

STRANGERS OF THE MIST: TALES OF WAR AND PEACE FROM INDIA'S NORTHEAST

by

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Strangers of the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast authored by Sanjoy Hazarika; Viking, Penguin Books India, 1994. Paperback. Price Rs. 425, ISBN 9780140240528

There had been ample indications before Independence that India's Northeast would be a hotspot of conflict. The Nagas had made a case before the British that they would not like their homeland to be attached to any other territory or country. Subsequently, the Naga National Council (NNC) declared independence a day ahead of India's. In Tripura, communists had already begun a vociferous campaign for the end of the feudal regime of the princely state. Failure of the government to comprehend the situation and the consequent implementation of faulty policies only resulted in the spread of the conflict to the other states of the region. By the end of the 1970s, Mizoram and Manipur began to burn; Assam and Tripura followed suit a few years later.

These conflicts were as similar as they were different from each other. Nagas and Manipuris claimed they were never part of India and that their territories had been forcibly incorporated. In Tripura, it was marginalization of the tribal communities in the face of the unabated immigration from Bangladesh. In Assam too, infiltration from across the border fuelled insecurity, which was compounded by a host of other factors that were ignored for decades by the Centre. Each had its local factors shaping the contours of the movement, its goals and strategies. There was a dire need to know these movements in detail and break the stereotype interpretations that viewed all of them under the same rubric of armed movements.

Strangers of the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast by Sanjoy Hazarika fills the void in reportage and documentation of these myriad conflicts in India's Northeast. The narration gives a peek into the origin of the separatist rebel movements, their spread and causes of sustenance. When the book was first published in 1994, it came as a surprise to many that the demand for independence in Mizoram grew out of the mishandling of the famine in the hill state and that the campaign would have actually fizzled out had the government been astute enough to deal with the Mizo rebels when they evinced the desire for a negotiated settlement in the early 1970s. ULFA's links with Pakistan and Afghanistan were also startling revelations as were its plans to set up a base in Bangladesh. This book would be immensely valuable to researchers, journalists and anybody who wishes to know more about the Northeast, its militant outfits and the response of the people in negotiating with the nation state superstructure.

One of the most salient aspects of the book is the lucidity of the narration weaved into a pattern that is enjoyable to read. The book is divided into four sections, which are subdivided into chapters. The first section "The Bangladesh Syndrome" traces the origin of the conflicts and gives a detailed description of the immigration from Bangladesh and its ramification in Assam. The second section "The New Rebellions" discusses the spread of the movements, the factors responsible and the role played by the neighbouring countries in sustaining the separatist movements. In the last, Hazarika gives suggestions to stem the crisis and the spiraling violence in the frontier zone.

Hazarika warns that "savage conflicts" would erupt in the Northeast in the absence of policies on "population growth, migration, flood control and agricultural production, sharing of resources and better cooperation." And if they occur, he adds, then even the "civil wars in Bosnia, Somalia and Azerbaijan will be reduced to a shadow on the world's memory." He comes up with a list of suggestions including development of the poverty stricken regions in Bangladesh to prevent its inhabitants from migrating.

Two decades later, the situation has only worsened in the Northeast with more migration, unemployment, ethnic riots and proliferation of rebel groups. According to some estimates there were more than a hundred rebel outfits active in the region by the mid-2000s. But gone are the days when the militant would die till the end fighting for independence. Now insurgent

groups come in different shapes, sizes and range of objectives with a majority of them were clamoring for a negotiated settlement now within the constitution. Only nine separatist groups remain in the jungles of Myanmar still campaigning for independence. The insurgency related incidents have also registered a sharp decline in the recent years in the Northeast.

The last section on appendices has nine documents of historical and current importance. Two among them including “Gandhiji’s Advice To Assam” shed light on the chain of events that sought to include the Northeast in East Pakistan and how it managed to extricate itself from the lethal design. Another interesting snippet are the letters written by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to the state chief minister Bishnu Ram Medhi on the Naga separatist movement and governor Fazl Ali on the reasons why a refinery ought to be set up in Barauni and not in Guwahati.

Few factual mistakes are the only shortcomings in the book committed probably due to paucity of information at the time when the book was written and difficulty in crosschecking facts. These hurdles are usually faced in a conflict situation. The 1990s was a turbulent decade in the Northeast. ULFA’s leadership was on the move and fighting for survival and it was difficult to get access to them. The first chairman of ULFA, for example, was not BhadreswarBuragohain (P. 169) but BuddeswarGogoi, a schoolteacher from Moran in Sivasagar. Buragohain(not Gohain as mentioned) was closely associated with the group during the formative phase and had even gone to Dimapur for setting up links with the Naga underground. But he changed tack and became a member of the RajyaSabha from the ruling AsomGanaParishad (AGP) a few years later. Then, ULFA chief of staff PareshBaruah never travelled through Tirap in Arunachal Pradesh to reach Kachin as has been mentioned (P. 178) and which was apparent from the interviews given by Baruah and other senior functionaries to this writer. There were two routes – through Changlang in Arunachal Pradesh and Mon in Nagaland - to Myanmar since 1983 when the first batch crossed over. ULFA already had a presence at the council headquarters of NSCN in Myanmar’s ChallamBasti and it was from here that the contact with the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) was established. Therefore, ULFA’s first contact with the Naga and Manipuri rebels came about in the Naga region of Myanmar’s Sagaing Division and not in Kachin (P. 178).