrubs and trees that are on the hill slope are cut and dried and burnt in the month of April. During May-June, the plot of land is cleared of heavy logs and ashes from the burning of shrubs and trees are scattered to fertilise the fields. Songs and festivities are carried along with the sowing of paddy and other crop. This period and the cultural practices associated with it, mark a period called Bongoi Alun in Karbi. When the paddy starts growing, the villagers perform rituals to propitiate local forest deities like Long-a-hii, so that their crops are saved by animals and other predators. Incidentally, this is also the period when most clashes between Karbi militia and settlers in the low-lying foothills are likely to occur, as the settlers forage the forest areas for grazing and collection of timber. July is the month when extensive weeding (Sok Karlu) is carried out and Sali (a variety of paddy that requires a lot of water) is sown. The Ahu (another

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142 Much of this section is paraphrased following conversations with villagers of Hemari-Timung Gaon. The terms used and cycle mentioned have been verified with geographers and forest officials in Diphu and Shillong and found to be correct. The indigenous communities (Karbi, Dimasa, Tiwa) in the plains and foothills do not have a similar cycle.

143 Sali is also called “winter paddy” as it is harvested in the winter months.
variety of seasonal paddy) is harvested in August, while Sali is harvested by the end of October. The harvested paddy is stocked in courtyards in the month of November and in December and January, Karbi males thrash the paddy and bring it home to the granaries. This practice is well spaced out and requires at least a 3 year fallow period according to respondents of Hemari-Timung Gaon. It has to be mentioned here, that even though the indigenous people who live in plain areas – like Hanlokrok – follow a different cycle, many of the rituals and customs associated with the traditional swidden cycles are still observed in Karbi households (in the plains).

State policies are seldom sympathetic to such complexities and cultural nuances in the social life of small communities. Moreover, the swidden cycle described above is highly mobile and communitarian as it involves a community that moves from one place to another. Governments, typically, prefer immobile communities and fixed land tenures. To enable such a process in 1974, the Assam Plantation Crops Development Corporation was formed for the period 1974-75 to 1981-82 at a financial cost of Rs. 12.15 crores. It brought ethnically distinct villages under its ambit and money was allocated for (a) reclamation and terracing, (b) minor irrigation, (c) plantation of coffee and rubber, (d) agricultural extension, (e) afforestation and (f) infrastructure and growth. The project was deemed a failure because it failed to confer land rights to families that practiced shifting cultivation and did not involve beneficiaries at different stages of the project (Das 2001: 37-40). The project was replaced by the Integrated Jhumia Development Programme in 1981, with a mandate to “promote ecological awareness, provide staple food at the doorstep and provide avenues for amusement and recreation” for families that practiced

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144 Ahu is also called “summer paddy” as it is harvested in the summer months and does not require as much water as Sali.
145 A term used for swidden cultivators.
swidden agriculture (Das ibid). The explicit concern was to change the lifestyles of the people and older respondents in Hemari-Timung. Mentioned that it hampered their livelihood and indigenous practices. They also spoke about the sub-standard quality rice that was provided to them and which undermined their need to grow their own food.

Questions asked about the developmental activities of the Council are routinely answered in small pamphlets published as pamphlets to showcase the “achievements” of the current executive committee. The council publishes its achievements in respect to tourism, forestry, agriculture and infrastructure but in the structural political discourse in the district, the narratives are more about the lack of funds and overwhelming parsimonious attitude of the state government that is supposed to provide for the political infrastructure for the functioning of the autonomous council. Yet another grouse is the control exercised by the central government, acting via the office of the governor of the state that dilutes the authority of the council. In truth, much of the decisions taken by the council are actually exercised by bureaucrats (who need not be from the region).

Under the aegis of the Sixth Schedule, provides that for any area notified as an autonomous region by the Governor of the state, a district council comprising of 30 members will be elected. Of these, four are appointed by the Governor of the state. Thereafter, it is the Governor who makes the rules for the first consultation in consultation with tribal representative organisations. As may be noticed, it is the Governor who has the final say in the creation and dissolution of the council. For finances, the autonomous district council gets a meagre amount from the business and commercial enterprises and some land revenue. A district and regional fund, endowed and managed by the Governor, is the main source by which the autonomous body is
financed. The powers of the autonomous council are varied, but it in their capacity to regulate land transfer that their discretionary powers are most interesting. Following the colonial policies of allowing land in the hills to be under "community ownership" and not bringing such land under its revenue scheme, the Sixth Schedule also mentions that tribal land is not be sold to anyone and that it belongs to the community. However, by 1979 the overwhelming logic of doing away with community property is noticed in a notification wherein private property is not only acknowledged but also encouraged. In that sense, the councils and village chiefs become the most likely figures of authority to be able to grant and renew leases and land titles. Furthermore, this leaves open the space for political manipulation, wherein it has been known that village chiefs who belong to one or the other political party, would try and push the leases (or titles) of their party members if the executive council is dominated by a friendly party.

The bureaucracy and members of the political elite in Assam and India do not just play an advisory role and actively intervene to ensure particular forms of political behaviour. Hence, most of the clauses of the provisions are routinely subverted. Another major loophole in implementation of the letter of law is the fact that electoral politics and political parties have major stakes in the allocation of land. In Hemari-Timung Gaon, for example, most of the lands currently used by the inhabitants were once forest lands that were given as grants to supporters of the ruling party at the Executive Council level. All the Karbi inhabitants of the village were granted land titles to approximately two bighas of forest land for jhum cultivation. Similarly, in Hanlokrok and Kheroni, settlers can lay claim to vast tracts of land because they are able to produce evidence to prove that they

146 Karbi Anglong District Council Notification of July 2, 1979: No. KAC/XVII/1/63
procured the land in one of the many quasi-legal processes of transfer of land. These processes further negate the role of the state as the neutral arbiter of conflicts for the indigenous peoples of the region. Echoing a concern along these lines, Biswas and Bhattacharjee state that "(ethnic) movements in the Northeast can be understood in terms of a contest over greater social, political and cultural spaces, the spaces in which the ethnic communities were not hitherto represented. This non-representation is further explained within the contexts of rights, power and authority, which cause ethnocentric concerns to find their expression in contestations in many possible ways (Biswas and Bhattacharjee 1994: 232-245). Here, contestation against the "other" assumes the most explicit form in social spaces (to mobilise). The 'other' is characterised in terms of an undifferentiated concept of citizenship, as enshrined within the constitution of India where the Constitution does not recognise the claims of an identity in separation from others as represented within the Nation and the State. This contrast between the statist view and collective aspirations is sharpened through a number of meditative measures (undertaken by the State) that apparently negotiates the variegating representations between communities in spaces within the concept of the Nation. One wishes to locate the ethnic polarisation in the Boro areas within this process of the lack of a meditative measure that can accommodate the different responses. Splits within the movement are a prime example of the kind of ad-hoc policies that are taken up by the state apparatus in containing the problem posed to the nation-building process by ethno-national projects. The persistence of colonial tones in the political structures in the region only account for one aspect of the "ends" to which governments strive- that of political and territorial unity. In the process, the Indian state's propensity to carve out states to satisfy the
political elite might suggest that it is more “tolerant” of ethnic aspirations. However, the fact that it has a definite “ethnic agenda” of its own— an agenda that is shaped by policy machines that are not “ethnically neutral”— is a condition that negates the provisional safeguards in its Constitution (Brown and Ganguly 1997: 7-19).

Public discourse in Nagaon, often reiterates the growing economic control that migrants have in the matter of land ownership. They are seen to be the most upwardly mobile section of society in the district. In this section, one looks at the details of the changes in land use in the two villages of Nagaon in order test this hypothesis. The samples, though small, are indicative of property and social relations within the unit of the village enclave. In this regard, if the land is productive and title rights are unequivocal, or if control over land is undisputed (either by legal or extra-legal means), it may be expected that changes envisaged by government policy would have some positive effects for the inhabitants, since such policy often rest on unambiguous ownership titles. The following table shows the extent of land actually owned by the respondents in the different villages.

Table 9: Village, ethnic group, land owned (in bighas).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Village</th>
<th>Assamese Muslim</th>
<th>Native Assamese</th>
<th>Nepali</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kacharigao</td>
<td>Land owned</td>
<td>Land owned</td>
<td>Land owned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Srimala</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

147 This view is often reinforced by the support that settlers receive in areas where the potential and realities of ethnic conflict are common occurrences. For many indigenous rights activists in the Northeast, the Sixth Schedule seems like a “Trojan Horse” for greater centralisation that would allow the state to fill up the lands (belonging to indigenous persons) with ethnically acceptable groups (See NPMHR et al. 2002).
Assamese Muslim villagers in the enclave of Kacharigaon own the highest amount of land as shown in the table. In the mixed village of Srimala, actual land ownership would favour the native Assamese villagers but within the enclave, it is the Nepali cultivators who own more land. The absence of other ethnic communities in Kacharigaon does not mean that there is no conflict within the immediate confines of the village. The role of the mattabars (as discussed in the earlier chapter) is a constant source of internal conflict and resentment among an educated section of the village. Besides, in a densely populated area, the ownership of land by Assamese Muslims (many of whom are perceived – at best – as second and third generation migrants) is a constant source of envy for neighbours. The tensions are far less, even negligible in Srimala, partly because the villagers feel they have participated in common projects, some initiated by the radical Assamese nationalists in the 1990s. Land ownership patterns favouring Assamese Muslims are often cited as proof of land-alienation among the native Assamese.

Table 10: Village, ethnic group, land use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Village</th>
<th>Ethnic gp.</th>
<th>Cultivate all</th>
<th>Cultivate/ rent out</th>
<th>Rent to others</th>
<th>Other (Specified)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kacharigaon</td>
<td>Assamese Muslim</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3 (2 fisheries/ 1 house site)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Srimala</td>
<td>Nepali</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 (house)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Assamese</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The land use table needs qualification. Though most Assamese Muslim respondents in Kacharigaon said that they cultivate all the land, in practice they often lease it out (on short-term periodic leases) on highly asymmetric terms to others within the community. Those who rent in land are usually from among the poorest, most vulnerable sections of the society. The Assamese Muslim respondents have also utilised many of the periodic
developmental schemes to start fisheries, all of which are privately owned. The Nepali respondents of Srimala also cultivate all the land, as do their native Assamese caste-Hindu counterparts. Some, like the respondents in Kacharigaon, rent out their land to members of the community for a nominal price. In the case where a respondent says that his land is both cultivated and rented out, it is to a member of the family who moved to the village ten years ago. The sole respondent who rents out all his land is old and unable to cultivate and has given out his land on a nominal lease to the village cooperative and some to another individual within the village. There is another aspect to land use that has to be mentioned here. Many young men from the villages/enclaves do not see farming as a viable future. Those who do are keen on changing from paddy to other crops. In both villages/enclaves, those with the means have taken loans to start fisheries.

Table 11: Village, ethnic group, amount of rent collected (annually)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Village</th>
<th>Ethnic gp.</th>
<th>Upto Rs.1000/-</th>
<th>Rs.1001-2000</th>
<th>Rs.2001-3000</th>
<th>Rs.3001-4000</th>
<th>Rs.4001-5000</th>
<th>Rs.5001-6000</th>
<th>Rs.6001-7000</th>
<th>Above7001</th>
<th>Not applicable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kacharigaon</td>
<td>Assamese Muslim</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Srimala</td>
<td>Nepali</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Assamese</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Assamese Muslims of Kacharigaon are by far the most advanced in terms of collection of rents from their land. As many as three respondents collected rent above Rs. 8000/- per annum which is about the average income of a daily wage earner. Added to this, these respondents also grow jute and rice and have the advantage of falling on their fisheries in times of crisis. The Nepali respondents in Srimala also collect some rent but not to such a varied extent as in Kacharigaon. The native Assamese caste-Hindu respondents do not collect any rent at all.
It needs mentioning that there are grants allocated for agricultural reconstruction in Assam. There is the seemingly positive picture of government allocation for funds for regions like Assam, while on the other hand there is also the steady retreat of the state from its welfare activities. In 2000, the chief minister of Assam said that more than two hundred thousand jobs were to be created to make up for a backlog in unemployed youth (Fernandes 2004: 4609- 4611). There are no reserved constituencies in Nagaon district where elected representatives can claim to create more employment opportunities. The 2001 census states that for the district of Nagaon, of a total population of 2,314,629 persons, only 727,641 could be categorised as “workers” leaving 1,586,988 non-workers, among the latter is included children as well (Registrar General and Census Commissioner 2001). Following the Assam agitation a lot of young students, especially from the rural areas of Nagaon were encouraged by the new government, run by former student leaders, to enter into small enterprises and avail of state government jobs and contracts. Although this was not written down in policies, the practice of “taking care” of old comrades and friends was common. An influential student leader, currently down on his luck and living off rent for his house in Guwahati comments: “We were the policy makers because we fought to get to Dispur148 and we did...all we managed (however) were a few contracts and leases for shops. It was pathetic”149. The poignancy and frustration writ in the words also point towards the failure of the political class among the agitators to foresee the structural poverty in Assam. The possibility of creating new jobs are as bleak as they can be and the student movement-inspired government ended up cannibalising existing industries and leading to a further rot in the white collar market.

148 Dispur is the administrative capital of Assam
149 Interview with M Rahman, a Nagaon native now residing in Guwahati and living off rent from an old house (January 4, 2004) and occasionally contributing articles on culture and society to Assamese dailies
On the other hand, the leaders of the agitation were held guilty of betraying the rural concerns of the masses that supported their movement. They failed to ensure a growth of the rural economy and this apparent failure on the part of the elected government, partially explains the overwhelming support received by the radical nationalists in the district in the early 1990s.

In addition to such policies, the government’s desire to encourage local devolution of powers to the villages via the Panchayati Raj system has in effect subverted indigenous people’s attempts to consolidate their homesteads and territories by exercising moral control in matters relating to sale and purchase of land within particular village groupings. Even though many of the progressive elements of the Panchayati Raj system have allowed marginalised groups like women to have a say in local matters, the fact that there is little or no attention paid to extraneous facts to development—such as ethnicity—is criticised by indigenous beneficiaries of the system. Ms. Leela Bordoloi, a village representative says:

"...The cause of the increasing dominance of Muslims in this area are:

(a) natural increase of the population (b) migration (c) lack of correct electoral rolls (d) government inattentiveness to the problem. The Assamese-speaking people are leaving their original homes because of a lack of security. There is also plenty of interference where the government doesn’t do anything for the Assamese people. Under the

150 The Panchayati Raj system received a moral fillip in Gandhian discourse. Gandhi’s notion of a post-colonial India governed by a tradition of village republics was altered to suit political exigencies and implemented via the 73rd amendment of the Constitution in the late 1990s. Various central governments have pursued this as a means to encourage local development in villages.
new Panchayati Raj rules, the Muslims have totally taken over the administration of the villages, because they are dominant. It is as if the Assamese speaking people have no right to live in their own land. One can only say that this is our fault and we can’t take any decision for own good". 151

Bordoloi also cites that statistically speaking, there are a total of 72 villages in the area of Juria. 10 of these villages are totally Hindu, the rest have mixed communities, with the Muslims dominating. Population wise then one would have: 83% Muslims (bilingual), 7% others, including Christian and tribals and 10% Assamese speaking. In such a situation, she feels that very soon, faulty government policies may allow the settlers to have a bigger say over developmental matters.

While occupational statistics show that a larger number of people are engaged in agriculture, and it has also been explained at length that there is scant protection for indigenous people from losing their land, it has to be mentioned that there are three “tribal belts” in the district. Kaki, one of the case-study areas where land use data was collected, is part of such a tribal belt. The genesis of tribal belts began in colonial times, when it was seen that in Nagaon district alone, settlers from Mymensing occupied 33,402 acres in 1920-21, which further increased to 102,363 acres in 1929-30 (Das 1986: 30). In 1939, seeing that Line System was not adequate to safeguard tribal lands, the idea of a “tribal belt” was conceived in the hope of cordonning off areas that would be “prohibited” for settlement by settlers. The decision was held in abeyance until 1942 when the

151 Interview with Ms. Leela Bordoloi, member of Gaon Panchayat, March 12, 2004: Haloong Gaon.
governor declared that certain sub-montane areas, predominantly peopled by tribals and backward classes would be kept off bounds for more technologically (and presumably) economically advanced settlers. Three years later, after much agonising over the issue of leaving “tribal adjuncts” to a frontier waiting to be settled, tribal belts were laid down in law. However, it was found that there were hardly any compact tribal villages in many of the areas. Therefore, in order not to break the compactness and continuity of a belt, non-tribal majority villages were included in the belt. The fate of the tribal belts therefore were somewhat mired in pessimism from the start. In Kaki, the non-tribal villages grew, overtaking and engulfing the tribal villages. What remained was a sizable tract of forest that began to see settlers in the early 1980s until it was “taken over” by radical Assamese nationalists, who resettled the area with tribal farmers from other districts. These attempts to reclaim the tribal belts were further threatened by the numerous security laws that were implemented to combat the political activities of the Assamese nationalists.

Karbi Anglong, being equipped with provisions of the Sixth Schedule, has a slightly different policy framework in terms of land tenure and laws regulating access to other natural resources. Some of the basic parameters of the framework have been discussed above (Section 4) but need to be clarified further. Under the provision of the Sixth Schedule (of the Constitution of India), the District Council in respect of all the areas within its jurisdiction has the power to make laws regarding the allotment, occupation, use or the setting apart of land other than a reserved forest, for the purpose of agriculture or grazing or for residential or non-agricultural purpose likely to promote the interests of the inhabitants of any village or town, the management of any forest not being
a reserved forest and the regulation of jhum or other forms of shifting cultivation. The laws prevalent in the plains districts of Assam are not applicable in the Sixth Schedule districts. The Mikir Hills District (Transfer of Land) Act, 1959 provides that no land under the jurisdiction of the District Council Authority shall be sold, mortgaged, leased, bartered, gifted or otherwise transferred to a non-tribal or by a non-tribal to another, except with previous permission of the Executive Committee of the District Council (Karbi Anglong District Council 1987). However, as pointed out by a leading member of the Autonomous State Demand Committee, this has not prevented the phenomenal growth rate of the district, with much of the growth being attributed to the presence of settlers. In order to check this influx, the Executive Committee of the District Council resolved to (a) give preference to bona-fide scheduled tribe members of the district in matters of settlement; (b) second preference to be given to scheduled tribes coming from North Cachar Hills; (c) no settlement of land will be made with a non-tribal coming to the district after August 15, 1947; (d) that victims of natural disasters may be settled in the district after due investigation and (e) wastelands suitable for wet paddy cultivation be reserved for scheduled tribes of the district.

To wit the Indian state has had a primarily military response to the conflicts in the Northeast. Its presence in Assam has come under a lot of criticism from human right

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152 For details of the text of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, see Appendix 8.
153 Interview with Elwin Teron, ASDC leader (April 16, 2004: Diphu). Teron claims that the decadal growth has been as much as 60% since 1991.
154 Herein lies another caveat that lead to the tragic impasse between Kuki settlers and Karbi people in 2003- 2004. Most of the Kuki settlers claimed that were indeed from NC Hills, where they are scheduled tribe and thereby claimed legal status for their settlements to the extent of claiming political rights with the autonomous council.
155 A seemingly arbitrary cut-off date whose only political significance being that it is celebrated as 'Independence day' in India.
organisations (MASS 2003). Accounts of rape, torture, extra-judicial executions and death squads do not enhance India’s democratic reputation but because they occur in the frontier they seem “autonomous” from democratic processes and institutions in other parts of the country. The army and paramilitary enjoy impunity because of security laws like Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958. In its fifty-odd years of existence as a sovereign republic, India has fought several wars. Most of it was on its northern and western borders. In 1962, it fought a war in the eastern sector against China, following which it embarked on a policy of aggressive militarization and development of the Northeast (Verghese 1996). In Nagaon and Karbi Anglong, the preferred response has been violent confrontation with armed opposition groups. ULFA sympathisers and activists in Nagaon were gunned down by government-aided vigilantes working in tandem with security forces through the late 1990s (MASS 2001). Many of the organisation’s middle-rung leadership were from Nagaon and were centrally responsible for the ascendancy of leftist programmes in the rural areas. Their deaths were seen as brutal, with many public intellectuals rueing the state’s policy of extra-judicial executions of insurgents. In neighbouring Karbi Anglong, Indian paramilitary and military agencies continue to target members of armed opposition groups like UPDS. However, since a section of the organisation decided to sit for peace talks with the government, there have been accusations that they have been used to coerce and kill members of the other faction. Such events leave their mark on civil society and the possibility of

156 Kabiranjan Saikia (whose nom-de-guerre was Swadhinata Phukan), served in the organisation’s publicity wing and was a published poet and occasional contributor to leftist ‘little magazines’. His death, under nebulous circumstances, drew widespread anger in the local media in 2000. Similarly, the deaths of Prasanta Borah and Bhaskar Dutta also resulted in public outpouring of grief (MASS 2001).
grievances festering as causes for future conflict, because they have not been addressed, or have been forcibly silenced, are real (Das 2003: 293-307).

Episodes of ethnic conflicts between migrants and indigenous people, quickly take on a security-related aspect for the government. Its conflict resolution measures have been few and far between. The measures can be outlined at two levels. The first level comprises accords and agreements with armed (or unarmed) movements. The second level comprises policies deemed to address the root causes of the conflict. Very often, there is a great degree of overlap between the two.

The Assam accord of 1985 was the only non-militaristic engagement that the government of India had with Assamese sub-nationalist movements. Since immigration was the key issue that fuelled the movement, it is only natural to assume that it occupied prime place in the negotiations between the government and the leadership of the movement. It found an oblique reference as much of the substance of the accord was devoted to secondary issues, such as establishment of institutions and building infrastructure. The Sixth Schedule that is in place in the hills districts of Assam is now seen as a kind of conflict mitigating tool by the government. It has bestowed it on other groups demanding autonomy and secession in Assam. Autonomy and autonomous institutions have not delivered justice. Hence, it is rare to find an instance where autonomy has sought to work on the principle of restitution, by acknowledging that an injustice has been committed, or that some form of reconciliation has to undertaken. Moreover, autonomy- as framed within a statist discourse- does not address the issue of control of resources, finances and costs of running autonomous territories in a comprehensive manner. When they do, as in the Sixth Schedule, they seem ineffectual
and laden with contradictions that make the principle of custodianship appear more like a managerial policy. As long as autonomy arrangements are seen as a tool to manage the political demands of people in the region, there will always be problems with its implementation. For every instance where an ethnic group is promised autonomy, there will remain others who will claim to be aggrieved by that arrangement. As one has seen in the case of Karbi Anglong, where the autonomous council already exists, it is hardly a guarantee that such models can be upgraded to include other ethnic groups and/or economic and political developments. If anything, it is seen as an impediment and a “Trojan Horse” that leads to further loss of lands of indigenous people. The political processes that oil the workings of such autonomous arrangements (as in Karbi Anglong) lead to an overarching reliance on institutions that need not have a democratic ethos.

With regard to the crucial issue of immigration, the government of India has continued with the Illegal Migrants (Detection and Deportation) Tribunal, an act that has come under a lot of criticism from Assamese organisations.159 Where provisions for protection of indigenous lands exist, they remain as derivatives of colonial law and do not have a notion of the changes that indigenous and settler societies have undergone. It is especially true in the case of developmental laws that are supposed to mollify indigenous aspirations. Very often these laws are framed by a distant bureaucracy with little or no understanding of the issues at stake. The case to ban and/or wean away peasants from jhum cultivation is a case at hand. The government sees shifting agriculture as primitive.

159 The newly elected United Progressive Alliance (UPA) central government in India decided not to repeal the IMDT Act on October 28, 2004. Almost immediately, organizations such as the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and North East Students Organization (NESO) criticized the Congress government for this move. In popular perception the Congress is seen to be “soft” on the issue of illegal immigrants and in Assam it was during the tenure of the party that settlers were allowed to occupy lands in parts of Nagaon district in the 1950s and 1960s. Part of the reason has to do with the fact that during that time, it was the most dominant with no regional part to challenge it.
and threatening in terms of its mobile practices. On the other hand, it does not take into account the deep rooted cultural and economic systems that still practice jhum cultivation. By trying to wean people away from shifting agriculture, the policy falls into a vicious spiral wherein tribal practices are as primitive and therefore the target of well-meaning developmental activities. This in turn allows other, non-indigenous communities to avail of policy benefits, leaving the indigenous community in a state of impoverishment and discontent. More importantly these policies encourage the ambiguity of constitutionalism. To stay with the shifting cultivation example, where the Constitution recognises that this is central to the identity of indigenous people, policies of the government constantly refer for the need to wean people away from it; while the Constitution recognises community ownership of land, policies are oriented towards encouraging private control.

It is widely argued by policy makers and academics that the government is aware of the prevailing conditions in the rural areas and that rural reconstruction is one of the prescriptions of ameliorating land-related conflicts in Assam (Verghese 1996; Das Gupta 1997: 345-370). The quasi-governmental North East Development Finance Bank (NEDFi) has consistently projected the need to go beyond the legalities of land alienation

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160 See Appendix 11. The draft forest policy with its developmentalist drive has been criticized by social activists in the Northeast for its lack of understanding of traditional institutions and practices associated with forests and land use by indigenous communities in the Northeast.
and concentrate on income generation for the most affected sections of rural NE.

Such imperatives, well-meaning though they may be, are based on an assumption that development is the only issue that matters in politicising ethnicity in the region. As one has tried to show, development (historically speaking) has been co-terminus with increased modernisation of tenures and land use, and is not necessarily the path that indigenous communities wish to follow. The often inchoate voices that demand the return to traditional systems of governance are but an aspect of the deeper problems around the lack of debate on developmentalist models that are followed by the state in the frontier regions.

When such policies exist along with the unambiguous military option, settler indigenous conflicts will remain a potent and tragic issue in the region. McGarry and O’Leary speak of a series of attempts by states to manage ethnic differences (McGarry and O’Leary ibid.: 4). Forced mass population transfers are one of them and even though the settler phenomenon cannot neatly fit into the scheme, there are enough indications in Assam to suggest that migration into the case study area are results of calculated policy (in colonial times) or artefacts of policy (in post-colonial times) and are capable of drawing violent response from natives/indigenous persons. The prescriptions for ethnic and settler indigenous conflict in the region are somewhat outdated, as they rest on a legal fiction of equitable land and resource sharing arrangements. Hence, it not surprising to

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For more details see NEDFi’s Annual Report 2003-2004, available online: http://www.nedfi.com/annual_report/index.htm (Accessed May 17, 2005). NEDFi was created in 1995 and was geared to resolving the downturn of rural Northeast. Its mandate extended to opening communication links within and outside the Northeast. Several of its projects were based in the rural sector as this was where its main impact and mission was to be situated. Its mission statement speaks of the need to transform rural industry and many of its projects are aimed at reducing the conflicts in these areas. Since 2003, NEDFi’s micro-credit programmes highlight the role of moneylenders and usurers were prevalent in preventing the poor from saving. To date, NEDFi has done work to increase the role of savings in rural Assam as well Northeast. Rural reconstruction, as in related restructuring land relations and holdings, though part of NEDFi’s mission, is generally not directly addressed in NEDFi’s programes.
see the deep divisions that arise around issues of territory (and belonging) in the course of ethnic conflicts in the region. They seldom encourage consociation or power-sharing at the local level, and even when they do (as in the case of traditional Karbi authority being streamlined into administrative structures) and attempt to include diverse ethnic groups via constitutional means, they are not sensitive to past histories.

Perhaps the occasionally mentioned examples of Northern Ireland, Fiji and Malaysia, as possible models to emulate in the case of Assam by activists, are worth following up. Recent debates and raïj mel organised by human rights organisations have seen tentative suggestions by common people and local village elders speak of a need to "co-exist as equals". Consociation is one of the ways to address this. The feeling that indigenous people have to be able to decide who their neighbours will be is something that is repeated frequently in political discourse in Assam. One of the urgent tasks for any government in Assam is to de-escalate the levels of violence. The current attempts to associate conflicts with underdevelopment and by some convoluted logic, to criminality are simply unrealistic and lack the capacity for engagement. Modern theories of governance and conflict are critical of such attempts to de-legitimise dissent with the logic of liberal peace and development (Duffield 2001: 128). The need to address grievances from a holistic perspective, rather than treat them as a tool to be used for control, is an imperative condition to conflict transformation (Reimann 2001: 15).

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162 Lachit Bordoloi, 2003: Personal communication. Mr. Bordoloi, as the chairperson of a human rights organization has been in the forefront of organizing raïj mel in different parts of the state on the issue of sovereignty, right to self-determination and armed struggle. His organization believes that the political impasse between the armed opposition movement and the government are precisely on these issues and therefore he (and his organization) wishes to reclaim the space for dialogue within civil society, as opposed to an intractable position for both entities seen to be at “war”.
To sum up, in Nagaon and Karbi Anglong, the ability to transcend identities is dependent on a number of related factors. The first is the language and processes within which a larger political discourse takes place. Political parties, in this sense, have been instrumental in the evolution of strategies that are adopted by native Assamese, indigenous and settler communities. One of the strategies in this case is for groups to strongly identify with particular local, regional or even national political parties. Sections of civil society also adopt this strategy when they articulate political positions. Parliamentary politics has the ability to transform local issues into a national debate. However, India's legislative bodies—like the two houses of parliament—follow the logic of majorities. In this process, peripheral regions like the Northeast are at a disadvantage because they represent a 'small state syndrome', where even though the formal institutions of governance—states, bureaucracy, police etc.—are in place, their effectiveness in influencing national policy is negligible (Agarwal and Datta Ray 1994; Chaube 1999). Yet, people vote either out of a sense of token resistance to established political parties in power, or due to sheer coercion (Kikon 2004).

Another factor, closely related to the first, is the role of the security establishment in framing political discourse. It would help to clarify this factor by citing an example at this juncture. On January 4, 2005, an English newspaper, widely circulated in Diphu (Karbi Anglong) carried two stories on the front page, reflecting the bewildering

163 This means that political parties that have a strong following in big, densely populated states have an advantage. They represent a larger percentage of the electorate. Therefore, smaller states (as the ones in the Northeast) have proportionate representation in legislative bodies.

164 Analysing voting patterns and strategies of the neighbouring Nagas, Kikon asserts that voting is the proverbial double-edged sword. The Nagas, like other native and indigenous communities in the Northeast, participated in national elections because failure to do so often resulted in military campaigns against them. She claims that Naga voters approach the ritual of Indian elections in 'bad faith', seeing their own actions as one of individual survival and the elections as the imposition of alien rules by an alien state.
circumstances that constitute daily life in the Northeast and in places like Diphu. The front page carried the Indian army’s press release, where its spokesperson categorically informed the media that it was opposed to the dilution of the Armed Force (Special Powers) Act, despite the massive campaigns carried out for its repeal by civil society organisations in the Northeast and in other parts of India. The army’s spokespersons also cast aspersions on journalists when they questioned the army’s lack of commitment to human rights standards by stating that the army was also engaged in developmental work in the region. On the same page, the paper carried a report presented to its correspondent in the hills of Manipur, where local village chiefs gave a detailed account of how their lives were destroyed by the army’s brutal counter-insurgency operations. The two stories are connected by a logic of conflict management that is reflected even in autonomy arrangements, or centre-state, state-civil society relations in the Northeast. For the reader in Diphu, the connections between the army’s need to retain draconian security laws and the victims of counter-insurgency with radically different stories to tell do not require further explanations.

That, in essence is the tragedy in Northeast India as a whole. In Nagaon and Karbi Anglong, such stories are only made more incredulous with the security apparatus taking greater care to win the “hearts and minds” of the people. Therefore, the army speaking the same discourse of development as the state and policy makers is not strange. What is, however, is the fact that it has been able to step into this role without attracting adverse reactions from the bureaucracy and political establishment in Assam. Governance in the

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region owes more to a security-military mindset than to civic ideals (Baruah 2001). Similar practices that are not disposed to democratic engagement with ethnic complexities and demands have produced lawless border interests where drugs and rebel armies are fixed in a complicated relationship with nation states, in the tri-junction between Burma, China and Thailand (Sturgeon 2004: 463-484).

Therefore, the need to reassess existing political discourse is the all the more important, as they are the key to a transformation of existing relations in the region. This reassessment has to also distance itself from security-driven measures so long as autonomy arrangements and developmental targets are seen as a tool to manage the political demands of people in the region, there will always be problems with its implementation. For every instance where an ethnic group is promised autonomy or for every community who benefits from a particular developmental package, there will remain others who will claim to be aggrieved by that arrangement.