

India's North East

CASE STUDY



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Dr Małgorzata Bonikowska

specialises in international relations and social communications. She is a graduate of the University of Warsaw, the Sorbonne and Columbia University in New York. Prior to Poland's accession to the EU, she headed the European Information Centre. She was the head of the European Commission's Information and Communication Programme in Poland and Bulgaria. She has participated in numerous EU projects in Europe and Asia.

Governing the Indian Union – “an explosive combination” of different States, language, religion and culture – requires unusual political skills. In “the world’s biggest democracy” the scale of tensions and conflicts of interest is proportional to the size and population of this complicated country. It can be seen in the example of the eight (seven till recently) North Eastern States, for decades shaken by all kinds of turmoil. The prevalence of peace, development agenda, as well as finding a way to unleash the human potential constitute three essential challenges of the region.

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The North Eastern outpost of India is still a turbulent area, although to a much lesser extent than several years ago, which is demonstrated by the declining insurgency over decades. Fewer inhabitants of the region today advocate independence per se. However, a large part continues to fight for the change of frontiers within the Union. The native population is a mixture of cultures and influences: Indian, Chinese, Burmese, Mongolian, as well as a religious cauldron. Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, and tribals - worshippers of primitive cultures. Due to decades of ethnic and political tensions, the region has been sadly ignored by mainstream politics and the country's growing economy, underinvested and underdeveloped. This is hopefully going to change. The gateway to the North East, Assam, has recently witnessed a political upheaval, with the ruling national party, BJP forming its first Government.

“Seven Sisters”

When India gained independence in 1947, three political subjects were present in the North East: the British province of Assam, famous for its tea, and the kingdoms of Manipur and Tripura, which stayed under British protectorate from the end of 19th century. With time, four new States were

carved out of the original territory of Assam, following ethnic and linguistic divisions. In 1963, in a territory of over a dozen of tribes who had never before had their own administration, a state of Nagaland was created. In 1972, Meghalaya, land known for its matrilineal traditions, became a State. In the same year, a territory of Mizoram, inhabited mainly by Christians, was carved out, and in 1987 it became a part of the India Union. Also, the State of Arunachal Pradesh was created out of a piece of land disputed with China. The kingdoms of Manipur and Tripura joined the Union of India way back in 1949, but were given statehood only in 1972.

These seven States of India's North East (called “Seven Sisters”), linked to the rest of the country with a narrow corridor of Siliguri via West Bengal, are literally squeezed between China, Bhutan and Bangladesh. Several hundred of tribes scattered around this territory preserve their ancestors' traditions and their own language, hardly integrating with the modern world. For example in Manipur alone there are 29 different tribes. Assam remains the gateway to the region, with States dependent upon one another in terms of economy and transport. For example, to prevent uncontrollable floods on the lowlands, it is necessary to

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ensure forestation and quality of soil in the highlands. In turn, the inhabitants of the highlands are able to lead normal life thanks to agriculture and trade in the lowlands. To formalise and enforce cooperation, which is necessary for the existence of the region, in 1971 the Indian government set up the North Eastern Council. It consists of the Chief Ministers and Governors of the eight States, including Sikkim, which was the last to join the Indian Union in 1975 and was included in the Council in 2002. The council is the nodal agency for economic and social development of the region and seeks to promote infrastructure, investment in education and energy production.

To secure peace

Some inhabitants of the North East have Mongoloid or Chinese facial features, specially the eyes. Many in India refer to them as 'Chinki' an insolent name for the Chinese or "yellow people." They feel 'alienated' from the rest of the country and cases of youngsters being attacked and abused appear to be on the rise in the recent past. More so since 2012, when hundreds of north-eastern students and labourers sought to flee a southern city of Bangalore, following rumours in social media that they would be targeted for communal violence in their

home State of Assam. The exodus made headlines and forced the Government at the Centre to step in and assuage fears.

More importantly, the locals have become attuned to living with violence and unrest triggered by insurgent groups, who have been fighting for years for autonomy or independence from India. Worse, the bitter rivalry for supremacy amongst the tribal groups (such as the Kuki-Chin-Mizo group, the Naga group, the Meitei group, the Bodos, the Karbis, the Dimasas, the Khasis, the Garos, the Assamese, the Bengalis), takes a heavy toll on the ordinary citizens, who are blackmailed, threatened, killed, have to deal with months of economic blockade etc. For example, never-ending tension can be sensed in Manipur, a state which prides itself of over a thousand years' tradition of independent nationhood. Other than the infamous Kuki-Meitei rivalry, over a dozen 'illegal' organisations are active. These include the People's Liberation Army of Manipur (PLA), People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK) and the Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP) and the lethal United National Liberation Front (UNLF), created in 1964, whose leaders are hiding in Myanmar or China, fomenting violence all the time.

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In the North East of India tension simmers from poor economic background. Additionally, there are other problems – similarly to contemporary Europe – with illegal migration, mainly from neighbouring Bangladesh, earlier East Bengal, later became East Pakistan inhabited by largely Bengali-speaking Muslims. In the beginning of the 20th century there were hardly any Muslims in Assam, today they constitute about 35% of the population and their number is growing, much to the chagrin of the local Assamese. Out of 21 districts, they have majority in nine. In the tiny state of Tripura pockets with Muslim population are growing.

The main reason for widespread migration is cultivable land, which is still possible to purchase. Inhabitants of the over-populated East Bengal started to move and settle in neighbouring Assam in search of a better livelihood. They would live there off the agricultural production in the wastelands. Hard-working and well-organised, they quickly took over the land and were learning to draw their income out of it. The Muslim League, fighting together with Mahatma Gandhi's Congress against colonialism, unofficially inspired them to do so. When India gained independence, divided into India and Pakistan, the migration from East Bengal did not stop. In 1971, after a

new country, Bangladesh, was created on the territory of East Pakistan, Indian authorities did not seal the border, which remains practically open even today, unlike the closely guarded frontier with Pakistan in the west.

Over the years, the original immigrants integrated into the local society and had no intention to return. Meanwhile, newcomers too started to arrive, because they could not make a living in over-populated and economically underdeveloped Bangladesh. At the same time, native inhabitants of Assam, who were initially glad to have somebody to help them out with work, started to be suspicious towards the immigrants, fearing they would become a minority in their own State and country. Cultural and religious differences added fuel to fire.

The problem has been growing for several decades. The local Assamese have been waiting anxiously for a fair resolution by the Central government and for starters that steps be undertaken to seal the border. On its part, the State government sought to ignore the local Assamese fear of losing identity as it got caught in 'vote bank' politics by appeasing the Muslim migrants. A new census, which has been carried out over several months, shows that Assam has recorded the highest increase in share of

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Muslims, from 30.9% of the State's population in 2001 to 34.2% in 2011. A deeper study would unravel the real social situation and the scale of the problem. One of solutions could be to ban the purchase of land by 'foreigners', but it would require better control over migration. This would in turn mean the necessity to increase the number of border guards, policemen, as well as to protect official border crossings. Political will and funds are also required.

Development agenda

The second biggest regional challenge is development. "Development agenda" is discussed and debated by all North Eastern politicians, because not only would it improve economic condition of the inhabitants, but also calm social tensions. For example, under-development along with ethnic strife was the main argument for creating an autonomous territory at the Western edge of Assam, comprising 4 districts inhabited by one million of the Bodo people.

Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) became autonomous in 2003. Since then, the situation in the region has significantly improved. The increase in subsidies from the Central budget resulted in a rapid growth of public investments, especially in

roads, hospitals and schools. Unfortunately, misguided ideas can also be found: in the middle of the field far away from Kokrajhar (the main BTC city) a huge cultural and exhibition centre was built, together with an art museum with not a single showpiece, and an open-air theatre not attended by any viewers. Nearly half of the Bodo population cannot read or write, numerous villages are still deprived of electricity and water.

The BTC is ruled by the Bodoland People's Front (BPF), created in 2005 mainly by activists, who had fought for autonomy before in the framework of the All Bodo Students Union. The party was one of the five forces in the Assamese Legislative Assembly, next to Indian National Congress, which till recently was ruling in the State. It now has a bigger stake by partnering with the BJP, which has won the State election 2016 along with another partner, the AGP (Assom Gana Parishad) and the AIUDF (All India United Democratic Front), mostly popular within Islam followers being relegated to the background. Around 60% of native population are Hindus, nearly 18% - Muslims, fewer per cent - Christians.

The Bodoland People's Front governs the autonomous council, and simultaneously is trying to win Delhi's permission to create a

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separate State. They argue that the region will receive even better growth opportunities, because right now it cannot get through with some of its postulates. The earlier division of Assam acts in favour of such separatist tendencies. However, it is largely believed that the main motivation of local politicians is the greed for the 'chair and power'. If a new State was to be created, there would be many more berths for grabs in the Government.

However, as of now the locals too concede that there are no realistic possibilities to create a new State, and the thread of ethnic and economic tension would continue to weigh heavily on the political debate. On the one hand, repeated attacks of radical militant groups fighting with Indian administration still continue and on the other – tensions between social groups persist. Last year about 80 civilians lost their lives in the Kokrajhar massacre in December. And every year over a dozen policemen are killed. According to official statistics, 382 people were killed in riots in the Bodoland areas since 2004.

Unleashing human potential

Investment in public infrastructure is critical alright, but in order to trigger social and economic change, active and educated

people are genuinely needed—such as engineers, teachers, doctors, artists, businessmen etc. However, the North East is largely seen as 'laid back', with its people not really fond of work. To snap them out of the lethargy it is necessary to create favourable conditions and unleash individual potential, which will not be possible without mass education. In theory, Indian constitution guarantees the Right to free education to all citizens up to the age of 16, but in reality there are not enough public schools, and teachers quite often do not turn up for work. At the same time, the huge amount of public funds distributed by the Centre, have got people addicted to subsidies and most look out for government jobs and the public sector undertakings. Squandering of money and corruption of political and administrative elites is on similar lines in the North East like the rest of the country.

Media also have a very important role to play. Unlike in the West, in India the newspaper circulation is on the rise, and newspapers – published in all local languages – are widely read. It is because still not many people use the Internet. Daily circulation of the most popular title in the region, Assam Tribune group, published since 1939, amounts to over 100 thousand copies. Media are eyes and ears of the government, but

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at the same time eyes and ears of the people. Journalists largely focus on reporting current affairs, they do not analyse the situation nor give knowledge commentary which could help the readers to understand what is going on. If media started to promote the peace process and local initiatives as intensely as they inform about conflicts and violence, India's North East would be in a far better state today.

There is hardly any local entrepreneurship in Bodoland areas, people live off small-scale agricultural production for their own needs or work in administration. Public resources come mainly from Central government's subsidies. Similar situation can be observed in the entire North East. Industry is not eager to invest in this dangerous region. For the same reason, the tourism sector hardly develops, despite numerous local attractions, such as national parks, where a white rhino can be easily spotted.

However, the North East wakes up slowly, and is eyeing development. Private investment is slowly coming up thanks to progressive stabilisation, harbingers of entrepreneurship can also be observed. For example, Manipur has become a centre of private medical services, with the leading Shija hospital, opened in 1985, which employs 650 workers, possesses modern diag-

nostic equipment, and offers, among others, plastic surgery. Over 8 thousand cataract operations, as well as 18 thousand laparoscopic surgeries were performed there. The hospital owns the only accredited blood bank in the region, the second is far away in Calcutta. The hospital charges for its services, however, some procedures are subsidised with public funds in the framework of a PPP model. Blood tests could cost up to approximately 2000 rupees (around 25 USD), but patients get these for free thanks to governmental funding. Lip surgery costs 2000 rupees and is covered by US AID. The hospital also has a medical college and it trains doctors from across the country, as well as foreigners, mainly from Myanmar. It also offers treatment to those wounded in riots, including members of hit squads – after having informed the Police.

Act East

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in office for two years, declared “a new opening” in the Central government's policy towards the North East. In 2015, he ensured he was at the closing ceremony of Sangai, a local culture festival in Imphal, the capital of Manipur, and also inaugurated a ten-day Hornbill festival in Kohima, the capital of Nagaland. Governmental programme “Act

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East” is meant to be a continuation of “Look East” programme, announced by the previous government back in the 90s. It provides for an increase of investment in the region, opening up to entrepreneurship, as well as activating profit-making sectors.

The government intends to soothe internal conflicts and tensions connected with the activities of the militant pro-independence movement, aims at political rapprochement of these States towards the Centre, while making grounds for local economic forces. Main infrastructural projects: a railway line to Myanmar and the construction of the East-West corridor act in favour of this goal. The North East could be the gateway to South-East Asia and its potential must be unlocked.

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Centre for International Relations (CIR) is an independent, non-government analytical centre established in 1996 which deals with Polish foreign policy and the most important issues of international politics. CIR is active in research, education and publishing, organises conferences and meetings, and participates in international projects in collaboration with similar institutions in many countries. CIR creates a forum for debate and exchange of ideas in matters of international politics, relations between states and challenges in the global world. CIR's activities are addressed above all to local-government officials and to entrepreneurs, as well as to officials of the central administration, politicians, diplomats, political scientists and the media. In 2014, CIR was again recognised as one of the best think-tanks in East-Central Europe in the study "The Leading Public Policy Research Organisations in the World" conducted by the University of Pennsylvania.

CENTRE FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS ul. Mińska 25, 03-808 Warszawa t: +48 22 646 52 67

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