

Medals and Ribbons

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A SALUTE TO OUR VALIANT WARRIORS

INDIA'S NORTHEAST

Military Amidst a
Multi-Ethnic Maze

**CHAKRAVYUH
AROUND
NORTH EAST INDIA**
- A SECURITY SCAN

**OPERATION
HOT PURSUIT 2015**
- SURGICAL STRIKE
INTO MYANMAR

**THE LEGENDARY
MAJOR BOB KHATHING**
- A CHRONICLE OF COURAGE
AND COMMITMENT

WALONG HALF MARATHON



The **Walong Half Marathon** was conducted on 27th October 2024 to commemorate the epic '**Battle of Walong – 1962**'. It was not just a race, but a powerful tribute to the brave soldiers who laid down their lives in the defence of our motherland. Held in the breath-taking and historically significant landscape of Walong in Arunachal Pradesh, the Marathon witnessed spirited participation from 558 male and female runners. Subedar Nitender Singh, a Rio Olympian, was the Guest of Honour, inspiring participants with his presence and embodying the spirit of perseverance and excellence. The Walong Half Marathon, a heartfelt salute to our war heroes, brought together civilians and soldiers in a challenge of endurance, courage and fortitude.

Col David Devasahayam



On return from the Young Officers' course in the summer of 1981 our battalion, the Second Battalion of the Eighth Gorkha Rifles, then stationed at Cooch Behar in Bengal was partially heli-lifted into Mizoram when the talks with Laldenga, the Mizo separatist leader with his Mizo National Front, failed for the first time. As a young officer now the Intelligence Officer and Commando Platoon Commander (the modern day Ghataks) at Thenzawl, a Grouped Village Centre with the Battalion Headquarters and Alpha Company, I had my first taste of counter insurgency operations. The thick foreboding jungles which began a short walk from our posts were ideal terrain for the hostiles (that is what we called them then) to operate in. It took us some time to familiarise and succeed in this challenging environment. Laldenga would later come overground and become Mizoram's Chief Minister in 1986.

Years later in 2000, I took over command of 6 Assam Rifles, which was deployed in Tirap District in Eastern Arunachal Pradesh, now in active operations against both the factions of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Khaplang and Isak-Muivah), two old and very violent insurgencies. An interesting moment of that time was a visit by Mr George Fernandes, the Defence Minister when he was visiting Arunachal Pradesh.

The Northeast as it will be seen, has often been sundered by violent conflict for diverse reasons. As a corollary, the Indian Army along with the Assam Rifles has been deployed for counter insurgency operations since the 1950s to restore normalcy, and contain the anti-national elements. Aply supported by the Indian Air Force, the Army has largely stabilised the militant movements and many parts of the Northeast are relatively peaceful. Manipur however, is today the cause for concern wracked by violence caused by the ethnic and political differences between the Meitei and Kuki communities with the violence beginning in May 2023.

Surrounded by China, Myanmar and Bangladesh, there is also an external dimension to the security challenges of North East India – narcotics from the Golden Triangle, illegal immigration, easy availability of weapons and civil strife besides safe havens in Myanmar have



With Mr. George Fernandes, the Defence Minister

made the security situation more complex. In this Region - specific issue, we have strung together perspectives, stories, reports and glimpses from different parts of **'India's North East'**.

On another note, recently, I read **'Shooting Straight'**, the biography of Lieutenant General R K Nanavatty, my first Commanding Officer, and it struck me for its honest appraisal of matters military. In this issue, we have hence included a review of this exceptionally incisive biography by Air Vice Marshal Arjun Subramaniam – the book is recommended reading for all those interested in the defence forces.

I am sure the readers will be enamoured with what the Northeast has to offer and will salute the Armed Forces for their contribution to instilling peace and stability in this turbulent region.



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A SALUTE TO OUR VALIANT WARRIORS

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Lt Gen J S Sandhu, (Retd).

Jammu & Kashmir and the Northeast have been major security challenges for the Indian State in the last seven decades. I joined my unit in *'Internal security'* duties in Lower Assam in **Operation Garam Hawa** in July 1980; we were assisting in controlling the riots against illegal migrants. But this was just one hot spot in the Northeast – counter insurgency operations were in progress in Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram. Later, secessionist or autonomy movements spread to Tripura, Bodo areas in Assam, to parts of Meghalaya and also to the Tirap District in Arunachal Pradesh.

Naturally, there was an increase in security forces deployment. There were about five Army divisions and 12 Assam Rifles battalions in the Northeast in the early 80s. Today, nine divisions plus, and 41 Assam Rifles battalions besides Central Armed Police Forces are deployed. The Air Force assets and bases have also been enhanced and many Advance Landing Grounds have been made operational. There are some who feel that

manpower surge is not the answer, but I feel that in Counter Insurgency, **'boots on ground'** matter. Technology helps in better application of combat power, but cannot replace the soldier fully.

Has this force application resolved the anti-national movements? Undoubtedly, there has been vast improvement – violence parameters have improved clearly, talks and suspension of operations are in progress, Accords and Agreements too have been signed, normalcy is observed in many areas which were earlier *'disturbed'*. The return of peace has been due to a combination of many steps. The Government granted greater autonomy and created suitable structures, financial packages were released and infrastructure development has accelerated. Political sagacity and military pressures have been applied in synergy.

But Manipur presently remains in turmoil, with sporadic clashes disturbing the fragile truce. External factors can disrupt the peace in other areas too, so we need to remain vigilant and ready. Lieutenant General R S Salaria (Retd) has highlighted this *'Chakravyuh'* around the Northeast and Lieutenant General R P Kalita (Retd), former Eastern Army Commander has also penned a lucid security scan of the region, while Lieutenant General K Himalay Singh (Retd) has traced the roots of the ethnic quagmire in Northeast India. We have also gone back in time to see how the McMahon Line came into being, and recall the valour and role of Major Bob Khathing, who first unfurled the Indian Flag in Tawang. The recovery of remains of American crew from lost aircrashes in the Himalayas is

discussed and the merger of Sikkim is also covered in this issue. We have described the surgical strike into Myanmar in June 2015 which was a decisive step in our national security response strategy.

Some of the other articles depict the landscape in Eastern Arunachal Pradesh, in South Mizoram, the Arakan Army's control in Rakhine State of Myanmar, the situation in Manipur and we have also included a profile on Assam Rifles – The Sentinels of the Northeast. The criticality of Airpower for the security of Northeast India, the crucial role of helicopters and air maintenance is also elaborated. And we have spotlighted two major international maritime exercises, namely Exercise Milan and Malabar.

In our regular columns, Dr. Renuka David recalls her time as a frontier doctor in Sikkim and our Finsherpa amplifies financial security aspects for senior citizens in the Money Matters column.

In July 25, we plan to focus on the 1965 Indo Pak War, the Diamond Jubilee of the War comes up in September this year. We look forward to articles on this theme. The articles may be sent to chiefeditor@medalsandribbons.com by 07 May 2025.

In this issue, we have stitched together a mosaic of articles covering **the Northeast**. Hopefully the readers will find them interesting and educative. We look forward to your earnest feedback. The Editorial Team thanks all the readers for your valuable support and your positive kudos.





CHAKRAVYUH AROUND NORTH EAST INDIA

The development initiatives of various governments have definitely initiated the process of development in North East (NE) India. There is an overall sense of economic well-being, improved connectivity and infrastructure development. Today, we see NE persons contributing to the national economy, particularly in the services / hospitality sector. Their immense contribution in the field of sports and adventure needs no emphasis. But there are many challenges and pitfalls, as this assessment highlights.

Overview

In the early 1970s as a child, I vividly remember visiting our two paternal uncles in the tea gardens of Assam, somewhere between Jorhat and Tinsukia, after a gruelling train journey of three nights. We would disembark at a station at night with no electricity connection. We felt as if we had arrived in an alien area, totally cut off from the mainland. While travelling by road through the countryside teeming with jungles and wild life, even as a child, one could not miss out on the state of under development.

As young boys, we were oblivious of the historical background as to why the NE had come to this pass. What hit the Nation most was apparently the partition of Bengal into the Hindu majority West Bengal and the Muslim majority East Bengal that went to Pakistan as “**East Pakistan**” in 1947. Amongst the numerous fall-outs, the most telling was the disruption of connectivity with rest of India. The entire communication network had been engineered through what is now Bangladesh. Post-partition, all movement had to pass through the narrow and strategically vulnerable Siliguri Corridor. The international trade routes and sea links that were functional during the British period were disrupted. This constriction added to the isolation of a region which already suffered from under development, and encapsulated this region into a land locked cocoon encircled on all sides with 5000+ km long and porous borders with Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar and East Pakistan (later Bangladesh). The region was extremely vulnerable to hostile forces and influences from across the borders.



Left. India Myanmar Border (credit visionias.in)

Right. India - Myanmar - Thailand Trilateral Highway (credit en.wikipedia.org)

confront these ground realities. Starting with establishment of the North Eastern Council in 1971, initiation of the Look East Policy in 1991, establishment of the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (MoDONER) in 2001, upgrade of **Look East Policy to Act East Policy** by Prime Minister Modi and his Development Initiative for NE Region 2022-26, the North Eastern Region that comprises a vital 8% of the country with eight states of Assam, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura and Sikkim, has indeed come a long way. The Prime Minister very aptly gave a vision of 4 Cs for the region, ie **Culture, Commerce, Connectivity and Capability Building**, aiming for an “insurgency free,

This strategic vulnerability and geographical divide should have attracted the topmost concern for the Nation. Unfortunately, with reactive policies we perceived the area mainly through the law and order lens. Though the resource exploitation of the British period stopped after independence, there was no credible effort for speedy economic development. The nation was at that time faced with the need to develop in the vast mainland too, where infrastructure and social challenges were immense. The NE too, despite its vast potential, suffered due to the overall lack of resources. Severe and long standing economic deprivation further generated feelings of alienation, mistrust, hatred and prejudice among masses that ultimately gave birth to violence, scramble for control of scarce resources, divisive or separatist tendencies, ethnic or tribal conflicts, secessionist political movements, further exacerbated by illegal migrations and demographic challenges.

It took some hard hitting lessons over three to four decades for the Nation to

peaceful and prosperous North East India”. How much of this vision has been achieved – needs to be assessed.

There has also been a significant improvement in the security situation, with a reduction of 75-80% in extremist incidents and casualties dropping by more than 90%. Several peace accords with insurgent groups have been signed, including suspension of operations agreements. That notwithstanding, development is still at the “tip of the iceberg” stage. A lot more needs to be done and meaningful development will take a few more years. Most importantly, a feeling must spread that “The Mainland wants the North East as much as the North East wants the Mainland”.

The **Act East Policy** too was conceived well. The Government launched various initiatives to develop international trade routes and physical connectivity with ASEAN countries through Bangladesh, the NE Region, Myanmar and Thailand, thus opening the gates for economic development of the NE Region. Everything seemed to be on track with excellent relations with Bangladesh, overall stability seeping into the area and amicable relations with the entity in power in Myanmar. However, starting February 2021 with the civil war in Myanmar, followed by Manipur violence May 2023 onwards, and overthrow of the Hasina Regime in Bangladesh in August 2024, the situation has taken on a completely different posture. Considering China’s overarching strategy and design to contain a rising Bharat, one can discern the growing tentacles of a multi-dimensional **Chakravayuh** that threatens to engulf the NE Region. This evolving **Chakravayuh** must be neutralised with utmost speed and priority before it impedes and harms our interests.

**Internal Dissensions
- The Hub of the Chakravayuh**

Let us first understand the internal dynamics and forces affecting the stability of NE India. **Firstly**, ethnic, cultural and tribal issues of the NE are most peculiar and intricate requiring understanding and respect. There are more than 220 tribes spread across intermingling pockets in the NE, each having its own identity, culture, language and land holding system. For each tribe, their identity and perception of ownership of their territory is supreme. Tensions have often existed between insurgents in these states and the Central Government, as well as amongst the native indigenous people and migrants from other parts of India and illegal immigrants from neighbouring countries. This has been the root cause of all insurgencies starting with the Naga and Mizo insurgencies in the 1960s. While the security situation in the entire NE (barring Manipur) may be well under control, the undercurrents of their desires for independent states or autonomy still persist.

There are 70 terrorist / insurgent / extremist groups currently inactive, and 18 groups involved in ceasefire / suspension of operations agreement with the Government. However, there are still 15 proscribed groups and as many as 35 groups who are still active in their respective struggles. In most of these claims, the territory claimed spills over to the neighbouring states or even countries like Myanmar. The demands for Greater Nagalim, Zomi identity and nationhood, Bodoland, Gorkhaland and Kamatapur are a few examples. The Government has created 10 Autonomous District Councils under the Sixth Schedule and 19 Statutory Autonomous Councils in various North Eastern states, but the problem persists due to lack of real autonomy, inadequate

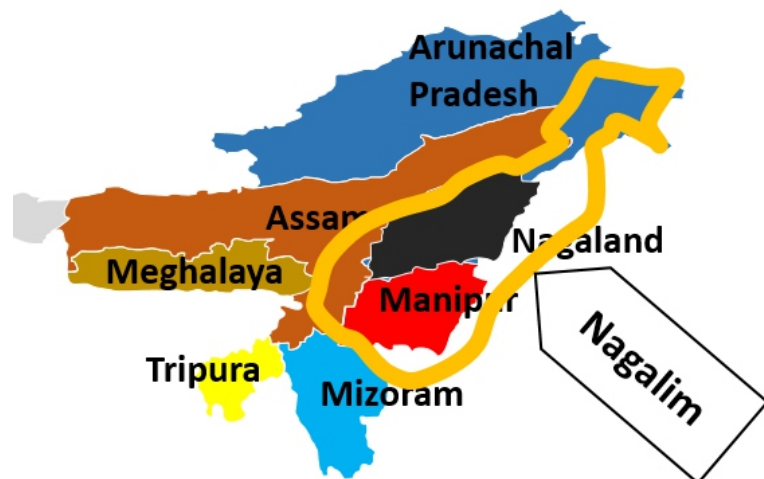
funding, political interference from State governments, poor implementation of development projects, internal power struggles within communities, and the complex nature of ethnic identities. Recent statements made by responsible politicians in support of Zomi identity and Nationhood are most uncalled for and will only endanger national security and sovereignty.

Secondly, the migration issue gnaws at NE India, particularly Assam. Connected is the involvement of domestic and foreign jihadist militant groups. It is natural that these result in a threat to indigenous demographic structures, leading to conflicts. To elucidate, some facts are outlined hereafter:

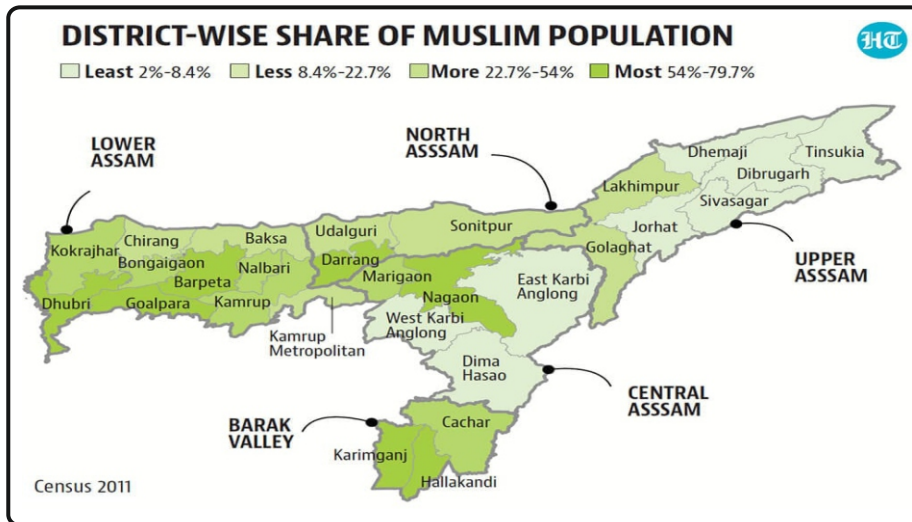
- Almost 99% of NE India's geographic boundary falls with neighbouring countries. The borders with Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar (duly aided over the years by the Free Movement Regime) are open / porous and have seen numerous migrations over centuries.

The scale of these illegal migrations is difficult to assess.

- The migrations involve all religions including Hindus and Muslims, as also various ethnic tribes from across Myanmar. Of utmost concern, however, are the migrations from Bangladesh into Assam.
- As per 2021 estimates, Assam has a total population of around 35 million. After independence, Assam witnessed rapid and suspicious population growth. The decades from 1951 to 1981 had maximum Bangladeshi migration, including Hindus, due to poverty, unemployment, uncontrolled rise and density of Bangladeshi population, natural disasters, and the 1971 War crisis. The Muslim population in Assam has grown from 9.22% in 1901 to 34.22% in the 2011 census, and is now estimated at around 40%. Of these, Bengali Muslims alone comprise 30% of the total population of Assam.



Greater Nagalim Demand (credit iasgyan.in)



(Image credit bindustantimes.com)

Muslims who came to India on or before 31 December 2014. This is being opposed since the amended Act will legitimize citizenship of illegal Hindu Bangladeshis.

A very deliberate and sustained plan of action is needed to control illegal migration. It will not be pragmatic to adopt abrupt, kneejerk actions and policies. It will have to be a judicious mix of the Foreigners Act 1946, Assam Accord 1985, National Register of Citizens and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2016. The Assam Accord must remain the basic tool for detection and deportation of all illegal entries, irrespective of religion.

Thirdly, the current destabilizing issue since May 23 is the Manipur

- The Bengali Muslims (called *Miyas*) were initially brought in by the British from the East Bengal Region (now Bangladesh) as labour class. Their population has grown 15 to 17% over the past decade. Muslims are today a majority in 11 out of the 35 districts in Assam, particularly the ones bordering Bangladesh in Lower Assam and Barak Valley.
- It is difficult to specify exact figures of illegal migration from Bangladesh and their religious composition. It is estimated that around 20 million illegal Bangladeshi immigrants are residing in India, and of these, around 6 million are in Assam alone.
- Consequent to the Assam Agitation (1979-1985) launched by indigenous groups against illegal immigrants, the Assam Accord was signed in 1985, which set 25 March 1971 as the benchmark to identify and deport foreigners. Subsequently, the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2016 seeks to grant citizenship to non-

ethnic turmoil. Manipur stands at a focal point of the Eastern frontiers of India straddling Myanmar and holds a vital central position for the transitory cross border movement of insurgent groups, drugs, arms, human trafficking and so on. Pertinently, the grievances of Meiteis started since British times. After the Kingdom of Manipur became a princely state in 1891, the British progressively inducted new Kukis and settled them in strategic locations surrounding the Manipur Valley, where they served as mercenaries and as a buffer to protect the valley from the Naga raids. The British administration actively separated the Meitei Valley from the Kuki / Naga Hills, creating a distinct administrative divide and fuelled tensions between the communities. The Meiteis, with a more established social structure and Hindu influence, were seen as more "*civilized*" by the British, while the Kukis were considered a rough animist tribal group. Because of this perception even at the time of independence, while there was contention about whether or not the Meitei community should be included in Scheduled Tribes, they were ultimately not included. Since 1949, illegal migrations of Kukis into the hills of Manipur continued and peaked in the past few years due to the ongoing civil war in Myanmar. The Meiteis feel that the Kukis and even Nagas encroached upon their land. These ethnic squabbles need due deliberation while making peace between the warring communities.

Chakravayuh Builds Up – Myanmar, the Eastern Front

India today has two boggy backyards in its East, and it will have to make its ground firm in both Bangladesh and Myanmar. This firm

ground will ensure seamless integration and development of the NE Region, as also provide India with a “*Hop, Step & Jump*” to South East Asia, as envisaged in its **Act East Policy**. Of course, the geo-strategic importance of the Bay of Bengal within the overall dynamics of the Indo-Pacific, and India’s access to Malacca Straits too weighs heavily in all strategic calculations.

Myanmar is strategically vital not only to India, but to the entire Indo-Pacific, as it bridges South and South East Asia. Curiously, despite our centuries old ethnic ties followed by a common freedom struggle that culminated with the Treaty of Friendship in 1951, Myanmar has remained an enigma for the Indian public at large and a neighbour generally overlooked. Perhaps, the intervening under-developed NE region imposed a psychological barrier in the Indian strategists’ minds. The military coup of 1962 in Myanmar was a further spoilsport, and democracy thereafter virtually disappeared from Myanmar’s landscape. The **Tatmadaw**, Myanmar’s military, has often held control, but grappled with ineffective governance in the multi-ethnic society, engaging in conflicts with ethnic minority groups fighting for self-determination. These factors dampened India’s attention, and we have only made half-hearted attempts to keep our ties strong with this vital neighbour. India’s diplomatic efforts got dissipated between the military junta and the democratic forces.

What then are India’s main concerns vis-a-vis Myanmar, and what is the recommended course of action? First and foremost is the dilemma – whom to woo in Myanmar – the military junta or the pro-democratic and pro-civil rule forces? Since 1990, India’s policy towards Myanmar has emphasized engagement with the ruling powers, thus

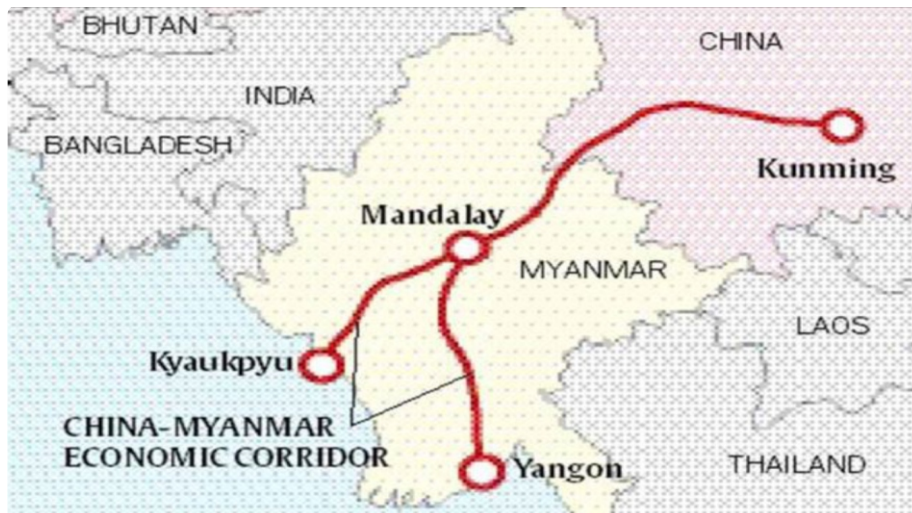
placing a premium on our security interests rather than promoting democratic principles in the neighbouring nation. Myanmar is today in a full blown civil war wherein the Ethnic Revolutionary Organisations (EROs), and the People’s Defence Forces (PDF) under a loosely knit shadow democratic National Unity Government (NUG) claim to control more than half the country. Almost the entire peripheral hilly and rural regions in the States of Kachin, Shan, Kayah, Kayin, Mon, Chin and Rakhine, along with Sagaing Region bordering China, India, Bangladesh, Laos and Thailand are under the control of the ethnic groups, and the battle is now shifting to the Bamar heartland and urban centres in the Mandalay, Magwe, Bago and Ayeyarwady Regions. The junta’s control has gradually narrowed down to control of urban centres in the heartland, and the situation is only getting worse for the military regime.

Speculation that the junta is on the verge of collapse may not be entirely true, because fundamentally, they retain all governmental resources, machinery and state infrastructure concentrated in the central plains. They have been in power for long, and money power still rests very heavily in their favour. With deep military support from Russia and China, particularly air power and drones, they may not crumble soon. Additionally, their intention to fight till they quash the rebel movement is very clear. On the other hand, the rebels too have been improving their combat capabilities, and appear most determined, motivated and aggressive to achieve their aim. But again, what ails the EROs is the unity and leadership factor.

Forces like the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA),

one of the principal components of the **Three Brotherhood Alliance**, brokered a ceasefire deal at China’s behest in the restive Shan State. Fence sitters like the Shan State Army (SSA) and the United Wa State Army (UWSA), are currently in a ceasefire with the Government. The diverse groups have differing political goals and objectives, and are still focussing on their ethnic differences. Will they move beyond a traditionally narrow ethno-centric approach? The deep-seated mistrust between ethnic groups and the majority Bamars, rooted in historical grievances, remains a significant obstacle. The PDF composed mainly of educated professionals and city dwellers lack combat experience and hardiness. Also, there is a lack of central leadership among the various ethnic groups. Pressure from neighbouring China adds another layer of complexity. The overall situation in Myanmar will thus continue to be of a strategic stalemate and India needs to balance its dealings between the Military Junta and the prominent ethnic forces in Myanmar, hoping that the NUG would one day mould itself into a potent and unified political body.

The second concern centres on Chinese influence, the most influential foreign actor in Myanmar. China’s main interest in Myanmar, apart from economic benefits, lies in opening a direct and shortest access to the Bay of Bengal from its Yunnan Province. Being its leading trade partner and major arms supplier, China has invested heavily in Myanmar across various sectors, mainly infrastructure, electricity, oil and gas, mining, manufacturing and agriculture to the tune of almost \$22 billion, accounting for almost 25% of the total foreign



China Myanmar Economic Corridor (credit nenom.in)

investment in the country. The China Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), a part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is planned as a network of roads, railways, ports and oil/gas pipelines designed to connect China's Yunnan Province with the Rakhine Province of Myanmar, as also Yangon down South. Within CMEC, of immense concern for India is the Kyaukphyu deep sea port that is getting operationalized on the Ramree Island on the Rakhine coast. Providing access to the Indian Ocean, this port will allow China to reduce reliance on the potentially vulnerable passage through the Strait of Malacca. The port will be a major hub for oil and gas pipelines that would transport energy from the Middle East and Africa/Europe to China. China is also involved in other major projects like the Myitsone Hydel Power Project in Kachin State. Though this project got shelved by the democratic government in 2011 on grounds of environmental and societal concerns, the military junta has announced its intention to revive the project.

forces. Analysts suggest that this operation had the implicit support of China, when it faced the intransigence of the military junta in effectively tackling the menace of the scam centres that affect the security of Chinese citizens. Of particular interest is the Chinese intervention to broker a second ceasefire deal in January 2025 between MNDAA and the military regime, using coercive tactics and sanctions. MNDAA dominates the Kokang Zone in the Shan State bordering Yunnan Province, affecting China's border trade and entry point of the CMEC. China has now focused its attention on the Arakan Army whose control in Rakhine severely affects the CMEC projects, particularly the Kyaukphyu Port project and the pipelines. In a nutshell, China's growing influence among various stakeholders in Myanmar reflects Beijing's willingness to engage across party lines with a carrot and stick approach to protect its strategic and economic interests. Irrespective of which force wins in the end, China would retain strong control over Myanmar policies.

India cannot nullify China's influence in Myanmar considering the deep seated roots and levels of investment, but nothing stops India to start building up her influence in Myanmar brick by brick with a similar approach, particularly with respect to infrastructure projects, namely the partially stalled **Kaladan Multi Modal Transit Transport Project** and the **India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway**, which pass through active combat zones of the ongoing civil war.

India's **third concern** relates to cross-border ethnic ties with Myanmar which affect our internal security. Many tribes of Manipur, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Assam share kinship with

China has handled the situation in Myanmar post the 2021 military coup with realpolitik and a pragmatic multi-stakeholder hedging strategy. China recognized the dictatorial regime despite sanctions by the West, and through diplomatic, economic and military backing, maintained their close ties with the junta. At the same time, China has simultaneously engaged with the EROs, particularly those that affect its strategic and economic interests and wherever the EROs dominate the border trade routes or connectivity routes of the CMEC.

Operation 1027, spearheaded by the **Three Brotherhood Alliance** which commenced in October 2023 has changed the power dynamics in Myanmar quite in favour of the rebel

ethnic races in Myanmar. The 16 km Free Movement Regime (FMR) facilitated the deep ethnic and familial connections across the Indo-Myanmar border. This inalienable bond is, however, like a Pandora's Box. The FMR gave rise to unconventional border dynamics, involving the movement of insurgents to safe havens, drug trafficking, illegal arms trade and human trafficking. The terrain also compounds the border surveillance challenges, as the clans continue to prioritise tribal loyalties over national affiliation. The level of border guarding is inadequate with the Assam Rifles, apart from being thin, operating from Company Operating Bases.

The Golden Triangle. Myanmar has emerged as the leading opium producer in the world, ever since Afghanistan, under Taliban rule, has virtually wiped out drugs. The porous border facilitates a substantial flow of opium grown in Myanmar, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Mizoram, followed by the move back of processed drugs into India. Post 2021, with the Myanmar economy nose-diving, opium cultivation has become the main source of livelihood for many in Myanmar. These operations are managed by organised crime groups, ethnic and insurgent organisations, Myanmar military factions / government officials who also engage in other illicit activities like arms smuggling, money laundering and human trafficking. With continued instability in Myanmar, it is apprehended that the 'Golden Triangle,' may turn into a 'Golden Quadrilateral' with the North-eastern part of India linking into it.

Instability in Myanmar is thus a steep challenge for India while it attempts to maintain security and curb the drug trade along its North-eastern border. It is estimated that post the 2021 coup in Myanmar, around 70000 Myanmar nationals may have illegally entered India

and there is no mechanism in place to trace and check them. These illegal entries also include hundreds of junta soldiers seeking sanctuary in Mizoram to escape the war. Several insurgent groups such as the United National Liberation Front (UNLF), the People's Liberation Army (PLA), ULFA, NSCN and smaller groups of Kukis and Zomis continue to operate from safe havens in Sagaing Region, Kachin State and Chin State in Myanmar.

How does India deal with this cross-border situation? At the outset, the Indian Government has suspended FMR and new guidelines are in place to regulate cross-border movement, requiring border passes and stricter checks. But, implementation is erratic due to resistance from the Mizoram government, social activists and civil society, who argue that it undermines ethnic ties and fosters distrust. India, therefore, must navigate the fine line between enforcement and maintaining cultural and social cohesion that exists across its North-eastern frontier.

The Government has also announced its intention to erect a border fence along the Myanmar border. In addition to local resistance, this project may not be pragmatic considering the tough terrain and manpower needs for surveillance over the fence. Till now only 10 km has been fenced in Manipur. That notwithstanding, the International Border should be selectively fenced with state of the art surveillance capability.

India has been conducting joint operations and intelligence sharing with the Myanmar Government to neutralise camps of the cross-border Indian Insurgent Groups. It must continue to do so, wherever feasible. In other places where the EROs have taken control, particularly the Arakan Army, Chin National Army, Chinland Defence Force, PDF and Kachin Independence Army, their engagement will be important for border management. Finally, there is a dire need to enhance the capability of



Golden Triangle (credit nititantra.com)



Image Credit YouTube

commonalities. The excellent bilateral ties reflect an all-encompassing partnership based on sovereignty, equality, trust, and understanding that goes far beyond a strategic partnership. The partnership has strengthened, matured and evolved as a model for bilateral relations for the entire region and beyond.” So, what went wrong just five months later in August 2024, wherein the entire situation took a 180 degree turn, and relations dipped down!!

The **first** fact to appreciate is the deep rooted Bengali identity vis a vis religious diversity and sentiments within the people of this region. Beginning 14th Century and with the advent of Islam, Bengal came under the rule of various Sultanates. The

Assam Rifles and review their deployment cum operational models.

On the whole, India must leverage the historical connections between NE India and Myanmar to enhance ties. What India needs is a close, multi-dimensional, bilateral and mutually beneficial relationship with Myanmar, hinging on the foundational pillars of Ethnicity, Economy, Connectivity and Security. Multilaterally, India and Myanmar are members of the BIMSTEC and Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC). Also, India enjoys a strategic dialogue partnership with ASEAN, of which Myanmar is a member. Though ASEAN has proved ineffective in managing the situation in Myanmar, these platforms should be used by India to participate in cooperation-enhancing initiatives, including combating drug trafficking.

Bangladesh – The Western Flank of the Chakravayuh

India’s MEA brief on Indo-Bangladesh relations of February 2024 stated – *‘India and Bangladesh share bonds of history, language, culture, and multitude of other*

Sultanates, owing to their prosperity and self-containment, became increasingly independent from Delhi. They were also the germinators of a unique Bengali culture in the region. Though Muslims comprised most of the landlord class during the Sultanates and Mughal rule, Hindu landlords started dominating the Muslim and Hindu peasantry during the colonial rule because they quickly adapted to the changes brought in by the British, while the Muslims lagged behind educationally and commercially. A number of community conflicts and clashes took place over time. At the same time, the elite Bengali Muslims regarded themselves as *ashraf* (of foreign descent) and sought to copy North Indian Islamic culture. To them, the Islam practiced by local Muslim peasants was contaminated by the non-Islamic Bengali rituals. Later, their beliefs got reinforced with the influx of Bihari Muslims who practiced a rigid version of Islam.

On the pretext of administrative problems, the British had partitioned the massive Bengal Presidency into two new provinces **“Bengal”** (comprising Hindu majority Western Bengal as well as the provinces of Bihar and Odisha) and **“Eastern Bengal and Assam Province”**, with Dhaka as the capital in 1905. This partition (which was reversed in 1911) created a Muslim dominated province, and was thus instrumental in highlighting the communal disunity in Bengal. Hindus and Muslims became distinct political groups, ultimately leading to the Partition of India and creation of East Pakistan in 1947. In the run-up to partition, Bengal emerged as the biggest supporter of the Muslim League mainly because the majority of East Bengal’s peasantry saw Pakistan as a good way of eliminating the feudal system. The clubbing of East Bengal with Assam planted the idea of **“Greater Bangladesh”**. Today, when this issue is brought up in various fora by

the ultra-nationalists in Bangladesh, it is not a bizarre fantasy, but a dream nurtured by them due to past links.

There is another historical point of interest, and that is the **“United Bengal”** episode before the Partition. There were three scenarios that came up for consideration by the Bengal Legislative Assembly in June 1947. First, the Assembly decided that a United Bengal be placed under Pakistan. Later, a separate session of the West Bengal Hindu legislators opted for partition, with West Bengal going to India. The Eastern legislators insisted to remain as a United Bengal under Pakistan, alternatively East Bengal to join Pakistan in case of Partition. There was also talk of a United Bengal, completely independent from India and Pakistan. In essence, the preference of Bengali Muslims was tilted in favour of going to Pakistan. The preference to remain as part of an Islamist polity is undeniable.

The concept of **“Greater Bangladesh”** is fuelled by a historical notion of supremacy, as Bengal had once been the most prosperous province amongst all that existed at that time. Interestingly, in 1998, Lieutenant General SK Sinha (Retd), then Governor of Assam, wrote to the President of India claiming that massive illegal immigration from Bangladesh was directly linked with *“the long-cherished design of Greater Bangladesh”* and also quoted pre-1971 comments from late Pakistan Prime Minister Zulfikar Bhutto and most surprisingly, late President of Bangladesh Sheikh Mujibur Rahman endorsing the inclusion of Assam into East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). In the current context, advocates of **Greater Bangladesh** seek expansion to include Assam, West Bengal, Meghalaya, Tripura as well as the Arakan Province of Myanmar with their Rohingya Muslims. In 2002, nine Islamic groups including Indian militant

organisations, namely MULTA, MULFA, MVF, Pakistani HuM, Myanmar’s Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO), Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front of Myanmar (ARIFM) and Pan Asian Harkat ul Jihad al Islami, formed a coalition that declared the formation of **Greater Bangladesh** as one of their aims.

The Bangladesh independence movement by Mujibur Rahman was initiated on grounds of cultural and linguistic differences with West Pakistan (the Bangla Identity), as also on discrimination. But by 1975, after facing a famine in 1974, and economic failures and agitations, Sheikh Mujibur assumed the Presidency with extraordinary powers, dissolved the parliamentary system and established a one-party state. By 1975, media described him as the *“most hated man in Bangladesh”* before he was assassinated in 1975. That hatred simmers and has re-manifested today in the form of burning down all that is attributed to Mujibur.

From 1975 to 1991, Bangladesh went through a number of military coups and two rounds of Martial Law under General Zia ur Rahman and General Ershad. While the parliamentary system came back in 1991, the country remained hostage to the Battle of two Begums, ie Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina. The Begums kept alternating in power every five years till 2009, after which Sheikh Hasina remained in power till she was ousted most unceremoniously in 2024. Political tools, to include boycott of Parliament, nationwide movements, agitations, strikes, killings, executions, election fraud accusations and election boycotts were used time and again with almost similar pattern to bring down the ruling party, followed by installation of a

caretaker government. This trend was witnessed again in 2024, and as per latest developments, fissures are already erupting between the interim government, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), student groups with the media stating that *“the honeymoon period is over because nothing has changed on ground”*, duly aggravated by a failing economy.

Radicalisation in Bangladesh started as early as in 1941 with the birth of Jamaat-e-Islami, which laid emphasis on Islam and remained committed to the unity of Pakistan. It became notorious when it collaborated closely with Pakistan Army, particularly for indoctrination of youth. Post the 1975 coup, Islamisation continued as the BNP maintained deep ties with the Jamaat-e-Islami, and through them with Pakistan’s Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) and its deep state. Many radicalized Bangladeshis have fought alongside various Islamic fundamentalists on foreign soil such as during the Soviet-Afghan War. On return, they formed various groups committed to hardline Shariat and Islamic values. Harkat – ul – Jihad (HUJI-B), Jamaat – ul – Mujaheddin Bangladesh (JMB), Hizb-ut-Tahrir were some of the groups that mushroomed in Bangladesh. ISIS and AQIS too stepped up their efforts post 2014. The deadly terror attack on Holey Bakery in 2016 was an indicator of radicalization. Persecution of religious minorities and communal disharmony has persisted over time, duly fuelled by the local clerics. The percentage of Hindus in Bangladesh has dropped from 22% in 1951 to about 8% now. The religious minorities have been facing atrocities, mainly through disinformation campaigns initiated against them through social media.



Pekua Submarine Base (credit <https://features.csis.org/snapshots/china-submarine-diplomacy/>)

urban centres only whereas the hills in the North of Bangladesh continued to serve as a terror base.

Finally, it must be realised that China has also been a major player. Apart from trade, it is Bangladesh's most important arms supplier, and military cooperation is expanding by the day – notable example being the operationalization in 2023 of a China-built submarine base in Pekua, Cox's Bazar – not very far away from the Kyaukphyu Port coming up to the South in Myanmar! From the above narration, what stands out is that the polity, fabric and ideology of Bangladesh have remained same throughout its history. Even post 1971, the nefarious design of ISI have always persisted, and the degree of involvement of the Islamist organisations, duly backed by BNP and

There are numerous instances of vandalism of idols and targeting of Hindu temples, festivals and residences.

Many Islamist groups funded by the ISI have emerged in lower Assam and West Bengal. After General Musharraf's visit to Bangladesh in 2003, ISI started conducting operations in Bangladesh with the help of Bangladeshi military and intelligence officials. Cox Bazaar was converted into a base for its activities where they established a nexus with terror organisations and smugglers. The focus of ISI was not only restricted to Islamist groups but also to sustain the Indian Insurgent Groups (IIGs) in the NE. ULFA, NSCN-IM, MULFA, MULTA, Islamic Liberation Army of Assam and even Kuki groups like Kuki-Chin National Front established networks in Bangladesh. Though Sheikh Hasina was very pro-active in cracking down on militants and terrorists, her strategies were centred on flushing them out of Dhaka and selected

Pakistan is intensifying by the day, which India must note with concern. As indicated by historical and current developments, there is also an inclination to move away from the Bangla identity with constitutional reforms; again not a good development for India. **Did India fail to sense these deep undercurrents running through the veins of Bangladesh?**

For India, a stable and prosperous Bangladesh is vital to keep our flanks in the NE totally secure. At the same time, it can no longer be that "goody-goody" relationship based on total trust and good will. Earlier, perhaps under Hasina Regime, India hoped to elevate the relationship to new heights, and preferred to look away even when the dark clouds were building up. Bangladesh had resisted falling into the Chinese lap, but the failing economy may nudge it towards China. Bangladesh is preparing to include China in the multi-purpose Teesta River Project, which will have serious repercussions for India.

India will thus need to base its strategy on a transactional, *give and take* relationship with firm diplomacy, exercising strategic patience as this exercise will not resolve overnight and a political vacuum will continue in Bangladesh for some time. Bangladesh also knows that it cannot survive without India. Already, its economy is under severe stress and showing signs of collapsing. So, psychological operations and intelligent media management holds the crux. While the political and social windows in a rising anti-India sentiment may be closed presently, India must keep all other links open. On the front of military diplomacy, engagements must

continue, and old historical memories must be kept alive. At the same time, India must tighten the border sealing / fencing, concomitant with a cooperative relationship with Border Guards Bangladesh. Most importantly, all connectivity, energy and developmental projects with Bangladesh, including those affecting the **Act East Policy** must be maintained alive and taken to fruition at the appropriate time. It will be a painstaking long-term effort to build up trust based on mutual benefit, respect and good will.

The Chinese Overarch – The Northern Arc of the Chakravayuh

Undeniably, China is the only power that can take on the might of the US. Despite all trade barriers being imposed upon it by the West, China enjoys an overall trillion dollar trade surplus as against a trillion dollar deficit suffered by the US. With India rising rapidly and emerging as a reckonable economic and military power, there are only three big actors on the global stage, ie US, China and India. With Indo-US ties getting stronger by the day, it is but natural that China would be deeply anxious to weaken this strategic bond. China's overtures to Nepal, Bhutan (Doklam in particular), Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Myanmar, duly supported by its strategic alliance with Pakistan need no intricate analysis. The intentions are obvious and even with a thaw occurring as on date, India will need to tread a very cautious path vis-à-vis China, and develop ties further only if there is a positive tick on the **“Trust Factor”**. In all our assessments on the NE Region of India, the overarching design and strategy of China to contain or negate India's power must be given prime consideration.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let us recall that not

very long back, Manipur was becoming a gateway to Myanmar, with major upgrades taking place in road, rail and air infrastructure. All these visionary projects now face heat with the turmoil in Manipur. So, if India has to resolve the internal and external threats, it has to nurture lasting peace in Manipur, coupled with a holistic approach to infrastructural and economic development of the NE Region. With President's rule, a conducive dialogue must commence between the Kukis and Meiteis. The tiniest slip-up while dealing with this complex issue has the potential of spreading disquiet across the entire NE rekindling old grievances, especially in Nagaland, Mizoram and Assam.

India also has to work out a collaborative strategy in Myanmar and Bangladesh, and engage with various powerful forces in these countries, including Russia in Myanmar. With a growing relationship and commonality of democratic and security interests with

the US, and President Trump acknowledging India's capability in handling Bangladesh, the time has come to work out collaborative multi-dimensional strategies with the US for both Bangladesh and Myanmar, along with utilisation of multilateral platforms like the BIMSTEC and ASEAN. This in turn will mitigate to some extent the threats rising from the **Chinese Overarch**.

The road ahead requires diplomatic finesse, adaptability, realpolitik and collaborative efforts to ensure lasting peace and stability, both internally and in the immediate neighbourhood in the region. Above all is the need for political maturity and placing national interests at the highest pedestal. Only then will India fulfil its vision to transform the entire Bangladesh-NE India-Myanmar Corridor into an Integrated Zone supporting its well-conceived **Act East Policy**.



Lieutenant General RS Salaria, PVSM, VSM (Retd) was commissioned into 7 Field Regiment (GAZALA) in June 1980, the regiment which he later commanded. A graduate of Long Gunnery Staff Course and the Defence Services Staff College, Wellington, the General Officer has also attended Higher Command Course at Army War College, Mhow and National Defence College at Delhi. His staff appointments include exposures to operational & logistical management at various Headquarters. The General Officer, apart from an instructional tenure in School of Artillery, was also a UN Observer in Angola and the Defence Attaché in Tajikistan. The General Officer commanded an Artillery Brigade and Artillery Division. The General served as Commandant School of Artillery till his retirement in March 2020.



Lt Gen RS Salaria

TRACING THE ROOTS OF ETHNIC CONFLICTS IN THE NORTH EAST

The North East Region of India is home to over 150 ethnic groups, non-scheduled tribes, scheduled tribes, sub-tribes and a significant number of migrants. The region has one of the most enchanting diversity of people, traditions, customs and ancestry - a haven for any student of anthropology. "Head hunting practices" existed at least till the last century in some parts of Naga and Lushai hills. Display of human heads at the entrance of the houses was common then. With only clan or village loyalties, hunting and raids on other villages were a common occurrence. An insightful analysis follows.

Backdrop - Origins of Fractionalisation

Most historians believe that the present day tribes (both scheduled and non-scheduled) in Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and many parts of Assam originated from Yunnan or Sinlung areas of China and Myanmar, while the Ahoms entered the Brahmaputra valley during the 10th century crossing the Patkai Range from Myanmar. The Bodos and their related tribes such as the Karbis, Kochs, Dimasas, Garos, Cacharis and the Tripuris have Tibeto-Burmese descent. Many tribes in Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim have deep ethnic affiliations with Tibet too. The people from other parts of India are believed to have migrated to the Brahmaputra valley from the days of Mahabharata wherein the Kamrupa kingdom finds mention.

Prior to India's independence, in the early 19th century, the only kingdoms which ruled in certain areas of the region were in Manipur, Sikkim and Tripura. Ahom Kingdom which existed till early 19th century ceased to exist after the Treaty of Yandaboo 1826. Ahom, Tripura and the Manipur Kingdoms adopted Vaishnavite culture of Hindu faith, but many animist ethnic / tribal groups were not part of this denomination. Most of the



Monoliths erected by the Kuki Community to commemorate the Kuki Genocide on 13 September 1993 by Nagas in Manipur (credit scroll.in)

present day hill areas of Nagaland, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya were headed by village chiefs or clan chiefs. The arrival of the British in North East India after the treaty of Yandaboo paved the way for mass scale conversion of the animist tribal groups to Christianity. On attaining independence, certain amount of constitutional protections have been provided by enacting a plethora of Acts and Laws pertaining to ethnic and other social issues. These have been in force since the British Raj days and almost all of them continue to be operative in the North East.

Some of the policies of the British, such as keeping almost the entire North East except some parts of Brahmaputra Valley under "Excluded Category" are difficult to comprehend. Was it for ease of proselytization into Christianity so as to establish a Christian state in the North East? Was it for security concerns? Divide and rule? These are now in the realm of conjecture. Indeed, the so called Coupland Plan to create a "Christian Colony" at the time of independence in the region is known to historians. The provisions of Article 371A in Nagaland and 6th Schedule in a

few other areas of erstwhile Assam are the legacy of British laws. These tribes were also scheduled in the Constitution to give them a certain amount of constitutional protection.

The linguistic, religious and ethnic fractionalization eventually led to an identity crisis and resulting ethnic unrest in the region leading to creation of Nagaland in 1963, Mizoram in 1986, Meghalaya in 1972 and Arunachal Pradesh in 1987. While state reorganisation in the rest of India was on linguistic lines, creation of states in North East India was more on ethnic lines, giving rise to ethnic sub-nationalism, even secessionist in nature.

Being located in a hostile environment externally, with hardly any border management along the entire 1643 km long Indo-Myanmar border and 2000 km long NE India - Bangladesh border, easy entry of drug money and illegal arms from China and other South East Asian countries, further exacerbated the security situation leading to the evolution of ethnic armed groups and their affiliates, and driving unrest and violence in the region. External anti-India forces have fully exploited the situation making it a national security concern for India.

Ethnic Unrest and Insurgencies

The roots of insurgency and ethnic unrest in the North Eastern region are results of geography, history and a host of socio-economic factors as well. 98% of the borders of the region are international borders. While the population share is a

mere 3% of the national population, the population growth has exceeded 200% between 1951-2001, indicating trans-border migration, generating great stress on livelihoods and adding to land fragmentation.

Conflicts in the region range from insurgency for secession to insurgency for autonomy; from 'sponsored terrorism' to ethnic clashes, to conflicts generated as a result of continuous inflow of migrants from across the borders as well as from other States¹. In sum, conflicts in the region can be broadly classified under the following categories² :-

- **'National' conflicts:** Involving a concept of a distinct 'homeland' as a separate Nation and pursuit of that goal. These are based on broad ethnic identities.
- **Ethnic conflicts:** Involving assertion of numerically smaller and less dominant tribal groups against the political and cultural hold of the dominant tribal group. In Assam this also takes the form of conflict

between local and migrant communities.

- **Sub-regional conflicts:** Involving movements which ask for recognition of sub-regional aspirations and often come in direct conflict with the State Governments or even the autonomous Councils. Kuki, Hmar groups in Manipur fall in this category.

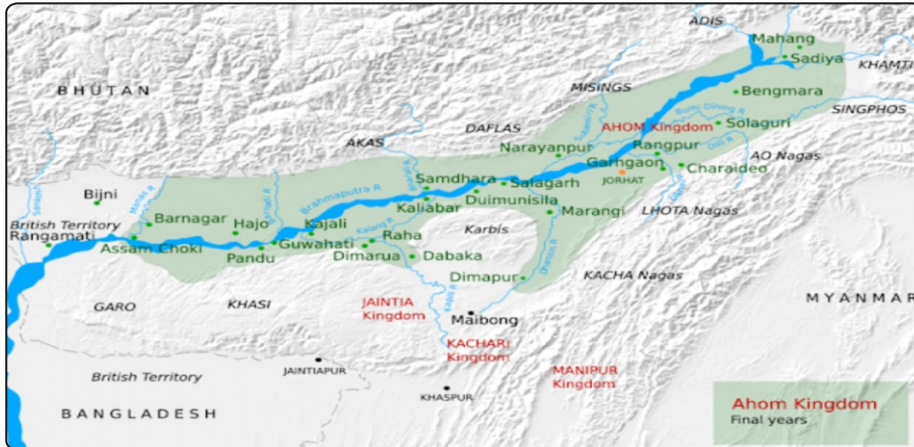
In Assam, the entire issue revolved around illegal migration from erstwhile East Pakistan and Bangladesh in the 1970s. This subsequently morphed into a separatist movement for the indigenous people of Assam, before degenerating into smaller groups establishing their identities against a dominant larger group. The Dimasas, the Karbis and some Muslim organisations are a manifestation of this, with the support of larger insurgent groups such as the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN). Availability of illegal arms and porous



The ferocious Wangchu tribe of the east with the tradition of headbunting. (Courtesy – Mr. Sachin Kadam, arunachal-diaries-1/ wordpress.com) Inset. Nagas in traditional attire (File photo Hemanta Singha, EPS)

¹ "Archana Upadhyay. "Terrorism in the North East : Linkages and Implications", *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 2, (2006).

² *Annual Report, DONER, "Conflicts in the North East : Capacity Building for Conflict Resolution", Chapter 12, pp-144, available at www.mdoner.gov.in/sites/default/files/ARC_7th Report_cb12.pdf*



Abom Kingdom c1826 (By Chaipau, commons.wikimedia.org)

border management mechanisms made it easier for these ethnic armed groups to operate with impunity in Assam for a long time. Lack of governance and externally crafted agendas only made it worse till the trend gradually began to reverse in the last 10 to 15 years. It remains to be seen whether changing geo-politics will finally render the Paresh Baruah led United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) irrelevant in the years to come.

The case of the 20 odd tribes of Nagas in Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, Arunachal and Myanmar is yet another example of **“Identity Construction as Nagas”** over a period of several decades with the British Raj and perpetuated even after India's independence. Many of the tribes with hardly any common language, dress, customs, traditions and history have been fighting the State for the common goal of **“Nagalim for Christ”** for long. Their aims and objectives also clashed with the interests of other ethnic groups in the region who themselves want to carve out their own imagined or assumed territories as a counter against majority domination. In Manipur, the Naga-Kuki clashes of 1992, Kuki—Paite clashes,

acquired the characteristics of a distinct species of conflict³. It has been aptly observed that:

“The conflicts in the North East have some peculiar characteristics: they are asymmetrical; they are ambiguous, making it difficult to differentiate a friend from an enemy; they are fought in unconventional modes, deploying political and psychological means and methods; and the conflicts eventually tend to escalate into prolonged wars of attrition. Violence in the region is also caused by the failure of the State administration to provide security. This has led to the creation of alternative forces of ethnic militia providing services which are a core function of Governance. From the perspective of its ethnic constituency, a private ethnic militia is considered a more reliable provider of security when it is threatened by another ethnic group that is armed with its own militia. This is usually the context in an ethnically polarised situation in which the State administration fails to provide security and the actions of the Army are perceived as not being objective.”⁴

Prognosis

A number of armed separatist movements and inter-group ethnic conflicts have now become an enduring feature of the region. Naga Hills district of erstwhile Assam State was the first to rebel, followed by a similar armed movement in the Lushai Hills (now Mizoram) district of that State. Soon secessionism overtook Assam, Tripura and Manipur. Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh have also occasionally been unstable and violence prone. Ethnic violence has been over identity formations, resources and opportunities, resulting in the state being pulled in different directions.

The Central Government has responded to the **‘ethnic’** challenge

³ *op cit*, Archana Upadhyay

⁴ *ibid*

through use of force against rebel groups; accommodation of aspirations of different communities through devolution of power and other arrangements, and through largesse doled out in financial terms. So much so, many groups consider special treatment in every sphere as their birthright. Various peace agreements or suspension of operations have been negotiated between the Central and State governments and the rebel groups. However, peace continues to be elusive in Manipur and Nagaland in particular, with simmering discontent in other States as well.

Religious diversity, competition for political power among the ethnic groups, real or perceived ‘unequal’ opportunities in terms of constitutional protections, a sense of deprivation as compared to other ethnic groups, perceived domination and unequal developmental opportunities and ‘forced’ integration of the Northeast region have been some of the common grievances of the ethnic armed groups in the region.

Besides separatist violence, inter-group ethnic clashes have been frequent and have taken a heavy toll of life and property.⁵ The Sixth Schedule has to some extent satisfied tribal ethnic group’s aspirations and has thus prevented many conflicts from occurring. Ethnic violence exists alongside inter-ethnic contestations over resources and opportunities, in which the state is left with no good options and little ability to provide solutions. Consequently, politics in the region has moved to protests, ‘public curfews’ and blockades by public organisations, many with the active support of armed groups.

The process of integration of the Northeast region into the Indian ‘mainstream’ post-independence has been abrupt and laced with violence. Awareness of the cultural differences between the Indian ‘mainland’ and the collective entity

Table 1.2: Ethnic Affiliations to the Insurgent / Terrorist Groups

Ser No	State	Major Insurgent Groups	Major Ethnic Affiliation	Remarks
1.	Assam	(a) ULFA	Assamese (Ahom)	Hindus (Non-scheduled Tribals)
		(b) NDFB	Bodos	Mostly Christians tribals
		(c) KPLT	Karbis	Hindus & Christians
		(d) DHD	Dimasas	Mostly Hindus
2.	Arunachal Pradesh	NSCN (IM) and NSCN (K)	Nocta / Konyak / Singpos	Mixed Christians / Buddhists / Hindus
3.	Manipur	(a) UNLF, PLA, PREPAK, KYKL (six to nine more groups)	Meiteis	Hindus (Non-scheduled tribes)
		(b) NSCN (IM)	Tangkhus and other Naga tribes	Christians
		(c) KRA, KNA, KNO, UPF (about 30 armed groups based on tribal Kuki-Zo-Chin groups)	Kuki / Zo / Chin	Christians
		(d) HPA	Hmar	Christians
		(e) ZRA	Zomis	Christians
		(f) PULF	Valley Muslim	Muslims
		(g) ZRF	Zeliang Rongs	Christians & Naga
4.	Nagaland	(a) NSCN (IM)	Tangkhu, Sema dominated	Christians
		(b) NSCN (K)	Konyak	Christians
		(c) NNC	Angamis	Christians
5.	Mizoram	No Active Militant Group		
6.	Tripura	NLFT	Tripuris	Mostly Christians
7.	Meghalaya	GNLA and ANVC	Garos	Christians

(Source: Newspapers / Periodicals – Assam Tribune, The Telegraph, Imphal Free Press, various articles published from time to time)

called the North East and the region’s significantly higher levels of ethnic and linguistic fractionalization compared to rest of India⁶ have contributed to the

ethnic unrest since independence⁷. Ethnic violence and secessionism in the North East exist alongside the many experiments with self-rule and

⁵ Some prominent ones being the Naga-Kuki (1992-96) and the Kuki-Paite (1997-99) clashes in Manipur; Hmar-Dimasa violence in Assam (2003); Tribal-not tribal violence in Tripura (1979-80 and subsequently) and the ongoing inter-tribal conflicts in Nagaland.

⁶ The North East makes up a mere 4% of India’s population. Yet it accounts for 58 of the 114 languages and 100 of the 600 tribes listed by the Census of India. (Census of India, 2001)

⁷ M Sajjad Hassan. “Understanding the breakdown in North East India : Exploration in state society relations”, pp-2, Published in May 2007, available at www.lse.ac.uk/depts/destin.

political autonomy for the region's peripheral communities. Competitive mobilization by each of the groups big or small has contributed to a sense of relative deprivation. This has resulted in mutual friction that fuels intensification of conflicts and violence. Showering 'economic largesse' has been a staple response of the Centre to the complex and violent challenges it faces in the North East. Integrative capability of national / State leaders has also not proved effective for peace in places like Manipur or Nagaland.

Recommendations for Peace and Integration

In terms of Foreigners (Protected Area) Order 1958 by the Ministry of Home Affairs, the entire state of Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland and parts of Sikkim and Manipur are declared "Protected Areas", where no foreigner can enter without authorisation from the Central Government. Such laws urgently need review if integration of the region with the mainland is desired.

Improved governance remains the key to reduce ethnicity related unrest and other forms of conflict in the region. This is easier said than done, since the pulls and pressures on the political dispensation, based on ethnicity will remain. If the administrators / bureaucrats are shielded or insulated from such pressures, many of them are likely to frame sound policies and deliver better results.

No future administrative policy should be based on ethnic lines as has been the case thus far. Continued policy of appeasement based on ethnicities may achieve short term gains and buy immediate peace, but sooner rather than later, ethnicity related administrative mechanisms are bound to collapse as visible today. Even worse, attempts to play one ethnic group against the other in the garb of "equilibrium" are a recipe for enduring strife and unrest.

Any imbalance of influence or opportunities amongst the people in the same

socio-economic ecosystem, disproportionate to their position in a democratic set-up will invariably result in instability. Hence, it is imperative that a sense of equity must prevail among the varied ethnic groups. A well-crafted approach to ethnic harmony can be achieved by way of proportionality.

Reasonably well guarded and effective border control with regard to the Indo-Bangladesh and Indo-Myanmar borders will to a certain degree enforce the rule of law in the border areas and stem the flow of arms, contraband and illegal immigrants. Security concerns are no longer well-defined insurgent movements but are multiple hybrid ways to weaken the writ of the state.

Last but not the least, a coordinated whole of Government approach is required for the region. A mini North East Security Council under the DONER could be a beginning; and the law of the land must prevail over non-existent local laws being enforced by illegal groups. National security mechanisms in the North East region must address the issues of ethnic unrest and violence squarely. It will require multi-domain and multiple pathways to include good governance, enforcement of the law of the land and reasonable accommodation to the aspirations of the people. **Towards this, maturity and statesmanship on the part of the political leadership will go a long way in embedding peace in the region.**



Lieutenant General (Dr.) Konsam Himalay Singh, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, YSM (Retd), an alumnus of Sainik School, Goalpara and National Defence Academy, Pune was commissioned into the 2nd Battalion, Rajput Regiment in 1978. A keen mountaineer, he took part in the 1987 Kanchenjunga expedition. He commanded 27 RAJPUT between 1998 and 2000 on the Siachen Glacier and during the Battle of Point 5770 in the Kargil War in 1999, for which he was awarded the Yudh Seva Medal. A graduate of the Defence Services Staff College, Wellington and the National Defence College, New Delhi, he has vast operational experience in counter-insurgency operations in Jammu and Kashmir, and in Northeast India. He commanded the Nagrota based Corps and was the Commandant of Infantry School, Mhow prior to superannuation. Post retirement, he has served as the Chairman of Manipur Public Service Commission, and is presently the Chairman, Board of Governors, Indian Institute of Information Technology, Agartala. He is a member of the Consultative Committee of Manipur Government on Naga Peace Talks and is a visiting faculty member of Manipur University.



**Lt Gen (Dr)
Konsam Himalay Singh**



TRAIL BLAZING THE McMAHON LINE IN 1913

The McMahon Line is the disputed boundary between India and China in the Eastern Sector. It was drawn as part of the Shimla Convention in 1914, an Agreement between British India and Tibet, with Chinese representatives present but refusing to sign. This article highlights how the McMahon Line was surveyed and mapped.

Top Left. Portrait of Sir Henry McMahon, by John Collier (credit en.wikipedia.org)

Bottom Left. Major Frederick Marshman Bailey, 1934 (credit en.wikipedia.org)

Right Centre. Henry Treise Morshead in Tibet, 1921 during Mount Everest reconnaissance expedition. Taken at 17,300 advanced base camp by Alexander Frederick Richmond "Sandy" Wollaston (credit en.wikipedia.org)

"Few lures are more potent than the lure of untrodden land to explore..."

"No Passport to Tibet" (1956), is a travelogue by Major F M Bailey, a British Intelligence Officer, who had journeyed and worked in Tibet from 1904 to 1908, a time when access to the region was highly restricted. His work and adventures in Tibet serve as an important historical and political backdrop to the book. Major Bailey's covert missions, including his role in the *"Great Game"* (the strategic rivalry between Britain and Russia), made him a legendary figure in Himalayan exploration. In 1913, Major F M Bailey, set out to delineate the boundary with Tibet in the Eastern Himalayas.

Unarguably, the border mapping enterprise was the exclusive brainchild of Major Bailey but in hindsight it is evident that without the mapping skills and the unconditional and inexhaustible enthusiasm of his companion, Captain H T Morshead, there was little chance of the grand success the venture ultimately became.

This unlikely and intrepid duo were born eight months apart in 1882 but on different continents; Bailey into an Army family at Lahore and Morshead at Devon (UK) to a distinguished family of jurists. Bailey graduated from the Royal Military College, Sandhurst and joined the 32 Sikh Pioneers at Darjeeling in 1901 while Morshead was commissioned from the premier Royal Military Academy, Woolwich and began his career in the Royal Engineer Corps as the Garrison Engineer at Agra in 1902.



The boundary pillar near Batang, photographed by Eric Teichman in 1922 (credit en.wikipedia.org)



The Eastern portion of the McMahon line drawn on Map 2, that was shared by the British and the Tibetan delegates at the Simla Conference, 1914. The Western portion is covered in a second map.

censured for overstaying leave, fined loss of two months' salary and summoned to Shimla to write a report of his journey.

This was when he came to the notice of Sir Henry McMahon (Foreign Secretary) in the corridors of power, becoming his protégé. In this capacity, he became aware of the likelihood of an international treaty involving China, Tibet and India, to delineate the boundary between Tibet and Assam.

Bailey was aghast at the idea of formalising such a treaty *"while that border region remained unmapped"*. Forever on the lookout for the next adventure, he requested and got acquiescence from Sir Henry McMahon for duty in the Mishmi Valley ostensibly to solve the

Two years later in 1904, Bailey's outfit marched out of Darjeeling with Colonel Younghusband's Mission to Lhasa and he was drawn irresistibly to the spirit of exploration, becoming fluent in Tibetan dialects and heading India's outposts in Tibet at Gyantse and Shigatse. Later on, he was absorbed in the Political Branch of the British Foreign Department, becoming a close confidant of the 13th Dalai Lama!

As for Morshead, his scientific propensities would lead him to the portals of the Survey of India, Dehradun - by 1906 becoming its foremost map-surveyor in what is Arunachal Pradesh today. He went on to earn a Distinguished Service Order (DSO) in World War I, was chosen as a climbing member of the first two Everest expeditions and much more.

Seized by the explorer's spirit of restlessness in 1912, Bailey travelled through Russia to Beijing and in the last leg by the end of December that year, on foot from Chengdu to Sadiya in Assam. Even though this was a great accomplishment *"...journeying on my own into unknown and unmapped country"*, he was nevertheless

mystery of the Tsangpo Gorge Falls rumoured to be bigger and mightier than the Niagara Falls. But this was a mere pretext because *"The realisation flashed through my mind that here was my chance of getting through to Tibet from Assam side....but one problem immediately presented itself, such an expedition could not be undertaken alone.....somehow he had to find another officer with ideas and ambitions similar to his own"*.

Bailey was not given to procrastination and he returned to Sadiya in March 1913, marched 80 miles North to Mipi (today's Anini Township) where unknown to him Morshead was already engaged on a map making assignment. Thanking providence, Bailey spent several days persuading Morshead to join him along with his map-making gear, on what he believed was a once in a lifetime venture. He explained to Morshead that his intent was to cross over to Tibet from Showa village (150 miles North of Mipi), then turning West, travel up-river in the Tsangpo Valley, while all the while mapping the Himalayan watershed ridgeline up to the Assam-Bhutan junction and thence turning Southward back to Assam, and return to Sir Henry McMahon at Shimla with the tentative blueprint, of a mapped international boundary between Assam and Tibet!

At this stage, Sir Henry McMahon obliged once again by way of a telegram to the Assam Administration that *"Captain F M Bailey....be allowed as much scope as possible for the exercise of his talent as regards exploration"*. As an afterthought, Sir Henry was quick to follow up with another cautionary telegram *"We approve but the party should not enter Tibet"*. But the duo conveniently claimed to have departed Mipi, thereby never getting to see the second telegram.

The complexities of the logistics and permission to enter Tibet

were propitiously overcome by Bailey's fluency in Tibetan dialects, his friendship with and possession of photographs of the Dalai Lama and the Tashi Lama, which would prove to be of Talismanic proportions. Besides he knew the Tibetan custom that when any official travelled on duty, he was furnished a document called the "Lamyik" which "entitled him to call upon villages enroute to supply food and lodging for himself and retinue and transport up to the next stage of the journey". So on reaching Showa village East of the Tsangpo Gorge, Major Bailey called on and charmed the Tibetan Dzungpon and obtained the "Lamyik" stating that "The English Bailey Sabib is going. Please do not stop him.....Bailey Sabib knows the Dalai Lama and Tashi Lama who know he is coming.....Please help him".

The relationship between the two plucky explorers and kindred spirits had blossomed into such a committed and close friendship, that unmindful of hardships on a daily basis, frequent desertions by porters, theft of their cash-pouches, their five and a half months long and arduous journey successfully ended in mid-November 1913 at the Rangiya Railway Station, after an incredulous "...fifteen-hundred mile (2414 km) journey on foot through un-surveyed and unknown country in Tibet.....The mystery of the Tsangpo Gorges was solved; the country forming the border between Tibet and Assam was mapped..."

The quality of mapping survey by Morshead was best rated thus, "Despite the appalling weather, Morshead not only triangulated the whole area but also completed computation of every triangulated point within a few hours of the observation, so that the plane-tables never lacked points by which to authenticate the work for accuracy".

And once the computed data, duly authenticated by The Survey of India was transposed on map sheets as the McMahon



Simla Conference, 1913 (credit en.wikipedia.org)

Line, there arrived the telegram "Delighted to hear of your safe return hope you are well I would like you to come up to Shimla as quickly as possible. McMahon foreign".

The cause of the summons was to have the duo in the wings during the four month long protracted negotiations between the representatives of India, Tibet and China during the Shimla Convention. Morshead's biographer states that "Morshead continued working on his maps, calling in Bailey for consultation whenever necessary. It was very gratifying to feel the glow of official approval; and a fortunate chance that the information acquired on the expedition should have proved so vital to the political negotiations. Without it the Indian

Government would have been negotiating a treaty regarding territory both unexplored and unmapped".

Ultimately the Shimla Convention was initiated by the representatives of India and Tibet with Chinese representatives being present on 27 April 1914, with the appended maps showing for the first time the McMahon Line as the acknowledged frontier between India and Tibet.

(This article has been adapted and abridged from a Chapter by the same name in the book 'Narratives from the Heart of a Veteran' by the author, published by Sabre and Quill Publishers)



Lieutenant General Baljit Singh, AVSM, VSM (Retd) was commissioned into the Regiment of Artillery in 1956. He superannuated from service in 1992 after a distinguished career spanning 36 years.

He was invited to the Board of Trustees of World Wildlife India in 1990 and served two terms therein.



Lt Gen Baljit Singh

THE HIMALAYAN HUMP

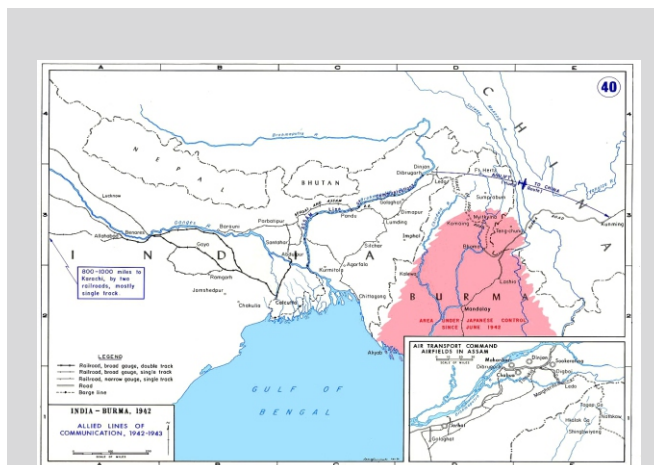
IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The Hump flights over Arunachal Pradesh were a vital yet harrowing chapter in World War II, exemplifying the courage and determination of Allied Forces. The subsequent recovery efforts of the remains of missing personnel, driven by India-US cooperation, reflect a shared commitment to honouring the sacrifices of those who risked and lost their lives during the war.

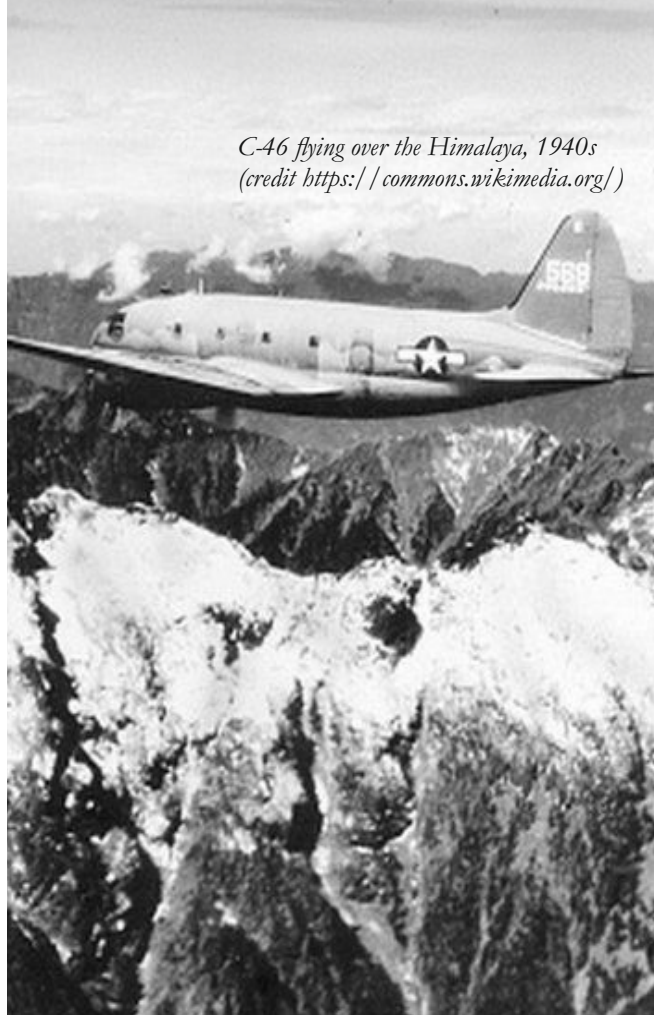
Introduction

On 30 November 2023, the Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh, Shri Pema Khandu, and the then US Ambassador, Mr Eric Garcetti, jointly inaugurated the **"Hump World War II Museum"** in Pasighat, Arunachal Pradesh. This is the second museum in Asia dedicated to honouring fallen airmen of the US Forces during World War II, commemorating the extreme sacrifice made by Allied Forces in the war against Imperial Japan. The tranquil landscape of Pasighat became an ideal site for this tribute to the brave US servicemen who lost their lives during the 'Hump' operation.

During World War II, the Japanese Army had captured Burma (present day Myanmar) in early 1942, severing the vital Burma Road—a major supply route between India and China. This necessitated the establishment of an alternate route to keep Chinese forces supplied with weapons, ammunition and other war waging essentials. The only viable option was to fly over the Eastern Himalayas, a region of extreme altitude, unpredictable weather, and minimal navigational infrastructure. This route became famously known as *"The Hump."*



Allied lines of communication in Southeast Asia (1942–43). The Hump airlift is shown at upper right (credit en.wikipedia.org)



C-46 flying over the Himalaya, 1940s (credit https://commons.wikimedia.org/)

The story of US aircraft crossing *“The Hump”* during the Second World War is one of courage, endurance, and logistical innovation. The **Hump** was a treacherous air route over the Eastern Himalayas, connecting India to China, primarily used by Allied Forces to supply Chinese troops fighting the Japanese forces. These flights, initially handled by the China National Aviation Corporation (CNAC), were later taken over by the United States Army Air Force (USAAF).

The Challenge

Flying from airbases in India, primarily in Assam (like Chabua and Dinjan), to Kunming in China, the aerial supply missions traversed the rugged terrain of Arunachal Pradesh. Flying *“The Hump”* was among the most dangerous missions of the war. Pilots flew unpressurized aircraft, often in complete darkness and without adequate radar or navigation systems using only a radio compass or by dead reckoning. They had to fly at altitudes of 15000 to 20000 feet and contend with ferocious winds, thunderstorms and sub-zero temperatures, not to mention the ever-present threat of Japanese fighter planes. Due to severe weather, Japanese threats, and varying mission requirements, there were two variations of the route:-

- **Northern Route:** Higher altitude, more dangerous, but shorter. Used primarily when Japanese fighters threatened the Southern paths.
- **Southern Route:** Slightly longer but considered marginally safer.

The Hump became a vital lifeline for supplying **Chiang Kai-shek’s Forces** in China and keeping China in the war against Japan. It also demonstrated the Allied commitment to defeating Japan on multiple fronts.

The aircraft used for these missions included C-47 Dakotas and later C-46 Commandos and sometimes B-24 bomber planes, which were specifically designed to carry heavy payloads. These aircraft were loaded with 10000 pounds of gasoline, food, ammunition and bombs and despite the immense risks, by the end of the war, the operation delivered **over 650000 tons of supplies**, solidifying its place as one of the most heroic and logistically challenging aerial operations in history and a crucial facet of the Allied effort in the China-Burma-India (CBI) theatre.

The average flight distance was **500 to 600 miles** (800 to 1000 km) one way and a typical flight to China would take **two to four hours**, depending on weather and load. The return flight would take up to 10 hours as the planes got battered by extreme headwinds as they climbed to gain altitude to get over the **Hump**. The Himalayas ran North to South, while the planes flew East to West, and in many cases, this was the first time most pilots flying the **Hump** were

exposed to vortex winds and the effect of headwinds. Terrain and weather weren’t the only obstacles. The C-46 airplane many of the Hump pilots flew was a new aircraft and was rushed into production. Most of the kinks were worked out flying actual missions as the crews encountered numerous problems in flight.

Cost of the Missions and Recovery Efforts

The human and material cost of these missions was staggering. It is estimated that over 650 aircraft and about two thousand airmen were lost during these flights. The Eastern Himalayas, particularly Arunachal Pradesh, became known as the **“Aluminium Trail”** due to the debris from crashed planes that littered the region. The dense jungles, high-altitude passes, and remote location of Arunachal Pradesh made search and rescue efforts near impossible during the war. Many of the airmen who crashed in the region were declared



Hump WWII Museum Opens In Arunachal With US Aircraft (credit neindiabroadcast.com)



Chief Minister Pema Khandu and US Ambassador to India Eric Garcetti inaugurated “The Hump WWII Museum” in Pasighat, East Siang district (Photo @USAmbIndia)

missing in action, and their remains were left unrecovered for decades. The first significant efforts to recover the remains of American airmen began after World War II. However, the vastness of the terrain, combined with political and logistical challenges, slowed progress. For decades, families of the missing airmen waited for closure, hoping that technological advancements and international cooperation would eventually lead to recovery.

In the 2000s, as US-India relations deepened, the two countries began collaborating to locate and recover the remains of US airmen who had perished. However, from 2010 to 2015, there was a de-facto moratorium in joint patrols to the approximately 15 documented crash sites in Arunachal Pradesh ostensibly due to the geo-strategic regional sensitivity of the state. This moratorium was lifted by the Indian Government in 2015 in allowing a joint team to visit a crash site. Human remains were recovered from this site in 2015-16 and sent back to the US for forensic identification. In another instance,

a 2019 Expedition discovered wreckage from a C-47 transport aircraft in the Dibang Valley. The site was painstakingly excavated, yielding personal effects and remains that were later identified through forensic analysis. Over the past two decades, at least 14 aircraft, which had been listed as “missing” and “unrecoverable” by US authorities, have been identified in Arunachal Pradesh alone, with additional discoveries being made in neighbouring Myanmar, Bhutan and Southwestern China.

The recovery efforts have gained momentum since, with the US Department of Defense’s Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) partnering with the Indian

Government. The collaboration involves archaeological excavations, DNA testing, and the use of advanced technologies like satellite imagery and ground-penetrating radar. This cooperation has been formalised through a series of agreements between India and the US. These agreements emphasise the humanitarian nature of the mission, with a focus on honouring the memory of the fallen. Indian authorities provide logistical support, while the DPAA brings technical expertise and funding.

The latest renewal of the Memorandum of Arrangement between the US Department of Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency and the Anthropological Survey of India (AnSI) to facilitate recovery from India of the remains of fallen US service members who served in World War II happened in September 2023. The effort is driven by a shared commitment to honour those who had sacrificed their lives for freedom. The recovery missions face significant challenges, like:-

- **Remote Locations.** Many crash sites are located in inaccessible areas of Arunachal Pradesh, requiring extensive trekking and helicopter support.
- **Environmental Factors.** Dense jungles, high altitudes, and unpredictable weather complicate operations.
- **Cultural Sensitivities.** Local tribes in Arunachal Pradesh consider the mountains sacred, and care has to be taken to ensure that recovery efforts do not disturb local beliefs or traditions.

Significance of the Efforts

The military holds pride of place in US society and there is strong societal support through organisations and associations that seek the

fullest accounting of those still listed as POW/MIA regardless of the conflict from which they went missing or were captured. There is relentless follow up and pressure on the US Government to persevere and sustain efforts in ensuring closure for families that have Service personnel declared missing in multiple conflicts, past and present, across the globe.

In effect, the recovery missions in Arunachal Pradesh are significant as they bring closure for the families of the missing airmen; these efforts provide long-awaited answers and a chance to honour their loved ones. The cooperation has strengthened bilateral ties and deepened India-US relations, showcasing the shared values of respect for human life and commemoration of military sacrifice. The recovery missions have unearthed artefacts and records that contribute to a better understanding of the **Hump** flights and their role in World War II.

Memorials and commemorative events have also been organised in India and the US to honour the memory of the fallen. In India, plaques and monuments have been erected at airbases that served as launch points for the Hump flights, such as Chabua in Assam. The inauguration of the **Hump World War II Museum** in Pasighat is a similar measure. Visitors to the Museum will have the opportunity to view remnants of aircraft, including rusting wreckage and machine guns, from the over 650 planes that crashed or went missing in Arunachal Pradesh during World War II. The Museum also serves as a powerful reminder of the sacrifices made in this region and the historical ties between the United States and Arunachal Pradesh, while ensuring that the stories of these fallen heroes are forever etched in our collective memory, serving as a powerful motivator for younger generations.

Changing Strategic Dynamic

Over the past 80 years, geopolitical calculi have undergone a shift. There is curiosity but also at times a shadow of scepticism about this humanitarian endeavour of recovering crashed planes. During World War II, the American and Chinese Forces fought side by side in the China – Burma - India theatre, commanded by the Chinese nationalist leader Chiang Kai Shek, who later established a government in exile in Taiwan. Today, the US and China are rivals, while India treads cautiously, often reluctant to spotlight an event in imperialist history. Complicating matters further, China claims Arunachal Pradesh as **“South Tibet”** and protests against significant activities in the region, thereby adding a layer of geopolitical tension to this delicate narrative.

In many ways closer India-US cooperation in sending joint identification and recovery teams to crash sites in Arunachal Pradesh, a state China views as disputed territory, serves as subtle but unambiguous strategic signalling by India on the settled and undisputed status of Arunachal Pradesh

from the Indian perspective. Additionally, the strategic importance of collaborating with the US on an issue of emotive and political significance cannot be gainsaid.

Conclusion

These missions serve as a reminder of the enduring bonds forged in times of crisis and the importance of preserving history for future generations. By recovering the remains of fallen airmen and remembering their contributions, India and the United States not only strengthen their partnership but also pay a fitting tribute to the heroes of the **Hump** flights. Lastly, joint India-US patrols in the geographically sensitive state of Arunachal Pradesh have positive politico-strategic spin-offs.

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Major General Ravi Murugan, PVSM, AVSM (Retd), an alumnus of National Defence Academy, Pune was commissioned into the 8th Battalion, The Brigade of Guards in June 1987. He has a Master's Degree in Science from Madras University as also an M Phil from Osmania University. In his 37 years of service, he has fulfilled multiple challenging roles across diverse operational areas. After command of his battalion, the officer commanded an Independent Armoured Brigade and subsequently, a Counter Insurgency Force in J&K. He was also the Defence & Military Attaché in the Embassy of India, Washington DC between June 2016 and July 2019. He has been the Additional Director General Military Operations (B) in Army Headquarters and commanded the Karnataka and Kerala Sub Area before retirement. He is presently in an advisory role with multiple companies.



Maj Gen Ravi Murugan

THE LEGENDARY MAJOR BOB KHATHING

A Chronicle of Courage and Commitment

Independent India inherited a chaotic McMahon line from the British Government which continues to haunt us till date. What events led to Indian control over Tawang in the early 50s? It was a young Major of the Indian Army who unfurled the Tricolour at Tawang on 09 February 1951. This legendary officer named Major Ralengnao Khathing, popularly known as Bob Khathing, went on to become an accomplished diplomat later.

Tawang, home to the world's second largest Buddhist monastery is a household name for those who have adorned Olive Greens in the Indian Army. Once a sleepy and mystic hamlet hidden in the South Eastern Himalayas at a height of about 9500 feet, this boat shaped monastery and Tawang Town shot into prominence when His Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama crossed over into India on 31 March 1959 after the Chinese occupation of Tibet. He was warmly greeted by the Indian Army at Khinzemane. In 1962, Tawang became the bone of contention between India and China and the Chinese and Indian Armies fought pitched battles around the icy heights of Tawang and further South near Jang, Sela and Bomdila.

Childhood

Major Bob Khathing was born on 28 February 1912 in Ukhrul in Manipur, a town rich in cultural heritage and community spirit. As a member of the Tangkhul Naga tribe, Ralengnao Khathing grew up in a well-educated family, where his father, a local leader, instilled in him a strong sense of duty and the importance of education. Khathing's educational



journey began in Ukhrul, but he faced challenges due to the remote location. Undeterred, he walked long distances to attend the Kangpokpi Mission Middle English School and Johnstone Higher Secondary School in Imphal. His efforts culminated in his graduation from Cotton College, Guwahati making him the first graduate among the hill people of Manipur.

Tryst with the Military

In May 1941, Bob Khathing embarked on a life-changing journey when he was commissioned into the British Indian Army. Assigned to the distinguished 19th Hyderabad Regiment (later day Kumaon Regiment) he quickly immersed himself in a world of discipline and camaraderie. As World War II raged on, Khathing's experiences prepared him for the trials that awaited him on the battlefield and his military career gained momentum. A few months after joining his Regiment, he was tasked with recruiting local volunteers for the 'V' Force, a covert unit formed to gather intelligence and support Allied operations against Japanese forces in Burma.

His leadership qualities were evident. He recruited about 5000 men for the 'V' Force from Bungpa area, where refugees were pouring in from Burma into Tangkhul areas. Thereafter, he established another Base Headquarters (HQ) in Southern Manipur at Chakpikarong and covered the entire Kabaw valley. He then shifted to Sunle in Kabaw valley itself, to be able to control all villages in South East Manipur including the Kabaw valley. When Japanese forces overran Shangshak and Ukhrul areas, he guided the British Army along with his 'V' Force personnel effectively mobilizing the Tangkhul leaders who united and helped organise an intelligence set up, passing information of Japanese movements to the Allied Forces. Major Khathing was awarded the MBE (Member of the Order of the British Empire).

After the war, he was elected to the first Manipur Assembly in 1948 and served as Minister for Hills Administration and Manipur Rifles till 1949 when the Assembly was dissolved on assimilation of Manipur into India. In May 1950, he was asked to rejoin as the Assistant Commandant of 2nd Battalion of Assam Rifles and later was assigned the post of Assistant Political Officer of North East Frontier Agency (NEFA, present day Arunachal Pradesh).

The Pioneering Expedition to Tawang (1951)

In the annals of India's Northeastern frontier, few events resonate as profoundly as Major Bob Khathing's expedition to Tawang in 1951. This mission not only marked a pivotal moment in asserting Indian sovereignty over the region but also laid the groundwork for future military and diplomatic efforts in a strategically significant area. An excerpt from the book on the Sino-Indian War of 1962 written by Dorjee Khandu Thongdok, a former Arunachal Minister highlights "India and

China had agreed in principle to determine the boundary on the basis of the watershed. In other words, areas where rivers flowed from South to North would be Tibet, while areas where rivers flowed from North to South would be India. As the Sela River flows from the South to the North, the Indian government initially presumed Tawang was a part of Tibet. But when the Survey of India found the Sela flowing back into India through Bhutan, Khathing acted quickly to establish an Indian post in Tawang. Khathing is the first Indian officer to have hoisted the Tricolour there in 1951, four years after independence."

Major Bob Khathing emerges as a pivotal figure in the nation's quest for stabilisation in the Northeastern region. While Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel is celebrated as the architect of India's integration, Khathing's contributions in stitching together the Northeastern territories are equally significant yet often overlooked. Tawang and NEFA (now Arunachal Pradesh), South of the McMahon line, became part of British India consequent to the Shimla Agreement signed in 1914 between British India and Tibetan representatives

bilaterally, in the presence of Chinese representatives. However, the British were unable to physically extend their administrative control over Tawang despite repeated attempts. Right till 1950, the area extending to the South of Sela Pass till Dirong Dzong was still physically under a loose Tibetan administration which in turn had appointed Governors called Dzongpens for the region; with one of them supervising monastic activities and the other ones called the Tsona Dzongpens being responsible for taxation and administration.

When China annexed Tibet on 06 October 1950, India started getting wary of the expansionist designs of China. It was learnt that the Chinese intended to establish a post at Tawang as the area was not under Indian control. The urgency to pre-empt the Chinese at seizing control over tracts of Tawang was clear.

The Governor of Assam, Jairam Das Daulataram summoned the Assistant Political Officer (APO) of Indian Frontier Administrative Service



With Dr Rajendra Prasad after the Padma Shri award ceremony in 1957.



Left. Sketch showing route from Tezpur to Tawang Right. Major Ralengnao Khathing receiving Padma Shri from Dr Rajendra Prasad, the President of India

(IFAS), Major Bob Khathing to his Headquarters at Shillong in December 1950. Major Khathing was directed to ‘occupy Tawang’ and establish a post there and convey assurance to the people of Tawang that none of their religious practices will be interfered with, there will be no forced labour and all their services will be paid for. This critical mission would test Bob Khathing’s mettle and diplomacy to occupy Tawang and bring it under Indian administrative control. With a sense of purpose Major Khathing embarked upon a journey fraught with challenges and danger and yet if successful, he would walk into the glorious annals of history of independent India.

Leading a team of dedicated soldiers from Charduar on 17 January 1951, he set out to navigate the challenging terrain that lay ahead. The journey to Tawang was fraught with obstacles—rugged mountains, unpredictable weather, and a complete lack of infrastructure which tested the limits of Khathing and his men. Yet, their determination never wavered. As they trekked through the harsh landscape, the team faced not only

physical challenges but also the weight of their mission. They understood that their success would not only secure a strategic foothold for India but also provide a lifeline for the Tibetan refugees seeking safety.

After days of arduous travel, Major Khathing and his team finally reached Tawang on 06 February 1951. On arrival, they were greeted by the stunning vista, where cliffs around Tawang seemed to watch over the magnificent monastery like ancient sentinels. The people of Tawang steeped in their tradition were wary yet curious about these new guests. This momentous arrival marked a significant assertion of Indian sovereignty in a

region that had long been a point of contention. The successful establishment of administrative control over Tawang was not just a military victory; it was a statement of India’s commitment to protecting its borders and supporting those in need.

Bob Khathing held discussions with local leaders and residents emphasizing the significance of Indian sovereignty and benefits of being part of the Indian Union. During these discussions, Khathing made it clear that under Indian governance, their cultural and religious practices would be honoured and preserved. He assured them that their traditions, languages and beliefs would not only be respected but would also find a place within the broader narrative of a diverse India. This commitment to cultural sensitivity was crucial in alleviating fears and building a sense of security among the local populace. By involving community leaders in decision-making processes, he fostered a sense of ownership and pride among the people. This collaborative approach not only strengthened the bond between the local communities and the Indian Government but also laid the groundwork for lasting peace and stability in the region. Thus, with the acquiescence of the local population of Tawang, on 09 February 1951 the Tricolour was unfurled at Tawang in a historic ceremony and the Union of India laid their legitimate claim over the tracts of Tawang marking its formal integration into India. It was a defining moment that not only shaped the future of the Northeastern frontier but also reinforced India’s role as a sanctuary for those fleeing oppression. In 1957, Major Khathing was honoured with the Padma Shri, in recognition of his exceptional service to the nation. This accolade was not merely a reflection of his military achievements but also a testament to his role as a bridge between cultures and communities.

In December 1957, Maj Khathing was posted to Mokochung, Naga Hills as the first Deputy Commissioner of Mokochung District. He then attended National Defence College (NDC) at New Delhi from July 1961 to April 1962. After NDC, he was deputed to the Sikkim Government as Development Commissioner of the State.

The Sino-Indian War of 1962

In 1962, the Chinese troops occupied the border areas of NEFA including Tawang, Sela and Bomdila. Bob Khathing sent an express telegram to the External Affairs Ministry, New Delhi, to pull him out from Sikkim and to be despatched to NEFA. He promptly received the order to report to HQ 4 Corps, Tezpur, where he worked round the clock to rehabilitate the NEFA people and to restore the civil administration. His appointment was designated as the Security Commissioner, NEFA. He served at Tezpur from November 1962 to January 1967. His noteworthy contribution was in the setting up of Sashastra Seema Bal, a border guarding force which was created after the war.

A Legacy of Service

In the rich mosaic of India's history, few figures embody the spirit of dedication and service as profoundly as Major Bob Khathing. His contributions to the nation, particularly during pivotal moments such as the Sino-Indian War, have left an indelible mark on the Northeastern frontier and beyond. Recognized for his unwavering commitment, Khathing's journey continued.

He took on significant roles in the Government. He served as the Chief Secretary of Nagaland, where he played a crucial role in the State's development and governance. His leadership during this

transformative period was marked by a focus on inclusivity and understanding, ensuring that the voices of local communities were heard and respected.

Khathing's dedication to fostering relationships extended beyond India's borders when he was appointed as India's Ambassador to Myanmar in 1972. In this role, he furthered his legacy as a dedicated public servant, working to strengthen diplomatic ties between the two nations. He breathed his last at his home, Valley View, Mantripukhri, Imphal, on 12 January 1990.

Major Ralengnao Khathing was awarded the **Arunachal Ratna** by the Government of Arunachal Pradesh posthumously on 21 February 2021. On 14 February 2021, the foundation stone for a museum in Tawang to honour Major Khathing was laid. The **Major Ralengnao 'Bob' Khathing Museum of Valour** was inaugurated on 31 October 2024 by Shri Rajnath Singh, Hon'ble Raksha Mantri in the presence of Shri Kiren Rijiju, Union Minister of Parliamentary Affairs and Minority Affairs, Chief Ministers of Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur, the Chief of Army Staff, and many other senior civilian and military dignitaries. It was a

befitting honour to one of the most decorated soldier diplomats of India.

Throughout his career, Major Bob Khathing exemplified the qualities of a true leader—vision, resilience, and an unwavering commitment to the welfare of his people. His legacy is not only etched in the annals of history but also in the hearts of those he served. As we reflect on his contributions, we are reminded of the importance of public service and the impact one individual can have on the course of a nation.

Today, Major Khathing's story serves as an inspiration for aspiring leaders and public servants. His life is a testament to the power of dedication, bridging divides, and fostering unity in a diverse nation. As we honour his legacy, we celebrate a man who not only defended India's borders but also championed the values of inclusivity and understanding, leaving behind a legacy that continues to resonate in the hearts of many.

(The author expresses his sincere gratitude to Mr John Khathing, son of Major Bob Khathing and Brigadier Vipul Singh Rajput, SM Commander of Tawang Garrison for sharing their valuable inputs for documenting this article).

Lieutenant General CP Mohanty, PVSM, AVSM, SM, VSM (Retd), an alumnus of RIMC Dehradun and National Defence Academy, Pune was commissioned into 6 RAJPUT in June 1982. A graduate of Defence Services Staff College, Wellington, he has also attended Higher Defence Management Course at College of Defence Management, Secunderabad and NDC at the National Defence College, New Delhi. In an illustrious career spanning nearly 39 years, the General Officer served in varied roles encompassing all possible operational and terrain profiles. The General Officer has researched extensively on China and South Asia & North East India making him a domain expert of these regions. He was the Vice Chief of Army Staff before his superannuation in January 2022.



Lt Gen CP Mohanty

SEPIA MEMORIES: HOLDING THE FORT BEYOND SELA

The Tawang Sector is very different today as compared to the situation in the late 70s, with far more troops and facilities. Only one battalion was deployed in the Sector in the late 70s, as this vivid narration by the Commanding Officer (CO) of the deployed unit shows.

In August 1977, our unit, 19 RAJ RIF, moved for its field tenure under the **'Ball of Fire Division'** in North East Frontier Agency (NEFA). For the record, the name and the state of Arunachal Pradesh came into being only a decade later in 1987. On reaching Misamari, as per the existing orders, the unit marched up to its location in Gachham 110 kms away, over four days on a self-contained basis. The idea was to start toughening the newly inducted units and orient them to the mountains from Day One. Incidentally, the marching route was along the old alignment that climbed up from Foothills – a small town on the edge of the Assam Plains – to its highest point **'Eagle's Nest'** before descending into Tenga Valley. After his dramatic escape to India in March 1959, the Dalai Lama also reached the plains along this route.

Over the next few months, the unit acclimatised and familiarised itself with the operational area, manned the defences and practised various contingencies at heights around 13500 feet. In July 1978, I took over the Battalion and the change of command also coincided with the change of the Battalion's operational role.



The author and his wife at Sela June 1992

At that time, one brigade was located at Misamari. Artillery units were at Dahung. Division Headquarters (HQ), Military Hospital and some divisional troops were in and around Tenga. Rising above Tenga, Chindit Top had family quarters, the Kendriya Vidyalaya, a branch of the State Bank of India and some such ancillaries. The second Brigade was at Birpur. Rupa was a happening place with the picture hall, few shops, the Ball of Fire Institute, and an officers' colony overlooking the stadium-cum-mini golf course having 'Browns'. Just past Rupa, at Gachham, was the third brigade. On the hillock above Gachham was a small complex of family quarters for Junior Commissioned Officers (JCOs) and men.

The fourth brigade of the Division was located in high altitude – short of Sela at Baisakhi, with its affiliated artillery regiment a little further at Ahirgarh. This brigade was relieved / rotated every two years. Only one battalion of the brigade remained operationally deployed beyond Sela holding several posts and patrolling the Line of Actual Control (LAC). Towards the second half of 1978, it was the turn of our brigade for the tenure in high altitude and my battalion was deployed beyond Sela to man the border.

To support the Baisakhi brigade, quite a few small administrative units were strung along the road beyond Bomdila - Army Supply Corps components at Munna, defence stores with a detachment of Engineers at Sapper Camp, an Animal Transport Company at Nyukmadong, a Field Workshop, Advance Dressing Station, Field Post Office and Transit Camp at Senge, where all ranks acclimatised before deployment in the high altitudes.

Three points of interest are being mentioned here. **First**, before moving to Baisakhi, some of the unit's heavy stores

were left behind with a guard in the 'Rear' at Gachham. The existing infrastructure and the facilities in the forward areas allowed only limited display, or the use, of ceremonial paraphernalia. **Second**, families of officers and other ranks stayed back in the Rupa-Gachham complexes since they were not permitted beyond Rupa. The farthest they were allowed was a 'day visit' to Bomdila, about twenty kms beyond Rupa, with its Gompa and the handicraft centre as the main attractions. **Third**, the unit moved to Baisakhi and beyond on a man-pack basis. During the movement, all ranks did two stages of acclimatisation at Senge and Baisakhi before further deployment.

Up Front Beyond Sela

A word about the roads. Misamari to Tawang was a narrow blacktop road with steep gradients. It had rough berms, rocky overhangs and was prone to frequent disruptions due to heavy rains causing landslides and the retaining walls to collapse. In the winter months,

snowfall often blocked Sela for days. It was a 'One Way' road with convoy timings and specified crossing places. No upward vehicular movement beyond Senge, and rearward movement past Jang, was allowed before seven in the morning and five in the evening. No roads existed beyond Tawang. The formation cutting of the road to Lumla had just commenced.

Interestingly, soon after the fall of Tawang in October 1962, the Chinese Army had built the Bumla-Tawang Road, climbing down from 15000 to 10000 feet over precipitous ridges, in less than six weeks. The road alignment followed the old trade route and had no bridge or culvert along its length. Wet and boggy patches had been 'corduroyed' with pine trunks for traction. The road had been in disuse ever since.

By first week October 1978, my Battalion was operationally deployed. There was one company guarding the Khinzemane axis. The centuries-old trade route coming down from Lhasa



The LAC as seen from Bumla, runs along the dark ridgeline



Sketch of Tawang and Surrounding Areas (Image credit forceindia.net)

Support and Administrative Companies were also located at Baisakhi. To ensure that all companies did their fair share of soldiering on Posts beyond Tawang, and got equal opportunities to train, they were rotated every six months.

The climb from Tawang to P'Tso at a height of around 13500 feet, took three hours of hard grind. A little beyond P'Tso, along a well-beaten track which branched off due North-west, it took about five hours of march to reach Khinzemane company. P'tso to Bumla (15200 feet) over Mila, Nagula and Tongpengla, was just under three hours. Next to, and high above the Bumla Post, on a rocky outcrop, was the Observation Post (OP).

The Signal Regiment maintained all

to Tawang across Bumla was held by one company with a platoon at Bumla and the remainder company at Panga Teng Tso (P'Tso for short). Lungtsang Post, about three hours' marching distance to the East from Bumla, was held by a platoon. One company, minus the platoon at Lungtsang, was at Jang guarding the bridge across Tawang Chu and the river line. Gashela, a dominating feature short of Tawang, overlooking the entire Tawang Bowl, was to be occupied only on orders. It was a tough climb of three hours to Gashela Top. As an aside, it is mentioned that Gashela and the area astride Jang were highly leech-infested.

Besides my Battalion, an Assam Rifles company was deployed further East on the Lungar-Chuna-Mago Axis. It was not under my operational or administrative command. The Battalion HQ and a rifle company – the Training Company – were located at Baisakhi. Save for the detachments of specialist platoons, nursing assistants and tradesmen with the forward companies, the skeletons of the

line communications up to Tawang. Line maintenance beyond was the unit's responsibility. Field telephones working on twisted copper cables left much to be desired. Nevertheless, after a bit of shouting into the mouthpiece and at the hapless operator, one did manage to talk.

After my first visit to all the posts, and having got a grip of the setting and the role, I ordered that within the next month, everybody in the Battalion HQ – the Second in Command (2IC), Adjutant, Quarter Master (QM), Specialist Platoon Commanders, Head Clerk and the Company Clerks will visit forward posts so that everybody is fully seized of the area and is not a 'paper tiger' in his dealings with those deployed ahead.

P'Tso Company Commander was tasked to repair the Road Tawang- Bumla as I intended to drive up next time. The direct track from Bumla to Lungtsang, passing close to the LAC, had not been in use since the Tulungla firing incident – farther to the East – of October 1975 where four Assam Rifles men were killed. An alternate track, veering more inwards, was in use. I decided that we would use the forward track and I joined the first such link patrol. As in vogue even today, all movement up to the patrolling points along the LAC was strictly tactical, with a minimum of a full-strength section carrying two light machine guns. Also, all patrols left behind 'Tell Tale Signs' of their visit.

The unit generated a daily Situation Report (SITREP). In due course, my drive up to P'Tso and movement from Bumla to Lungtsang along the forward track was suitably reported. While my actions were appreciated, I was instructed not to develop / improve the road beyond P'Tso to Bumla, and not to be aggressive or adventurous anymore.

Fortunately, throughout my tenure, the Brigade and Division Commanders were firm in their directives but never interfered in my command and were unwavering in standing by the Battalion.

I had the difficult task of ensuring a reasonable strength in the forward companies. It was managed by running promotion cadres or pre-course training at the Posts. Similarly, because of Jang's low altitude, the strength was maintained by placing the volleyball and basketball teams there.

After a couple of rotations of the companies, such was the mastery of the unit in the operational area beyond Sela that, when given the task to act as the 'enemy' in the Division's exercise with troops, my eight columns, led by officers and JCOs moved cross country, attacking and infiltrating the defences over three nights, to reach their objectives, from beyond Tawang to behind Sela. In the 'Summing Up' the Battalion was suitably applauded.

As usual, there were visits by senior commanders. Once the Division Commander and the three Brigade Commanders, on a hush-hush reconnaissance mission, stayed overnight on the P^oTso Post. The next day we all walked up to a few vantage points next to Bumla before returning. In January 1979, the Chief of the Army Staff, General O P Malhotra, PVSM, visited us at Baisakhi and commended all ranks for their dedication to duty under difficult conditions. A month later, our Colonel of the Regiment (COR), Lieutenant General H C Rai, PVSM, also spent a day with the battalion at Baisakhi. The Chief and the COR had commanded their brigades in these parts and were nostalgic during their visits. Being the sole senior officer beyond Sela, the civil administration in Tawang, the Lamas of the monastery and the Task Force

personnel constructing / maintaining the road were all very considerate to me. It felt good to be somebody.

Life on the posts was tough because of the altitude, vagaries of weather, patrolling commitments and administrative constraints. This period also coincided with the other ranks' cadre review. In place of Naiks, Havildars were to command sections. The JCO strength was to increase from 26 to 44 (Plus or minus one or two to the best of my memory). Understandably, the windfall of promotions and the associated monetary benefits kept the men in good cheer and gave me undue credit for ushering in so good a policy.

We were – the unit continues to be so even now – very good in sports. Though operationally deployed in high altitude, we won the Overall Division Championship for two consecutive years. At the cost of being faulted for bragging, I must mention that, having come down to Gachham, we won it again for the third time.

The family members were permitted to visit their families in Gachham-Rupa for two days once a month. Since a longer stay in the low altitudes necessitated a seven-day re-acclimatisation, a longer break was allowed only on compassionate grounds.

I must highlight that the busiest troops are indeed the happiest troops. Days, weeks and months flew by as we kept vigil along our far-flung disputed border. The sanctity of LAC was maintained without any untoward incident. Despite physical, mental and psychological stresses we had no disciplinary case, insubordination or medical emergency. Snow, fog or rains notwithstanding, none of our vehicles plying on those rough mountainous roads had a mishap. We had done our bit efficiently. On being relieved in the second half of 1980, the Battalion marched back to Gachham. At Gachham, we erected a memorial for Brigadier Hoshiar Singh, IOM, IDSM,



Visit of the Army Chief to Tawang, January 1979. The Chief is second from right, and the author is first from the right.

SITREP. The OP at Bumla could observe the Chinese Post across the LAC. The Post was behind a low ridge and only their OP/Sentry Post was visible. The daily SITREP would reflect the change of sentry and such like routine activities. One day the Adjutant received instructions that the SITREP must assess the activities being reported. Next day, the bored Bumla Post Commander sent the following SITREP “Sentry seen with snow boots and thick hooded coat rubbing hands and pacing up and down. Assessment. It is cold up there”. Admittedly, the higher-ups were not amused but, after a bit of buzz-buzz, held their peace. Soon a clarification was received saying that ‘assessment of only unusual activities’ need be reflected.

Croix-de-Guerre, who died fighting the Chinese in November 1962 while commanding 62 Brigade at Sela.

Tailpiece. A decade later, in November 1990, I was posted as Brigadier General Staff, 4 Corps in Tezpur. By then the families were permitted in Tawang. I took my wife to show her where I had roughed out as the battalion commander. However, in the interim, the setting had changed dramatically. The roads were broader and well-surfaced now. We stayed in well-appointed guest rooms en route. Rupa had a shopping complex. Baisakhi had electricity and TVs. We had a smooth drive right up to P’Tso and Bumla. On our way back, she queried “Are these the places you used to make so much song and dance about?” What could I say?



Major General V K Shrivastava, VSM (Retd), an alumnus of the National Defence Academy, Pune, was commissioned in 1962 into the Rajputana Rifles. He was in J&K during the Indo-Pakistan conflict of 1965 and was in Bangladesh in the 1971 war. A graduate of the Defence Services Staff College, Wellington, he also attended the prestigious National Defence College, New Delhi. He has held a number of coveted command, staff and instructional appointments. Post-retirement in 1998, he had a short stint as the Executive Editor of the Indian Defence Review before joining the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi, as a Senior Fellow. From there he led many delegations for interactions with think tanks abroad and was also a member of the Indian team invited by the National Defence University, USA, for strategic dialogue. He has written researched text for four coffee table books, has a published monograph on China, a prize-winning essay, and a number of articles on matters military to his credit. He has authored "Manthan: Multifaceted Reflections on the Indian Armed Forces", which was released in February 2021. His second book, "Arms and the Woman: The Shattered Glass Ceiling" was released in October 2022.



Maj Gen VK Shrivastava

ENEMY AT THE GATES

Criticality of Air Power in the North East

The eschewal in the employment of offensive air power contributed significantly to the humiliating defeat in the 1962 Sino – Indian Conflict, a terrible strategic mistake that continues to haunt the nation. It also underscored the salience of the region to India’s sovereignty and security, and was a harbinger of the criticality that air power would play in defending it. This was proven when air power achieved total air superiority on the Eastern Front in the Indo-Pak War of 1971, which enabled total freedom of surface operations, and played an invaluable role in the subsequent victory that followed.

And lo! The hunter of the East has caught the Sultan’s turret in a noose of light¹ - Omar Khayyam

India’s North Eastern region is no stranger to air power. When the Japanese invaded Asia, ‘and when the gateway to India, most glittering prize of all, was threatened, it was decided to send No.1 Squadron the Indian Air Force (IAF) to Burma.’² 16000 sorties and 24000 operational flying hours later, for its immense contribution towards the victory over Japan, the prefix of ‘Royal’ was bestowed on the IAF.³

¹ “The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, translated by Edward J. Fitzgerald, <https://web.cs.dal.ca/~johnston/poetry/rubaiyat.html>

² Squadron Leader Rana TS Chhina, *The Eagle Strikes, Appendix E Tribute to Indian Airmen, Air Mshl Sir Patrick Playfair, Queen Mary’s Book, 1942, Ambi Knowledge Resources Pvt Ltd, New Delhi, 2006, p. 317*

³ *Ibid*, p. 318



Winged Dragons in Shigatse Airfield, Tibet - 150 kms from Sikkim



Sukhois on Combat Air Patrol - Keeping the PLAAF in check



AWACS - Critical for Air Defence of the East

The Terrain Effects

In India's vast Northeastern region geography is king, as the mountainous terrain and dense jungles have for centuries dictated the history of the region. The absence of adequate road-rail connectivity, infrastructure and communication links in the erstwhile North East Frontier Agency (presently Arunachal Pradesh) kept the region disconnected from the rest of the nation with IAF's air maintenance meeting military and civil administration requirements. Thus, the scattering of Advanced Landing Grounds and forward helipads, which are nestled in the East-West stretch of the lower reaches of the Great Himalayan Range in Arunachal Pradesh, which further connect to the 'book shaped' series of hills of the Patkai Bum straddling the Assam Valley, and extend further South-westerly along a series of ranges ending in the Lushai Hills of Mizoram, have remained a critical lifeline for India's national security.

The Chinese Challenge

China's periodic assertive regional claims are a part of its coercive strategy that includes salami-slicing of territory,

creation of new-normals by establishing civilian villages across disputed areas, and cartographic aggression with the renaming of 62 villages, towns, peaks, passes, and water bodies till date.⁴ The Border Peace and Tranquillity Agreement of 1993 led to relative peace and downplaying of the border issue, leaving it to be managed at the tactical level between the two Armies by keeping communications open and through border management protocols. This has had serious strategic consequences. While the relative peace allowed India the space for stepping up military and

infrastructure development on the borders, it equally allowed China to expand and strengthen their communications, connectivity, permanent infrastructure, and widen the military capability differential to its advantage. The face-offs at Doklam in 2017 and Galwan in 2020 underscore the fact that the levers of the status quo on the border lie in the hands of the Chinese who could alter it militarily when it suits Beijing. From an Indian context the current border manning status has been possibly altered permanently, wherein increase in boots on ground by the Indian Army (IA) is no longer an option. The extensive airlift of troops, tanks, artillery, combat equipment and vehicles is the outcome of a much-needed robust posture⁵ in the face of China's persistent destabilising actions. The forward deployment of forces, backed by reserves in the high altitudes, entails Herculean challenges of acclimatisation, kitting and enormous logistical back up.⁶ Expansion of helipads, greenfield runways and extension of old airfields are as vital to the Army for Coordinated Air Operations (erstwhile Counter Surface Force Operations)⁷ and Air Mobility and Air Maintenance Operations⁸, as they are vital for IAF's Air Defence (AD) and offensive air power employment in the region.

⁴ "Tejaswini S S and Rajesh A M, *The curious case of China renaming locations in India's Arunachal Pradesh*, *The Border Lens*, October 24, 2024, <https://www.borderlens.com/2024/10/24/the-curious-case-of-china-renaming-locations-in-indias-arunachal-pradesh/>

⁵ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/more-than-enough-troops-deployed-along-lac-officials/articleshow/102703095.cms?from=mdr>

⁶ *Air Mshl Diptendu Choudhury, A Waning Conventional Deterrence: A National Security Portent*, *VIF*, September 22, 2023, <https://www.vifindia.org/article/2023/sepember/22/A-Waning-Conventional-Deterrence-A-National-Security-Portent%20%20>

⁷ *Doctrine of the Indian Air Force*, LAP 2000-22, p.53

⁸ *Ibid* pp.60-63

Often missed in the complex territorial dynamics of the unresolved borders, is the issue of sovereign airspace which extends into the aerial domain vertically above the Line of Actual Control. Air violations by the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) are already evident and have added an aerial dimension, which till recently did not form a part of IA's border strategy against China. The recent inclusion of air power in the military strategy is a welcome joint approach in India's continental threat calculus, which is no longer seen as a binary between the two Armies, but hearteningly as one multi-domain threat with a joint military strategy - a strategy which includes and leverages all elements of India's military, especially air power. The serious initiatives being taken towards establishing a joint military approach for the future employment of force in India's national security is indicative that the military leadership is already seized of its dire necessity. The increase in the conduct of multi-domain joint exercises in the operational areas of the Northeast and the North not only enhances the much-needed synergised application of force to counter the continental threat, it also is a valuable strategic signal of our national security resolve and preparedness.⁹⁻¹⁰ But will that be enough?

The Indian military is acutely aware of the role of hard power and deterrence dynamics against China, and given the hyphenation of expectations of normal ties with peace on borders,¹¹ a holistic strategy reset which includes all elements of comprehensive national power is warranted. An accelerated all-round regional development must be accompanied by bolstering of offensive air power and AD capability in the nation's conventional deterrence. Over and above the Army's resolute stand and escalated

deployment, what is strikingly different from the past is the inclusion of offensive air power in the Indian military calculus. The courageous actions and the resolute stand of the Army in the two stand-offs certainly took the Chinese by surprise, but what also bolstered the stand was the rapid deployment of combat assets, and airlift by the IAF¹² in the region. Swift scaling up of the forces and logistics by air in the Northeast will remain a critical factor in the IA's future strategies. While the offensive air power capability differential between the Air Forces continues to be in India's favour for the present, China has evidently drawn its' lessons and accelerated its PLA Air Force infrastructure and deployment. The latest geo-intelligence imagery of the underground military infrastructure and subterranean facilities by China close to Depsang in East Ladakh¹³, underscores the air threat perception in the sensitive region, as much as it reveals their future military perceptions. It is making every effort that any asymmetric military advantage in India's favour is mitigated, if not neutralised.

The Winged Dragon in Tibet

The threat to India in the Northeast needs to be seen in the correct perspective. The **first** is that while China remains the highest priority threat for India, the reverse is not so.

China's highest strategic security priority, i.e. Taiwan, lies to its East, and therefore, it can ill-afford a simultaneous two-adversary military conflict. A simultaneous conflict with India on its South and with the US on its East and Southeast is Beijing's worst nightmare, and is borne out by its strategic discomfort of the growing politico-military proximity between the US and India.

The **next** is that the strategic military deployment in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) has somewhat of a land-fortress construct, with the flat Tibetan plateau being protected by the Himalayan ranges in the South and the Karakoram Range in the South West. The high altitudes of the plateau and the surrounding layers of some of the highest mountain ranges of the world prevent unrestricted sensor and weapon system coverage in TAR, which China's Anti-Access-Area-Denial (A2AD) military deployment strategy enjoys in the East and South China Seas. The **third**, is that in the past China had been predominantly focused on strengthening its Eastern and Central Theatre Commands. Hence its air power deployment has been seasonal in the absence of necessary infrastructure for permanent positioning of the PLAAF in Tibet and Sinkiang. Coupled with the current limited offensive air power capability of the Chinese Air Force,

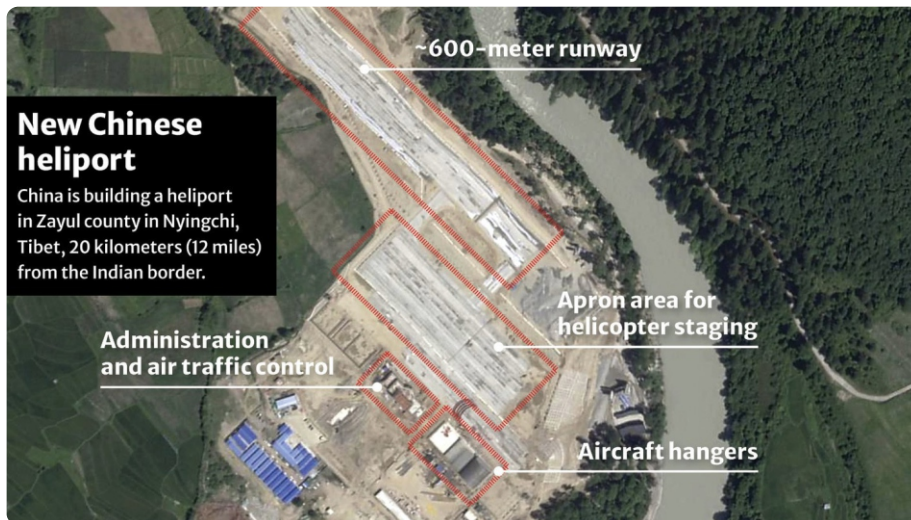
⁹ <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/army-iaf-conduct-joint-multi-domain-exercise-close-to-lac-in-northeast-8515612/>

¹⁰ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/on-g20-eve-iaf-army-kick-off-mega-drill-on-china-pak-fronts/articleshow/103371162.cms?from=mdr>

¹¹ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/jaishankar-warns-china-normalisation-of-ties-impossible-without-peace-on-lac-101686250103401.html>

¹² <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/indian-air-force-airlifted-over-68000-soldiers-to-ladakh-in-2020-galwan-valley-clashes-2420580-2023-08-14>

¹³ <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/china-goes-underground-in-aksai-chin-what-it-means-for-indian-forces-4340185>



Nyingchi Heliport, Tibet - Creating new normals

year China and India squared off on the Doklam Plateau. At least 22 of these are identifiable as military or dual-use facilities or are expected to be once they are completed. Most importantly, its military deployment, training, and exercises have taken on a distinctly India-centric operational flavour.¹⁵

The pace of this activity sped up significantly in 2020. That year alone, China began constructing seven new air facilities and initiated upgrades at seven others with much of the activity taking place within Tibet in areas close to its disputed border with India. Since 2017, China had initiated upgrades (such as new terminals, hangars, aprons and runways) at all five of Tibet's existing military and civilian dual-use airports.

China is supplementing these with four

new airports in Tibet. Three of these, the Lhuntse, Ngari-Burang and Shigatse Tingri airports are positioned less than 60 km from the China-India border. The new facilities also fill large gaps along the Indian border where there were previously no airports. If PLAAF units are deployed at these airports, China will gain several new nodes along the border from which to project air power into India. New and upgraded air facilities also significantly enhance the People's Liberation Army's (PLA's) ability to move personnel and logistics in the region via air, which is particularly important given the unforgiving terrain of both Xinjiang and Tibet. They also offer the PLA additional bases from which to launch airborne surveillance and reconnaissance missions, as well as strikes and counter-strikes against India in future conflicts. The PLA is also scaling up its ability to conduct helicopter-based operations through the construction of at least five new heliports in Tibet and the upgrading of two existing heliports. These heliports are dotted throughout Tibet, stretching from Rutog County in the West to Nyingchi City in the East. These heliports will enhance PLA operations in the mountainous region since they will facilitate rapid troop transfers, logistic support, and other combat support missions behind the tactical battlespace and on the frontline in relatively benign airspaces which are not contested.

which it is hard at work to expand, in the interim, it has sought to offset this shortcoming with its Rocket Force.¹⁴

After having ignored the military infrastructure development in the past, the Doklam and Galwan stand offs brought India into China's military strategy playlist. It has since gone into an overdrive in building and upgrading airfields, extending logistic lifelines and storage facilities, strengthening its road-rail communication networks. China's largest military formation is the Western Theatre Command (WTC), which spreads across the Sichuan, Tibet, Gansu, Ningxia, Qinghai, Xinjiang and Chongqing regions. The air power buildup taking place on China's Western frontier is sweeping in scale as massive infrastructure projects sanctioned by the 14th Five-Year Plan are scheduled for completion by 2030-35. Based on analysis of satellite imagery and other open-source material, a report has identified 37 airports and heliports within Tibet and Xinjiang that have been newly constructed or upgraded since 2017—the

¹⁴ Air Marshal Diptendu Choudhury, *Breaching the Dragon's A2AD: Strategic Targeting the Key*, USI Strategic Year Book, Vij Books, New Delhi, 2023

¹⁵ *How is China Expanding its Infrastructure to Project Power Along its Western Borders*, China Power, CSIS Report, March 16, 2022, updated November 09, 2023, <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-tibet-xinjiang-border-india-military-airport-heliport/>

Aerial Threat – A Reality Check

The Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on ‘Further Deepening Reform Comprehensively to Advance Chinese Modernization’ was adopted at the third plenary session of the 20th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on July 18, 2024. It seeks to – ‘optimize the composition of the command centres for joint theatre operations and improve the configuration of commands for joint task force operations. We will better coordinate the development and application of the network information system. To develop a new framework of services and arms, we will speed up the development of strategic deterrence forces and strive to develop new-domain forces with new combat capabilities, while making coordinated efforts to strengthen traditional combat forces.’ It is clear that air and space power is not only a part of China’s deterrence strategy, it also highlights the balancing and synergising of its conventional forces with new domain forces, towards joint military operations.

PLA’s strategy is underpinned with the need for superiority in three main domains - information, air, and maritime - with information domain its top priority in its targeting strategy. The ‘three superiorities’ lie at the core of its doctrinal thinking and operational planning.¹⁶ Therefore, it is the limitations of PLAAF’s ability to exercise air superiority in the TAR¹⁷ coupled with the IAF’s offensive capabilities, which has led to the extensive integration of the PLA AD into the WTC’s order of battle.¹⁸ Given PLAAF’s limited air to ground strike ability, it has attempted to compensate it by ballistic missile targeting by the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF) against the IA’s deployed forces and IAF bases as well.¹⁹ It is also enhancing the accuracy of its missiles, with much improved Circular Error Probability (CEP), which is the

radius of a circle in which 50 per cent of rounds are expected to hit and is a measure of a weapon’s precision.²⁰ With more accurate CEP of its missiles, the PLARF’s targeting ability of ‘key strategic and operational targets of the enemy,’ including reconnaissance, intelligence, command and control, electronic warfare, anti-aircraft and logistics systems to disrupt enemy supply, logistics, and defences, will improve.²¹ The PLARF’s expanding capabilities while essentially aimed at the Taiwanese and US systems, will be able to engage some IA and IAF targets as well, the quantum of which will increase in proportion with the rise of China’s India-threat perception.

However, the PLA’s military capabilities are not without critical vulnerabilities. The military capability and the capacity of its weapons against India are presently limited to those deployed in the WTC. The threat priorities on its East and the large geographical distances preclude the possibility of switching its forces and redeploying them against India. Also, the weapon and deployment densities are presently limited to specific areas of China’s focus against India in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh, and these will keep the IA engaged in the assessed ‘like for like retorts.’²² Thus, the only depth offensive into the layered PLA defences will be possible by the IAF, which will

have to carry out extensive parallel targeting – in the forward areas to assist the Army in its defensive operations by keeping the PLAAF of its back, and targeting PLA’s offensive elements; in the intermediate depths to cut off the logistic and communication lifelines; and in the depths to target the PLAAF’s air power on ground by striking its key air bases in WTC,²³ its fixed AD radars and missile sites, its aircraft and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) in the air, and identified long range vector deployments. Penetrating the WTC’s equivalent of A2AD deployment will therefore be critical not only to IAF’s air operations, it will be the deciding factor in giving the IA with its significant high altitude warfare experience and skills, a fighting chance. Breaching the citadel will certainly come at a cost, as aside from the enemy, there will be attrition both for the IAF and the IA in combat. But that is an integral part and parcel of the sacred commitment of India’s military towards the nation’s security, which it will uphold at all cost.

Some Strategic Takeaways – Air Power in the North East

With the enemy at the gates across the Northeast, there are several strategic takeaways with respect to air power in the region. These are enumerated hereafter.

The recent thawing of the border

¹⁹ Ravinder Singh Chatwal, *Enter the PLA Rocket Force: Assessing China’s Missile Capabilities*, *Air Power Journal* Vol. 11 No. 3, monsoon 2016 (July-September)

²⁰ *Ibid*

²¹ Adam Ni and Bates Gill, *China’s New Missile Force: New Ambitions, New Challenges (Part 1)*, *China Brief* 18, no. 14 (10 August 2018), accessed 12 March 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-new-missile-force-new-ambitions-new-challenges-part-1/>.

²² Menon, n.20

²³ *Air Mshl Anil Chopra, Xinjiang Military Region: Air Assets to Monitor*, *CAPS Issue Brief* 137/21, June 16, 2021 <https://capsindia.org/xinjiang-military-region-air-assets-to-monitor/>



Siliguri Corridor (image credit borderlens.com)

spectrums are a given. Periodical to regular fighter and UAV missions can be expected to test IAF's readiness status and operational response in the near future. Thus, India's future border strategy, especially in the Northeast, must include IAF's AD response and counter strategy. The stepping-up of IAF's ISR and combat support missions alongside its fighter operations in the region is a future-necessity in India's joint military strategy. Greater integration of land and air strategy is thus a joint military imperative, and necessitates the inclusion of the sovereignty of the aerial domain in our overall security approach. Regular joint appreciation, planning, training and conduct of exercises in the region must become the current and future norm.

issue remains a complex affair with no solution but an interim whistle-stop, which India is treating with hard-learned caution. China will keep pushing towards arriving at agreements which suit their larger strategy. The creation of buffer zones in disputed stretches is fraught with danger as China could next insist that these buffers include the air spaces above them. This would imply that the forward airstrips close to the border and sovereign air spaces over the disputed areas could easily become 'no-fly zones', inaccessible to the IAF aircraft for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) missions, AD combat air patrols, as well as air mobility and air logistics. It would also limit IAF's operational flexibility and response in peace and the grey zone of no-war-no-peace conditions.

The PLAAF presence in the region will increase in the future with an inevitable shift from temporary to permanent force deployments. Greater aerial intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance missions across all

The vulnerability of the strategic Siliguri corridor must be made robust with the creation of an aerial domination box capability over the region to deter adversarial air power. The current situation in Bangladesh, and China's continuous infrastructure and influence expansion efforts in Myanmar, underscore the future possibility of changed threat dynamics. Military partnerships for the sale of Chinese aircraft have already commenced.²⁴⁻²⁵ PLAAF access to any base in Myanmar will allow its threat to stretch into the Bay of Bengal region and India's Eastern coast. The need to expand IAF operational footprint and infrastructure on an accelerated footing, inside the geographical 'hook' in the NE in between Bangladesh and Myanmar, needs no reiteration.

The enormous potential of civil aviation in the Northeast must be exploited and leveraged through a comprehensive air power approach in India's military and civil aviation. Setting up of a large-scale civil aviation and logistic hub in the region will expand the capacity and volume of logistics connect with the rest of the nation in peace and war. It will also greatly boost regional connectivity and tourism of all the **Seven-Sisters** states. The civil aviation assets and infrastructure will also create a much needed dual use advantage for the IAF and the IA. Needless to add, the Air Defence Identification Zone in the Northeast must be made more effective towards greater control of sovereign airspace and its security by ensuring gap free multi-tier, multi-agency sensor coverage. Increase

²⁴ <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/jf-17-thunder-bangladesh-officially-shows-interest/>

²⁵ <https://thediplomat.com/2014/06/burma-to-purchase-chinese-pakistani-jf-17-fighter-jets/>

of Civil and Army radar deployment in the region in the near future, integrated and networked with an increased deployment of IAF surveillance and AD radars, is a strategic need.

The urgent need to upgrade the IAF's depleting combat bench strength is an issue which the government is amply seized of. There is a critical and concurrent need for the urgent purchase of 114 multi role fighter aircraft (MRFA) and additional combat enablers - Airborne Warning and Control System aircraft and Aerial Refuellers, which are critical to preserving India's conventional deterrence capability. Concurrently, India's indigenous fifth generation Advance Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA) programme must be accelerated. Here a key aspect that needs highlighting and understanding emerges. India needs to take a long-term nuanced view in embracing the *Atmanirbharta* strategy in the military aviation industry. It has to be a mix of immediate near-term foreign purchase for the urgently needed 114 MFRA, with a medium-term joint manufacturing strategic partnership for the fifth Gen AMCA, and long-term research and development for future-gen fighters and Unmanned Aerial Systems. The lowest hanging fruit must be leveraged immediately to strengthen the foundations of India's *Atmanirbharta* in defence production. This is the aggressive production and marketing of the wide range of proven AD sensors, surface to air systems, aerial guided weapons, aerial platforms, etc., in the region. These concurrent criticalities need to be balanced and addressed in parallel with greater urgency of action.

Closing Thoughts

The present and rapidly diminishing air power advantage serves as a crucial factor in India's conventional deterrence



Building A2AD - Surface to Air Missile Base in Nyingchi, Tibet

posture, which has restrained the Chinese military actions escalation. The strategic importance of the small window of India's current asymmetric air power advantage in the Northeast, which is swiftly closing with the PLAAF's air power infrastructure development drive across the region, needs wider appreciation and debate amongst India's strategic community and security establishment. As China seeks to offset or at the least balance the IAF's air power asymmetry, its greatest adverse impact will be on the future of Indian military's operational capability.

Given the salience of offensive air power and AD in all future conflicts and wars, especially since both adversaries have strong Air Forces, air power in the Northeast is vital to India's future-relevant continental threat framework and the matrix of response strategies. The convergence of air and military strategies, especially in the Northeast, is an inescapable future imperative. **As China seeks to offset, if not reverse IAF's air power asymmetry, it will be a strategic mistake for India to cede the current air power advantage to China's Flying Dragons.**



Air Marshal (Dr) Diptendu Choudhury, PVSM, AVSM, VM, VSM (Retd), an alumnus of the Royal College of Defence Studies, UK has a Masters from King's College, London. An experienced fighter pilot who has commanded several combat units, he has held various appointments handling air operations at tactical, operational and strategic levels. He was involved in policy formulation and strategy development for the IAF and led the IAF in three international air exercises, viz., with the USA, France and the UAE. He was the Commandant of the National Defence College, New Delhi prior to his superannuation. He is an avid scholar, writer and speaker on air power, strategy, national and international security matters. He has authored the book "Indian Air Power: Contemporary and Future Dynamics".



Air Marshal (Dr) Diptendu Choudhury

AIR MAINTENANCE IN NORTH EAST INDIA

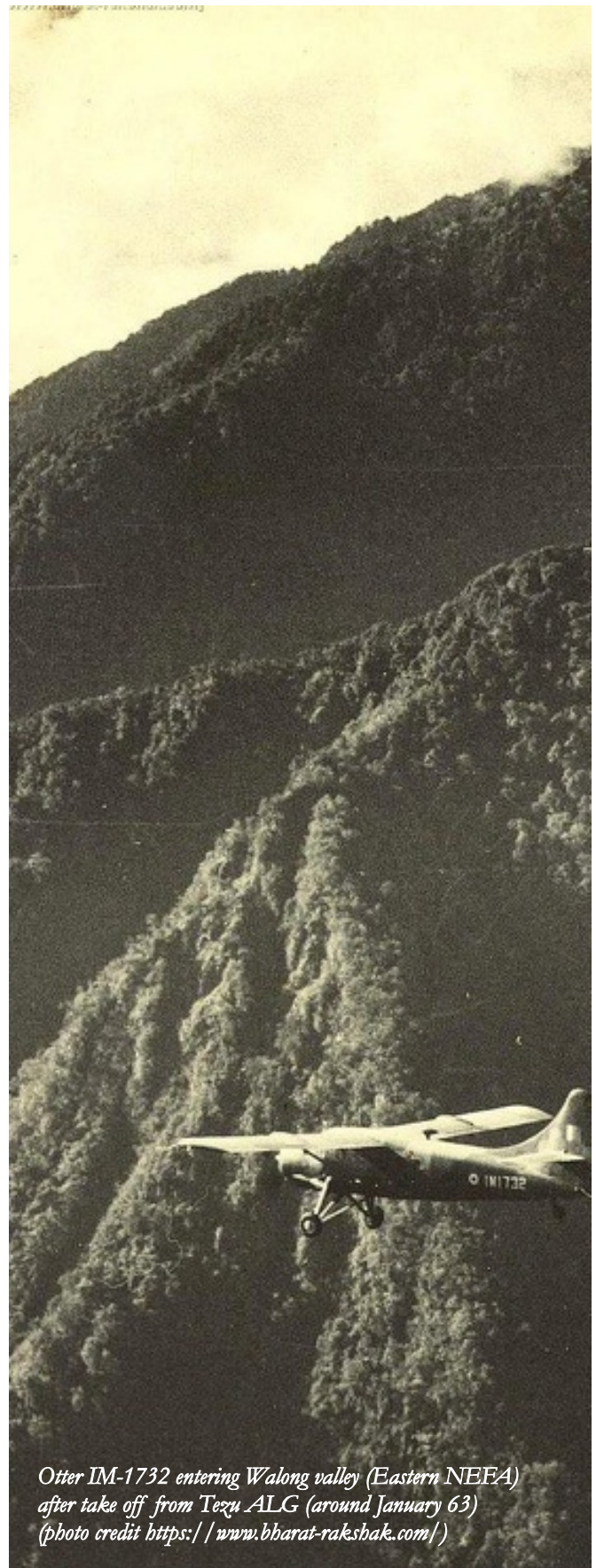
A View from the Caribou Cockpit

The Eastern Air Command (EAC) is responsible for Air Maintenance operations in North East India. Its area of responsibility includes a 6300 km long international boundary with China, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangladesh. The Headquarters of EAC is housed in a spectacular location in Shillong, also called the 'Scotland of the East'.

Introduction

Another cold winter morning in Chabua. I had just celebrated my 21st birthday. Late nights and early mornings were romantic at that age. They still are if you are young, 21 and have stars in your eyes. I loved the battle jackets we wore along with the wings and no ribbons (we were yet to earn them). The glamour of the uniform and the free chocolates they promised us every day was what drew me to join the Air Force and fly planes. The meagre salary was a bonus. The bright white wings gave away the fact that we were rookie pilots still wet behind the ears. Did it matter? Yes, in a BIG way. Some of us tried to soil those wings to make us look old. But then our face and the single, narrow, Pilot Officer's stripe on our shoulders, barely visible even to us (leave alone the pretty girls) was a giveaway. By the way, the Service has noticed the insignificance of the rank and done away with it.

It was a cold foggy morning, as we started up our Caribou (DHC-4) aircraft. We were dressed as warm as we possibly could. A layer of inners, a Polo neck sweater, our flying suits and on top of that a warm fluffy coat bought from the Bhutia Bazar in Shillong (at a bargain after a lot of haggling). Just about enough to keep us warm we thought. The low



*Otter IM-1732 entering Walong valley (Eastern NEFA)
after take off from Tezu ALG (around January 63)
(photo credit <https://www.bharat-rakesh.com/>)*

temperatures made starting up the old piston engines a challenge. The DHC-4 Caribou aircraft, equipped with two Pratt and Whitney R2000 Twin Wasp piston engines were inducted in the immediate aftermath of the 1962 India-China War. As part of the emergency aid that the United States and Canada diverted to India to help shore up the effort against the Chinese, two Caribous from the US Air Force were delivered to India. Both aircraft arrived at Palam on 08 January 1963. The very next day, No.33 Squadron was raised with these two aircraft. Soon after, the two Caribous were used in Prisoners of War evacuation missions from Walong and other forward locations in 1963.

Further orders were placed with De Havilland, Canada for sixteen new production aircraft – enough to equip the newly raised unit. The Squadron was initially based in Guwahati and the aircraft were extensively used in the Northeast in the tactical support role. Its ability to operate from short and unprepared runways and landing grounds cut from forests and mountain sides while carrying a three-ton load was unparalleled.

This cold foggy morning, I had more pressing worries - would the engines start or not. A few hiccups, some stuttering, a few backfires and the engines coughed to life. WOW, what a relief. My co-pilot was trying to put the maps in place. Yes, we flew with maps those days. We taxied out, our eyeballs popping out trying to spot the taxiway. A quick line up, *Mixture Rich, Pitch fully fine* and we advanced the throttles. The 'not so gentle' whine of the piston engine was like music to the ears as we raced past V1 (decision speed) and rotated to get airborne.

Past 1500 feet, we broke cloud and a clear blue sky beckoned us. The Sun was yet to show his bright face and we had won the race. It was all about getting airborne

before 'Sunrise'. We called up Dibrugarh and the perky young lady on radio with a beautiful Assamese accent wished us good morning and a happy and safe flight into the hills.

The destination was "Taksing", one of the furthest dropping zones (DZs). The total flying time in our Caribou was 02:45 hrs. We soon crossed the foothills at 7000 feet and were to climb to 11000 feet. Very high for a Caribou and also quite cold. But then, this was the Subansiri valley and the hills here were very high. We prepared for a long cruise into the hills as we changed over from Dibrugarh to the HF frequency. A quick hello and we flicked the frequency to Radio Ceylon. Lovely Hindi and English numbers. But then such was life in the early 80s. Flying was still about *'kick the tyre, light the fire'* and getting airborne.

An hour into the flight my Co-Joe was shivering. He looked imploringly at me and wondered if I could heat up the plane. Why not? What are Captains there for? The "Cockpit Air" handle was

right below the "Parking Brake" handle. I reached down, gripped and pulled. It was meant to induct hot air into the cockpit and warm us up. Well, the act done, we both felt warm and cosy. We completed the drop and set course back for Chabua. We still had four more drop missions to go. It was a matter of pride for us to do five drop sorties a day; it gave us a feeling of accomplishment, a day well spent and something to brag about in the bar in the evening.

The return flight was at 12000 feet. The aircraft was light, the skies blue and tail winds all the way. We crossed the hills and commenced our descent. Flying over the Brahmaputra was always exciting, especially watching the fishermen go out in their boats. We turned towards the runway and positioned ourselves on the finals for Runway 23. Gear down, 3 greens, we asked for landing clearance. Air Traffic Control saw us and cleared us to land. We lowered full flaps and aimed to touchdown at the threshold. A matter



Indian Air Force lands C-17 Globemaster at Mechuka, Arunachal Pradesh (Photo: ANI)



Advanced Landing Ground in Tuting (Photo: @CMPemaKhandu)

Well, just another day of Air Maintenance operations in the North East!!!

But not everyone, every day was as lucky. Air Maintenance has always been a complex logistics exercise undertaken by the Indian Air Force (IAF) in aid of the Army, the civilian administration and the Border Roads Organization. Wars are still fought on the ground and measured by foot. To this end, always and often, the Army is deployed in far out, inhospitable and inaccessible regions. Air Forces perform the role of a support service when it comes to aiding the Army in this role. It uses all its available air assets to achieve this goal. The entire process is capital and resource

of pride for us. The boasts in the Bar were all about who could drop the load on a “Stamp” and who could make the shortest landing. At 40 knots, our landing speeds were something to write home about, and worth the boast. We sailed through the stopway and I chopped the throttles just before crossing the threshold. The wheels kissed the threshold. AND THEN I SAW THE SHORTEST LANDING IN THE WORLD. The Caribou stopped in less than 50 feet! And we, the crew in the cockpit, looked wonderingly at each other. My Co-Joe quickly brought me down to mother earth. He pointed out that I had pulled the ‘Parking Brake’ instead of the ‘Cockpit Air Handle’ by mistake and the result was a comedy of errors with a few miracles thrown in. We had essentially landed with our parking brakes ON. It was a miracle that none of the tyres had burst. We sheepishly unlocked the ‘parking brakes’ and taxied back to the dispersal. Lucky day and a providential escape for us though everybody including the ATC had noticed our stupidity. We were rather quiet in the Bar that evening.

intensive. But when it’s the question of national security, cost is not a factor.

Air Maintenance in the Northeast is different from that in the Northern Himalayas. Hills here are not as high as those in the North. And they are much greener. Built up areas and rail heads are closer in the Northeast. Hence Air Maintenance in the Northeast is a different ball game altogether.

Contrary to popular belief, Air Maintenance in the Northeast did not originate in the 60s or post the Chinese aggression. In fact, intensive air maintenance operations were carried out in the 40s by Americans across the Hump to aid Chiang Kai-Shek’s Nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) Chinese forces. Almost 80000 personnel and more than 700 aircraft were involved in this exercise. That is around 10 times the IAF assets deployed even today. And interestingly, most operations were carried out from the same air fields that we were now operating from. Just the drop zones and the scope are different today. The load dropped ranged from 45000 to 70000 tonnes a month during the Hump.

In the 60s upto mid- 80s, Air Maintenance in the Northeast was dependent and divided according to the aircraft capabilities. The Caribous mainly operated in four sectors / valleys, namely the Subansiri, Lohit, Siyang and Tirap. The valleys were narrow and the DZs demanded accuracy. The Caribous with a ramp exit were more suited for this role and operated ex Chabua / Mohanbari. The Dakotas did operate to some of these DZs but mostly dropped in Nagaland and the DZs in and around that area. They flew out of Jorhat and also maintained a detachment of one or two aircraft in Chabua. The Tawang sector was initially handled by the Mi 8 helicopters and later by AN 32s.



LAF's air logistics remains a vital necessity

The operational concept was of **'Hub & Spoke'**. Load would be positioned at one of the **'Hubs'** and thereafter dropped by suitable air machines on the designated **'Spoke'**. As the road infrastructure improved, the Hubs kept moving forward towards the border and the Spokes kept getting shorter. Some of these Hubs in the forward areas were Mechuka, Along, Tuting, Yingkiang, Hayuliang, Pasighat, Tezu and Vijaynagar. And then there were the load requisitioning agencies. The Army Supply Corps (ASC) performed this function for the Army while the ADST / District Food & Civil Supplies Officer (DF&CSO) looked after these issues for the Arunachal Pradesh Government requirements. They were adept at procuring, packing and loading the cargo. The cargo comprised of everything ranging from oil, fuel and food grains to *'meat on hoof'* (live animal stocks) and passengers.

In the North Eastern part of India, the Sun rises and sets almost an hour earlier than the rest of the country (call it the

mainland). This not only plays havoc with the circadian clock, it also disrupts a work day. So the local population follows what they call the **'Garden Time'**, an hour earlier than Indian Standard Time (IST). The aircrew, stayed in make shift accommodation where everything from water to electricity was a rarity. Geysers were unheard of and we always moved with a bucket and an immersion rod of our own. We boarded the aircrew transport at around 0400 hours (IST) and were airborne in our flying machines by 0500 hours. Sunsets were early, so we were back by 1600 hours at the latest. Bar was the favourite and the only haunt in the evenings. So much for us **'Cowboys of the Wild East'**.

We, the cavaliers of the 70s and 80s, cannot stake claim to being the pioneers in this region and in this craft. Around three decades earlier, there was another breed of daredevils, an entirely different kind who were the trail blazers. And to their credit, they rushed in where even angels feared to tread.

Kalinga Airlines was a private airline based in Kolkata founded in 1947 by aviator and politician Biju Patnaik, a former Royal Air Force pilot who flew the Spitfires and Dakotas during World War II. In October 1947, after the Instrument of Accession was signed by the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir, Indian troops were rushed into Srinagar to stop the Pakistani marauders and push them back. Troops of 1 SIKH were airlifted by DC 3 Dakota aircraft of the IAF and of civil airlines like Kalinga, and Biju Patnaik was one of the first pilots to land troops at Srinagar. A gallant feat by any standards.

In later years, Kalinga Airlines' DC-3s were also used to drop supplies in the North Eastern part of India. In 1953, the airline, along with other seven independent domestic airlines were nationalised and merged into the Indian Airlines Corporation. Kalinga Airways restarted operations in December 1957 with the merger of five



Dakota DC-3 of Kalinga Airlines (courtesy National Library of Indonesia)

airlines to include Assam Airways, Indamer Airways, Jamair and Darbhanga Aviation with a fleet of 15 DC-3s. Since May 1960, Kalinga specialised in supply drops in the Northeast. The air-drop operations were taken over by the IAF in June 1967. Those *'Magnificent men in their Magnificent Machines'* indeed deserve accolades.

The present day IAF has a variety of transport aircraft on its inventory for undertaking Air Maintenance. The air effort, resources and time cornered by Air Maintenance both in the Northern and Eastern sectors is sizeable. But the attention given to its rationalisation and future modernisation is grossly inadequate. A doctrine advocating against the development of infrastructure on the borders is passé and akin to shooting one's own foot. The strategy should be all about taking the battle into the enemy territory. For starters, we need to aggressively build infrastructure on our borders. Notably, Air

develop newer technologies to deliver supplies in distant and challenging geographies. **Till something new fructifies, Air Maintenance would continue to be done the same old way!**



Wing Commander S R Swarup (Retd) was commissioned into the transport stream of IAF in June 1980. During his 25 years of service he flew a number of types of aircraft ranging from gliders and microlight to AN32s and IL76. After hanging up his boots he flew with established airlines like Sabara and Indigo. For the last 10 years, Swarup has been a 'Private Jet Pilot' flying a Gulfstream 550 with Aditya Birla Group as their Chief Pilot and Head of Operations. In an aviation career spanning 45 years, he has over 12000 hours of flying experience.



Wing Commander S R Swarup (Retd)



Special Forces train for slithering onto a roof top with an Indian Air Force helicopter

HELICOPTERS - CRUCIAL OPERATIONAL ASSET FOR THE NORTHEAST

India's Northeastern (NE) region presents some of the most complex military challenges in the country.

Surrounded by five nations—China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal, this landscape is noted for rugged mountains, dense jungles, erratic weather, and insufficient land-based infrastructure, which makes troop movement and logistics immensely difficult. In this context, helicopters, uniquely suited for vertical take-off and landing (VTOL) and high manoeuvrability, have become critical for combat support operations in the North East in both peacetime and conflict scenarios.

Helicopters - Early Operations

Helicopters played an important role in the 1962 India – China Conflict. The 1962 conflict revealed India's deficiencies in high-altitude logistics. Soviet-origin Mi-4 helicopters provided limited but vital troop insertions and casualty evacuations. Despite inadequate numbers, these rotary-wing assets demonstrated the necessity of air mobility in mountainous combat. To quote Air Marshal Trevor Osman, *"The helicopter pilots were overworked and tired with sleep deprivation. We, young fighter pilots, flew as their co-pilots and were handed over controls of the helicopter after take-off, while they grabbed some sleep, till just before landing when they were woken up to touch down."*

The war's outcome galvanized India to progressively expand and modernize its helicopter fleet. In the words of Air Vice Marshal Manmohan Bahadur: *"It's a myth that the Indian Air Force (IAF) wasn't used in the 1962 War. Helicopter and*

Transport fleets were deeply involved." He highlighted the significant roles played by the IAF's transport aircraft and helicopter units in supporting ground operations, despite the challenging circumstances, *"The small IAF helicopter fleet did yeoman service transporting troops and ammunition right up to the frontlines. Such were the rescues done, day in and day out, by the brave helicopter pilots before, during and after the ceasefire. When the forward elements of the Army disintegrated and withdrew in an uncontrolled manner (including through Bhutan), helicopters flew non-stop in the hills picking up stragglers by the dozen. In one sortie, Wing Commander KK Saini evacuated 37 personnel (in peacetime the limit was around 12), including casualties, in a Mi-4 from Walong."* Notably, Air Vice Marshal Bahadur has penned **"The Troubled Days of Assam 1983: A Helicopter Pilot Recollects"**, published on February 16, 2023, which offers a personal account of his experience as a helicopter pilot during a turbulent period in Assam.



LAF Mi-4 in North East Frontier Agency in 1962 (credit indianairforce.nic.in)

Operation Falcon 1986-87

Sometime in 1986, Chinese troops occupied Sumdorong Chu in the Tawang district of Arunachal Pradesh. The Division Commander opined that he would require 1200 mules to build up and adopt a forward posture, which was crucial to pushing back the Chinese. The time taken to achieve this would be a few months. When the Army Chief was briefed on the situation, he is believed to have said, *“Why are we talking about mules in this era? Let’s talk about helicopters.”* This set the tone for extensive employment of helicopters in **Operation Falcon**, a finely executed mountain operation, fully supported and executed by the IAF.

The newly acquired Russian Mi-17 medium-lift helicopters were also assigned along with the older Mi-8s, which were already involved for over six months and were operating much beyond their operational limits. The newly inducted Mi-26s were also put to task, during the operation. The IAF airlifted reinforcements, establishing temporary helipads near the LAC. Mi-8 and Mi-17 helicopters supplied front-line units with munitions and rations.

“Hot refuelling” was adopted which is not a standard practice, with engines running during refuelling, to ensure conserving limited battery life. Landings at forward Landing Zones (LZ) came with much-needed refreshments—sweet corn soup at Longrula (4.1 km altitude) at sunrise by Gorkha troops, *rasam* in steel glasses at Niliya (3.1 km altitude) by Madras Regiment boys, and hot tea with *pakor*as and *gulab jamuns* at Lumpo (2.7 km altitude). Invariably, actual payloads exceeded manifested figures, driven by the urgency of maintaining peak operational readiness, unlike in normal air maintenance sorties.

As part of **Operation Falcon**, a brigade was airlifted to the Zimithang Sector, and helipads were constructed. Dropping Zones were constructed to sustain the troops. Artillery guns, mortars and ammunition stocks were airlifted. The newly-acquired 155 mm Bofors medium regiment was heli-lifted.

The Chinese backed off, as by the spring of 1987, the Indian Army was well-entrenched in their positions. The Indian troops were on higher ground and looking down upon the Chinese troops. This robust show of force stabilized the border and underscored how swiftly helicopters could reverse a threatening situation.

Helicopters in Counter Insurgency

The NE region has long been involved in insurgent activity by groups such as the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN). Dense forests and porous borders with Myanmar and Bangladesh enabled them to resort to guerrilla tactics. Helicopters significantly curtail the insurgents’ tactical advantage.

Special Forces are inserted into the desired area of operations with

minimal ground movement for execution of their special tasks, and thereafter extracted rapidly, minimizing overall risk. The methodology may vary from *'hover drops'*, to *'slitbering'*, to *'rappelling'*, to *'Small Team Insertion & Extraction (STIE)'*. Landing on small unprepared locations including roof tops is a common task undertaken. Sometimes, armed or unarmed helicopters equipped with sensors are used to track insurgent movements through jungle terrain.

Operation All Clear

Operation All Clear was a military operation conducted by the Royal Bhutan Army against Assam's separatist insurgent groups in the Southern region of Bhutan between 15 December 2003 and 3 January 2004. In 1996, the Bhutan government became aware of a large number of militant camps on its Southern border with India. The camps were set up by four Assamese separatist movements: the ULFA, National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), Bodo Liberation Tigers Force (BLTF) and Kamatapur Liberation Organization (KLO). The camps also sheltered separatists belonging to the NSCN and All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF).

India offered support to the Bhutanese Government in the execution of **"Operation All Clear"**. The Indian Army deployed 12 battalions along the border with Bhutan to prevent rebel infiltration. India also provided helicopters in order to assist the Royal Bhutan Army troops with evacuating the injured. Also, five top ranking militants were transferred to Tezpur, India by an IAF helicopter.

Operation Hot Pursuit

On 9 June 2015, the Indian Army conducted a cross-border strike, code named **"Operation Hot Pursuit"** against

insurgents belonging to NSCN-Khaplang, near the border with Myanmar in response to an ambush of an Indian Army convoy in Chandel district of Manipur. The IAF and 21 PARA (SF) were involved in this operation along the India-Myanmar border. For the execution, Special Forces troops were "fast-rope" from Dhruv helicopters just inside Indian territory near the border with Myanmar. Thereafter the troops trekked to the camps and carried out attacks on two camps. IAF Mi-17 helicopters were on standby, ready to be pressed into service to evacuate the commandos in case anything went wrong.

Disaster Relief and Humanitarian Operations

The North East is prone to natural disasters like floods, earthquakes and landslides. Such disasters isolate entire communities. Roads become unusable overnight, making helicopters the only swift channel for relief. The Armed Forces invariably get involved in rescue

operations. Rotary-wing units can rescue stranded populace, deliver medical supplies, and even evacuate critically injured patients to better-equipped hospitals. In doing so, the Army not only aids civilian populations but also solidifies public trust and fosters goodwill.

Commanding at Mohanbari

The North East has a flavour of its own. I was commanding Air Force Station, Mohanbari, a helicopter base with two resident helicopter units, in the far eastern part of Assam from 2007 to 2009. As Station Commander, I was accustomed to getting unusual requests from the Army, especially from NDA coursemates, who were commanding Brigades in our Area of Operations. A coursemate once wanted to be expeditiously dropped to a forward post on the Indo-China border, to reach the post before his Army Commander's arrival. The most challenging request came from a Brigade Commander who needed three grievously injured soldiers



IAF airlifted 149 civilians stranded in Lachen and Lachung villages in Sikkim in October 2023 (Photo ANI)



LAF helicopters evacuating stranded persons after Sikkim flash floods (Photo PTI)

how helicopters evolved from limited assets to irreplaceable enablers of mission success. Today, specialized platforms like the Apache, Light Combat Helicopter, and HAL Dhruv reflect the advances in technology and doctrine necessary for high-altitude operations.

The topography in the Northeast is defined by steep, forested mountains and narrow valleys, with the narrow mountain roads often blocked by landslides or buried under winter snow. Many forward posts in Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim remain inaccessible for months each year. In the absence of reliable road links, rotary-wing platforms provide steady life support in terms of fuel, rations, ammunition etc, to far-flung outposts, ensuring their

operational readiness even during harsh weather conditions.

evacuated in the evening. Night flying in the hills is always tricky, with helicopters using Night Vision Goggles, operating in pairs as per the Standard Operating Procedure. We coordinated with Dinjan airfield to arrange improvised lighting, allowing a night landing to deliver a soldier who had succumbed, before continuing to Air Force Hospital, located at Jorhat.

Every detachment to a forward hub (typically lasting 50 flying hours) came with at least one “*birthday*” moment-code for a near-miss, mostly due to weather. After a few no-flying days, the urge to take calculated risks was common, especially for casualty evacuation sorties.

Overview

In India’s Northeastern region, helicopters function as a strategic and humanitarian bridge. They bypass impassable roads, overcome punishing weather, and connect forward posts to the wider logistics chain. Historical conflicts—from the 1962 Sino-Indian War to Operation Falcon-demonstrate

operational readiness even during harsh weather conditions.

India shares a 3488-km border with China, a significant portion of which runs through high altitude terrain in Arunachal Pradesh. Periodic standoffs and tensions, such as those near Tawang, have underscored the need for rapid troop insertion and logistical support. Helicopters make it feasible to reinforce border areas at short notice. This ability not only deters potential encroachments but also boosts troop confidence in locations where weather can be as formidable an adversary as any opposing force. When required, additional infantry or specialized mountain warfare assets are pumped in within hours as a Surge Operation.

From Tawang to Kibithu, numerous border posts remain cut off during heavy snow or monsoon rains. Medium-lift helicopters such as the Mi-17 V5 serve as the workhorses, delivering tons of supplies in each sortie. During heightened border tensions, these missions become even more frequent to ensure stocks of rations, ammunition and fuel, never dip to critical levels. While executing missions, harsh weather conditions demand meticulous flight planning. Pilots operate within narrow “*weather windows*,” often contending with strong crosswinds, heavy fog, and sudden weather shifts typical of the Himalayas. Many temporary or semi-permanent helipads are perilously located on mountain slopes. Pilots must perform precision manoeuvres in thin air, where rotor efficiency and engine power drop significantly with altitude.

Operational Plans are made based on various factors such as threat assessment, likely axes of enemy action, own plans to counter the enemy, and many more such considerations, to achieve Operational Objectives.

As the battle progresses, there would invariably be a need to reassign some forces along some different axes. In the plains, the road / rail network makes shifting of forces relatively easier. In the NE region, because of the topography, re-assignment of forces along a different axis, viz., Inter Valley Troop Transfer is possible only with the use of helicopters.

The IAF now has heavy lift helicopters like the Chinook on its inventory, which makes it possible to airlift heavy loads, heavy duty vehicles and heavy equipment, for the Armed Forces, other governmental agencies and civil administration.

At times, troops deployed to high-altitude areas suffer from injuries related to frostbite, falls, or altitude sickness, apart from normal day to day sicknesses. Ground evacuation is generally not feasible. Helicopters like the Chetak, Cheetah, or Dhruv Advanced Light Helicopter (ALH) become indispensable for Casualty Evacuation (CASEVAC). A quick airlift to a well-equipped field hospital can prevent complications of prolonged exposure to high altitude environment. Sometimes, when troops are either lost or trapped in some tricky situation, helicopters fitted with rescue hoists locate and retrieve them from steep cliffs or forested ravines. Increasingly, these flights carry paramedics or medical officers who initiate first aid or stabilization during transit.

Insurgencies and frequent natural disasters add another layer of complexity, highlighting the indispensable nature of rotary-wing assets, not only for combat but also search, rescue and humanitarian missions. As India continues to modernize its military and emphasize joint operations, helicopters will remain at the forefront of ensuring national security and stability in the NE region.

Looking Ahead

Modernization efforts for helicopter operations focus on advanced avionics, night-time capabilities and synergy with Unmanned Aerial Vehicles. Establishing forward area heliports in sync with the rapid infrastructure development being undertaken by the Government, and refining joint command structures will further boost rapid response. These developments intersect with broader economic goals - indigenous helicopter production supports local industry, fosters innovation, and can even help cultivate dual-use infrastructure for civilians.

Challenges remain-ranging from training crew to operate at 15000 feet to building robust maintenance hubs near forward areas. Funding constraints also compete with multiple military modernization priorities. Still, the push toward self-reliance and integrated planning signals a concerted effort to fortify helicopter operations, ensuring that India's Armed Forces can respond effectively to any crisis.

Ultimately, helicopters stand at the heart of India's Northeast strategy. Their vertical mobility not only deters adversaries but also delivers vital relief in floods, landslides, and other calamities. By combining indigenous design and

production with a forward-looking approach to training, inter-service coordination and infrastructure, India can harness the full potential of rotary-wing platforms. In a region where geography and geopolitics converge so starkly, **helicopters will remain the indispensable cornerstone of both defence and development-bridging the vastness of the Himalayas and cementing India's vigil over its Eastern frontier.**

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Air Commodore Rajan Kapur (Retd), an alumnus of the National Defence Academy, Pune, was commissioned into the helicopter stream of the Indian Air Force. A Qualified Flying Instructor and a post-graduate from the Defence Services Staff College, Wellington, he has held several key operational and Command appointments. He led the Indian Aviation Contingent as part of UN Peacekeeping operations in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and later commanded a major LAF base at Mohanbari. With extensive operational experience, he has served four tenures in the Northeast and two tenures in a Flying Training Establishment (FTE). He superannuated in April 2014.



Air Commodore Rajan Kapur (Retd)

OPERATION HOT PURSUIT: SURGICAL STRIKE INTO MYANMAR

The Northeast region of India, sharing borders with China, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Myanmar, has historically been a home for various insurgent factions advocating for autonomy or secession over many decades. In 2015, there was growing apprehension regarding escalating violence in the Northeast, particularly after the unsuccessful attempt to renew a ceasefire with the Khaplang faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-K), predominantly based in Myanmar.

“The task of Special Forces is proxy application of force at low and precisely calculated levels, the objective being to achieve some political effect, not a battlefield victory.” - Stephen Cohen

The Militant Outfits

In March 2015, a significant development occurred when SS Khaplang, the leader of NSCN (K), terminated a 14-year ceasefire agreement with the Government, setting the stage for subsequent attacks. The NSCN (K) had been actively working towards establishing a sovereign Naga state encompassing present day Nagaland and certain regions of Myanmar. In April 2015, the NSCN (K) collaborated with eight other organizations, including ULFA (I), NDFB (Songbijit), and Kamatapur Liberation Organization, to establish the United Liberation Front of Western South East Asia. The formation of the front was attributed to the actions of Khaplang and ULFA (I) leader Paresh Baruah, who played significant roles within the new grouping.

Myanmar hosts approximately 60 rebel camps of varying sizes, distributed across a broad area adjacent to the Northeast of the country. The 1643-km Myanmar border exhibits significant permeability due to an established agreement that allows individuals from either country to enter up to 16 kms for trade activities. The fragmented landscape and dense forests bordering



Myanmar facilitate the unobstructed movement of insurgents, enabling them to launch attacks on the Indian Army. The insurgents employ hit-and-run tactics in Manipur, utilizing camps that facilitate their ability to execute strikes within the state before retreating to Myanmar territory.

The Trigger

On the morning of 4th June 2015, 18 brave soldiers from the Indian Army's Dogra Battalion were killed and about a dozen others injured in a meticulously planned and violent militant attack in Manipur's Chandel district. The attack occurred on the Tengnoupal - New Samtal Road during a road opening party (ROP) exercise when the forces were attacked with improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and gunfire. The newly established United Liberation Front of Western South East Asia claimed responsibility for the devastating attack. Even as the Army was reeling from its bloodiest ambush since 1982, another attack was launched against an Assam Rifles camp in Arunachal Pradesh (Tirap district). In April and May of the same year, around 11 soldiers from the Army and Assam Rifles were killed in the Northeastern provinces of Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. In the aftermath of Manipur's Chandel ambush, Baruah asserted that the NSCN (K) chief was responsible for orchestrating and directing the operation.

On 9 June 2015, based on credible intelligence inputs regarding the insurgents, the Indian Army executed a cross-border operation, codenamed **'Operation Hot Pursuit,'** along the India-Myanmar Border. This operation involved 70 commandos from Special Forces targeting the training facilities and camps associated with NSCN (K). The operational plan involved traversing the border, conducting a thorough reconnaissance to locate and

identify the insurgent encampments located deep within the jungles, and subsequently eliminating the insurgents. The operation culminated in the neutralization of 38 insurgents, with many others sustaining significant injuries.

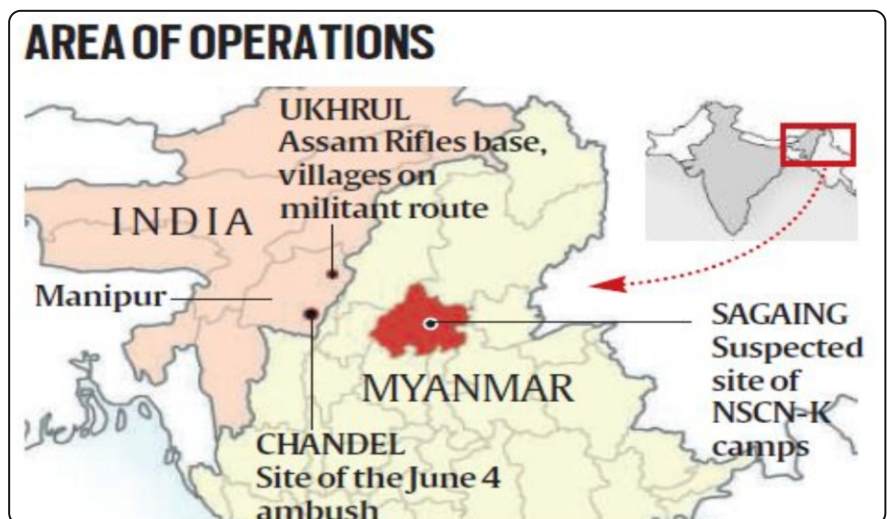
The Planning

The fatalities in the Chandel District ambush necessitated retribution. In the aftermath of the assault, the Defence Minister convened a meeting with the Home Minister, National Security Advisor (NSA) and the Army Chief to meticulously assess the ambush and strategize appropriate countermeasures. The atmosphere in the room was sombre yet determined. The Army had experienced its most devastating single-day counterinsurgency loss in nearly thirty years, profoundly unsettling India's security apparatus. The NSA withdrew from the Prime Minister's official visit to Bangladesh, and the Army Chief subsequently called off a planned tour

of the UK. The meeting examined the possibilities of conducting air strikes utilizing Sukhoi and MiG-29 fighter aircraft, alongside ground operations executed by the Army's Special Forces. Nevertheless, this alternative was dismissed due to the significant risk of collateral damage associated with an aerial bombardment. The Indian Army received directives to undertake a discreet **"Search and Destroy"** mission targeting the camps of militant groups situated along the border with Myanmar.

One tactic used by the military to eliminate danger or achieve an objective is the surgical strike, which entails an extremely precise and focused attack on a specific target. In reference to military operations conducted by the Indian military against terrorist targets in Pakistan and Myanmar, the term **"surgical strike"** is often used in the Indian context.

The decision required considerable deliberation, as numerous factors needed to be taken into account.



Representative sketch of the India Myanmar border area (Source. Indian Express)



The Special Forces Team which took part in the operation (Credit reddit.com)

Myanmar, indeed, presents itself as a welcoming nation. Was it practical to ensure that the Myanmar Government and its military were informed and involved in the discussions? Was it conceivable that Myanmar would consent to such an operation? These questions required prompt responses. Ultimately, following extensive discussions among all relevant stakeholders, including the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), the NSA and the Army, a consensus was reached to designate the large camps as the target for operations. The responsibility for managing communication with Myanmar was entrusted to the NSA and the MEA. Subsequent reports indicated that the Myanmar Government had been engaged at the highest echelons prior to the operation by the Indian Special Forces.

Operation Hot Pursuit

The selection of the unit was unequivocal—the 21st Battalion of the Parachute Regiment, 21 PARA (SF), stood as the Army's distinguished entity for specialized jungle warfare operations. It had been stationed in the Northeast for nearly twenty years. Deployed strategically across pivotal insurgency-affected regions,

meticulously planned, drawing upon insights provided by intelligence operatives. Two camps were identified approximately eight kms from the border. The operation was diligently orchestrated to enhance the probability of achieving a favourable outcome and two PARA (SF) teams were tasked along distinct axes at the two insurgent camps.

Each camp, believed to accommodate between 40 and 50 insurgents, would be addressed with a classic special forces-style hit-and-run operation that relied on the element of surprise. The camps exhibit a comparable configuration, with the NSCN (K) camp situated centrally, encircled by other resident groups within a ten-km radius. The principal rationale for keeping space between the camps in any such settlements throughout the region was security. Should one camp be assaulted, cadres from the others could get mobilized promptly to initiate counterattacks. In hilly terrain, even a large army would struggle to execute simultaneous assaults on all camps.

Infiltration

By posing as regular troops and travelling in Army trucks, the commandos devised a deception strategy and arrived at their prearranged staging location on the border on 7th June. Because of the attention they would attract in the forward zone, they had decided against using helicopters for insertion. A handful of Kuki jawans changed into civilian clothes and proceeded into the village to gather intelligence as the team entered the neighbouring Assam Rifles camp. The villagers had not seen any movement of the militants. Because they were accustomed to these teams working along the border, the locals did not view the Special Forces troops with suspicion or hostility.

The Special Forces group of 70 members started their trek on foot after midnight in the direction of the international border, which was

21 PARA (SF) operated as the Eastern Command's elite response unit. A contingent of 21 PARA (SF) was waiting in Delhi, prepared to embark on a special flight to South Sudan, having been chosen for UN peacekeeping deployment. Without a moment's hesitation, the team was directed to return to its base in the Northeast.

The unit possessed a remarkable network of local informants. A considerable number of the officers and personnel were drawn from the region, and one of the unit's most distinguished officers from the Northeast was appointed to lead the mission. The operation was

roughly 20 kms away. The commandos were split into two teams and armed with night vision goggles, assault rifles, rocket launchers and grenades. The party unexpectedly encountered a group of Burmese hunters searching for animals while trekking through the dense bushes in extremely high humidity. The hunters were just as shocked as the Special Forces soldiers, who had obviously not factored in this complication.

The Team Leader had to devise a strategy to deal with the hunters after they were rounded up and inquired about insurgent camps located deep within Myanmar's territory. The Team Leader simply chose to take the hunters along with them because it was impossible to kill them or leave them on the loose. Naturally, that required reserving a portion of the team to protect them. In retrospect, the Special Forces were able to refine their final plan thanks to the hunters' familiarity with the terrain, information about the camps, and the actions of the militants in the vicinity.

The Team was roughly five kms away from the large terrorist camp by late afternoon on 08 June. Fearing for their lives, the hunters would not proceed further. Special Forces scouts, who advance ahead of others to inspect the area, noticed a mix of small and large huts and sheds on a ridge in the distance. When the scouts returned, they informed the Team Leader that their mission would be difficult because the only way to get to the camps without being noticed was to scale the steep cliff, launch an attack, and then travel back the same way.

Execution

As darkness fell, the Team Leader had to decide on the approach to the camp and the timings for the final assault. The commandos opted to rest after a difficult day of marching through the mosquito-

infested jungles. The Team Leader began dividing troops for the mission at hand, and the team was most certainly outnumbered in strength, with intelligence indicating that at least 100 terrorists were in that camp. The fundamental drills are, of course, standard, but each task is unique. So the Team Leader decided to stick with the original plan of attacking two or three major buildings to inflict the maximum casualties and make a speedy return without pausing to count the dead. He divided the team in two: one half carried large calibre weapons, and the other carried light weaponry. Each of the two halves was further divided into two sub-groups: one was in charge of the direct assault, and the other established an outer ring to prevent any rebels from running and escaping.

At midnight on 8 June, the entire team, with the exception of a squad that was left behind to safeguard the captive hunters, had advanced and established itself at the base of the steep escarpment, which rose approximately 600 metres straight up. The Special Forces personnel heard gunfire and

observed a group of militants approaching the cliff's edge. The soldiers, who were clothed in camouflage and had their faces darkened by black paint, remained entirely still; their primary challenge was to avoid panic and opening fire.

Many of them wondered, *"Will we be detected before we can reach the target?"* However, the Team Leader was certain that the militants were not in possession of definitive information regarding any Special Forces movement but rather were conducting a routine patrol and generally taking precautionary measures to safeguard the camp. The militants appeared to unwind at approximately 0200 hours, as they began singing songs, and their voices progressively diminished. The patrol had presumably returned to the camp. The commandoes now waited for the first light.

At dawn, the first group of Special Forces personnel began gently climbing the steep ridge, with others following in a well-practiced drill. They crept stealthily forward, forming a semicircle and racing towards the



Commandos - ready for action (Representative image)

target. As the soldiers approached the camp, they noticed that the lookout sentries at the entrance compound had abandoned their posts for their morning meal! The 21 PARA (SF) men crossed the compound barrier without being challenged. Each commando took up a predetermined position and opened fire with automatic weapons, rocket launchers and hand grenades. For the first fifteen minutes, the camp's occupants, most of whom were either asleep or on the verge of waking up, had no idea what had happened. There was no retribution, and most of them were killed, causing significant damage to their thatched huts and barracks.

Soon, the others, who lived in the second and third tiers of the enormous camp, regrouped and began retaliating with whatever weapons they could get their hands on from behind well-defended positions. The Team Leader opted to pull back because the surprise aspect had been lost, making it difficult for the troops to engage reinforcements. It was time to begin the return journey, and the soldiers reassembled and retraced their steps in a well-practiced manoeuvre.

Exfiltration

Because of the oppressive heat and humidity that prevailed throughout the day in the tropical jungle, the journey back was not an easy one. More than the heat, it was the possibility that the militants or personnel of the Myanmarese Army might give them a chase. The Special Forces squads walked back quickly, despite the fact that they were exhausted. They continued on until they had crossed into Indian territory around noon. The hunters were finally set free after being given a stern warning to never, ever discuss the incident under any circumstances. Due to the fact that their lives would have been in danger if they disclosed their ordeal, the Team Leader was confident that they would not utter a single word.

After crossing back into India, the Team Leader immediately called the Corps Commander, who was in the Operations Room keeping an eye on how the raid was progressing. He asked the team to come by the helicopters that had been kept ready to transport them back to the headquarters. As many as 38 Northeast insurgents belonging to NSCN (K) and

Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (a Meitei insurgent group) militant organizations were killed, and many others were injured as a result of the surgical strike.

Conclusion

Guerrilla warfare evens out the advantages enjoyed by even the most highly trained and well-equipped security forces when confronted with extremists entrenched in their strongholds. Success, therefore, cannot be regarded as a guaranteed outcome. The Indian Army's capacity to respond with significant power to provocations and to take decisive pre-emptive action was clearly illustrated by the surgical strike in Myanmar.

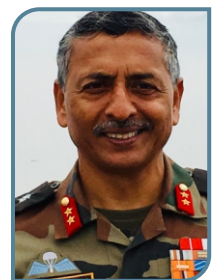
The Myanmar raid initiated a series of actions aimed at enhancing India's internal and external security policies. This operation was regarded as the inception of a significant transformation in India's increasingly assertive stance, moving away from a previously restrained perspective. The strike exemplified India's emerging willingness to proactively address terror threats, unencumbered by geographical boundaries. The unit was awarded a **Kirti Chakra**, and **Shaurya Chakra** each and five **Sena Medals** for the successful operation on Independence Day 2015.

This was not merely a singular event; rather, it represented India's strategic choice to adopt a pre-emptive stance in addressing threats posed by terrorism. **"Hot Pursuit"** serves as a valid articulation of "National Security"; however, for reasons that are more comprehensible than they are easily articulated, India has historically refrained from employing this strategy in neighbouring nations. In fact, in a statement, the Army then declared unequivocally that, *"While ensuring peace and tranquillity along the border and in the border states, any threat to our security, safety, and national integrity will meet a firm response."*

(References : India's Most Fearless by Shiv Aroor and Rabul Singh (Penguin: 2017), Securing India - the Modi Way by Nitin Gokhale (Bloomsbury: 2019) and History TV18 Documentary)



Major General Ashok K Dhingra (Retd) was commissioned into 1 PARA (SF) in 1983 and has varied operational experiences, including in Sri Lanka (IPKF) where he was severely wounded. He went on to command his Battalion in Jammu & Kashmir. He has also commanded the prestigious Parachute Brigade and a Division on the Northern Borders. He was the Defence & Military Attache to USA during 2013-16 and raised the Special Operations Division integrating the Special Forces of the three Services, prior to superannuating in March 2020.



Major General Ashok K Dhingra (Retd)



The proposed map of 'Kuki State' covering more than half of Manipur's territory spread over five bill districts, released by Kuki State Demand Committee on 14 November 2012 (credit e-pao.net)

ETHNIC CAULDRON IN MANIPUR

Manipur has been wracked by ethnic turbulence since May 2023, and deep fissures have sundered the communities. This ground report traces the problem and its backdrop.

"The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members" --Mahatma Gandhi

The Arena

Manipur, also known as the **'Land of Jewels'** sits at the cross roads of India and South-East Asia and is the gateway to India's **'Act East'** policy. The State is bounded by Myanmar to its East and South over a 352 kms International Border. Towards the Southwest, West and North, it is bounded by the Indian States of Mizoram, Assam and Nagaland respectively. Geographically, the State can be divided into two regions i.e Valley and Hills. The Valley forms the heart of Manipur and constitutes 10% (2238 sq km) of the total area (22327 sq kms) of the State. The State has the largest fresh water body in Northeast India i.e Loktak Lake. The Hill region comprises of six districts i.e Senapati, Kangpokpi (KPI), Tamenglong, Churachandpur (CCP), Chandel and Ukhrul. The Valley region has four districts i.e Imphal East, Imphal West, Thoubal and Bishnupur. All the major highways i.e NH 2, NH 37, NH 102 and NH 202 converge in the Valley. Imphal Airport is the second largest airport of Northeast India. The Valley is the most developed part of the State with quality medical facilities, education institutes and Government Administrative offices.

The People

The three major communities / tribes in Manipur are the Meiteis, Nagas and Kuki-Chin-Zo. The Meiteis form the majority of the State's population with 53%, Nagas account for 26% and Kuki-Chin-Zo are 13% of the total population. The



A damaged water tanker that was set afire during the Kuki - Meitei clashes in Manipur, May 4, 2023. (photo Stringer/Reuters)



Women hold a sit-in protest against spiralling violence in Manipur

Valley with 10% of area has approximately 60% of the population and hills with 90% of area have approximately 40% of the population. The majority of Nagas and all Kuki-Chin-Zo tribes inhabit surrounding hills. Further, Naga and Kuki-Chin-Zo communities have sub-tribes under each of them. The prominent Naga tribes are Angami, Kabui, Kasha Naga, Mao, Maram, Poumai, Sema and Tangkhul. The Kuki-Chin-Zo community consists of Gangte, Hmar, Paite, Simte, Sukte, Thadou, Vaiphei, Zou and other smaller tribes. The Naga communities are spread over the Northern, Northeastern and Western parts of the State. The Kuki-Zo communities are spread over the Southern, Southwestern and Southeastern parts of the State.

Historical Background

Manipur was a princely State prior to its merger with India in 1947. King Pamheiba, generally known by his other name **Garib Niwaj**, was one of the great conquerors of Manipur. During his reign, the Kingdom had acquired considerable power. In the years 1725, 1735, 1738 and

1749, King **Garib Niwaj** repeatedly invaded Burma (now Myanmar), defeated the Burmese Armies and devastated many of its parts. Manipur also faced Burmese invasion in the later period of 1890, which led to seven years of devastation in the history of Manipur. During this period, the then King of Manipur, Gambhir Singh took shelter in Cachar district of Assam. There he re-organised his Army with the assistance of the British and ousted the Burmese from Manipur.

Slowly, the British started interfering in the administration of Manipur which ultimately led to a full-fledged war of the Manipur Army with the British in 1891. The Manipur Army led by Major Paona, armed with swords and shields

faced a modern British Army at Khongjom (in Thoubal district). The fierce battle ended on 23 April 1891 in favour of the British. Many gallant soldiers of Manipur Army laid down their life including Major Paona. Since then, every year, 23 April is celebrated as '**Khongjom Day**' in the State.

After the Battle of Khongjom, the Kangla Fort was taken over by the British and subsequently Yuvraj Tikendrajit and General Thangal were executed on 13 August 1891. This day is still remembered and observed as '**The Patriots Day**' in the State. Manipur came under British rule from 1891 onwards. Manipur witnessed Anglo-Burmese Wars and the Burma Campaign during World War II.

The first Indian Tri-Colour Flag was hoisted at Moirang, Bishnupur district on 14 April 1944 by Colonel Shaukat Malik of the Indian National Army, during the Second World War. Fierce battles were fought between the Allied Forces and Japanese. The Battle of Imphal was fought from 08 March till 03 July 1944. The Allied Forces were victorious and this was the turning point in the Burma Campaign.

On 15 August 1947, Manipur regained its lost sovereign status. The Maharaja of Manipur enacted the Manipur Constitution Act 1947 and established a democratic form of government with the Maharaja as Executive Head and an elected Legislative Assembly. On 15 October 1949, Manipur merged with the Indian Union through a merger agreement between the Government of India and the then Maharaja of Manipur. Manipur was granted Statehood in 1972.

Rise of Insurgency in Manipur

The Naga movement in neighbouring Nagaland spilled over into

Manipur's hill districts and gained prominence with the establishment of National Socialist Council of Nagaland - Issac Muivah (NSCN-IM) in 1980. The senior hierarchy of NSCN-IM is predominantly Tangkhuls who hail from Ukhrul district in Manipur.

But Meitei insurgency emerged in Manipur in 1964, with the formation of United National Liberation Front (UNLF), which remains one of the most formidable insurgent outfits. The rise of separatist insurgency in Manipur is mainly attributed to perceived discontent over the alleged 'forced' merger of Manipur with the Union of India and subsequent delay in granting it full-fledged Statehood. At present UNLF, Peoples Liberation Army (PLA), People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK), Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL) and Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP) are active in Imphal Valley. The Pambei faction of UNLF i.e UNLF-P is in peace talks with the Government of India since November 2023.

Kuki insurgency took root in late 1980s / early 1990s with the establishment of Kuki National Organisation and Kuki National Army. The Kuki insurgency also came into the limelight after the violent Naga-Kuki clashes from 1992 to 1998. The Kuki groups were part of the Tri-partite agreement of Suspension of Operations (SoO) between the Government of India, Manipur Government and Kuki insurgent groups since 2008. The SoO agreement was withdrawn by the State Government on 10 March 2023.

Fault Lines in the Society

The erstwhile Meitei Kingdom became a melting pot of diverse ethnicities, tribes and communities sharing linkages with adjoining States and Myanmar. Each of these ethnicities had their own language, culture, customs, traditions and aspirations,

which have manifested into permanent fault lines, fissures, mistrust, conflict of interests and incessant competition for natural resources and land. This distrust and animosity between the communities inhabiting Manipur have witnessed clashes in the past and also the recent violence which commenced in May 2023.

Land plays a vital role in shaping ethnic and cultural identity in Manipur. The livelihood of tribal communities depends on the forests and they have an intricate traditional land ownership system protected by various laws of the Government.

Meiteis. The majority Meitei community suffers from an existential threat and fear psychosis due to decline in their numbers and lessening of the population gap between them and the hill tribes. The Meiteis and Nagas with their tribal affinities have always labelled the Kukis as 'outsiders'. The Imphal Valley is dominated by Meiteis and has 40 of the 60 MLA seats, leading to political imbalance irrespective of which

party comes to power. Due to this, development is mostly carried out in the Valley vis-a-vis the Hills. The State laws allow tribals to purchase land in the Valley but not vice versa, which has led to shrinking of space for the Meiteis and exacerbating their sense of insecurity. The Indo-Myanmar Border Free Movement Regime (FMR) allowed tribes living along the border to travel 16 kms across either side of the border without visa restrictions. This also led to a sense of insecurity and fear of demographic inversion in the Meiteis. The FMR was suspended by the Government of India in February 2024 due to concerns of illegal immigration, smuggling and drug trade. The move was welcomed by Meiteis but not liked by the Nagas and Kukis.

Nagas. The Nagas are mostly located in the hills and have their unique culture, traditions and language among its many tribes. The community has Scheduled Tribe (ST) status and makes the most of it in getting Government jobs in as well as outside



Tribal Solidarity March in Manipur, May 2023 (photo PTI)



Left. Kangla Gate - West entrance to Kangla Fort (photo Mongyamba, en.wikipedia.org)
Right. Kangla Fort, Imphal

the State. The Nagas claim to be the original settlers of the hills and have confrontations with the Kukis over land. The fissures between the two communities have increased after the creation of seven new districts by the Congress Government in December 2016 before the 2017 Manipur Legislative Assembly elections. The United Naga Council (UNC) objected to the decision, claiming encroachment into ancestral Naga land. The decision of the State Government was welcomed by the Kuki community.

Kukis. The third largest community of Manipur, Kukis mostly occupy the foothills along the Imphal Valley and a few hill districts in South-East, Southern and South-Western parts of Manipur. The community has ST status, with ethnic linkages in neighbouring Myanmar, and is hence regarded as outsiders in Manipur by the other communities. Prior to the ethnic clashes in May 2023, 2-3% of Kukis were in Imphal Valley, peacefully co-existing with Meiteis.

more than 1000 persons and displacement of approximately 50000 plus persons.

Kuki - Paite Clashes

The Zomi or Zou tribe was formed with six tribes i.e Zou, Vaiphei, Gangte, Simte, Paite and other smaller tribes called Zomi. These Zomi tribes formed the Zomi Re-unification Organisation (ZRO) in 1995. ZRO formed an armed wing called the Zomi Revolutionary Army (ZRA) for the protection of its conglomerate. The Zomi tribes were earlier under the Kuki umbrella, however due to language differences and to create their own identity, they formed the Zomi tribe.

The Kuki National Front (KNF) started levying more taxes from the Zomi tribes, and the two communities developed animosity between them. Kukis and Paites clashed between 1997 and 1998 in CCP district, after KNF insurgents killed 10 Paite villagers of Saikul village on 24 June 1997. The clashes led to approximately 350 persons being killed, destruction of villages and displacement of over 13000 people. The peace between the two communities was brokered by the Church in 1998.

Meitei - Pangal Clashes

The Imphal Valley witnessed violent clashes between Meiteis and Pangals in May 1993. There is no confirmed trigger to the incident, however, the violence flared up post killing of a Pangal by Meitei

The Naga - Kuki Clashes

The non-inclusion of Manipur's Naga inhabited areas in the idea of 'unified Nagaland' by the Naga Peoples Convention held in 1957 led to a desire in Manipur's Naga Community to integrate with Nagaland. The strategy adopted by the Manipur Naga Council was two-fold. **First** was to include smaller tribes inhabiting the Northern hill areas under the Naga umbrella and **second** was to drive out the Kuki tribes staying in these areas. This led to friction and subsequent armed clashes between Nagas and Kukis.

The longest ethnic clashes between Nagas and Kukis lasted for six years i.e from 1992 to 1998. The clashes started with the killing of a Kuki youth by Naga miscreants and expanded to a deadly armed conflict resulting in deaths of

miscreants. The violence lasted for three days, which resulted in death of approximately 90 to 130 persons. The incident has sown seeds of distrust between these communities.

Meitei-Kuki Ethnic Clashes Since 2023

On 03 May 2023, Manipur witnessed unprecedented communal clashes between Meiteis and Kukis. The suddenness and magnitude of the violence took everyone by total surprise, leaving the State Administration paralysed and polarised on ethnic lines. The present conflict is unusual as it marks the first such violence between Valley and Hill based communities. Till now, Manipur had only witnessed violent clashes between different hill communities or among the Valley based communities. The genesis of the present crisis and the impasse between Meiteis and Kukis dates to February 2023.

In February 2023, claiming heavy influx of illegal immigrants, the State Government initiated land survey of the Reserve forests and wetlands adjoining Imphal Valley. Eviction notices were served to encroachers and 16 Kuki villages were evicted. In response, Indigenous Tribal Leaders Forum (ITLF) organised several peaceful rallies in the Hill districts. In March 2023, one such rally organised in KPI district turned violent. The State Government imposed Section 144 of CrPC and announced withdrawal from the Tripartite SoO Agreement with Kuki National Army (KNA) and ZRA.

Reacting to the demands made by Meitei Civil Society Organisations (CSO), the State Government expressed willingness to implement the National Register for Citizens (NRC) which was perceived by Kukis as a move against them. On 14 April 2023, based on a writ petition, the Manipur High Court asked the State Government to send a recommendation to

the Central Government on the demand for ST status for Meiteis.

On 03 May 2023, a peaceful ‘**Tribal Solidarity March**’ organised by the All Tribal Students Union Manipur (ATSUM) against ST status for Meiteis turned violent in CCP, with reprisals by the Meiteis in Imphal Valley on the same day. The minorities in each other’s areas were targeted. Large scale riots, killings, arson and looting in areas of Kangvai and Torbung in CCP spread to Imphal Valley and Moreh. The current conflict has increased the Hill-Valley divide with polarised communities on either side. Till date, about 230 persons have been killed, over 60000 persons have been displaced and approximately 4500 houses have been torched. The miscreants and insurgent groups have utilised the complex situation to solidify their gains and capitalised on fears of innocent civilians.

Prognosis

The warring communities have put forward their demands to come to the negotiating table, however, no concrete progress has been made. The ethnic divide sown by the present conflict is deep and can only be bridged with political sagacity. As a first step, access to

airport facilities, medical facilities and educational institutions, national highways and the economic hub at Moreh should be extended to Kukis and Meiteis equally. Resettlement of Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) of both communities can be the next step.

The proliferation of illegal weapons and War like Stores (WLS) in the society is a major problem. A dedicated drive to de-weaponise the society, followed by a ruthless crackdown on insurgents and inimical elements in both hills and valleys can act as a confidence building measure for both the communities.

Decades of insurgency and mistrust between communities facilitates manipulation of narratives by inimical elements.

Politics and insurgency have also developed a symbiotic relation, and long term political instability has deepened the mistrust of the people. Rampant extortion, smuggling of weapons / WLS, illegal timber trade and flow of drugs have further complicated the present scenario. The volatile and fragile Internal Security situation due to the ambivalent political environment remains a challenge for the Security Forces.



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Lt Col Baljit Singh

NEUTRAL COMMUNITIES EMERGE

IN MANIPUR'S ETHNIC TURMOIL

The communal tensions that started on 03 May 2023, spread like wild fire across Manipur. In no time, the conflict escalated between two warring communities, with their ideologies, their supporters, their leaders and worse, well-armed groups, in place. There were concerns that the fighting may quickly transcend towards areas dominated by other communities, especially in the Naga dominated areas, as they too opposed the Meitei demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status, but thankfully that did not happen. This brought to fore the importance of what may be considered as neutral communities in Manipur during this crisis. As tensions raged on, these communities in the hills and valley of Manipur have been instrumental in ensuring administrative functioning and peace in many parts of the state. The role they play hereafter can only increase, as this analysis postulates.

Since the crisis began, the Nagas of the hill districts, the Meitei Pangals of the Valley districts, and the Nepali community that resides in the valley and the hills, have been the only Manipuri citizens who have been able to access all parts of Manipur with some sort of immunity. This has allowed people of these communities to take on most aspects of administration, supplies, policing and essential services across districts. Naga and Nepali drivers have plied supplies and passengers on the two National Highways (NH-2 and NH-37) along with non-local drivers, ensuring essential provisions and passenger movement from the neighbouring states. While administrative officers of the opposing communities cannot operate in affected districts, the officers of neutral communities have filled those vacancies. Police personnel of the neutral communities have been able to operate in conflict hit areas, and they have also brought a sense of objectivity in policing in these



Police fire tear gas shells to disperse students protesting against a fresh wave of ethnic violence in Imphal, Manipur, on Sept. 10, 2024. (AP)

troubled times. Due to displacement of the people consequent to the violence, wherever gaps have developed in essential services, medical assistance, humanitarian aid and infrastructure development, it is these neutral communities that have filled those gaps.

While the security forces did their bit to curtail the spread of the crisis, the importance of these neutral communities cannot be lost sight of. Nepali, Naga and Pangal settlements have become de facto buffer zones between the settlements of opposing communities, thereby reducing chances of direct confrontation in those areas. A few days into the crisis, NH-37 between Silchar and Imphal was made functional for large scale essential supplies. The highway passes largely through Naga dominated areas, and could only be opened by the support of citizen groups of these communities that decided to support this endeavour. The

Naga groups have thereafter vehemently opposed attempts by some Kuki and Meitei groups to sabotage this movement; whether by threats of shut downs or armed intimidation.

It is not that the neutral communities have remained untouched by the crisis. Peace in the entire state and essential services like health care, education, communications etc were affected. Disruption of supplies drove up the costs and dried up avenues of employment, especially for the Internally Displaced Persons (IDP). There have been isolated instances when these communities have been targeted, at times deliberately. On 15 July 2024, a Naga girl was brutally murdered at Kangchup Chingkhong under Lamsang police station, while on 14 January 2024 a Meitei Pangal man was shot dead at Lilong Town purportedly for not paying extortion money. Instances of Naga and Nepali drivers being beaten on NH-2 due to refusal to pay extortion money, were reported with alarming frequency. Recently, a Pangal man was shot by suspected armed cadres of the group Arambai Tengol at Andro Village. This highlights the increased pressures faced by neutral groups of paying extortion sums to the rejuvenated armed groups on one side, and effects of general high handedness by their front organisations on the other. Fortunately, the communities quickly diffused the situation by swift dialogue, public apologies as also compensations, where deemed fit. There is a conscious endeavour to not spread the violence beyond the present demographic boundaries.

The ethnic crisis is unlikely to end as quickly as it started. It may take years to heal the wounds of these two years of intermittent violence. So, what is the desired role of the neutral communities in crisis resolution in the context of Manipur? Firstly, a clear and loud political message

has to be aired by political leaders of these communities. Although there are only about 10 Members representing these communities in the Legislative Assembly, their voice is important, especially as an unbiased one. Sadly, apart from some obligatory calls for peace, there has been no resounding reconciliatory tone struck by these leaders. Most of them have only voiced warnings against violence subjected on some of their constituents, but it's been generally quiet beyond that. This would have to change for the better. A stronger message to the warring communities to work towards peace is essential. As Manipur increasingly looks towards a third party to resolve the issue, a neutral entity from within the state is the best bet in this regard.

The Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and citizen groups denounced violence quite early in the conflict and they assisted the security forces and police in ensuring calm in the areas where they were in a majority. The political and CSO leaders of these communities, with their neutrality intact, also have an important role to address the contentious issues that were the root cause of the crisis in the first place. Whether it is illegal migration from Myanmar, poppy cultivation or land rights for the Kukis, or ST status for the Meiteis, a rational, unbiased, holistic and non-violent resolution is imperative, for which the leaders of these communities must strive. They can and must become the ambassadors of the Central Government in this endeavour.

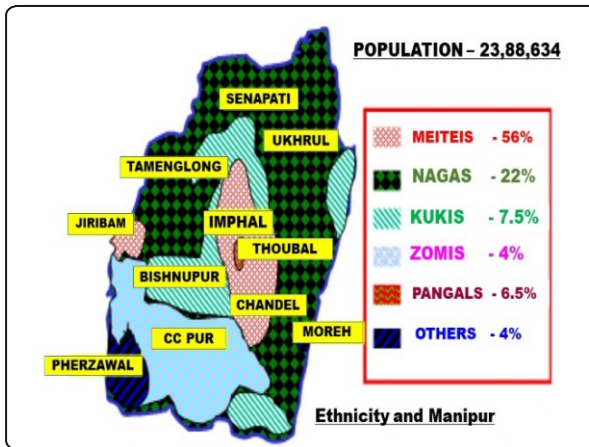
As policing becomes challenging, the police officers of neutral communities will have to step up, not only to provide service, but also to assist in integration of the Meitei and Kuki police persons. Their leadership role in

the higher echelons may ensure an unbiased force, which is the need of the hour. The same can be said about administrative services as well. As the law and order situation in the state worsened due to the return of largely dormant insurgent groups, it is these police personnel who will have an important role to target these groups of both communities, with no prejudice.

The neutral persons will also have to continue providing essential services across the state, as it is unlikely that the two warring communities will have access to each other's areas for quite some time. The education and health care sectors, especially higher and specialised education, will require their assistance. Essential supplies and passenger services will mostly be provided by such neutral communities that have pan-state access. Infrastructure development took a major hit when the problem started, it has recommenced, mostly with the help of the neutral communities and non-locals. Construction of new highways and railways is essential for future development of Manipur and must not stop.

Manipur was labelled as an essential cog in India's **Act East** policy. The conflict in Myanmar and the ethnic turbulence in Manipur have put a serious dent on this endeavour of the Central Government. The neutral communities must do more to assist the government in ensuring that Manipur remains relevant in future plans, especially in terms of infrastructure development and promotion of peace.

Why have the neutral communities not done enough already? Perhaps the answer lies in past episodes. In Manipur, almost all communities have had tensions with



Left. Demographic areas in Manipur (Credit Vivekananda International Foundation) Right. A woman gestures as she argues with an Indian army member in the village of Gamgiphai, Manipur state, India, August 31, 2011. (Manpreet Romana/The New York Times)

others at some point in time, although this is the first time that entire communities have violently fought against each other. With that backdrop, all communities tend to protect their interests and avoid getting embroiled in others' matters. Presently however, it is important that these communities shed their past prejudices and push for peace, as it affects the entire state.

It is also presumed that as armed groups have got involved more proactively in the crisis, they have derived favours from the insurgent groups of other communities, viz, mainly the Naga insurgent groups. National Socialist Council of Nagaland - Isaac-Muivah (NSCN (IM)) is reportedly supporting the Meitei groups logistically and operationally in Myanmar Naga Hills, while some other smaller Naga groups are assisting some Kuki groups, mainly by giving access for movement through the areas of their influence. Control of large smuggling syndicates and routes for trans-border narco-smuggling is also enticing for many of the groups. This has resulted in the

Naga groups collaborating and patronising with some, and fighting the other warring groups. Recently, NSCN (IM) cadres reportedly had a standoff against Kuki National Army (KNA) insurgents on the Indo-Myanmar border in the Ukhrul -Kamjong region, while assisting United Nationalist Liberation Front (UNLF), a Meitei group. Naga groups wield vast influence in Naga dominated areas, and many CSOs are generally known to toe their line. It would not be wrong to say that this has also contributed to a muted response to the large scale violence.

The neutral communities have much to contribute in the resolution of this crisis in Manipur. While they may be smaller in numbers, the decision makers in the Government need to harness their impartiality by empowering them adequately, ensuring that they can function in all operations, to usher in the much-needed peace in the region.

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Col Aman Ahluwalia



VOLATILE RAKHINE AND THE ARAKAN ARMY'S EXPANDING CONTROL

The Civil War in Myanmar has resulted in intense fighting across multiple states and regions of Myanmar. The Arakan Army and other ethnic armed groups are engaged in a conflict with the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw). There are over two million internally displaced persons and over a lakh refugees who have fled to neighbouring countries. The situation has been one of ongoing chaos and mayhem. The situation in Rakhine State (historically, the Arakan State) strategically located along the Bay of Bengal has geopolitical significance for India and remains explosive. Rakhine has become a focal point for Myanmar's continuing civil war. An analysis follows.

The Rakhine State

Arakan is the historical name of Rakhine state. The region was called Arakan for centuries until the Burmese military junta changed its name in 1989. The people of the region were known as Arakanese. Historically, the region was an independent kingdom between Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent. Arakan not only integrated Hindu-Buddhist rituals from the subcontinent; but it also absorbed the influence of Islamic India, particularly the Bengal Sultanate. Between 1430 and 1638, Arakan rulers used Muslim titles. None however adopted the religion; they remained Buddhists.

A map of Rakhine State, Chin State, and the Arakan (Dry Zone) control during the Myanmar Civil War [as of January 5, 2025] (credit <https://commons.wikimedia.org/>)



Arakan Army Cadres during an anti-regime operation in Rakhine State (Credit Arakan/Princess Media)

The Rakhine state is known for its diverse ethnic groups. After Burma's controversial citizenship law in 1974, the Buddhists became known as **Rakhines** and Muslims became known as **Rohingya**. Rakhine (Arakanese) are the majority ethnic group in the Rakhine State, they are predominantly Theravada Buddhists like the majority in Myanmar; but they have their own cultural practices and identity. Rakhine people have a rich history of forming their own kingdoms and dynasties with a distinct Indian influence. Arakan was one of the first Indianized kingdoms in Southeast Asia. Arakanese legends and some Rakhine people claim that they are Aryans and came from the Shakya clan in India. This was the clan to which Buddha belonged, with the three main Shakya cities being Kapilavastu (close to the Nepalese border), Devdah in Nepal and Sankisa in Uttar Pradesh.

Rohingyas, are the Muslim minority group. They claim to be indigenous to the region while the Myanmar government calls them colonial immigrants from the

bordering regions of Bangladesh and do not recognise them as citizens. In 2017, the Rohingyas experienced a severe campaign of persecution by the Myanmar Army resulting in the displacement of over 700000 Rohingyas into neighbouring Bangladesh and India. Current developments could similarly lead to a spillover effect, as approximately 70000 Rohingyas remaining in Rakhine await clarity regarding the Arakan Army's intentions towards them. There are several other minority groups too like the Bamar, Chin Kaman (Muslims), Mro, Khami, That, Maramagyi, Daingnet (Chakmas), and Maramagyi.

The Arakan Army

Founded in April 2009, the **Arakan Army** operates in various regions, including Rakhine State, Chinland, Kachin State, Magway Region, Sagaing Region and Shan State. It is part of the United League of Arakan Allies and the Northern Alliance, which includes other ethnic armed groups. The **Arakan Army** is led by Major General Twan Mrat Naing, who has shaped the organization's strategic direction and military operations (he is also the Chairman of its Political Wing, the **United League of Arakan**). The **Arakan Army** has been involved in ongoing conflicts with the Tatmadaw and other armed groups and has captured several townships and military outposts including a major regional Army headquarters at Ann in Rakhine State recently.

The broader goal of the **Arakan Army** is to gain greater autonomy for the Rakhine people and challenge Myanmar's Military Junta (Central Government). The **Arakan Army** seeks to liberate every citizen and ethnic group of Myanmar from the Central Myanmar Government. They seek to safeguard the identity and cultural heritage of the Rakhine people and work for their greater autonomy, sovereignty and self-determination.

The **Arakan Army** has been steadily expanding its influence in strategic areas, including near the Teknaf region and Saint Martin Island, which has heightened tensions with neighbouring Bangladesh. As covered in the News on 14 January 2025 (News 18), the **Arakan Army** effectively established control over 15 out of 18 townships in Rakhine state, including complete authority over the 271 km border with Bangladesh. This significantly alters the security dynamics along Myanmar's border with Bangladesh and India. While the **Arakan**

Army has had successes, there is no denying that they have a long struggle ahead.

The Forces in Rakhine

The Myanmar Military (Tatmadaw), consisting of the Myanmar Army, Navy and Air Force is the primary force contesting the **Arakan Army's** quest for control. It holds significant power in Myanmar, playing a dominant role in the country's governance. Around 12000 Myanmar Infantry troops are still in Rakhine state along with about 3000 Naval personnel and several thousand police and border guards – mostly in the South. The Tatmadaw has a reputation for being notoriously harsh on protesters and civilians. The current Commander-in-Chief is Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, who led the coup that overthrew the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi (currently under house arrest) in February 2021. China is reportedly supporting the Military Junta, which could influence the tide of the Rakhine conflict. Notably, Kyaukphyu Port Project in Rakhine, a part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is still under the Tatmadaw and with their significant presence – the work still goes on.

In another twist to the conflict, two militant groups - Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) and Arakan Rohingya Solidarity Army (ARSA) are cooperating with the Myanmar military against the **Arakan Army**. Ironically, it was ARSA's attacks against Myanmar security force outposts in 2016 and 2017 that sparked the military's mass ethnic cleansing campaign that forced some 700000 Rohingya across the border into Bangladesh and India.

These temporary or convenient 'handshakes' have the capacity to turn the conflict in Rakhine on its head; the **Arakan Army** thus faces a quagmire of protracted

conflict involving multiple protagonists. The future of Rakhine State will depend on a combination of conflict resolution, international support and regional cooperation. It is a complex and challenging situation, but with concerted efforts, there is hope for a more stable and prosperous future.

The Strategic Canvas

Myanmar is at the crossroads of South Asia, Southeast Asia and East Asia, holding significant geopolitical importance due to its strategic location and natural resources. It shares borders with China, India, Bangladesh, Laos and Thailand and provides an alternate route (a possible transit corridor for goods) to Northeast India. This is crucial in the face of the fluid and adversarial political situation in Bangladesh. Connectivity projects such as the BBIN Motor Vehicles Agreement (Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal) and the use of Bangladeshi ports like Mongla and Chattogram play a vital role. Bangladesh's shifting political status has created uncertainty and could possibly disrupt the planned communication conduits towards Northeast India.

Myanmar has a sizable coastline approximately 2227 kms along the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea. The Bay of Bengal has historically been a route for cultural and trade exchanges between India and Myanmar, fostering strong ties going back many centuries. Concurrently, Myanmar provides China an economic corridor and is a key part of China's BRI. It provides an alternate route to the Chinese to access the Indian Ocean. China views Myanmar as a critical ally in the Asia-Pacific region, especially in addressing the "*Malacca Straits Dilemma*" by diversifying its trade routes. The China-Myanmar pipelines, transporting gas and oil from Rakhine to

China's Yunnan Province, form part of this initiative.

The Kyaukphyu Port Project is a significant infrastructure initiative in Myanmar by China, located in Rakhine along the Bay of Bengal. An industrial zone is planned alongside the port to attract foreign investment and boost economic activity. It is a crucial part of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) to enhance connectivity between China and Myanmar. The port is located near existing oil and gas pipelines running from Kyaukphyu to Kunming in China, further enhancing regional connectivity. The project is valued at \$7.3 billion for the port and \$2.7 billion for the industrial zone. The CITIC Group, a Chinese state-owned enterprise, holds a 70% stake in the port project, with the Myanmar government owning the remaining 30%. Critics worry about Myanmar falling into a "*debt trap*" and becoming economically dependent on China as has been observed in similar projects globally.

Indian Initiatives in Myanmar

The India-Myanmar border stretches approximately 1643 kms. This boundary spans several states in both countries, manifesting in important cultural and trade exchanges. Myanmar also has a 2185 kms border with China and a 271 kms border with Bangladesh. Myanmar is a gateway to Southeast Asia facilitating India's '**Act East**' policy. The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway is planned to connect Moreh in India with Mae Sot in Thailand via Myanmar, covering a distance of approximately 1360 kms. Due to the political instability in Myanmar, the project has faced



RSO Cadres undergoing training, 12 June 2021 (credit defensepoliticsasia.com)

has been constructed as the deadline of July 2025 approaches.

The **Sittwe Port** is a deepwater port constructed by India as part of the KMTTP. The port was built with a budget of around USD 120 million and was funded by India, with India Ports Global Ltd looking after operations of the entire port. The port improves connectivity between India's Northeastern states and the rest of the country, reducing dependence on the narrow Siliguri corridor. Additionally, the port strengthens India's maritime influence in the region and counters Chinese dominance in Myanmar. It also facilitates regional trade and economic development, promoting bilateral and regional business relations.

financial constraints and logistical hurdles. Despite these challenges, this remains a crucial infrastructure project for India and for regional economic integration and connectivity.

The Rakhine and Chin States provide passage for the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMTTP) aimed at enhancing connectivity between Kolkata and Northeast India. The project involves three main segments:

- **Kolkata to Sittwe in Rakhine State** – 539 kms by sea.
- **Sittwe to Paletwa** - An inland waterway route along the Kaladan River from Sittwe to Paletwa in Chin State – 158 kms.
- **Paletwa to Mizoram** - A road route from Paletwa to the India-Myanmar border – 129 kms.

According to recent updates, while the waterways segment of the KMTTP has been completed at a cost of approximately Rs 983 crore, only 20 kms of the road link

India's Act East Policy

Myanmar is central to India's "Act East" policy, which seeks to strengthen economic and strategic ties with Southeast Asia. India has critical strategic interests and ongoing projects in Myanmar including in the Rakhine State which inter alia include enhancing connectivity to its Northeastern states and to Southeast Asia. The region is rich in natural resources, including significant gas and oil reserves. The Shwe gas field and the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone (SEZ) are notable. These resources attract interest from India and China who seek to secure energy supplies and bolster their influence.

The Kyaukphyu Port Project and the Sittwe Port are located 275 kms apart and are significant infrastructure projects in Rakhine. However they have different geopolitical orientations and strategic purposes in the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. It would thus be geopolitically prudent for India to take a balanced view of the Rakhine conflict and encourage a dialogue between the Myanmar military and ethnic armed groups, including the **Arakan Army**, aimed at ending this situation of strife. India needs to balance the influence of other regional powers, such as China, by maintaining a strong presence and fostering good relations with Myanmar. India has several geopolitical options in Myanmar, aimed at enhancing regional stability, economic growth and security.

Additionally, links / conflict with Chin groups and pressing issues of Kuki-Zo ethnic groups in Manipur, illegal flow of migrants, weapons and drugs to India via Manipur and Mizoram impact Indian security concerns, and need to be handled firmly. India needs to enhance border

security along its shared border with Myanmar by increased surveillance to prevent illegal immigration and smuggling; this however must not be viewed as an inimical step but a protective one useful to both sides, and will require extensive perception management.

The Rakhine – Arakan Influence on India Myanmar Relations

While the Rakhine state does not share a border with India, it holds significant geopolitical importance due to its strategic location on Myanmar's Western coast, providing access to the Bay of Bengal. Crucial for maritime trade routes and regional connectivity, it has competitive significance for India and China. India will have to balance its relations with Rakhine (the **Arakan Army**) and Myanmar (the Myanmar Government); a delicate but essential task for a 'connect to India's Northeast' and its 'Act East initiative' – a fine balance of necessity.

India can play a proactive role in supporting peace-building initiatives in Myanmar including with the **Arakan Army** through dialogue and reconciliation; by facilitating a dialogue, India gains regional stability in its neighbourhood, protects its economic interest and extends its strategic influence. India can increase trade, investment, and development projects in Myanmar and Rakhine State; use of geo-economic principals and financial diplomacy to achieve geopolitical objectives appears to be the most obvious way forward. India must enhance regional connectivity, promote infrastructure projects and trade routes that link Myanmar with India's Northeastern states and Southeast Asia.

There have been reports of some Northeastern Indian insurgent groups being in the process of setting up bases in

Bangladesh post the political turmoil in the country. India's relations with the **Arakan Army** who control the border with Bangladesh and exerts influence even across can be suitably leveraged to address this threat. Peace in Myanmar or otherwise, the **Arakan Army** needs to be kept engaged to ensure stability in the region. India can continue to provide humanitarian aid and support to displaced populations in Myanmar, including the Rohingya refugees, a good beginning could be the establishment of a health centre / hospital in Rakhine State.

End Note

In the current environment of Bangladesh's anti-India rhetoric, the Indian influence with the **Arakan Army** can be a source of strength and leverage in shaping regional policies and neighbourhood response. The **United League of Arakan's** enduring ambition

for secession from Myanmar appears increasingly attainable. Should this aspiration materialise, it would signify Asia's second successful national liberation movement since Bangladesh; whether it suits India's interests in the long term will remain to be seen.

In the heart of Myanmar lies a tapestry of rich culture and resilient spirit, woven through centuries of history and the enduring quest for peace – a land of resilient spirits caught between history and hope. Considering the state of India's relations with these countries as also the political turmoil in Myanmar, there is competitive geopolitical jostling underway in the region. While the flavour is 'opportunistic', India's diplomacy must surpass that of other regional and international players who are very keen to make inroads into this region.



Major General Harvijay Singh, SM (Retd) is a third-generation soldier, and his two sons are also Army officers. An alumnus of National Defence Academy, Pune, he was commissioned in the Corps of Signals in 1981. He is a specialist trainer and has trained soldiers in military training establishments at various stages of his career. As the Chief Instructor of the Military College of Telecommunications Engineering, he was strategizing issues and training professional soldiers on Communication Networks, Cyber Security and Electronic Warfare. A prolific writer, he contributes regularly to various professional journals. He has written three books related to Military History and Leadership and is the recipient of the prestigious 'Scholar Warrior Badge'.



Maj Gen Harvijay Singh

SOUTH MIZORAM: A GEM IN NORTHEAST INDIA

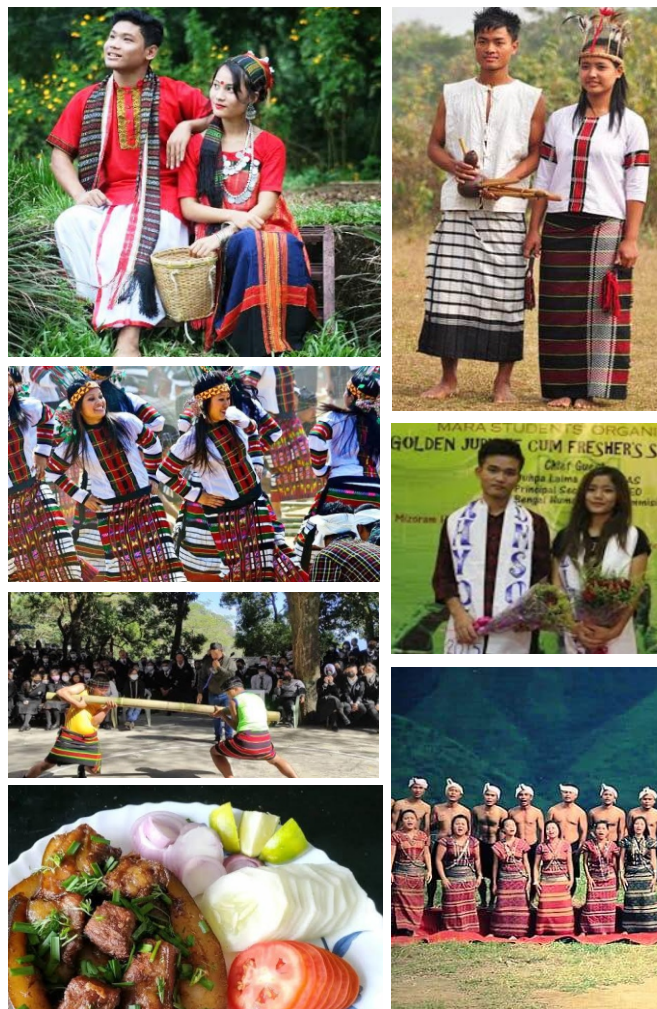
South Mizoram comprises the districts of Lunglei, Lawngtlai, Siaha and some parts of Champhai. This culturally rich region of rolling hills, valleys and scenic landscapes is home to the Lushai, Mara, Chakma and Lai tribes. Administratively, the region has three Autonomous District Councils, viz, The MADC, LADC and CADC, dedicated for the three major Mara, Lushai and Chakma tribes. South Mizoram is at the strategic Southern tip of Northeast India, sharing borders with Myanmar and Bangladesh. Overall, South Mizoram is a unique and fascinating region, offering a blend of natural beauty, cultural richness and economic potential.

A Glance Back in Time

South Mizoram, also known as Lushai Hills, has a rich and diverse history that spans thousands of years. The earliest known inhabitants of the region were the Kuki and Lushai tribes, who migrated from the Eastern Himalayas. The Lushai tribes established several chiefdoms, each ruled by a hereditary chief. The Kuki and Lushai tribes frequently clashed over territory, resources and trade routes.

The British East India Company annexed the Lushai Hills in 1890, and the region became part of the British Indian Empire. Christian missionaries, particularly from the Baptist and Presbyterian denominations, arrived in the region and converted many Lushai and Kuki people to Christianity.

After independence, the Mizo National Front (MNF), a separatist organization, was formed in 1961 and sought independence for Mizoram. The MNF signed the Mizo Accord with the Indian Government in 1986, which led to the creation of the state of Mizoram in 1987. Today, South Mizoram is a thriving region with a strong economy, rich culture and stunning natural beauty.



Clockwise from Top Left. Chakma couple, Lushai couple, Mara couple, Mara dance troupe, Mizo vawksa, Insuknawr sport and cheraw dance

Tribes of South Mizoram

South Mizoram is home to several indigenous tribes, each with their unique culture, language and traditions. The main tribes found in South Mizoram are Lushai (Mizo), Mara, Lai, Chakma, Bru (Reang), Pang and Tlanglau tribes.

- **Lushai.** The Lushai are the largest tribe in Mizoram, making up around 80% of the population. Predominantly Christian, they have a rich cultural heritage, with their ancestors having migrated from the neighbouring regions of Myanmar and Bangladesh. The Lushai tribe has undergone significant changes in recent years, with many adopting modern education, occupation and lifestyle.
- **Mara.** The Mara tribe is found primarily in the Southernmost part of Mizoram, particularly in the Siaha district, where they are known as West Mara. They are also found in the neighbouring Chin state of Myanmar, where they are known as East Mara. With a distinct culture and language, they are experts in hunting and gathering. Predominantly Christian, with a significant

influence of traditional animist practices, the tribal affinity among the Maras even across the borders is often stronger than affiliation with their own countries.

- **Lai.** The Lai tribe is found mainly in the Lawngtlai district in Mizoram and in Chin State (Myanmar) in the townships of Falam, Thantlang and Hakha. Their sub-tribes also reside in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh. Their languages “*Lai bolb*” and “*Hakha bolb*” are classified as Central Kuki Chin languages. They are known for their skilled craftsmanship, particularly in weaving and woodcarving.
- **Chakma.** The Chakmas, a Buddhist tribe found primarily in the Western part of Lawngtlai district in Mizoram are the second largest ethnic group of the CHT region of Bangladesh. They have strong ethnic affinities to Tibetan-Burman speaking groups of Northeast India. Most modern Chakmas practice Theravada Buddhism. The Chakmas are divided into 31 clans or *gozas* and the community is headed by Chakma Raja, the tribal head. They have a distinct culture and language, and are known for their expertise in agriculture.
- **Bru.** The Bru, a small tribe found primarily in Tripura, Assam and in the Mamit, Kolasib and Lawngtlai districts of Mizoram were originally Hindus, but many of them have converted to Christianity. In 1997, ethnic violence forced thousands of them to leave their homes in Mizoram. The Bru have been treated as “*outsiders*” by the Mizos. They are a patriarchal society known for their love for music.
- **Pang.** The Pang tribe is an indigenous community who live in the Chamdur valley of Bungtlang Block of Lawngtlai district as well as in Chawngte, Tlabung and West Phaileng Subdivisions. They

are trying to be recognized as a separate tribe, along with Bawm and Tlanglau tribes. Their traditional clothing is vibrant and handcrafted and they have a strong sense of identity and connection to their roots.

- **Tlanglau.** A sub-tribe of the Lai community, the Tlanglau tribe is based in the Western part of the Lawngtlai district and in CHT of Bangladesh. They are believed to have originated from Myanmar’s Chin State.
- **Bawm.** The Bawms, an ethnic community inhabiting the CHT of Bangladesh are also found in the Western part of Lawngtlai district. Victimised in the CHT conflict, they are targeted by the Bangladesh Army and the Kuki-Chin National Front; hence they have been migrating to South Mizoram for security. The Bawms are a sub-tribe of Lai and follow Protestant Christianity.

With their rich cultural heritage, these tribes contribute significantly to the diversity and uniqueness of South Mizoram. However, their relationships are complex and influenced by historical, cultural and geographical factors. The Mara and Lai tribes have distinct cultural practices, languages and traditions and have a long history of conflict, primarily over territorial disputes. In recent years, the conflict has escalated, with reports of violent clashes, arson and displacement of people. Another contributing factor is the fact that both these tribes are also present in the neighbouring Chin state of Myanmar, where they have violently opposed each other in the quest to overthrow the Military Junta. These clashes also spill over to South Mizoram.

Moreover, these two tribes have their own ethnic armed groups, further complicating the conflict. The Chakmas, predominantly Buddhist, have maintained a relatively neutral stance in the Mara-Lai conflict.

Notwithstanding the historical animosity, the Mara, Lai and Chakma tribes have engaged in trade and commerce, exchanging goods such as food grains, textiles and handicrafts. The tribes also share cultural practices, such as music, dance and art.

Culture

The culture of South Mizoram is a unique blend of traditional and modern elements, reflecting the region's rich history and heritage. *Puanchei* and *Puan* are the traditional attire of the people of this region. *Chapchar Kut* is a spring festival celebrated with music, dance and feasting. The people also celebrate a harvest festival, known as *Mim Kut*, with music and dance. The famous dance forms are *Kbuallam* and *Cheraw*, the latter being a bamboo dance performed by women. A famous local cuisine is the *Mizo Vawksa*, a dish made from smoked pork.

Mizo, the official language of Mizoram is spoken by most people in the state. In South Mizoram, the tribes prefer to speak in their own tribal language. English is also widely spoken, especially in urban areas. Elderly people are highly respected in Mizo culture, and their wisdom and guidance is sought in all aspects of life.

Mizo women are skilled weavers, creating beautiful textiles with intricate designs. Skilled craftsmen create beautiful wooden artefacts, such as decorative boxes and figurines. Besides the popular games of football, basketball and volleyball, the region



(Left) Mizo handicrafts (Right) Phawngpui Peak

also has its unique traditional sports such as *Insuknawr* and *Inbuan*. Both these sports are a test of strength and agility of the players.

Tourism

With its stunning natural beauty, rich culture and warm hospitality, South Mizoram offers numerous exciting tourist destinations. These include several natural wonders, cultural and historical sites, apart from places for adventure and trekking. The **Phawngpui peak**, the highest peak in Mizoram offers breath-taking views of the surrounding landscape. Another beautiful place to visit is the **Palak Lake** in Siahla district. The hills are full of stunning waterfalls that cascade down the rocky cliffs during the monsoons.

The Lunglei Museum showcases the history, culture and traditions of the Lunglei region. The **Khawnglung Wildlife Sanctuary** is a protected area home to various species of flora and fauna. South Mizoram also proudly boasts of having a golf course in Thenzawl, which is surrounded by rolling hills and lush forests.

On the adventure and trekking circuit, the Lunglei - Phawngpui - Thenzawl Trek is a challenging trek that takes you through lush forests and rolling hills. The Kaladan

or Kolodyne River in South Mizoram also offers several scenic locations along its banks. These are just a few of the many exciting tourist destinations in South Mizoram. The region offers something for everyone, from nature lovers to adventure seekers to culture enthusiasts.

Economy

South Mizoram's economy is primarily driven by agriculture, with a significant focus on subsistence farming. Rice is the main crop, with the region producing a significant quantity for local consumption and export.

Fruits like oranges, bananas and pineapples also provide a source of income for local farmers. Among spices and herbs, turmeric, ginger and chilli peppers are commonly cultivated, contributing to the region's spice trade.

As far as industry is concerned, traditional handloom and handicraft products are made to include woven baskets and textiles. Small-scale food processing units in the region produce items like rice, oil and spices. A nascent construction industry has started, with cement and other building materials being produced locally.

A moderately well-developed road network connects major towns and villages. In August 2017, the Indian Railways completed a survey for a new route extension from Sairang to Hmawngbuchhuah (Zorinpui) on the Southern tip of Mizoram, which will provide rail connectivity to the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMTTP). There are no airports in South Mizoram, but there are several helipads for emergency helicopter services in the region.

Opportunities for South Mizoram

The KMTTP is a significant infrastructure development project aimed at improving connectivity between India's North-eastern states and the Bay of Bengal. The project comprises a 539-km shipping route from Kolkata to Sittwe port in Myanmar, a 158-km inland water transport route on the Kaladan River from Sittwe to Paletwa and finally a 110-km road route from Paletwa to the Indo-Myanmar border at Zorinpui; a 100 km road extends from Zorinpui to Lawngtlai. This project is planned as a strategic link to the North-East, reducing pressure on the Siliguri corridor. The project will naturally create new employment opportunities for South Mizoram.

South Mizoram has potential for agricultural growth, particularly in horticulture and spice cultivation. South Mizoram's natural beauty and

cultural heritage offer opportunities for tourism development. Upgrading infrastructure, including roads, transportation and communication networks, can boost economic growth and promote employment.

The Challenges

South Mizoram, like many other hilly and remote regions, faces several challenges that impact the lives of its inhabitants. Prolonged monsoons with excessive heavy rainfall and a lack of development make things more difficult. Here are some of the key challenges:

- **Infrastructure Challenges.** South Mizoram's remote location and hilly terrain make it difficult to establish and maintain connectivity, including roads, bridges and communication networks. Frequent power outages and limited access to electricity hinder economic development and daily life. The conflict between the Military Junta and the Arakan Army in Myanmar has disrupted work on the KMTTP, causing delays and increased costs. Currently, the Kaladan corridor of the project is completely under the control of the Arakan Army and the pace of work is slow between Paletwa and Sittwe. There have been no supplies to Sittwe from Myanmar and all the supplies are being transported from South Mizoram.
- **Economic Challenges.** The region's economy is primarily driven by agriculture, which provides limited job opportunities and income sources. The region relies heavily on government support and funding. The absence of industries and entrepreneurial ventures hinders economic growth and diversification.
- **Social Challenges.** While literacy rates have improved, the quality of education remains a concern, and access to higher education is limited. The region lacks

specialized healthcare facilities, medical professionals and equipment, making it challenging to provide quality healthcare services amidst the prevalence of diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS. Social inequality and discrimination against certain groups, such as the Chakmas and Brus, persist in the region. Also, the conflicts in Myanmar and Bangladesh have resulted in Maras and Bawms fleeing to South Mizoram for safety.

- **Environmental Challenges.** South Mizoram is prone to natural disasters, such as landslides, floods and earthquakes, which can devastate infrastructure, livelihood and human lives. Widespread deforestation and land degradation threaten the region's biodiversity and ecosystem. Climate change effects, such as changing rainfall patterns and increased frequency of natural disasters, impacts agriculture and infrastructure. The region faces water scarcity, particularly during the dry season.
- **Security Challenges.** The proximity to the Bangladesh and Myanmar borders creates geopolitical tensions and security concerns. In particular, the conflict in Chin State has had a significant

impact on South Mizoram. Myanmar has been turbulent in the last few years with consequent black marketing of weapons, drugs and other contraband items. Cross-border smuggling of these illegal items through the porous borders into India has caused social tensions in South Mizoram. Also, thousands of Chin people have fled to Mizoram, seeking safety and shelter due to the conflict. The situation is becoming increasingly challenging with the refugees struggling to find work. Local organisations are trying to fill the gap, but they face significant constraints, including limited funding and bureaucratic hurdles.

Conclusion

Addressing these challenges will require a multi-faceted approach that involves government initiatives, community engagement and support from external partners. The people of South Mizoram are known for their warm hospitality, strong community bonds, and are simple and contented with their lifestyle. They are hard-working, ready to build a bright future for themselves. With the upcoming and ongoing infrastructural projects in the region, South Mizoram is likely to see better prospects in future.



Colonel Jaswinder Singh, SM was commissioned into the PUNJAB Regiment in December 2007. Besides operational experience in Counter insurgency in Kashmir and in high altitude areas, he has served in UN peacekeeping operations. He has also been an Instructor in Indian Military Academy, Dehradun and has served in National Security Guard. He is presently commanding an Assam Rifles battalion on the Indo-Myanmar Border in South Mizoram.



Col Jaswinder Singh

A MISSIONARY'S JUNGLE ABODE IN MIZORAM

Lorrain Ville is a century old Villa built in 1914 by the Christian Missionaries which still stands today in all its charms near Siaha, Mizoram. J Herbert Lorraine and FW Savidge first landed here to preach the gospel in 1907. The author dropped in at this abode during a Long Range Patrol, and recalls the short halt.

In January 1972, soon after the Indo-Pak War of 1971, our unit, 19 RAJ RIF, was pulled out from Dhaka and inducted into Mizoram. It was then an insurgency-infested Union Territory. The unit was deployed on a counter-insurgency grid on Posts in Lunglei and beyond.

I was a rifle company commander then and, in May 1972, was on a long-range patrol in South Mizoram – past Lawngtlai, across River Kaladan, and further to the South of Siaha. On the one-inch map, close to village Serkawr, two red dots were marked as Lorrain Ville and Maud's Grave. I was intrigued by the unusual names and decided to check them out before going further.

The place was just off the beaten track and was easily located. It was midday when I stood before a small colonial-style bungalow with a porch. The wooden gate had a warning: **“Trespassers will be Prosecuted”**. The wooden panel on the porch roof had the inscription **“Lorrain Ville-1914”**. The small swing gate was tied by a string to a sturdy bamboo pole.



*Left Top. Foxcall Left Below. Rev. Violet Louise Anne Mark, daughter of Reginald Lorrain (credit indiatimes.com)
Right. J Herbert Lorraine (credit en.wikipedia.org)*



Pioneer Mission Bungalow Saikow (credit mizoramitourism.com)



Lorrainville, 1914 (credit www.siaba.nic.in)

As I pushed the gate open, the bamboo bent under tension and as soon as I released the gate, the bamboo snapped back straight closing the gate. Rustic but ingenious automation indeed.

I walked in and stood on the porch. The door leading in was ajar and I could see Victorian-style chairs and a centre table in the living room. I called out aloud “Hello. Anybody home”? I heard shuffling sounds, and an old man with a walking stick, wearing thick glasses, slowly emerged. He introduced himself as Mr Foxall. After the initial pleasantries, he narrated the story below.

Mr James Herbert Lorrain was the first missionary to arrive in Aizawl in 1894. A few years later, at his behest, his younger brother, Reginald Arthur Lorrain, also fired by the missionary zeal, reached Kolkata in 1907. He then travelled for many days by boat from the Gulf of Akyab up the Kaladan River to finally establish himself at Serkawr in the Southern Mizo Hills District. He was the first to reach such interiors to work amongst the tribals. He soon endeared himself to the locals,

constructed a small church, and by 1914 also the Lorrain Ville. By then his wife Maud had also joined him.

Interestingly, until then, the Mizos had no script. Therefore, the missionary couple procured a hand-operated printing machine, had it brought up piece by piece and then reassembled it in Serkawr. They then taught the locals the alphabet and, using the phonetic spelling, printed educational and religious material for them in their language. Mr Lorrain died in 1944 and Maud continued the good work till her death in 1960. Her grave, with an impressive marble tombstone, was within the compound.

Mr Foxall joined them in 1928, married their daughter in due course, and has been doing missionary work ever since. He said they have been going back to England once every ten years and, after the death of his wife in 1968 – she died of cancer in a Jalandhar hospital – he made his last trip to say final bye-bye to his kith and kin before returning to Lorrain Ville once and for

all. His only daughter was married to a local and the young couple were pursuing their higher studies in Shillong. He hoped they would come back and work for the betterment of the tribals.

With that, he took a deep breath and leaned back in his chair. I sat quietly for a while. The silence was pregnant. The experience of visiting Lorrain Ville and meeting Mr Foxall was indeed overwhelming. I would have liked to spend more time with him and listen to his stories of yore. But I had to get on with my patrol. I still remember our parting handshake – firm, warm, and perhaps a second longer than usual.

(Tail Piece. Mr Foxall died in 1977. The Illustrated Weekly of India, perhaps the most admired publication of its times - it closed down in 1993 - had carried a write-up and obituary announcing his death).

■ Major General V K Shrivastava
Please refer page 38 for Author's Profile.

THE BODOLAND MOVEMENT

This is an Artificial Intelligence (AI) generated article. Youngsters today are extensively using AI tools like Chat GPT4, Deepseek R1, etc to churn out their assignments, prepare notes, etc. The Editor too queried ChatGPT4 on the Bodoland Movement and refined the responses to deliver this AI-sourced end product – changing times! In essence, the author of this article is ChatGPT.

Who are the Bodos

The Bodos are an indigenous ethnic group from the North-eastern state of Assam. They are primarily concentrated in the Bodoland region, which encompasses parts of the Kokrajhar, Baksa, Chirang and Udalguri districts in Assam. They speak the Bodo language, which belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language family and is one of the recognized languages in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. Historically, the Bodos are believed to be one of the earliest inhabitants of the Brahmaputra Valley and have a rich cultural heritage. They follow a variety of religions, with the majority adhering to Bodo traditional beliefs, though many also follow Hinduism or Christianity.

The Bodos have faced socio-political challenges over the years, and demanded autonomy and recognition of their rights. This led to the formation of movements for greater self-rule, culminating in the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), which was established in 2020 to address their political aspirations. The Bodo Accord of January 2020, signed between the Government of India, Assam Government and Bodo representatives, aimed at bringing lasting peace and development to the region.

Culturally, the Bodos have a rich tradition of dance, music and festivals. One of their key festivals is **Bwisagu**, which marks the Bodo New Year and is celebrated with traditional music, dance and rituals. Traditional Bodo dances, like Bodo



The Bagurumba dance by Bodo girls, also called the Butterfly dance (credit en.wikipedia.org)

dance (a folk dance) play an essential role in their cultural expression. Despite facing challenges, the Bodos have managed to preserve their distinct identity and contribute to the cultural diversity of Assam.

The Major Bodo Organisations

Several Bodo organizations have played pivotal roles in the social, cultural and political landscape of the Bodo community in Assam and have advocated for the rights, autonomy and development of the Bodos. Some of the prominent Bodo organizations include:

- **Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC).** The BTC was established in 2003 as a political body after the signing of the Bodoland Accord between the Government of India, the Government of Assam, and the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU). The BTC governs the BTR in Assam, covering parts of Kokrajhar, Baksa, Chirang and Udalguri districts and plays a significant role in the administration and development of the Bodo-majority areas.
- **All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU).** Founded in 1967, ABSU is one of the most influential student organizations in Assam, working for the socio-political rights of the Bodo people. ABSU has been at the forefront of the Bodo movement, advocating for the creation of a separate Bodoland state and later pushing for the BTC and BTR. It has been instrumental in bringing the community's issues to national attention.
- **Bodoland People's Front (BPF).** The BPF was founded in 2005 by Hagrama Mohilary, a prominent Bodo leader, after a split within the Bodo community. It emerged as a key political player to represent Bodo interests and has participated in several elections. It has been part of the Government in Assam,

particularly in the BTC, and has played a role in implementing the Bodoland Accord.

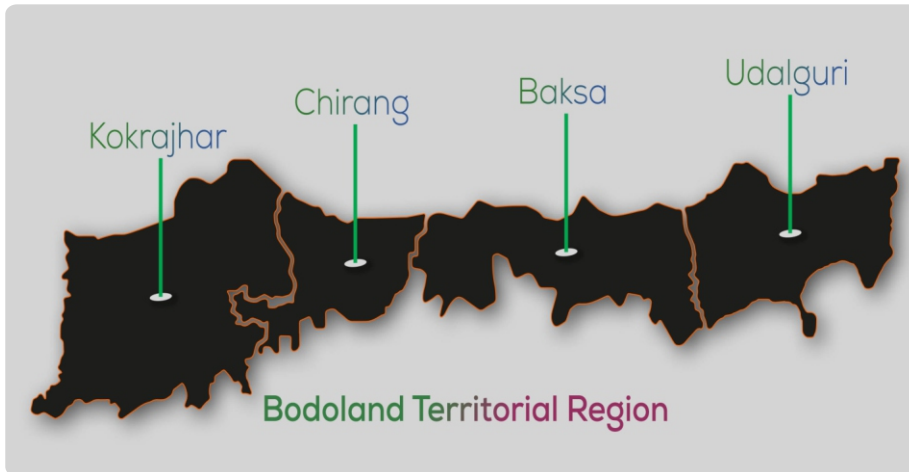
- **National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB).** Established in 1986, the NDFB was a militant separatist organization that sought an independent Bodo homeland called Bodoland. The NDFB waged an armed struggle for a separate state for the Bodos. Over the years, the group joined in several peace talks with factions like the NDFB (Progressive) engaging in negotiations that led to the signing of the Bodo Accord of 2020.
- **Bodo Liberation Tigers Force (BLTF),** also known as the Bodo Liberation Tigers were an armed militant group that was founded on 18 June 1996 by Prem Singh Brahma and Hagrama Mohilary. The group initially wanted to carve out separate autonomy of Bodoland in Assam, but surrendered with the establishment of BTC, an upgrade of the Bodo Autonomous Council. The leaders of

the BLT, together with the leaders of the All Bodo Students' Union, formed a political party called Bodo People's Progressive Front.

- **All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation (ABWWF).** The ABWWF is an organization focused on empowering Bodo women and advocating for their rights. The organization works to address gender issues within the Bodo community and aims to promote the welfare and development of women, especially in areas related to education, employment and social rights.
- **Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS).** The BSS, a cultural organization formed in 1952, works towards the promotion and development of the Bodo language, literature and culture. It is dedicated to preserving Bodo traditions and advancing the use of the Bodo language in various forms of media and education.
- **Bodoland Movement (Various Factions).** Over the years, various



A Bodo student with painted face shouts as hundreds of thousands of Bodo tribal people gather demanding the creation of a new state of Bodoland during a mass rally at Ghoramara in Sonitpur district of Assam, August. 20, 2013. (AP Photo/Anupam Nath)



Map of BTR (credit bodoland.gov.in)

factions within the Bodoland movement have existed, primarily focused on the creation of a separate state for the Bodo people. While organizations like the NDFB were militant, others like the ABSU advocated for a political solution.

- **Bodo Cultural Organization (BCO).** BCO is dedicated to promoting and preserving the cultural heritage of the Bodo people. The organization works to celebrate Bodo festivals, support the preservation of traditional dances, arts and crafts, and promote the Bodo language.

The Bodoland Movement

The Bodoland movement is a broad term used for the collective struggle for the rights and recognition of the Bodo community, which includes both peaceful and militant efforts. The political demands of the Bodos have evolved over time, shaped by the community's aspirations for self-governance, political representation and cultural preservation. These demands have been central to their movements for autonomy, leading to various negotiations, accords and even conflicts.

Initially from the 1960s to the 1980s, the Bodo organisations sought the creation of an independent state called Bodoland. This demand was rooted in a desire to protect their distinct identity, culture and language from being overshadowed by other communities in Assam. The demand for a separate state escalated after the formation of the ABSU in 1967.

In the 1980s, the NDFB was formed and led an armed struggle for an independent Bodoland. The NDFB sought to establish a separate state that would be exclusively for the Bodo people, separate from Assam. With the failure to achieve a separate state, the Bodo leadership began to shift their focus toward achieving political

autonomy within Assam. This led to the demand for a Bodoland Autonomous Council to administer the Bodo-majority areas of Assam. In the 1990s and 2000s, several rounds of talks took place and the demand for autonomy was partially addressed with the BTC, created under the Bodoland Accord of 2003.

The BTC gave the Bodos self-governance over their territory, with a focus on the development and cultural rights of the Bodo people within Assam. The BTC governed a defined region, known as the Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD), comprising parts of Kokrajhar, Baksa, Chirang and Udalguri districts. However, the limited powers of the BTC did not fully satisfy the Bodo aspirations for complete autonomy.

Even after the formation of the BTC in 2003, the demand for full statehood did not subside completely. Some factions, including the NDFB, and various groups within the Bodo community continued to push for the creation of a separate Bodoland state due to the perceived limitations of the BTC in terms of administrative, political and economic powers. The demand for a separate state of Bodoland has persisted, even though the government focused on resolving issues through political autonomy rather than full independence.

A new phase in Bodo politics came with the Bodo Accord signed in January 2020, which replaced the BTC with a more comprehensive administrative setup known as the BTR. This accord was aimed at addressing the long-standing political demands of the Bodo community and brought together various factions of the Bodo movement, including the NDFB and the ABSU. The BTR provides greater political autonomy and development powers for the Bodo-majority areas within Assam,

including the creation of new administrative units and financial provisions for the region.

The Bodo Militant Leaders

The Bodoland Movement naturally threw up many leaders who played a significant role, especially during the period when the community sought a separate state of Bodoland. Many of these leaders were involved in armed struggles for independence or autonomy and were instrumental in negotiations leading to peace accords. Some of the key Bodo militant leaders are named hereafter.

- **Ranjan Daimary**, the founder and chief of the NDFB was a key figure in the fight for an independent Bodoland. The NDFB began its militant activities in the 1980s, demanding a separate Bodo state. He was arrested in 2010 on charges of involvement in several violent incidents and bombings. Ranjan Daimary was later part of the peace talks that culminated in the Bodo Accord of 2020, which resulted in the creation of the BTR.
- **Bhaihmuhari** was a prominent leader of the NDFB (Progressive) faction, which split from the original NDFB and his faction engaged in peace talks with the government. Bhaihmuhari and other leaders from NDFB (Progressive) were more willing to negotiate and participated in discussions leading up to the Bodo Accord of 2020. His efforts were instrumental in the political resolution that granted more autonomy to the Bodo region through the creation of BTR.
- **Dharma Narzary**, one of the leaders of the NDFB was involved in militant activities in the 1990s. Narzary played a role in raising awareness of the Bodo people's political and cultural rights. He was also involved in discussions for a political resolution.

- **Gobinda Basumatary**, a key leader in the NDFB (Progressive) faction was associated with the efforts to negotiate a peaceful solution to the Bodoland crisis.
- **Sanjay Boro** is the current president of ABSU. Though a non-militant student body, ABSU played a crucial role in shaping the Bodo movement. While not directly a militant leader, Boro's ABSU was instrumental in pushing for the demands of the Bodo people and facilitated dialogues with the government. The ABSU, under Boro's leadership, played an important role in the Bodo Accord of 2020.
- **Hagrama Mohilary**, a significant Bodo leader and former president of the BPF, a political party tied to the Bodo movement and its demand for autonomy. Though not a militant in the strict sense, Hagrama Mohilary played an influential role in the political part of the Bodo movement, particularly within the BTC. His role as a leader of the BPF has made him a key figure in Bodo politics and peace processes.

- **Bijoy Basumatary**, a NDFB militant leader played an important role in the group's militant activities and was one of the key figures in the NDFB's armed struggle. Like other NDFB leaders, he later became involved in the peace process, especially after the group's split into multiple factions.
- **Ingti Kathar Songbijit** led the secessionist faction of NDFB. Interestingly, Songbijit is not a Bodo himself, and was born in a Karbi family. In 2015, Songbijit was deposed as the NDFB President, following differences between him and other top leaders.
- **Indigenous People's Democratic Soldier (IPDS) Faction Leaders.** The IPDS, although not as large as the NDFB, was another militant group that was active in the Bodoland region. Leaders of the IPDS were involved in militant activities during the Bodo movement. Like the NDFB, the IPDS also fought for the creation of an independent Bodoland. Some members of the IPDS faction later



The Bodoland statehood movement (credit chanakyamandal.org)



Bodoland Movement (credit youthkiawaaz.com)

participated in the peace talks, but the group was much smaller and less influential than the NDFB.

The leaders mentioned above represent different phases of the Bodo militant movement and have been involved in the armed struggle and peace processes. The ongoing transformation of the region is a reflection of their efforts to secure political autonomy, economic development and cultural preservation for the Bodo people.

Violent Incidents by the Bodos

The Bodo militant groups, particularly the **NDFB** and other factions involved in the struggle for a separate Bodoland, have been responsible for several violent attacks over the years. These attacks were largely driven by the demand for autonomy or the creation of a separate state of **Bodoland** and were often part of the wider Bodo insurgency in Assam. Some of the major violent incidents are highlighted hereafter.

The 1996-1997 Assam Blasts and Attacks. The NDFB carried out a series

of bombings and attacks in Assam during this period, targeting both civilians and security forces to pressure the Indian Government into conceding to their demands for a separate Bodoland. The violence aimed at destabilizing the region and drawing attention to their cause.

The 2008 Assam Serial Blasts. On 30 October 2008, a series of bomb blasts occurred across Assam, including in Guwahati, the state's capital. More than 80 people were killed and hundreds injured. While the Islamic militants (such as **Indian Mujahideen**) were primarily blamed for the blasts, several Bodo militant groups, including the **NDFB**, were

suspected of either collaborating with these groups or executing similar operations. These bombings were seen as part of a broader pattern of violence in the region during the insurgency.

The 2014 Kokrajhar and Baksa Killings. In May 2014, a group of armed militants from the **NDFB-S (Songbijit)** faction attacked villages in the Kokrajhar and Baksa districts of Assam, killing at least 30 people, including women and children. The attack targeted non-Bodo communities, particularly **Muslim** and **Bengali** settlers in the region. This was seen as an effort to drive out non-Bodo groups from the area. The attack is remembered for its brutality and the targeting of civilians, which escalated ethnic tensions in Assam.

The 2015 NDFB-S Attack on Adivasi Villages. In December 2015, members of the **NDFB-S (Songbijit)** faction carried out an attack on Adivasi villages in the Kokrajhar, Sonitpur and Chirang districts of Assam, killing at least 70 people. The attack was a reprisal against the Adivasi community, which had been caught in the crossfire of ethnic and insurgent violence in the region. The NDFB-S militants had previously clashed with Adivasi groups over issues related to land rights and ethnic identity. The attack was among the deadliest in the region, drawing widespread condemnation due to the scale of civilian casualties.

The 2014 Assam Assembly Elections Violence. In April 2014, militants from the **NDFB-S** faction attacked polling stations, resulting in several deaths and widespread panic. The NDFB-S group was trying to disrupt the election process and prevent the Indian government from consolidating control over the Bodoland region. It was also part of a larger strategy to oppose the government's political control in areas claimed by the Bodo people.

The 2017 NDFB-S Attack on Police and Security Forces. In 2017, NDFB-S militants ambushed police and security forces in Assam, resulting in the death of several security personnel. The NDFB-S faction had continued its fight for a separate Bodoland and regularly targeted the Indian Army, Assam Police and other security forces as part of their insurgent activities.

The 2019 Assam Violence and Clashes. In early 2019, there were significant clashes between the Bodo militants and security forces during the unrest in Assam over the **National Register of Citizens (NRC)** and the **Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA)**. While the main violence was not directly orchestrated by Bodo groups, some Bodo militant factions, such as the **NDFB-S**, used the political turmoil as an opportunity to attack civilians and security forces. This violence was part of a broader unrest in Assam.

The 2020 NDFB-S Attack in the Bodoland Region. In February 2020, following the **Bodo Accord** in January 2020, a faction of the **NDFB-S** was still involved in violence and armed clashes, even after some factions entered into the peace process. The attack was seen as part of a lingering sentiment among some militant factions who were dissatisfied with the outcome of the peace negotiations and the terms of the **Bodo Accord**.

These violent incidents reflect the deep-rooted political and ethnic tensions in Assam, especially concerning the Bodo movement's demand for a separate **Bodoland**. The militant groups, particularly the **NDFB** and its factions, have used violence as a means to advance their demands, often targeting civilians and security forces. However, following the **Bodo Accord of 2020**, many of these factions, including Ranjan Daimary's

NDFB, have laid down arms in exchange for political concessions, which have helped reduce the scale of violence in the region.

Socio-Economic and Cultural Issues

Bodo Language Rights. A significant political demand was the recognition of Bodo as an official language of Assam. In 2003, following the Bodoland Accord, the Bodo language was made an associate official language in the BTC region. The Bodo language was eventually included in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution in 2003, recognizing it as one of the official languages of India. This was a major victory for the community, ensuring the preservation and promotion of their language at the national level.

Economic Development and Welfare. Beyond political demands, the Bodos have consistently called for economic development and social welfare programmes in the Bodoland region. These include infrastructure development, better education facilities, healthcare, job opportunities, and social security for the Bodo people.

Cultural and Social Rights. The Bodos have demanded the preservation of their unique culture, traditions, and language. They seek the promotion of Bodo customs, including their dances, music, festivals and art forms, as an integral part of the region's heritage. The community has sought measures for social justice, including protection of land rights, safeguards against encroachment by other communities, and affirmative action to promote Bodo representation in jobs and education.

Relief for Bodo Refugees. In the past, there have been significant ethnic clashes between Bodos and other

communities in the region (e.g., the Assamese, Bengalis, and Muslims). The Bodos have demanded relief for families displaced due to the ethnic violence, as well as compensation and rehabilitation for those affected by violence.

Bodoland Mohotsav. Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi inaugurated the 1st Bodoland Mohotsav, a two day mega event on language, literature, and culture to sustain peace and build a Vibrant Bodo Society on 15 November 2024 at New Delhi. Terming the occasion as an emotional moment, Shri Modi remarked that this opportune moment had ended 50 long years of violence and Bodoland was celebrating its first festival of unity. He added that the Ranachandi dance in itself displayed the strength of Bodoland. The Prime Minister lauded the Bodos for creating a new history after years of struggle and mediation efforts.

Conclusion

The political demands of the Bodos have evolved from a quest for an independent Bodoland to a struggle for political autonomy, cultural preservation and economic development. While the BTR and the Bodo Accord of 2020 represent significant steps toward meeting these demands, the broader question of full-fledged statehood and the region's development continues to be a subject of debate and political engagement. The Bodos remain a significant force in shaping the future of Assam's political and cultural landscape.

■ Lt Gen JS Sandhu (Retd)
The Editor

THE ASSAM RIFLES

- A FORCE TO RECKON WITH

Assam Rifles, known as the **Sentinels of the Northeast**, have come a long way since their raising in the 19th Century. This force has been the silent unifier of our Northeast, restoring peace in the midst of ethnic clashes, insurgencies and cross border threats. The author takes us through the journey of these incredible warriors.

A Force is Created

With Mr Bruce bringing the tea industry to Assam in 1832, tea plantations spread very fast with large-scale tea exports to Britain that improved the economy of the region and also highlighted the security needs of the tea plantations. The first Armed Police force raised in Nowgong in 1834-35 to protect the tea gardens was called **Cachar Levy (militia)** with 750 all ranks; it became the forebears of the Assam Rifles (AR). In 1850, **Kuki Levy** was raised with 250 personnel. These Militia forces were the predecessors of 1 and 3 AR Battalions. The Abors were the most troublesome tribe and in 1864 special Frontier Police force was raised to tackle them along the Northern borders, they were later renamed as 2 AR. In Central Assam, a small Frontier Police force of Gorkhas and Cacharis was raised in Tura in 1879 that later became the forerunners of 4 AR.

These four Assam Police Battalions (APBs) officered by the Civil Police were called Military Police battalions and were commanded by an Army Officer as Commandant with an English Sergeant to assist in training the recruits. For excellent services rendered in World War I, in October 1917, these four APBs were converted to **'The Assam Rifles'** battalions as the 1 AR (Lushai Hills), 2 AR (Lakhimpur), 3 AR (Naga Hills) and the 4 AR, adopting black buttons like other Gorkha Rifles (GR) battalions.



Assam Rifles Soldier on a regular patrol (credit <https://commons.wikimedia.org/>)



Assam Rifles and Manipur Police in a joint operation in Imphal (photo ANI)

Between the Two World Wars

During World War I (WW I), the Gorkhas recruited in the APBs formed an excellent para military force (PMF) due to their militarized training and were hence sent as reinforcements. The four APBs that then existed provided relief drafts to several regular Gorkha battalions during the war. In 1938, another similar force known as **Jorhat Militia** was raised to protect the tea gardens around Sibsagar and numerous operations were launched in Cachar, Naga Hills, and Manipur to tame the tribals.

After WW I, an ad-hoc Assam Rifles Brigade under Col LW Shakespear, the Deputy Inspector General (DIG) with elements of Burma Military Police (BMP), effectively controlled by punitive actions the **'Kuki Rebellion'** as the Kukis unlike the Nagas and Lushais, refused to serve as labour force in France towards the war effort. Numerous columns operated with no transport in the rugged mountainous jungle terrain. Though heavy casualties were suffered in these counter-insurgency (CI) operations, the taming of the uprising

led to improvement in training, administration and morale of all ranks with awards of **one Companion of the Indian Empire (CIE)**, **one Order of the British Empire (OBE)**, **14 Indian Distinguished Service Medal (IDSM)**, **one King's Police Medal** and many **Mentions-in-Despatches**. After this operation, 4 AR was also made responsible for Garo Hills with a permanent post at Tura.

In the intervening period between the two World Wars, 5 AR was raised on 10 June 1920 at Lokhra and Captain Ogily (1 GR) was its first Commandant; later in April 1932 the unit was disbanded as part of the post war economy measures and personnel were transferred to 2 AR. The Recruiting

Office in Shillong and Recruiting Depot at Guwahati were closed down and the force equipped with .303 rifles. Service conditions were improved and some Kukis were recruited in 4 AR after suppression of their rebellion but initially their desertion level was high.

The AR battalions were affiliated with various GR units of the Indian Army. While 3 AR mounted major operations on the Burma border, 2 AR provided two platoons to dominate McMahan Line at Tawang and 1 AR elements did yeoman service in **'aid to civil authority'** during torrential rains in Aizawl and Manipur. While the Commandant of each Battalion was a British Officer, the Subedar Major's stature was high and synonymous to *'Indian Commandant'* and many were awarded titles of **'Rai Bahadur'**, **'Sardar Bahadur'** and **'Khan Bahadur'** for their loyalty and unflinching service.

In January 1941, the AR personnel, being from the North-eastern region were specially selected for strategic trans-border reconnaissance along the Indo-Burma border and their inputs on terrain helped substantially in later operational duties of border patrolling, internal security and training. 1 AR conducted excellent jungle training and the affiliated 2/2 GR sent troops to undergo this training capsule. With the Japanese offensive looming from Burma, 5 AR was raised to act as a Training Battalion and large numbers of AR volunteers were sent to their affiliated battalions in the Gorkha Brigade while 500 AR other ranks (ORs) were transferred to the newly raised Assam Regiment.

4 AR actively enhanced **'Passive Air Defence'** and constructed field fortifications against the impending Japanese attacks in Manipur and established a 'Reception Centre' at Tamu for the large influx of refugees. 3 AR was co-opted in movement control of refugees to



3 Assam Rifles paid tribute to Late Lance Naik Hanuman Ram at Battalion Headquarters on 17 June 2024 (credit <https://neindiabroadcast.com/>)

Kohima, in motivating troops of 1 Assam Regiment and 3 AR during the Battle of Kohima. By end of 1943, Assam Rifles posts were established all along the Tibetan Border at Karbo, Riga, Pangin and Pasighat in Siang valley and Walong, Changwinti, Hayuliang and Denning in Lohit valley.

Post-Independence Scenario

After the Second World War, the General Headquarters desired to convert the units into a police force, officered by police officers while some suggested its merger with the Assam Regiment. It was finally decided to separate the force from the police and Colonel Sidhiman Rai, MC, took over as the first Indian Army Officer

appointed as the Inspector General Assam Rifles (IGAR). Immediately after independence, like the Pakistani irregulars threats to Kashmir, the East Pakistani irregulars threatened Tripura in the Northeast. The threat was thwarted by ten platoons drawn from the various AR battalions by Colonel Sidhiman Rai, MC and many posts were established in different areas to control the tribal unrest. But the force was handicapped due to shortages of officers, transport, obsolete weapons, ammunition, equipment, wireless communication and clothing procured through unreliable civilian firms. The troops deployed in remote insurgency prone areas and mountains, also had to rely on irregular air maintenance.

The 1950 Assam Earthquake caused widespread devastation throughout the frontier areas of Northeast Himalayas. There were cracks and fissures on tracks, bridges and rail lines were destroyed and rivers beds were blocked by landslips causing severe flooding and destruction of infrastructure, human lives and property. The AR units spread all over Assam provided massive help and its signal communications contributed immensely in the relief measures. Many newspapers reported the heroic efforts made by AR troops in the relief and rehabilitation works. As a result of their immense efforts, the Assam Chief Minister and Governor instituted the award of 'Commendation Cards' and presented them to large numbers of force personnel.

Since Tripura princely state had merged with the Indian Union, the State Forces unit named Tripura Rifles was disbanded and merged into the newly raised 6 AR with some platoons joining from other AR battalions. The newly raised 6 AR established 11 field camps all over Tripura employing two Officers and 450 men for nearly eight months

Dimapur via Kohima while 2 AR along with other AR elements carried out important long range reconnaissance of difficult jungle tracks in Northern Burma. Special 'V' or 'Victor Force' was raised primarily with AR personnel to operate and fight self-contained in stealthy independent actions behind the Japanese lines for long durations to gather intelligence, sabotage and ambush the Japanese columns and lines of communications.

In the IV Corps plan to capture Gangaw, platoons of 1 AR under the Lushai Brigade played a significant role. Similarly, platoons of 3 and 4 AR battalions acted as 'eyes' of the IV Corps. 3 AR under Lieutenant Colonel GAE Keene and Subedar Major Sardar Bahadur Bal Bahadur Gurung fought with courage and fortitude in the defence of Kohima against heavy odds. 48 gallantry medals were awarded to the Force during the Burma campaign. It won't be out of place to commend the role played by Mr (later Sir) Charles Pawey, MC and Bar, veteran of WW I the then Deputy Commissioner of

and in 20 encounters captured large numbers of weapons and anti-national elements.

The Naga Insurgency

In 1954-55, the first signs of insurgency appeared in Tuensang (earlier a part of North East Frontier Agency (NEFA)) and spread to other places. Lieutenant General RK Kochar was appointed General Officer Commanding (GOC) Assam as unified commander to control insurgents who had grown stronger by using weapons issued during the Burma campaign for village protection and making ample use of the arms and ammunition dumps left behind in jungles by the fleeing Japanese. There were ample supplies from across the borders of Burma, East Pakistan and China too. With AZ Phizo intensifying the armed struggle, hostile Nagas established the **‘Naga Federal Government’** and hoisted the Naga flag in Phensiyu village in Rengma. They adopted their own constitution and duplicated the official administration.

There were several raids, ambushes and attacks by the hostiles on the Army and the AR and two AR battalions were raised at Dehradun and Meerut and rushed as reinforcements. 600 more recruits were trained at the Assam Rifles Training Centre (ARTC) then functioning at Misamari. The Signal Wing training signal recruits and Boys Wing in Shillong merged with the newly raised ARTC.

Many gallant actions were fought, killing large numbers of hostiles and capturing huge quantities of arms, ammunition, explosives and prisoners. In one operation in April 1961, Subedar Major Kharka Bahadur Limbu, MC of 8 AR, with a few riflemen stormed through a bunker in a well-defended hostile camp, killing and wounding many hostiles before succumbing to grave injuries. He was

awarded the Ashok Chakra, the country’s highest peacetime award.

Though insurgency has been contained in Nagaland, many National Socialist Council of Nagaland – Isaac Muivah (NSCN-IM) elements continue to demand Greater Nagaland and some miniscule elements still harp for independence. Near normalcy is prevailing in the state and a coalition government is functioning. The NSCN (IM) and other factions must shun violence and Greater Nagaland demand and join the mainstream for rapid economic and industrial development, investment in the state and progress of the people. But sporadically, turmoil erupts in other areas of the Northeast; presently Manipur is witnessing ethnic violence.

The 1962 Sino- Indian Conflict

With the Chinese not recognising the McMahon Line and claiming NEFA (now Arunachal Pradesh), it was important to ensure that administration

extended up to the border. New AR posts were established all along the watershed mostly in snow bound high altitude, without roads and tracks and even with paucity of digging equipment, field fortifications and winter clothing. The AR troops accepted the new challenges cheerfully. With revolt in Tibet over the Chinese excesses, many refugees including the Dalai Lama poured through these posts to India for shelter. In retaliation, the Chinese started intimidating our posts in disputed territories that were placed subsequently under 4 Infantry Division, which took operational control of the area under the new **‘Forward Policy’**. 2, 5, 7, 9, and 11 AR Battalions were deployed along with the Army at forward posts and the newly raised 17 AR was deployed in Sikkim. To ward off the Chinese encroachment in Dichu valley, where they were inciting locals to establish *‘Kachin Peoples’ Democratic Republic’* in North Burma, 17 AR established a post named Vijaynagar



An Assam Rifles patrol, with men and women soldiers (Picture Credit: Abbisbek Bballa / India Today)



Assam Rifles All-women contingent at Republic Day Parade, January 2019

after herculean efforts of Major Sumer Singh and Major General AS Guraya, the IGAR.

All AR posts were deployed on a wide front, were self-contained, mostly on inaccessible heights, with no MMGs and Mortar fire, far apart with no mutual support or artillery fire and depended on erratic weather and erratic air maintenance. There were no defence stores, inadequate digging tools and woollen clothing. Behind these AR posts, the Army deployed at Tawang, Bomdila, Daporijo and Walong. The AR held 34 new posts, yet with all the difficulties, the Force went about cheerfully accomplishing the tasks. On 20 October 1962, China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) invaded India in Ladakh and across the McMahon Line in NEFA in Kameng, Central and Walong Sectors. The Chinese attacked with superior forces and the AR faced the brunt of the first onslaughts along all the invasion routes.

The Mizo Insurgency

In Mizoram, on 1 March 1966, the Mizo National Front (MNF) led by its

firebrand leader Laldenga declared independence. The MNF's armed wing Mizo National Army (MNA) launched a series of simultaneous well-coordinated attacks on the posts of 1 AR and 5 BSF Battalions and on the local police posts in Mizoram. They resorted to burning, looting and snapping communication with the outside world. The government retaliated and recaptured all the places seized by the MNF by 25 March 1966 while the IAF carried out an airstrike. The CI operations in Mizoram lasted over two decades.

The over-all conduct of the AR troops and their ability to operate in thick forested mountainous terrain in the CI operations was second to none and their morale and abilities to operate in hostile infested jungles was

recognised. AR also played a commendable role in regrouping and shifting of the villages so very essential for security, safety and operational and logistic needs. If Mizoram is free from insurgency and developing very fast in the North-eastern region, the credit goes to the Army and the AR troops who conducted relentless CI operations.

Random Musings

I was posted to ARTC Dimapur as Second in Command (2IC) from June 1986 to June 1990. I was deeply involved in administration, welfare and training of large numbers of recruits, conducting courses for AR personnel selected for Assistant Commandants and development of the future location of ARTC in Sukhovi foothills. ARTC was then functioning from 3 locations - Diphu (Karbi Anglong, Assam), Dimapur and Sukhovi (Nagaland) over 50 to 60 km apart making command and control difficult. On my arrival in ARTC, I realized that recruitment had become broad based and even South Indians were being recruited in the force, vis-a-vis the earlier ethos of recruiting 60% Gorkhas and 40 % North-eastern tribals.

The Khukri of the Gorkhas serves multiple purposes. It is a melee weapon and regular cutting tool. When stranded in a jungle, with a Gorkha Johnny having a Khukri, one was sure to survive as the Gorkha and his Khukri can protect you from the enemy, prepare a shelter by chopping bamboos and wood, dig bamboo shoots, other wild fruits/vegetation, kill birds/animals for survival and food and clear shrubs and under growth for making tracks. Their cross-country navigation in mountains and hills is superb. No other soldier has this

overbearing superiority that acts as a **'force multiplier'** in combat effectiveness. I feel that only the Gorkhas, North-eastern tribals, Kumaonis, Garhwalis and Himachalis should be recruited in the Assam Rifles as combat elements. The others can join in the administrative/non-combat jobs.

There are several Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs) who like to club themselves as PMFs. The CAPFs have some cadre officers but are commanded by the IPS officers. But Assam Rifles is the only PMF in the country officered and commanded primarily by the Army Officers on deputation with some cadre officers on administrative jobs. The 22 and 23 AR Battalions operated admirably in Sri Lanka and did exceedingly well even to the envy of regular infantry battalions. Four Battalions deployed in J&K operations have earned many laurels. In the last decade or so, AR soldiers have killed over 121 insurgents with 5460 of them apprehended and 632 surrenders. The Force has recovered 5087 weapons and a large quantity of ammunition besides contraband worth Rs 7055 crores.

Presently there are 46 AR battalions, 12 Sector HQs (erstwhile DIG Ranges under a Brigadier each) and three IGARs under a Major General each, located in Kohima, Imphal and in Silchar. HQ DGAR and ARTC continue in Shillong and Dimapur / Sukhovi respectively. The erstwhile policy of Battalions located at fixed static stations has been changed and units are rotated between peace and field deployment. For this arrangement, six new raisings and Key Location Plans for turn-over are planned. Incidentally, the Assam Rifles Public School, Shillong has acquired an excellent reputation and provides quality education.

Concluding Remarks

While Manipur is in turmoil, the Assam Rifles is playing a significant role in maintaining law and order, conducting flag marches in the affected areas, sheltering civilians who are victims of the ethnic violence and collateral damage, rescuing stranded persons, providing medical aid and coordinating with state government, police other CPOs and the Army. The Northeast is destined to play a greater role in national security, tourism, tea, trade and sports. Sports and sportsmanship by itself is a major national integration factor to wean the region away from insurgency. The Assam Rifles and the Assam Rifles Public School can play a major role in enrolling sports talent in the Force.

Apart from excelling in border guarding and CI Operations in the Northeast, the Assam Rifles also contributed to International Peace and Harmony by despatching a company size Contingent on Peace Keeping Operations (PKO) in Haiti from 2010 to 2019. The Force has created one NDRF

Battalion too to meet disaster situations in the region while its' all women contingent in the Republic Day Parade received tremendous applause. The Force hopefully is training for future wars where drones, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, Artificial Intelligence, space, cyber war and disruptive technologies would play decisive roles in war and peace.

Last but not the least, post-independence, being awarded with **4 Ashok Chakras, 33 Kirti Chakras, 5 Vir Chakras, 47 Shaurya Chakras and 400 Sena Medals** besides other awards and decorations is not a mean achievement for any Force. The **'Sentinels of the Northeast'** and **'Friends of the Hills People'** have acquired national stature like many of our distinguished infantry regiments. It is apt to **SALUTE** the Assam Rifles Bravehearts and pay homage to those who sacrificed their lives for the country's safety, security and integrity along with their families and *'Veer Naris'*.



Colonel NN Bhatia (Retd) was commissioned in mid-1963 in 13 KUMAON of Rezag La fame and commanded 2 KUMAON (Berar), one of the oldest Indian Army battalions. After retirement from the Army, he specialised in Industrial & Infrastructure Security and security audited a large number of organisations to include Airports, Banks, Defence establishments, Energy infrastructure, Ports, Railways, Refineries, Dockyards and various vital R&D laboratories. He is a prolific writer on matters military and industrial security and has written popular books like Kumaoni Nostalgia, Industrial & Infrastructure Security (2 volumes), Soldier Mountaineer (Biography of the renowned mountaineer Colonel Narinder Kumar), 'Reminiscing Battle of Rezag La'. Colonel Bhatia can be contacted on email ID narindrabbhatia@hotmail.com & mob No 9818044762.



Col NN Bhatia (Retd)

THE CHOGYALS AND SIKKIM'S MERGER WITH THE INDIAN UNION

The history of the Chogyal dynasty of Sikkim is deeply intertwined with the region's cultural, political and spiritual fabric. It spans several centuries, marked by the emergence of a unique Buddhist monarchy, its role in shaping the identity of Sikkim, and the eventual political developments that led to its Accession to India in 1975.

Origins of the Chogyal Dynasty

The title “Chogyal” means “Dharma King,” symbolizing a ruler who governs according to Buddhist principles. The Chogyal dynasty of Sikkim traces its origins to 1642, when Phuntsog Namgyal, a prince of Tibetan descent, was enthroned as the first Chogyal. This moment marked the formal establishment of the Kingdom of Sikkim. Legend has it that the event was orchestrated by three revered Lamas from different parts of the Himalayas, who came together to anoint Phuntsog Namgyal in Yukuksom, now regarded as Sikkim's first capital. The coronation underscored the spiritual basis of Sikkim's monarchy, with Buddhism as the guiding philosophy of governance.

Phuntsog Namgyal's ascension also laid the foundation for a system of governance deeply rooted in Tibetan culture and Buddhism. The Chogyals were seen not only as temporal leaders but also as spiritual figures, often compared to Tibetan Lamas. This dual role reinforced their legitimacy and created a unique identity for the Sikkimese Kingdom.

Territorial Expansion and Challenges

Under the early Chogyals, Sikkim expanded its territories to include parts of modern-day Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet. However, the kingdom faced constant challenges from neighbouring states. The rise of the Gorkhas in Nepal during the 18th century posed a significant threat. In 1788, Nepalese



9th Chogyal Thutob Namgyal (credit Sikkim Palace Archive)

forces invaded Sikkim, capturing large tracts of territory compelling the Chogyal to seek assistance from the British East India Company.

The British were interested in establishing a foothold in the Himalayan Region; they intervened and defeated the Nepalese in the Anglo-Nepalese War (1814-1816). The Treaty of Titalia in 1817 formalised Sikkim as a British protectorate, restoring some of its lost territories and ensuring its autonomy under British oversight. This relationship marked the beginning of Sikkim's entanglement with colonial powers, a dynamic that would decisively shape its future.

The Anglo-Sikkimese Relationship

The relationship between the Chogyals and the British was complex. While the British provided protection, they also sought to exploit Sikkim's strategic location as a gateway to Tibet. The construction of trade routes, including through Nathu La, increased British influence in the region. The Chogyals, on the other hand, strived to maintain their autonomy, resultantly often finding themselves at odds with British interests and officials.

A turning point came in the mid-19th century during the reign of Tsugphud Namgyal, the 7th Chogyal. Disputes over the control of Darjeeling, which the British had leased from Sikkim in 1835, escalated into a military confrontation,

with the British defeating the Sikkimese forces and imposing the Treaty of Tumlong in 1861, effectively reducing the Chogyal's authority and making Sikkim a de-facto British protectorate.

The Chogyals in the Modern Era

The early 20th century brought new challenges to the Chogyal dynasty. Sikkim's status as a protectorate meant limited autonomy, with British political agents exercising significant control over its administration. This period also saw increasing migration of Nepali-speaking people into Sikkim, which altered the demographic composition, creating inevitable social tensions. Despite these challenges, the Chogyals attempted to modernize their kingdom.

Sidkeong Tulku Namgyal, the 10th Chogyal, initiated several reforms during his brief reign in 1914, including efforts to modernize agriculture and improve education. In December 1914, Sidkeong was found dead in his bedroom, apparently of heart failure, aged 35, in what the British described as 'mysterious circumstances'. His successor, Tashi Namgyal, who ruled from 1914 to 1963, continued these reforms while striving to preserve Sikkim's unique cultural heritage.

Sikkim and Indian Independence

India's independence in 1947 and the subsequent partition of the subcontinent brought significant changes to Sikkim's political landscape. The Chogyal sought to maintain Sikkim's autonomy, leveraging its status as a protectorate. However, with the departure of the British, Sikkim's relationship with India became a focal point of discussion.

In 1947, a popular movement led by the Sikkim State Congress (SSC) emerged, demanding democratic reforms and closer integration with India. The SSC, supported

by the majority Nepali-speaking population, clashed with the Chogyal's desire to retain Sikkim's independence. After negotiations, Sikkim signed a Standstill Agreement with India in 1949, preserving its autonomy while allowing India to handle its defence, foreign affairs and communications.

Political Developments in Sikkim

The post-independence period was marked by growing tensions between the monarchy and pro-democracy forces. In 1950, the Indo-Sikkim Treaty was signed, formalizing Sikkim's status as an Indian protectorate. While the treaty ensured internal autonomy for Sikkim under the Chogyal, it also gave India considerable influence over the kingdom's affairs.

The demographic dynamics of Sikkim further complicated matters. The growing Nepali-speaking population demanded greater representation and political rights, often conflicting with the Bhutia-Lepcha elite who supported the monarchy. These divisions intensified during the reign of Palden Thondup Namgyal, the 12th and last Chogyal, whose second wife (Queen Consort) was an American socialite, Hope Cooke.

The Merger with India

The 1970s brought a decisive turn in Sikkim's history. Palden Thondup Namgyal's efforts to assert greater independence coincided with increasing demands for democratic reforms. The Chogyal's position was further weakened by accusations of autocratic rule and favouritism toward the Bhutia-Lepcha minority. In 1973, widespread protests erupted against the monarchy, leading to the signing of a Tripartite Agreement between the Chogyal, the Indian Government, and the leaders of

the Sikkimese political parties. This agreement established a more democratic system, reducing the Chogyal's powers and creating an elected council.

However, the political situation remained unstable. In 1974, the Sikkim Assembly passed a resolution seeking full integration with India. This move was backed by a popular referendum held in 1975, in which an overwhelming majority voted in favour of abolishing the monarchy and merging with India. On 16 May 1975, Sikkim was formally integrated into India as its 22nd state. The Indian Parliament passed the 36th Constitutional Amendment, which added Sikkim to the Union of India. The Chogyal's title and privileges were abolished, marking the end of the dynasty's nearly 333 year reign.

Legacy of the Chogyal Dynasty

The transition of Sikkim from one of the six hundred odd princely states to a Protectorate to an Associate State, and finally becoming an integral part of India is a fascinating story. The Maharaja of Sikkim was the Vice President of the Chamber of Princes (Narendra Mandal) established in 1920 by King-Emperor George V for rulers of the princely states to voice their needs and aspirations. As such it was clearly more like Patiala and Baroda, rather than like Nepal and Bhutan with whom the British arrangements were different. Another difference between Sikkim and Bhutan lay in the fact that the majority population of Sikkim was Nepali, and had no intrinsic affiliation to the ruling Bhutia clan, which ran the kingdom in an autocratic manner through their own clansmen the Kazis – who were the hereditary feudal lords with revenue and magisterial powers



The 12th Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal and his Gyalmo (Queen consort), Hope Cooke, with their daughter, Hope Leezum, watch birthday celebrations in Gangtok, May 1971 (Photo Dr. Alice S Kandell, United States Library of Congress's Prints and Photographs division)

over their disenfranchised Nepali serfs and the dispossessed Lepchas.

The condition of the region in 1947 is best described in the words of Tashi Tshering:-

"Sikkim is a small Indian state tucked away in a corner of the Himalayas. Its ruler Sir Tashi Namgyal, KCSI, KCIE is of Tibetan descent and so are his personal adherents called Kazi who form the majority of the landlords of Sikkim. His Highness has a State Council consisting entirely of the landlords and a Secretariat which is largely controlled by the landlords, the subject people or Eyoys (peasants) have no voice in administration and they have long groaned under the pernicious yoke of landlordism".

The final years of the Chogyal dynasty were marked by internal strife and external pressures. The referendum in 1975, though widely criticised for its irregularities, led to Sikkim's merger with India. Palden Thondup Namgyal, the last Chogyal, was forced to abdicate, ending centuries of royal rule. Despite its dissolution, the monarchy is remembered for its role in unifying the region, fostering a unique blend of Tibetan and Himalayan culture, and establishing Sikkim as a bastion of Vajrayana Buddhism.

What cannot be denied is that, notwithstanding the controversial circumstances of their downfall, the Chogyals left a lasting impact on Sikkim. Their patronage of arts and culture contributed to the preservation of Sikkimese traditions and the development of a distinct cultural identity. The monasteries and religious institutions established during their reign continue to play a vital role in the spiritual and social life of the people. Monasteries like Rumtek, Pemayangtse and Tashiding continue to attract devotees and tourists alike.

The Chogyals also played a significant role in shaping Sikkim's political landscape. Their interactions with British colonial officials and Indian leaders influenced the kingdom's foreign policy and domestic governance. The legacy of their administrative reforms and modernisation efforts can still be seen in various aspects of Sikkimese society.

As in most monarchies, the Chogyals' legacy also raises important questions about the nature of power, the role of tradition in a modernising society, and the complex interplay between local, regional and global forces. The legacy of the Chogyals is thus a reminder of the delicate balance between tradition and progress, between the past and the future. It is a legacy that continues to shape the identity and aspirations of the Sikkimese people, even as they navigate the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century.

The story of the Chogyal dynasty is a testament to the resilience and adaptability of a Himalayan kingdom navigating the dynamic currents of history. From its spiritual origins in 1642 to its eventual integration into India in 1975, the Chogyals shaped Sikkim's identity while contending with external pressures and internal challenges. Their legacy lives on in the cultural and spiritual life of modern Sikkim, a state that continues to honour its rich heritage while embracing its distinct place within the Indian Union.

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Major General Ravi Murugan

Please refer page 29 for Author's Profile.



“BAR BAR” MALABAR!

The Indian Navy’s Annual Multi-National Exercise

Navies around the world have distinct characteristics shaped by the geographic, political, and historical context of their nations. While each navy may have its own unique operational doctrine and naval culture, the ability to operate together in a multinational environment is an essential part of modern naval cooperation. Countries with capable navies often share common goals such as maintaining freedom of navigation, ensuring maritime security, and enhancing international cooperation.

The Importance of Partnerships and Inter-operability

Diverse fleet capabilities, training methodologies and doctrines present challenges when navies from different nations come together for joint operations. Notwithstanding the differences, many navies have developed interoperable practices. The ability of different nations' naval forces to operate together effectively in operations such as exercises, humanitarian missions and combat can have significant benefits across this wide range of tasks and missions. This is achieved through shared doctrines, common communication systems, compatible equipment and procedures and mutual understanding developed over years of cooperation. Naval exercises are one of the most visible manifestations of this cooperation, allowing different forces to refine their tactics, communication and coordination, and learn from each other. The ability to cooperate with different naval forces, therefore, can be considered useful in a world where maritime security is global. Naval exercises help build trust, develop joint operational capabilities, and improve decision-making processes. These exercises, especially when involving multiple countries, are vital to maintaining maritime peace and stability in an increasingly interconnected world.

From Small Steps to Complex Exercises

The Malabar Naval Exercise, which has evolved into a multilateral naval exercise of considerable standing and value

began as a bilateral exercise between India and the United States. The exercise was first initiated in 1992, off the Malabar Coast (and hence the name) during a time when the post-Cold War international security environment had just begun to evolve. India, which had historically followed a non-aligned foreign policy, started to engage more closely with the United States in the early 1990s. The genesis of Malabar lies in this growing strategic partnership between the two countries, particularly in the maritime domain.

The Indian Navy was rapidly undergoing modernisation and evolving into an effective navy in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and beyond. India's intervention in the Maldives coup as part of Operation Cactus in 1988 had marked a significant moment in the history of the Indian Navy and its role in safeguarding regional security and the rule of law in the Indian Ocean. The actions by the Indian Government to help restore the lawful dispensation in Maldives not only reiterated statecraft but also demonstrated the operational capabilities of the Indian Armed Forces including that of the Indian Navy. It enhanced its image as a capable and dependable maritime force in the region. The coup and the subsequent intervention by India had multiple implications for India's naval profile, and it showcased the growing role of India as a regional power in ensuring peace and stability in the Indian Ocean.

This was also a time when India was liberalising and began to think differently about strategic partnerships. India and the



Senior participants from USA, Japan, Australia and India in Exercise Malabar, October 2024 at Visakhapatnam

US had discussed the so-called Kicklighter proposals in 1991 on defence cooperation. The United States Navy was looking to cement relations with navies in the region and establish stronger relationships with rising regional powers like India. The idea behind the Malabar Exercise was to enhance interoperability and foster better naval cooperation between the two countries.

Initially, Malabar was a small scale bilateral exercise, focused on enhancing tactical training, improving communication between the two forces, and developing a deeper understanding of each other's naval operations. The exercises included basic drills such as naval manoeuvres, search and rescue operations and communication procedures. These early exercises set the foundation for the developing importance that Malabar would come to hold in subsequent iterations over the years. Over the years, Malabar evolved from being bilateral exercises, albeit of increasing complexity, with wider participation of the two navies and Special Forces, to one that involved multiple nations, reflecting the growing importance of international cooperation in maritime security. This evolution occurred in stages, driven by the changing geopolitical landscape and the growing need for multilateral cooperation in

enhance its naval capabilities and work more closely with India and the United States, especially in the context of regional security concerns. Similarly, the inclusion of Australia was notable because it marked a new chapter in regional naval cooperation, signalling a shift toward greater collaboration between key maritime powers in the Indo-Pacific.

However, in the years following Japan's participation, there was some inconsistency in the exercise's format. In 2008, Malabar saw participation by Japan and Australia taking a pause. The absence of Japan and other regional players from the exercises during this period was an indication of the complexities of involving multiple countries in a sensitive geopolitical region. Despite this, India continued to hold bilateral Malabar exercises with the United States. The need for cooperative security in the Indian Ocean remained paramount, particularly in the face of growing threats like piracy and terrorism amongst other challenges.

The strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific region led to renewed interest in a more inclusive Malabar exercise. In 2015, India and the United States took steps to broaden the exercise. Japan once again participated in Malabar, marking the resumption of its involvement after a hiatus. Japan's re-engagement with Malabar in 2015 was a direct response to the increasingly complex security challenges in the broader Indo-Pacific region.

The exercise, in any case also grew from the initial days to more complex evolutions. The focus was on strengthening naval capabilities of the participating countries to address maritime security concerns in the Indo-Pacific that reflected the commitment of the nations to work together for regional safety and security.

Australia rejoined the exercise in 2020, marking the return to a more robust multilateral format with India, the United States and Japan.

the Indo-Pacific region. The exercise itself shifted from off the Malabar Coast to the larger Arabian Sea, or the Bay of Bengal and even into the Western Pacific while retaining the label of "Malabar".

From Bilateral to Multi-National

The first major shift in the Malabar exercise came in 2007, when Japan and Australia (and even Singapore) participated for the first time. The inclusion of Japan was a significant development, as it marked the exercise's transition from a bilateral to a multilateral format. The Malabar exercise offered Japan a platform to

The rejoining of Australia in 2020 marked a key milestone, reaffirming the importance of multilateral naval exercises and signalling the shared interests of these four countries in maintaining peace, stability and a respect for a rules-based international maritime order in the Indo-Pacific region.

Malabar 2024

Exercise Malabar continues to grow in importance and complexity and **Malabar 2024** was a clear example. The exercise has solidified its place as one of the most significant naval drills globally. It serves as a key platform for the participating countries to test their interoperability, refine their joint operational capabilities, and send a strong message about their commitment to maintaining peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific. **Malabar 2024** saw the continued participation of the United States, India, Japan and Australia. This edition was hosted by the Indian Navy on the Eastern Seaboard from Visakhapatnam, the **City of Destiny**.

The opening ceremony, hosted by Vice Admiral Rajesh Pendharkar, Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Eastern Naval Command, was attended by senior naval and military officials from participating nations. The crew and planning staff of participating ships, aircraft and Special Forces from Australia, India, Japan and the USA were also present. In a joint press conference, the Commanders of all participating navies acknowledged the importance of Exercise MALABAR in enhancing understanding, collaboration and engagement to address common maritime challenges and to create a truly cooperative framework. Vice Admiral Pendharkar highlighted that **“MALABAR 2024 reaffirms Indian Navy’s commitment to maritime security and cooperation among like-minded nations in the Indo-Pacific”**.

The participating assets included the

Indian Navy destroyer *INS Delhi*, frigate *INS Tabar*, corvettes *INS Kamorta* and *INS Kadmatt* and Fleet Tanker *INS Shakti*, as well as a submarine and P8I maritime patrol aircraft. The Royal Australian Navy deployed an Anzac-class frigate *HMAS Stuart* and a Royal Australian Air Force P8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft. The Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force (JMSDF) deployed the Murasame-class destroyer *JS Ariake*, while the US Navy deployed a P8 Poseidon aircraft and the Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyer *USS Dewey*. Special Forces detachments from all four nations also participated in the exercise.

The exercise focussed on enhancing tactical proficiency and interoperability across a range of operations, including anti-submarine warfare, anti-air warfare and maritime security operations. Exercises also included complex drills in logistics support, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations, further underscoring the growing importance of naval cooperation in non-combat areas. In addition to traditional naval operations, the exercise also included Subject Matter Expert Exchange (SMEE) with the participating navies exchanging best practices in varied fields. All these facets of the exercise ensured that the participating forces can respond effectively to maritime challenges in a cohesive manner when and if required.

Malabar 2024 took place in the backdrop of a highly dynamic geopolitical context. The Indo-Pacific region is central to the global economy, and maritime security is at the forefront of international discussions. The increasing militarisation in the Indo-Pacific has raised concerns among regional countries and the international

community. Malabar serves as a reminder reinforcing the importance of freedom of navigation and the rule of law in the oceans.

In balance, over the past three decades and more, the Malabar series has evolved from a simple bilateral exercise between India and the United States into a powerful multilateral platform involving Japan and Australia. Over the years, it has become an essential tool for enhancing naval cooperation, improving operational capabilities, and building strategic partnerships in the Indo-Pacific. As the geopolitical landscape shifts, exercises like Malabar are vital to maintaining peace and stability in the region.

Malabar 2024 was another significant step in this ongoing effort, with a renewed focus on strengthening cooperation, refining tactics, and ensuring that **the four participating nations are ready to work together with purpose, efficiency and synergy**.



Commodore PSS Uday

Commodore P S S Uday Kiran is a serving naval officer currently posted in New Delhi.

A Navigation and Direction specialist, he has served in various staff, instructional and command assignments. The officer is a keen student of maritime security and geo-strategy.

MILAN - INDIAN NAVY'S FLAGSHIP INITIATIVE

For International Cooperation in the Maritime Domain

The maritime domain is the oldest and a most significant global common. It has helped bridge the continents since ages and Navies have always been the shining ambassadors of international diplomatic efforts. The strategic location of the Indian subcontinent has made it a focal point for trade and international relations with constant exchange of cultures, resources, assets and ideas. The Indian Navy (IN) has been at the forefront in leveraging our strategic maritime location through various initiatives in the military and diplomatic domains. One such flagship initiative is the MILAN, a biennial gathering of Navies hosted by IN, with its 14th Edition - MILAN 26 set to unfold as part of the International Fleet Review (IFR) in early 2026, at Visakhapatnam. This significant event has been a cornerstone of the IN's efforts to foster camaraderie, cohesion and collaboration among like-minded maritime nations. As IFR 26 and MILAN 2026 prepare to unfold, the 'City of Destiny,' Visakhapatnam, eagerly awaits the convergence of the world's navies to witness the spirit of oceanic friendships and collaboration.



MILAN's Expanding Horizon: Key Highlights over the Years

In the early 90s, the end of the Cold War saw India's rebalance in the region by reaching out to the neighbourhood. In 1991, the Government launched the **Look East** policy to develop political, economic and security co-operation in South East Asia. In consonance with the **Look East Policy**, the IN conceived a MILAN of friendly Navies in 1995 with participation of four South East Asian littoral countries, namely Indonesia, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Thailand. MILAN, a Hindi word which means 'meeting' or 'gathering', continues to aptly symbolise the initiative. The maiden edition of MILAN in 1995 was held at Sri Vijaya Puram (erstwhile Port Blair) in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and was aimed at promoting cultural sharing and naval interactions among the participating nations. The common thread connecting the nations was capacity building, increasing mutual confidence and inter-operability between the navies in the region. MILAN has been regularly conducted ever since biennially, except when it was skipped in 2001 & 2016 due to

the conduct of the International Fleet Review and in 2020 due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The cycle changed from 'odd' to 'even' years, due to rescheduling of the 2005 edition to 2006, in the aftermath of the Tsunami in December 2004.

MILAN 2012 witnessed a significant surge in international participation with maiden participation by countries like Brunei, Cambodia, Maldives, Mauritius, New Zealand, Philippines, Seychelles and Vietnam. Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid out the vision for India's foreign policy, and articulated a shift from the "**Look East**" to "**Act East**" Policy in 2014. The next year, he enunciated the vision of **SAGAR** (an acronym for "**Security and Growth for All in the Region**"), which furthered India's position as a security partner in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). In 2018, he further outlined the wider Indo-Pacific vision, emphasising maritime cooperation, capacity building and regional stability. Consequently, the 2014 and 2018 editions of MILAN were further scaled up in participation and scope. The 2014 edition saw participation from 17 nations including maiden participation of Kenya and Tanzania. MILAN 2018 also received a wide and welcome response with Oman participating

for the first time. Thus, from a gathering for Bay of Bengal peripheral nations in 1995, MILAN has evolved into an Indo-Pacific event.

MILAN was conducted under the aegis of FORTRAN (Fortress Andaman and Nicobar as created in the 1970s) and subsequently by Andaman and Nicobar Command till its 10th Edition in 2018. In a strategic move, the 11th Edition of MILAN in February 2022 was relocated to Visakhapatnam, the Headquarters of the Eastern Naval Command and a city with a rich maritime heritage. This decision underscored the IN's commitment to expand naval cooperation and to showcase India's industrial growth and urban development. MILAN 2022 saw participation from 39 countries including 14 foreign warships, one aircraft and several delegations. Visakhapatnam, the **'City of Destiny'** served as an apt venue, with its large port and vibrant urban infrastructure providing a larger staging base compared to Sri Vijaya Puram (erstwhile Port Blair). The International City Parade at the RK Beach Marine Drive with ship and aircraft drills in the backdrop, has become a landmark event for the people of the city. The steep gradient off the beach enables ships to operate closer to the shore and a long beach offers excellent viewing experience for the public to see the ships manoeuvring.

MILAN 2024, conducted from 19 to 27 February 2024 at Visakhapatnam was one of the largest unions of like-minded maritime countries, with 47 countries participating. This included representation by 13 warships, foreign delegations, ambassadors and diplomats. This 12th edition was far more inclusive with representation from Fiji in the Pacific 11500 kms from India; Gabon on the West African coast 14000 kms by sea; Papua New Guinea near Australia 10500 kms away; Timor – Leste 8000 kms near the

strategic Ombai-Wetar Strait, to name a few. Whilst underscoring the SAGAR initiative, the term Region in it has been expanded in MILAN to cover everyone far and near, big and small, developed and developing. The theme for MILAN 2024, **'Partners Across Oceans : Collaboration, Synergy, Growth'**, was a reaffirmation of India's G20 Presidency theme - *'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' or 'One Earth, One Family, One Future'*.

The inclusion of non-littoral states and observer nations has transformed the exercise into a truly global initiative. The scope has also undergone significant transformation, with expanded content to keep pace with evolving maritime security trends and reflecting the IN's commitment to promoting peace and stability in the region. The event which was primarily focussed on harbour interactions has metamorphosed into a hybrid event with a **'Harbour phase'** and a **'Sea phase'**. The sea exercises which started as simple communication serials between ships, and surface gun shoots, is today a plethora of evolutions covering the entire multidimensional spectrum of maritime operations. It has been themed aptly over the years capturing the vision of SAGAR, including **Milaap** (2014), **Friendship Across the Seas** (2018), **Camaraderie, Cohesion & Collaboration** (2022), and **Partners Across Oceans: Collaboration, Synergy, Growth** (2024).

Why MILAN Matters: The Strategic Significance Building Trust and Shared Commitment. Every navy is characteristically a comprehensive instrument of its country's sovereign power and the attributes of mobility, sustenance, reach and versatility make navies unique. A coming together of such

navies is in the larger interest of maintaining good order at sea as it emphasises dialogue, trust-building, and a shared commitment to address global and regional challenges. By fostering camaraderie, cohesion, and collaboration among nations, MILAN plays a vital role in promoting maritime security and cooperation. MILAN has also consistently aimed at achieving multiple objectives, reflecting the multifaceted nature of maritime security in the IOR.

Strengthening Maritime Security. The IOR is beset by several security challenges including piracy in the Gulf of Aden, drone attacks on shipping by non-state actors in the Red Sea, refugee crises, narcotics trade, etc, which affect the global economy and peace in myriad ways. MILAN exercises provide an effective platform for resident and extra-regional navies operating in the IOR to collaborate in tackling threats to peace and stability. The exercise complements other existing bilateral and multilateral frameworks in the maritime domain. Apart from the IOR, MILAN has also served to bring about consensus in the broader Indo-Pacific region, cementing India's position as a leading voice of the Global South.

Experience Sharing - Interoperability - Capacity Building. MILAN provides a platform for exchange of knowledge, expertise, and experience sharing, enabling participating nations to enhance their maritime capabilities and address common challenges and tackle global threats. The harbour interactions through workshops, seminars and discussions are on topics ranging from maritime domain awareness to disaster response. The exercise at sea serves as a



Left. Young Officers of participating Navies being briefed on the maritime equipment.
Right. Closing Ceremony at Sea.



Beyond the Waves: The Future of MILAN

MILAN is not just an event – it is a statement of unity in an increasingly unpredictable world. It symbolises the collective will of nations to safeguard the high seas, ensuring that they remain a domain of peace, progress, and cooperation. It is also an exemplary demonstration of India’s commitment towards promoting maritime cooperation and security in the IOR. MILAN reaffirms the significance of navies in bringing nations together in the spirit of partnership, to steer a

platform for participating navies to enhance interoperability through joint drills, exercises, and simulations since standardised procedures and communication protocols are crucial for effective coordination during real-world maritime operations. Joint drills enable participating navies to understand each other’s procedures, help overcome linguistic barriers, and foster familiarisation with different equipment and their capabilities. A mechanism of policing the seas by pooling in resources and capacities may be the credible solution to contain the scourge of the oceans than going about it singlehandedly.

Diplomatic Engagement. Maritime diplomacy or naval diplomacy through large-scale multilateral exercises entails the use of naval forces to support foreign policy objectives to build and sustain friendships across the oceans and further international cooperation. Beyond military-maritime objectives, MILAN has played a crucial role in fostering diplomatic relations among participating countries, promoting mutual understanding, and strengthening ties between navies through its various events, including naval parades, cultural festivals, and B2B meets. Informal interactions during the exercise provide opportunities for naval personnel and policymakers to build social ties, thereby contributing to mutual understanding and trust.

course towards a more secure future.

As the maritime domain continues to evolve, so too must MILAN. While the event has undoubtedly contributed to enhancing maritime cooperation in the IOR, it faces challenges that require careful consideration. The themes of MILAN from the start have expounded cooperation and collaboration; and the wide canvas of participation has ensured that the event is not construed as a military alliance. However, an increasingly polarised world and differing strategic priorities of participating nations can challenge this essence and it is essential to stay the course.

The exercises at sea have been a crucial component, making it a meaningful event for naval professionals, promoting interoperability and information sharing to address common challenges. The scope of exercise at sea needs to keep pace with contemporary challenges and revolutionary technological advancements such as Artificial Intelligence. The next edition, MILAN 26, is set to be one of the most significant editions in a hybrid avatar with International Fleet Review and MILAN held together. The event is expected to set new benchmarks in cooperation and collaboration, further solidifying India’s position as a key player in regional and global maritime affairs.



Rear Admiral Shantanu Jha, NM, an alumnus of National Defence Academy, Pune, was commissioned into the Indian Navy on 01 July 93. He is a specialist in Navigation and Direction and has navigated six frontline frigates, destroyers and the aircraft carrier, Viraat. He has been the Executive Officer of the aircraft carrier, Vikramaditya and his sea commands include Nisbank (missile vessel), Kora (missile corvette) and Sahyadri (Guided Missile Frigate). Besides several key staff appointments at Navy HQ, he has also been India’s Naval Attaché at Tebran. A graduate of the Defence Services Staff College, Wellington and the Royal College of Defence Studies, London, he holds a Master’s degree in Defence Studies, and one in International Security and Strategy from King’s College, London. He is presently the Chief Staff Officer (Operations), Eastern Naval Command.



**Rear Admiral
Shantanu Jha**



Clockwise from Top Left. The Winning Girls Team in the Tezu Warrior Carnival Obstacle Race; Team members take a selfie in front of the Carnival poster; Football match during the Lohit Premier League; Physical Drill display by Army men and Military Bands Display

THE LOHIT PREMIER LEAGUE AND TEZU WARRIOR CARNIVAL

Sports and adventure have long been recognized as powerful tools to foster unity, empower communities and inspire the youth. Under Operation Sadbhavana, the Indian Army kick-started the Lohit Premier League Football tournament and the Tezu Warrior Carnival Obstacle Course in February - March 2024 at Tezu, Arunachal Pradesh to harness the potential of sports as a tool for unity and empowerment. The initiative drew the participation of more than thirty teams from diverse backgrounds in both the events. Wide publicity and coverage by print and social media gave a festive flavour to the events, resultantly local youth organizations and the district administration have sought continuation of these as calendar events.

Lohit Premier League

The first edition of Lohit Premier League, a football tournament organized in the picturesque town of Tezu, became a celebration of talent, spirit and camaraderie. Football which resonates deeply with youth across Arunachal Pradesh was the ideal choice to harness their passion and energy. The tournament witnessed enthusiastic participation from 32 teams from Lohitpur, Anjaw, Namsai and Lower Dibang districts of Arunachal Pradesh, showcasing a blend of skill, determination and sportsmanship. By providing a structured and competitive environment, Lohit Premier League brought forth the raw talent in the region and offered an opportunity to the young athletes to dream big. The Indian Army, sports authorities and local leaders identified promising talent, opening doors for their professional training and exposure at higher levels.

More than just a sporting event, the Lohit Premier League became a community celebration. Spectators filled the stands, cheering for their teams and forming bonds that transcended cultural and ethnic differences. The tournament effectively demonstrated how sports bridges divides, fosters unity and inspires hope. The closing ceremony of the league was a mega event that attracted about 3500 spectators from the remotest parts of the region cheering for their favourites and witnessing the spectacular cultural show organised in the presence of Lieutenant General KT Parnaik (retd), Hon'ble Governor of Arunachal Pradesh and other civil and military

dignitaries. The finalists were awarded sports kits and cash incentives by the Hon'ble Governor to steer their sports journey to even greater heights.

Being an open tournament, the Lohit Premier League serves as a platform for young football enthusiasts to showcase their talent, determination and sports skills on a competitive stage. Through exhilarating matches and spirited performances, players not only hone their skills but also forge bonds of friendship and mutual respect transcending cultural and social barriers. The initiative aims at nurturing the youth and guiding them from **'Sidelines to Spotlights'**. The Indian Army aims to channelize their energies positively and instil values of discipline, teamwork and resilience. Beyond the football field, the tournament serves as a catalyst for social cohesion and community building, fostering a sense of belonging and pride among participants and spectators alike.

Tezu Warrior Carnival

The **Tezu Warrior Carnival**, an obstacle course event, was a thrilling addition to the sports initiatives under **Operation Sadbhavana**. Designed to test participants' physical endurance, mental strength and teamwork, the carnival epitomized the spirit of adventure and resilience. The first edition of the vibrant and exhilarating event was organised at Tezu from 22 – 24 March 2024, bringing together spirited youth from the districts of Lohit, Anjaw, Namsai and Lower Dibang. The carnival, a true testament to the energy and enthusiasm of the young generation, saw 30



Left. Lohit Premier League match in progress. Right. Lt Gen KT Parnaik (Retd), Governor of Arunachal Pradesh presents a cheque and the cup to the winning team of the Tezu Warrior Carnival Obstacle Race.

teams, each comprising five members, participating in a thrilling obstacle course challenge. The obstacle course comprised 12 different obstacles ranging from balancing beams, beam carriages to slack line and hume pipes. Open to male and female participants of all ages, the carnival promoted inclusivity while encouraging individuals to push their limits. It was not just a test of strength but a powerful metaphor for overcoming life's obstacles with determination and support.

What made this event even more special was the presence of 11 all-girl teams, showcasing the strength, determination and skill of the young women of Arunachal Pradesh. Beyond the physical challenges, the carnival fostered a sense of collective achievement. Families, friends and entire communities gathered to cheer the participants in this rare sporting extravaganza, turning the event into a festival of unity and celebration. The top two teams in the men and women category were awarded medals and cash incentives by the Hon'ble Governor of Arunachal Pradesh, while all other participants were given jerseys and certificates of completion of the thrilling obstacle course.

The carnival also had stalls displaying local delicacies and handlooms to engage the spectators along with a career guidance cell established by the

of the youth of Arunachal Pradesh, inspiring all present to strive for excellence and unity.

Uniting Youth through Sports and Adventure

Sports and adventure events like the **Lohit Premier League** and the **Tezu Warrior Carnival** have a profound impact on uniting youth. In a region as diverse as Arunachal Pradesh, these initiatives provided a common ground where differences dissolved, and shared goals emerged. The events encouraged collaboration, teamwork and mutual respect among the participants, fostering a sense of collective identity. They also promoted a culture of healthy competition and self-discipline, equipping the youth with life skills essential for personal and professional growth. By involving participants from various communities and backgrounds, the initiatives also helped break down stereotypes and prejudices, fostering harmony and understanding.

The success of the **Lohit Premier League** and the **Tezu Warrior Carnival** highlighted the triumph of youth and unity as essential pillars for vitality and wellness. The participants not only demonstrated their physical and mental prowess but also inspired others to embrace a lifestyle centred on health, fitness and teamwork. The events served as a reminder of the transformative power of collective effort. When the youth come together, united by shared aspirations, they can overcome challenges, break barriers, and build a brighter future for their communities.

Fight Against Drugs

One of the key objectives of these initiatives was to combat the growing menace of drug addiction among the youth. By providing

Indian Army to motivate youth to join our thrilling and adventurous life in uniform. The 'one of its kind' event attracted people from all walks of life to cherish the spirit of '**Adventure, Fitness & Fun**'. Our ultimate aim is '**Meaningful engagement of youth while promoting fitness through adventure and fun**'.

The **Tezu Warrior Carnival** is not just a competition but a celebration of youth, community spirit and the indomitable human will. As the teams battled through the obstacle course, they not only showcased their physical abilities but also demonstrated the power of teamwork, determination and perseverance. The carnival served as a reminder of the potential and promise

constructive outlets for energy and creativity, the **Lohit Premier League** and **Tezu Warrior Carnival** acted as preventive measures against substance abuse. Sports and adventure activities are known to instil discipline, focus and a sense of purpose, all of which are crucial in steering individuals away from destructive habits. The tournaments also served as platforms to raise awareness about the dangers of drug use, with local leaders and the Indian Army emphasizing the importance of leading a drug-free life.

Women Empowerment

The inclusion of women was a significant step towards promoting gender equality and empowerment. Female participants showcased remarkable talent and determination, proving that sports and adventure are not confined by gender. By providing a platform for women to excel, the events inspired young girls to dream big and challenge societal norms. The active involvement of women also sent a powerful message to the community, emphasizing the importance of equal opportunities in fostering progress and unity.

Opportunity to the Underprivileged

The **Lohit Premier League** and the **Tezu Warrior Carnival** being open and non-entry fee tournaments are designed to be inclusive, ensuring that even the underprivileged have the opportunity to participate. The Indian Army, in collaboration with local authorities, provided necessary resources such as equipment, training, logistical support and cash incentives enabling individuals from economically weaker sections to pursue their dreams. For many, these events became life-changing experiences, offering a sense of belonging, achievement, and hope. The initiatives underscored the role

of sports and adventure in creating opportunities, breaking the cycle of poverty, and nurturing talent irrespective of socioeconomic backgrounds.

Fostering Unity between Indian Army and Local Populace

The **Lohit Premier League** and **Tezu Warrior Carnival** played a pivotal role in strengthening the bond between the Indian Army and the local populace. These events resonated deeply with the community, and the Indian Army showcased its commitment to the region's development and well-being. The events became platforms for meaningful engagement, collaboration and trust-building. The Indian Army's efforts in organizing these initiatives were widely appreciated, fostering goodwill and mutual respect. The enhanced relationship between the Indian Army and the local communities is crucial for the region's overall stability and progress.

Impact on Local Communities

The impact of such events extends far beyond the sports field. It provided a platform for local youth to showcase their talents, build friendships and engage in healthy competition. It was a rare opportunity to play at a competitive level, with a chance to be noticed by the sports authorities. The cultural performances and interactions between local communities and the Indian Army created a sense of pride and belonging. The events reminded us of the importance of cultural preservation and the need to celebrate the diverse traditions that make Arunachal Pradesh such a unique part of India.

The Indian Army reaffirmed its commitment towards the people of Arunachal Pradesh while celebrating the

region's cultural and geographical uniqueness. Events like the **Lohit Premier League** and **Tezu Warrior Carnival** are not just celebrations of sports and adventure but also symbolic assertions of unity, trust and national pride. They create a conducive environment for meaningful interaction and dialogue, and also set the stage for future initiatives aimed at bringing people together through the power of sports and culture, thereby contributing to the overall well-being and prosperity of the people of Arunachal Pradesh. As Arunachal Pradesh continues to thrive as a symbol of resilience and diversity, initiatives like these will remain crucial in harnessing the potential of its people and fostering progress.



Captain Kushagra Dhawan

Captain Kushagra Dhawan was commissioned into the Corps of EME on 9th September 2023. An OTA Alumnus, he's presently serving under Operation Snow Leopard. An Electrical Engineer by qualification, the officer worked for Development Bank of Singapore for two years before joining the Indian Army.

A TAPESTRY OF NATURE AND ADVENTURE

EXPLORING ARUNACHAL'S MESMERISING BEAUTY

Arunachal Pradesh, the "Land of the Rising Sun" is a region where the first rays of the sun kiss the Indian subcontinent, casting a golden hue upon the towering peaks of the Eastern Himalayas. Nestled along the borders of India and China, this North-eastern state is a blend of untouched natural landscapes, ancient mythologies, rich cultural heritage, and the indomitable spirit of its people. A realm where history intertwines with spirituality and adventure, Arunachal Pradesh creates an experience unlike any other. With its snow-capped peaks, verdant valleys, sacred rivers and vibrant tribal cultures, Arunachal Pradesh has become a coveted destination for travellers, explorers and spiritual seekers alike.

The Sacred Tapestry of Arunachal Pradesh

Arunachal Pradesh is a region where nature and mythology are intricately intertwined, forming a hallowed environment imbued with heavenly significance. One of its most revered sites is **Parshuram Kund**, nestled in the Lohit Valley, where the Hindu sage Parshuram is believed to have sought absolution by immersing himself in its sanctified waters after committing the act of matricide. The river, regarded as a divine cleanser of sins, continues to draw thousands of devotees seeking spiritual purification. Similarly, the Lohit River, known as the "River of Blood," holds a sacred place in mythological narratives as a holy tributary of the Brahmaputra. It is said that ancient sages performed intense penance along its banks, striving for spiritual enlightenment and purification.

Walong, also known as the "Land of the Bamboo Groves", holds deep spiritual and historical significance. Local people believe that ancestral spirits inhabit its dense bamboo forests, guarding the land and bestowing protection and prosperity. The region's sanctity is further amplified by its



Dembuen Waterfalls in Dibang Valley, Arunachal Pradesh

historical prominence, as it was here that Indian soldiers displayed unparalleled courage during the 1962 Sino-Indian War, infusing the landscape with both divine guardianship and martial valour.

In the Dibang Valley, the ruins of **Rukmini Nati** are associated with **Rukmini**, the consort of Lord Krishna, who according to legend, once graced this land. The remnants of a once-grand fortress stand as a silent testament to Arunachal's connection with the Mahabharata. In the alpine reaches, **Karan Tui Lake** is believed to possess healing properties, with local folklore attributing its sanctity to benevolent water spirits that offer peace and renewal to those who seek refuge by its shores. Additionally, the pristine forests of **Namdapha**, central to **Singpho** cosmology, are revered as the primordial cradle of life, where the first humans are said to have emerged under divine guidance. These forests remain sacred to the **Singpho** people, who believe their ancestral spirits continue to safeguard the land. Every river, mountain and valley in Arunachal Pradesh carries a deep mythological resonance, enriching the state's identity as a land where the ancient and the natural converge. These sacred stories, passed down through generations, continue to shape the spiritual and cultural life of the region, making Arunachal Pradesh not just a destination but a living, breathing canvas of divine lore.

A Land of Untamed Beauty and Endless Wonders

Arunachal Pradesh, a land of unspoiled beauty and mesmerising landscapes, calls out to nature lovers and adventurers. The state's enchanting topography is adorned with towering snow-capped peaks, lush green valleys, sparkling rivers and dense forests that weave a tapestry of serenity and grandeur.

Each corner of this mystical land offers its own story, its own charm, and invites you to witness its raw, untouched beauty. From the snow-dusted **Mayodia Pass** in the **Dibang Valley**, which glistens under the winter sun, to the tranquil, almost ethereal atmosphere of the **Lohit Valley**, Eastern Arunachal Pradesh remains a paradise for trekkers, explorers and photographers alike. The towering mountains and dense forests of Dibang speak of the rugged, untamed nature of the region, while the peaceful Namsai district, home to the magnificent **Golden Pagoda**, exudes an aura of tranquillity. This revered Buddhist monastery, also known as **Kongmu Kham**, stands as a stunning example of **Tai Khamti** architecture, offering a stunning vista and spiritual solace to devotees and visitors alike. Surrounded by manicured gardens and reflecting pools, the **Golden Pagoda** is a beacon of faith and a cultural landmark of Eastern Arunachal. This hidden gem remains an unspoiled treasure, drawing travellers not just for its beauty but also for its deep connection to the divine.

Athu Popu, a sacred place of the Idu Mishmi tribe is located approximately 220 kms away from Anini in the Dibang valley, 3500 metres above sea level. According to the Idu Mishmis, the souls of the ancestors live in Athu Popu and after one's death their souls are guided to Athu Popu by the *Igus* or the Priest. At this sacred place, a big mass of stone stands alone and is believed that the priest Sinerwu once cried on this sacred stone on hearing of his mother's death. The stone still bears the impression of the priest's palm and his tears. A large paddy field nearby is believed to be cultivated by the departed souls.

The **Athu Popu Trek** in Dibang Valley is an extraordinary adventure that combines the thrill of high-altitude trekking with the beauty of pristine landscapes and the opportunity to immerse oneself in the culture of one of India's most isolated tribes. Demanding physical endurance and resilience, it rewards trekkers with memories that will last a lifetime. For those seeking an off-the-beaten-path



Golden Pagoda, Namsai District



One of the cascades of the Dembuen Waterfalls

adventure in one of India's most unexplored regions, the **Athu Popu Trek** is the answer. The Indian Army in collaboration with the local administration organises treks to **Athu Popu** for the youth of Anini and nearby areas. This fosters amongst them a sense of belongingness towards their cultural beliefs.

The **Seven Lakes Trail**, nestled within the remote expanses of **Mishmi Hills** in Arunachal Pradesh, represents a rare confluence of natural grandeur and spiritual solitude. This invigorating trek meanders through an array of alpine meadows, dense coniferous forests, and precipitous mountains, offering an intimate peep into the Eastern Himalayas' most unspoiled landscape. Along the way, trekkers encounter seven crystalline lakes, referred to as '*sat taliya*' situated at altitudes ranging from 4500 to 5200 metres. These serene bodies of water, surrounded by rugged topography and the whispering winds of the wild, provide not only an aesthetic delight but also a reflective space for introspection. The moderately challenging trek ideally undertaken between March and October, typically begins from Emuli Grasslands near

Anini, the administrative headquarters of the Dibang Valley district. The journey of approximately 60 kms takes around six to seven days. Experienced trekkers walk on Idu hunting trails accompanied by experienced guides and hunters. One can expect a climb of five to six hours every day on average slopes upto 70 degrees. The journey, marked by physical challenge, is equally a pilgrimage into the heart of the untouched wilderness, immersing trekkers in the profound stillness of nature and offering unparalleled communion with the sublime beauty of the region.

One reaches the first lake – '*Kabmu-Ya*' on the third day. The next day, one heads off to the next lake – '*Emub-Ya*'

which is adjacent to the base camp for the remaining five lakes. The base camp is near a gurgling waterfall and a crystal clear stream. The third lake – '*Koyombo*' is at 13500 feet amidst narrow ridges and an alpine spread of vegetation. The fourth lake – '*Dinu*' at 14000 feet is the most gorgeous of all. The crystal clear blue lake stands sandwiched amidst the grey mountains. The '*Che-Ne*' lake is the mystical one, with many hunters and trekkers having observed its mystical glow during night. The final two lakes – '*Hubu I & II*' are adjacent to each other, with one lake flowing from the crater of one mountain to another mountain forming the second lake.

The **Dembuen Waterfalls** offer a unique opportunity for trekking and hiking enthusiasts to explore the region's raw landscapes. The trek to the waterfalls begins from the village of Dembuen and winds its way through dense forests and rugged terrain. The trek is moderately challenging, with steep inclines and rocky paths, but the scenic views and breath-taking waterfalls make it a rewarding experience.

The magnificence of nature again becomes evident at the Dembuen Waterfalls, a series of seven cascades, each with its unique charm and character. The waterfalls create a mesmerizing spectacle as they cascade down the rocky slopes. The first waterfall, '*Poya Pani*' located near the village of Dembuen, is a picturesque cascade that drops down a rocky slope, creating a small pool at its base. The second waterfall, '*Abi Pani*' situated about two kms away, plunges down a steep rock face, creating a thunderous roar that echoes through the valley. The third waterfall, '*Achi Pani*' located about three kms ahead, is a splendid cascade that drops down a series of rocky steps, creating a misty veil that rises into the air. The fourth waterfall, '*Jayo Pani*' is situated about four kms



Left. Bamboo Groves near Walong Centre. Tourists at the Namdapha National Park Right. A tourist resort near Dembuen

from the third, and is a stunning cascade that flows gently down a rocky slope. Five kms further, the fifth waterfall, *Kaba Pani* plunges and creates a thunderous roar. The sixth waterfall, *Chigu Pani* situated about six kms from the fifth, is a majestic cascade that drops down a series of rocky steps, creating a misty curtain. The seventh and final waterfall is *Mawu Waterfall*, located about seven kms ahead, and marks the end of the Dembuen River's journey as its waters flow gently into the nearby Dibang River.

The Dibang valley is surrounded by several mountain ranges, including the Daphabum Range to the North and the Mishmi Hills to the East. These mountain ranges are home to towering peaks, many of which are yet to be fully explored or conquered by mountaineers. Dibang Valley is a rich biodiversity hotspot. Its dense forests are a combination of subtropical, temperate and alpine ecosystems, supporting a diverse range of flora and fauna. The region is home to several endangered and rare species of plants and animals, making it a paradise for nature lovers. The forests of Dibang Valley

are teeming with various species of trees, including towering deodars, pine trees and rhododendron shrubs. The valley also sees a burst of colour during the flowering season when the meadows bloom with wildflowers, creating a stunning landscape of vibrant hues.

In a major achievement, Anini has been declared as the Best Offbeat Mountain destination by The Outlook magazine. Capitalizing on its unique blend of natural beauty and cultural heritage, the Dibang Valley is increasingly becoming a tourism hotspot. A number of resorts, and adventure camps, treks and trails in the area around Anini and Dembuen are attracting tourists across the nation.

Further East, the **Lohit Valley** unfolds with its combination of rugged terrain and spiritual significance. **Parshuram Kund**, a sacred site in the valley, is a pilgrimage destination where devotees seek purification in its holy waters. The surrounding landscape, with towering mountains and the meandering **Lohit River**, enhances the spiritual ambience of the region, weaving a sense

of reverence and awe throughout the valley. **Roing**, nestled within the valley, serves as a hidden treasure for those seeking both adventure and tranquillity. Its proximity to nature reserves and trekking routes makes it a favoured location for explorers looking to immerse in the untouched beauty of Eastern Arunachal.

Not far from Dibang, the **Dau-Delai Valley**, between the Anjaw and Lohit districts, offers a landscape of rolling grasslands, dense jungles and meandering rivers. This lesser-known paradise provides explorers with a pristine experience. **Namdapha National Park** offers a wealth of biodiversity for wildlife enthusiasts, sheltering rare species like snow leopards, tigers and the elusive red panda. The park also hosts over 400 species of birds, making it a birdwatcher's dream. The untouched beauty of this sanctuary, nestled in the heart of the Eastern Himalayas, offers adventurers the chance to witness one of India's most exotic ecosystems. While navigating the dense forests and



A few visuals of Arunachal Pradesh

spotting elusive wildlife, **Namdapha** promises an immersive and thrilling journey. Eastern Arunachal offers more than just trekking and wildlife; it is a region where land, culture and spirituality converge.

Kibithu, an ancient village tucked away in the Eastern most corner of India, is a perfect starting point for exploring the diverse landscapes and historic sites of the region. For those with an adventurous spirit, white-water rafting on the **Lohit River**, one of the Brahmaputra's mighty tributaries, is an unforgettable experience. The powerful river offers an adrenaline rush, while the surrounding valleys create a spectacular setting, further enhancing the thrill of the adventure.

Legacy of Valour

Arunachal Pradesh is also a land of immense historical significance, particularly marked by the events of the 1962 Indo-China War. The 1962 Sino - Indian Conflict saw fierce clashes in Arunachal Pradesh. In places like **Walong** and **Kibithu**, the bravery of Indian soldiers who fought valiantly against overwhelming odds is commemorated through memorials and monuments that are

enduring testaments to their sacrifice. The **Walong War Memorial**, a poignant site draws local and national visitors each year and is a tribute to the courage and patriotism that defined India's defence during one of its most challenging times. Similarly, **Kibithu**, with the **General Bipin Rawat Dwar**, is a symbol of India's unyielding commitment to safeguarding its borders.

The impact of these historical events on tourism is profound. Sites associated with the 1962 conflict offer visitors a chance to reflect on the sacrifices made by soldiers in defending the nation's borders. Memorials, battlefields and strategically significant

locations now serve as destinations for **battlefield tourism**, where history, valour and the spirit of resilience come together. This unique blend of historical legacy and natural beauty makes Arunachal Pradesh a remarkable destination for those who seek to explore the intersection of India's military past and its stunning landscapes.

A Vibrant Tapestry of Culture, Traditions and Festivals

Arunachal Pradesh, with its rich tapestry of culture and traditions, celebrates a range of vibrant festivals that showcase the deep-rooted connection between its indigenous communities and nature. One of the most significant festivals is the **Solung Festival**, celebrated by the **Adi Tribe**, which marks the beginning of the agricultural season. The festival involves traditional dances, songs, and offerings to nature spirits, honouring the land's fertility and prosperity. Similarly, the **Reh Festival** of the **Mishmi Tribe** is dedicated to worshipping nature spirits and ancestors, with rituals, prayers and cultural performances seeking blessings for a good harvest and a prosperous future. The **Idu Mishmi** community practices a blend of animism and Buddhist influences, with a deep reverence for nature. They believe in various deities and spirits associated with natural elements, which guide their daily lives and rituals. The sacred landscapes, such as mountains and rivers, are integral to their spirituality, shaping their worldview and cultural practices.

The **Sangken Festival** of the **Monpa Tribe** is a joyous water festival marking the arrival of the Buddhist New Year. Participants engage in water splashing to purify themselves, accompanied by processions, dances and chanting of Buddhist mantras. The **Tam la du Festival**, celebrated by the **Nyishi Tribe**, is an important harvest

celebration where traditional music, dances and rituals take place to give thanks for the crops and express gratitude to the land. The **Losar Festival**, observed by the Tibetan Buddhist community, marks the Tibetan New Year with grand celebrations, including traditional Tibetan dances, songs and offerings to Buddhist deities in the regions.

The agricultural traditions continue with the **Dree Festival** of the **Apatani Tribe**, where people offer rice, millet and maize to nature spirits to ensure a bountiful harvest. The festival is filled with traditional rituals, dances and communal feasts. The **Mopin Festival**, celebrated by the **Galo Tribe**, marks the beginning of the sowing season, with prayers for a successful harvest, traditional dances, songs and feasts, bringing the entire community together in joyful celebration. These festivals not only celebrate the connection to nature and spirituality but also unite families and communities in joy, making Arunachal Pradesh a vibrant cultural destination.

The Future of Tourism: Pioneering New Frontiers

In recent years, the Indian Army has significantly contributed to the transformation of Arunachal Pradesh into an important tourism destination through **Operation Sadbhavana** initiatives. The Army has established infrastructure in remote border areas like **Hayuliang** and **Dibang Valley**, thereby enhancing connectivity and stimulating local economies. In addition to its infrastructure developments, the Army has initiated a range of adventure activities such as trekking expeditions, cycling rallies and rafting excursions. These endeavours not only highlight the state's natural beauty but also foster meaningful interactions between tourists and local communities.

The **Namsai-Namti Cycling Expedition** and **Lohit River Rafting** foster sustainable tourism while prioritising environmental conservation.

Beyond the realm of military operations, **Operation Sadbhavana** has emerged as a pivotal initiative in enhancing civil-military relations through its emphasis on community welfare. The initiative has resulted in the creation of educational institutions, complimentary healthcare services and skill development programmes, effectively meeting essential requirements in isolated communities. By placing social welfare at the forefront of its responsibilities alongside defence obligations, the Army has cultivated trust within local communities, thereby reinforcing India's standing in the region and effectively countering external influences, especially from China, through the strategic use of soft power and community involvement.

The future of tourism in Arunachal Pradesh glows with the promise of sustainable growth and responsible travel, ensuring that the state's breathtaking natural splendour and vibrant cultural heritage remain untouched by the tides of time. With its mystical landscapes, cascading rivers, dense

forests and a kaleidoscope of tribal traditions, Arunachal Pradesh is a treasure trove waiting to be discovered by discerning travellers. As infrastructure evolves and access improves, the state stands on the cusp of becoming a premier destination for ecotourism, thrilling adventure travel and profound cultural immersion. Yet, the true essence of this paradise lies in its unspoiled charm, which must be safeguarded with utmost care.

Preserving the delicate balance between progress and conservation is imperative. By fostering sustainable tourism practices that prioritize environmental preservation and the active participation of local communities, Arunachal Pradesh can pave the way for the harmonious coexistence of growth and tradition. Only the warmth of its people, whose customs and stories offer a splendid cultural experience, can match the fascinating beauty of the state. With unwavering support from the government, committed stakeholders and the Indian Army, **Arunachal Pradesh is poised to emerge as a beacon of responsible tourism, a sanctuary where nature, culture and development flourish together in perfect harmony.**



Major Rajmohan Acharya, an alumnus of Sainik School Purulia and the National Defence Academy, Pune, was commissioned into the Regiment of Artillery in 2012. A tactically sound officer, he is a graduate of the Defence Services Technical Staff Course at MILIT, Pune. An accomplished sportsman, he has excelled in hockey and cross-country, and participated in numerous long distance marathon events.



Maj Rajmohan Acharya

SHOOTING STRAIGHT:

SOLDIERING, LEADERSHIP & STRATEGY

Book Review

'**Shooting Straight**' is the biography of Lieutenant General Rostum Nanavatty, undoubtedly a man of stellar character, with a passion and commitment for soldiering and a military leader who tenanted some of the most challenging operational assignments in the Indian Army with a sense of purpose and the ability to speak '**truth to power**'. The book has been meticulously researched by Air Vice Marshal Arjun Subramaniam, undoubtedly one of India's most accomplished contemporary military historians.

Arjun has not only captured details of Nanavatty's transition from a tactical to operational and thereafter a strategic level but also given a rare insight into the people and events that shaped his values and leadership style. His unique journey in uniform commenced from being commissioned into **2/8 Gorkha Rifles** soon after the 1962 War with China to commanding the Northern Army during **Operation Parakram**.

Written chronologically, it is a book that can be read at multiple levels, a personal story, the evolution of the Indian Army and leadership lessons. What stands out in this book is the manner in which the sheer depth and breadth of his insights and his rich operational repository have been captured by Arjun. The intellectual dimension of warfighting also comes out very clearly as does his strategic mindset.



The Book

When Nanavatty joined his Battalion, they had withdrawn to Along after the 1962 war and had lost a large number of personnel including the Commanding Officer. When he got the opportunity to pen his thoughts on the war, Nanavatty was '*unsparing in his indictment of the senior leadership*'. He felt that there was a complete lack of foresight and planning and the Army had been reduced to a '*mere peacetime machine*'; physically unfit, ill-equipped and ill trained. The other issues which he touched upon would remain his focus throughout his career; '*build defences where we can provide easy logistics support*', '*train extremely hard*', '*junior leaders to take the initiative*' and '*create an offensive spirit*'.

The Battalion was soon moved to Nagaland where as a young officer he got involved in operations against insurgents.

Colonel Shamsheer Singh, the new Commanding Officer *'was a man on a mission, determined to see that misfortune did not strike the battalion twice'*. He credits him and Colonel (later Lieutenant General) Anand Sarup; who *'embodied the ideal Commanding Officer, physically tough and mentally very robust'* of laying the high training standards of the unit.

During **Operation Pawan**, Nanavatty headed the Para Commando Task Force for a few months. His meticulous approach laid the foundation for Special Operations in Sri Lanka. As per him the *'LTTE was the most efficient guerrilla outfit the Indian Army has ever encountered'*. It is here that he put into place his observations regarding the functioning of Special Forces units based on his interactions and observations when he was the Indian Army Liaison Officer in the United Kingdom. But he was scathing in his assessment regarding how infantry units were equipped during the early days of the IPKF deployment.

He served under General Sunderji at multiple times, and admired and shared a personal rapport with him. He states *"the brilliant General Sunderji was and ever remained an ardent proponent of the 'big battle'. Consequently, he paid little attention to counterinsurgency"*.

As the Brigade Commander of the Siachen Brigade, he walked to every post and was instrumental in improving the quality of training at the Siachen Battle School and focused on achieving ascendancy over the enemy and improving the living conditions of those who served on the glacier. He remembers Major General VR Raghavan, his Division Commander, as *'a fine clear thinking and erudite Commander in the soldier scholar mould'*. Siachen always remained close to him but later in his career and after retirement he argued *'against the prevailing hawkish perspectives of retaining significant deployment on the glacier'*.

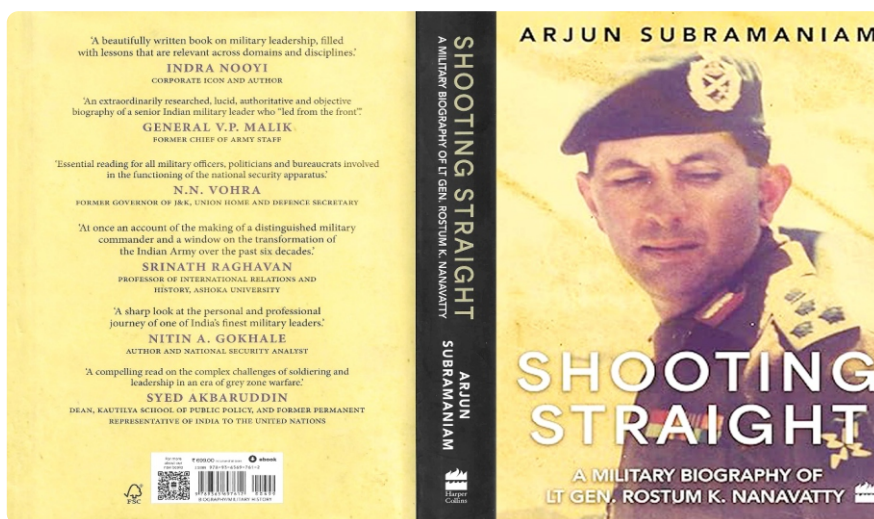
In June 1993 Nanavatty assumed

command of 19 Infantry Division at Baramulla. There, he focused on Counter Terrorism (CT) operations and felt that Pakistan was only likely to resort to a conventional war if CT operations fail. He also opined that *'however successful the Indian Army was in securing the peripheral areas, the centre of gravity of the secessionist movement would remain Srinagar.'* He also felt that the Pakistan Army needed to pay a heavy price for abetting and supporting terrorism and *'changed the rules of the game by dominating the no man's land'*. Intelligence was also given the highest priority and his leadership style was both *'enabling and empowering'*. He states that his Corps Commander General Padmanabhan *'had a razor-sharp mind'*. In his assessment North Kashmir was a war zone and there was a sense of alienation and deprivation amongst the people. *'He felt that the government and civil administration needed to move the peace process forward'*.

Though he desired to command either 15 or 16 Corps, Nanavatty was posted to 3 Corps, where he was responsible for the insurgency ridden

states in Northeast India - Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura and parts of Arunachal Pradesh. In September 1998, in Manipur he told the then Home Minister Indrajit Gupta that the dire situation in Churachandpur was due to the fact that the State Government had completely abdicated their responsibility and cautioned regarding the damages of ignoring Manipur. His observation, analysis and prognosis about the Nagaland and Manipur problems are striking. His tenure which he termed as complex and difficult exposed him to *'the perils and complexities of modern conflict which involved an intersection of politics, culture and societal faultlines'*.

The book gives an insight into Nanavatty's tenure as the Northern Army Commander and how he wanted to carry out a series of limited battalion sized operations to seize and control key areas across the Line of Control. **Operation Kabaddi** was aimed to push the envelope of Northern Command proactive deterrence and



The cover of the book

introduce a punitive paradigm. Unfortunately, it was not launched due to the geopolitical events post 9/11. At a seminar at 16 Corps, in October 2001, he had clearly stated that with time Pakistan's role has dwarfed that of the Kashmiri separatist. He emphasized that India was now faced with a relentless covert war in the guise of a freedom struggle planned, organized, directed, coordinated and controlled by Pakistan.

It was during **Operation Parakram**, when Nanavatty came closest to conventional war, but as seven of his nine divisions were committed in CT Operations, he needed time to prepare. *'This is not what Paddy wanted to bear'*. Following his experience in **Operation Parakram**, Nanavatty believes *'India is deceiving itself if it can prosecute a unilateral war of choice without creating the right conditions'*.

He ended by stating that *as the Northern Army Commander he called the capture of Pakistan-controlled areas in Kashmir "achievable" but "would demand extraordinary synergy of political, diplomatic, economic, intelligence and military effort, and an uncharacteristic single mindedness of purpose"*.

In April 2002, he with the assistance of Colonel (later Lieutenant General) Sanjeev Langer submitted a paper suggesting a *'whole of government approach for the resolution of conflict in J&K'*. General Padmanabhan had given the *'go ahead, but told him to be brief and ensure there are no accusations or recrimination.'*

He sent copies of it to many senior government functionaries like then Home Minister LK Advani, Home Secretary NN Vohra and Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh, but except for Jaswant Singh, who took time off to discuss the strategy document with Nanavatty, there was little interest in other quarters. Lieutenant General H S Panag who was the Northern Army Commander in 2007 calls the paper *'a clear and bold contemporary road map for conflict resolution'*. Unfortunately, the national security establishment did not leverage his experience post-retirement.

Conclusion

Given General Nanavatty's ability to put things down in writing and predict what needs to be done in the future, it is surprising that his thoughts on China have not been articulated in depth; though he has stated that *'deciding the mutually acceptable LAC is a matter of the highest priority'*.

This stands out due to two reasons; the first being his joining his Battalion soon after they had been de-inducted from Mechuka after the 1962 conflict and as a result he was witness to the plight of the Army at that time and had penned down very relevant observations. The other being that he held the appointment of the Northern Army Commander during **Operation Parakram** and was responsible for operations both against Pakistan and China.

What stands out is his professional excellence, integrity, unflinching moral courage and the ability to always stand up for what he believed was right and unhesitatingly put across his views with courage of conviction. Understandably, he did have critics like Lieutenant General Arjun Ray who states that *'innovation, mental mobility and foresight are not his strengths' and 'he had little understanding of the big picture'*.

The book is a masterpiece which holds leadership lessons across domains and is strongly recommended to be read not only by those who don the uniform but also by academics, practitioners and students of national security. It also gives a prism of the country's security challenges and the Indian Army's operational art through the lens of one of its accomplished and distinguished soldiers. Arjun has yet again added a valuable contribution to India's national security literature.



Major General Jagatbir Singh, VSM (Retd), a second generation Army Officer was commissioned in December 1981 into 18 Cavalry, a Regiment he subsequently commanded. He has held varied command, staff and instructional appointments which include commanding the First Armoured Division. Post retirement, he is a Distinguished Fellow with United Service Institution of India and apart from writing for various newspapers and magazines has co-authored Armour 71 and co-edited Valour and Honour.



Maj Gen Jagatbir Singh



SECURING YOUR GOLDEN YEARS

A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO RETIREMENT PLANNING

Introduction

Retirement represents more than just the end of a career—it's the beginning of a new chapter filled with possibilities. The "me time," planned vacations, and quality moments with family are what many of us envision for our retirement years. Yet, amid life's daily hustle, comprehensive retirement planning—both financial and mental—often falls by the wayside. Recent findings from the **India Retirement Index Study (IRIS)** conducted by **Max Life Insurance** in 2024 reveal concerning statistics:

- Nearly **half of the participants** have **not started saving for retirement.**
- **61%** worry they will **run out of retirement savings within 10 years.**
- **90%** of Indians in the **50+ age group** **regret not starting their retirement savings earlier.**

If you've already begun planning for retirement, *congratulations—you've taken the crucial first step.*

This guide will help you develop a more holistic approach. If retirement planning isn't yet on your radar, don't worry—these ten essential considerations will provide you with a solid foundation to begin your journey toward a secure and fulfilling retirement.

1. Aim for a Debt-Free Retirement

One of the most fundamental aspects of retirement planning is ensuring you enter this new phase of life free from debt obligations. Financial freedom in retirement begins with proactive debt management well before your career ends.

Strategies for Achieving a Debt-Free Retirement:

- **Create a debt repayment timeline:** Map out all existing debts and establish a repayment schedule that concludes before your target retirement age.

- **Avoid new debt after 50:** Consider implementing a personal policy against taking on new loans once you enter your 50s, as these can become significant burdens during retirement.
- **Accelerate mortgage payments:** Consider making extra payments toward your mortgage to eliminate this typically largest debt before retirement.
- **Address high-interest debt first:** Prioritize paying off credit cards and personal loans with high interest rates to minimize the total amount paid over time.
- **Consider debt consolidation:** If managing multiple debt payments becomes overwhelming, explore consolidation options that might offer lower interest rates and simplified payment structures.

If you've already taken loans with repayment periods extending beyond your retirement date, factor these obligations into your retirement expense calculations. Completing all loan repayments before retirement eliminates the stress of regular EMIs, contributing significantly to a peaceful and financially secure retirement life.

2. Build a Robust Emergency Fund

Financial emergencies don't stop occurring just because you've retired. In fact, having a substantial emergency fund becomes even more critical in retirement when you no longer have regular employment income to fall back on.

Emergency Fund Essentials for Retirees:

- **Size matters:** While the working population typically aims for three to six months of expenses, retirees should consider maintaining 12 to 18 months of living expenses in readily accessible accounts.

BECOMING DEBT-FREE IS ABOUT MORE THAN JUST *paying off debt* IT'S ABOUT DISCOVERING FREEDOM, FLEXIBILITY, AND CONTROL OVER YOUR LIFE, YOUR FINANCES, AND YOUR FUTURE.



- **Account selection:** Choose high-yield savings accounts or money market funds that offer better returns than traditional savings accounts while maintaining liquidity.
- **Regular reassessment:** Review your emergency fund annually to ensure it keeps pace with inflation and any changes in your lifestyle or healthcare needs.
- **Separate from retirement investments:** Maintain your emergency fund separately from your retirement investment accounts to avoid disrupting your long-term financial strategy during emergencies.

A well-funded emergency reserve serves as your first line of defence against unexpected medical expenses, home repairs, or family emergencies without forcing you to liquidate retirement investments at potentially inopportune times. This financial buffer also avoids incurring new debt late in life, when income options may be limited.

3. Secure Comprehensive Insurance Coverage

Insurance becomes increasingly valuable as you age, serving as a crucial safety net during retirement when income sources are typically fixed and medical expenses tend to rise.

Health Insurance Considerations:

- **Start early:** Secure personal health insurance well before retirement—ideally in your 30s or 40s—to benefit from lower premiums and fewer pre-existing condition exclusions.
- **Coverage adequacy:** Ensure your policy offers comprehensive coverage for hospitalization, critical illnesses, and regular health check-ups.
- **Senior-specific options:** Explore health insurance plans specifically designed for seniors that offer age-appropriate benefits like home healthcare, preventive screenings, and specialized treatments.
- **Medicare/government options:** Research government health programmes for seniors and understand how they integrate with private insurance options.
- **Long-term care insurance:** Consider adding this

specialized coverage to protect against potentially catastrophic costs of extended nursing care or assisted living.

Term Insurance Strategy:

- **Extended coverage:** Select term policies that extend well beyond traditional retirement age—ideally to 70 or 75—particularly if you have dependents who will rely on your financial support.
- **Decreasing term insurance:** Consider this option where coverage amount gradually decreases as you age, matching your diminishing financial responsibilities while keeping premiums manageable.
- **Policy review:** Regularly review your term insurance needs, especially after major life events like children becoming financially independent or mortgage payoff.

Maintaining adequate insurance coverage throughout retirement requires diligent attention to premium payments and policy renewals. Factor these recurring costs into your retirement budget to ensure continuous protection. Remember that healthcare costs typically increase with age, making proper insurance planning an essential component of your overall retirement strategy.

4. Calculate Retirement Expenses and Plan Withdrawals

Understanding your post-retirement financial needs forms the cornerstone of effective retirement planning. This process involves a thorough analysis of current expenses, anticipated lifestyle changes, and establishing a sustainable withdrawal strategy.

Determining Your Retirement Number:

1. **Baseline calculation:** Begin with your current monthly expenses.
2. **Expense adjustments:** Subtract costs that will disappear in retirement (children's education, mortgage payments, commuting costs) and add new expenses (increased healthcare, leisure activities, travel).
3. **Inflation adjustment:** Apply an inflation factor to project these costs into the future when you'll actually be retiring.
4. **Duration planning:** Multiply your annual expenses by your expected retirement duration (typically 25-30 years), factoring in inflation throughout this period.

Effective Withdrawal Strategies:

- **The 4% rule:** Consider the widely-recommended guideline of withdrawing no more than 4% of your retirement corpus annually to ensure sustainability.
- **Systematic Withdrawal Plans (SWPs):** Set up SWPs from your investment portfolio to receive regular monthly income transfers directly to your bank account.
- **Bucket strategy:** Divide your retirement savings into immediate, intermediate, and long-term buckets based on when you'll need the funds, allowing for appropriate risk allocation.
- **Dynamic withdrawals:** Adjust your withdrawal rates based on market performance—taking slightly less during downturns and potentially more during strong market periods.

The flexibility of SWPs makes them particularly valuable in retirement planning. You can temporarily pause withdrawals, adjust monthly amounts based on changing needs, or redistribute your

investment mix as market conditions evolve. This adaptability helps you navigate the financial uncertainties that inevitably arise during retirement.

5. Account for Inflation's Impact

Inflation represents a silent threat to retirement security that many people underestimate or overlook entirely. The erosive effect of rising prices on purchasing power can dramatically alter the lifestyle your savings can support over a 20 to 30 year retirement period.

Understanding Inflation's Compounding Effect:

The current 5% inflation rate in India means that what costs ₹50,000 today will require approximately ₹132,665 in 20 years to purchase the same goods and services. Conversely, ₹50,000 in today's currency will only buy goods and services worth about ₹18,845 twenty years from now.

Inflation-Proofing Strategies:

- **Growth-oriented investments:** Maintain an appropriate allocation to equity investments even during retirement to help your portfolio grow faster than inflation.
- **Inflation-indexed products:** Consider government securities like Inflation-Indexed Bonds that offer returns linked to inflation rates.
- **Real estate income:** Rental properties can provide income that naturally adjusts with inflation as rental rates increase over time.
- **Regular portfolio reviews:** Conduct annual portfolio assessments to ensure your investment returns are outpacing inflation.
- **Escalating withdrawal plans:** Structure your withdrawals to increase annually by the inflation rate, maintaining consistent purchasing power throughout retirement.

Even seemingly modest inflation rates can significantly impact your retirement lifestyle when compounded over decades. Building an inflation buffer-typically an additional 10-15% on top of your calculated retirement corpus-provides extra protection against this persistent financial challenge.

6. Optimize Your Asset Allocation

The distribution of your investments across various asset classes is a critical factor in both building your retirement corpus and ensuring it lasts throughout your retirement years. Your asset allocation strategy should evolve based on your risk tolerance, investment time horizon, and age.

Risk Profile-Based Allocation:

- **Conservative profile:** Prioritize capital preservation with approximately 20-30% in equities and 70-80% in fixed-income securities.
- **Moderate profile:** Balance growth and stability with a 40-60% equity allocation and 40-60% in fixed income.
- **Aggressive profile:** Maximize growth potential with 70-80% in equities and 20-30% in fixed income and cash equivalents.

Age-Based Allocation Guidelines:

- **Building phase (30-50 years):** Adopt an aggressive approach with up to 100% in equity-based investments to maximize growth potential during these prime earning years.
- **Pre-retirement phase (50-60 years):** Transition to a balanced portfolio with approximately 50% in equities and 50% in debt instruments to protect against market volatility as retirement approaches.
- **Retirement phase (60+ years):** Shift to a conservative allocation with roughly 20-30% in equities and 70-80% in safer debt instruments to prioritize income generation and capital preservation.

Advanced Asset Allocation Strategies:

- **Tactical asset allocation:** Make temporary adjustments to your investment mix based on market conditions and economic forecasts.
- **Core-satellite approach:** Maintain a stable "core" portfolio of index funds or ETFs while exploring potential outperformance with smaller "satellite" positions in select sectors or companies.
- **Liability-matching:** Align certain

investments specifically with anticipated future expenses, creating dedicated funding for major retirement costs.

Regularly rebalancing your portfolio-at least annually-ensures your asset allocation remains aligned with your retirement timeline and risk tolerance. This disciplined approach prevents unintended risk exposure and helps maintain the long-term stability of your retirement savings.

7. Leverage Government Pension Schemes and Employer Benefits

Government-sponsored retirement programmes and employer benefits can significantly enhance your retirement security, providing additional income streams and tax advantages that complement your personal savings.

Government Pension Schemes:

- **National Pension System (NPS):** This voluntary, long-term retirement savings scheme offers tax benefits under Section 80C and additional deductions under Section 80CCD(1B). The NPS allows flexible asset allocation and partial withdrawals for specific needs while providing a guaranteed pension after retirement.
- **Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maan-Dhan Yojana (PM-SYM):** Designed for workers in the unorganized sector, this scheme provides a monthly pension of ₹3000 after age 60 with minimal contribution requirements.
- **Atal Pension Yojana (APY):** Targeted at unorganized sector workers, this guaranteed pension scheme offers fixed monthly pensions ranging from ₹1000 to ₹5000 based on contribution levels.
- **Pradhan Mantri Vaya Vandana Yojana (PMVVY):** This scheme provides senior citizens with guaranteed pension returns for 10 years with the option for monthly, quarterly, half-yearly, or annual payouts.



Employer Retirement Benefits:

- **Employee Provident Fund (EPF):** Maximize your contributions to this mandatory retirement savings programme, where both employer and employee typically contribute 12% of the basic salary plus dearness allowance.
- **Employee Pension Scheme (EPS):** Understand how this pension component of EPF works and the monthly pension benefits you can expect after retirement.
- **Gratuity:** Factor this lump-sum payment (typically 15 days' salary for each completed year of service) into your retirement corpus calculations.
- **Superannuation benefits:** Many larger companies offer additional retirement benefits through superannuation funds, which can provide either lump-sum payments or regular pension income.
- **Leave encashment:** Calculate the potential value of accumulated leave that can be converted to cash at retirement.

Integrating these programmes with your personal retirement planning reduces the total corpus you need to accumulate independently. Many of these schemes also offer tax benefits during the accumulation phase and tax-advantaged income during retirement, enhancing their overall value to your financial security.

8. Plan for Meaningful Retirement Activities and Travel

Retirement represents an opportunity to pursue passions and experiences that work life may have limited. Thoughtful planning for leisure activities, particularly travel, adds fulfilment to your retirement years while ensuring these expenses are adequately funded.

Travel Planning in Retirement:

- **Vacation fund:** Establish a dedicated vacation fund separate from your primary retirement corpus, invested in more liquid assets for flexibility.
- **Budget allocation:** Determine what percentage of your annual retirement budget you wish to allocate to travel and leisure activities.

- **Timing strategy:** Plan major trips during off-peak seasons to maximize your travel budget while enjoying less crowded destinations.
- **Health considerations:** Schedule ambitious or physically demanding journeys earlier in retirement when health and mobility are typically better.
- **Travel insurance:** Factor age-appropriate travel insurance into your vacation budgeting, as premiums increase significantly for older travellers.

Funding Leisure Activities:

- **Hobby investments:** Allocate funds for equipment, classes, or memberships related to hobbies you plan to pursue more actively in retirement.
- **Education budget:** Set aside resources for continued learning through workshops, courses, or educational travel programmes.
- **Social engagement:** Budget for dining out, entertainment, and social activities that maintain important connections and combat isolation.

Carefully balancing aspirational experiences with financial prudence ensures your retirement remains both enjoyable and sustainable. Consider creating a "retirement bucket list" with prioritized experiences and estimated costs to guide your leisure spending throughout retirement.

9. Define Your Retirement Lifestyle

Your vision for daily life in retirement significantly impacts both your financial requirements and overall satisfaction. Thoughtfully designing your preferred retirement lifestyle-ideally in partnership with your spouse-creates clarity about your financial needs and priorities.

Retirement Lifestyle Options:

- **Active retirement:** Characterized by travel, social engagement, continued education, part-time work, or volunteering. This lifestyle typically requires a larger financial cushion to support diverse activities and potential relocation.
- **Balanced retirement:** Combines periods of activity with quieter pursuits like gardening, reading, family time, and local community involvement. This approach usually requires moderate financial resources.
- **Relaxed retirement:** Focuses on home-based interests, family relationships, and simple pleasures. While generally less expensive, this lifestyle still benefits from adequate financial planning to ensure comfort and security.

Lifestyle Considerations:

- **Location decisions:** Evaluate whether to age in place, downsize, relocate to a retirement community, or move closer to family members.
- **Healthcare accessibility:** Consider proximity to quality medical facilities, particularly if managing chronic conditions.
- **Climate preferences:** Assess whether your current location's climate supports your desired activities and comfort as you age.
- **Social connections:** Weigh the importance of established community ties versus new experiences in potential retirement locations.

Begin visualizing and discussing your retirement lifestyle at least 10 to 15 years before your planned retirement date. This timeline allows for adjustments to your savings strategy if your envisioned lifestyle requires additional resources. Remember that retirement lifestyles often evolve over time, typically starting more actively and gradually becoming more home-centred-plan for this natural progression in both your activities and budget.

10. Establish Your Legacy Through Estate Planning

Thoughtful estate planning ensures your assets are distributed according to your wishes, minimizes tax implications for beneficiaries, and prevents potential family conflicts. This final piece of retirement planning provides peace of mind that your financial legacy will benefit loved ones as you intend.

Essential Estate Planning Components:

- **Will creation:** Draft a clear, legally valid will that specifies asset distribution, guardianship designations (if applicable), and executor appointment.
- **Trust considerations:** Evaluate whether trusts might benefit your estate plan by providing tax advantages, privacy, probate avoidance, or controlled distribution of assets.
- **Power of attorney:** Designate trusted individuals to make financial and healthcare decisions on your behalf if you become incapacitated.
- **Advance healthcare directive:** Document your preferences for medical treatment in situations where you cannot communicate your wishes.
- **Beneficiary designations:** Regularly review and update beneficiaries on insurance policies, retirement accounts, and financial assets to ensure alignment with your overall estate plan.

Legacy Planning Strategies:

- **Lifetime gifting:** Consider transferring assets to beneficiaries during your lifetime to witness their enjoyment and potentially reduce estate taxes.
- **Charitable bequests:** Incorporate



philanthropic goals into your estate plan through direct bequests or charitable trusts.

- **Family business succession:** Develop a comprehensive plan for transitioning business interests to family members or other successors.
- **Digital asset management:** Create a plan for transferring or managing online accounts, digital currencies, and electronically stored personal information.

Regular review of your estate plan is essential, particularly after major life events like marriages, births, deaths, divorces, or significant asset acquisitions or disposals. Working with qualified legal and financial professionals ensures your estate plan complies with current laws while optimizing benefits for your beneficiaries.

Conclusion

Planning for retirement is truly a lifelong journey that evolves with your changing circumstances, priorities, and financial capabilities. Starting early

provides the most powerful advantage through the compounding effect on investments and the ability to make gradual, manageable adjustments to your financial habits. Remember that retirement planning extends far beyond simple calculations of income and expenses-it encompasses your values, relationships, health considerations, and personal aspirations for this significant life stage. The most successful retirement plans balance financial security with meaningful purpose, creating a foundation for genuinely fulfilling golden years.

By addressing these ten essential aspects of retirement planning, you're not merely preparing for the end of your career but designing the beginning of perhaps life's most rewarding chapter. Take action today-whether that means opening your first retirement account, increasing your savings rate, or refining your existing retirement strategy-to ensure your future self enjoys the retirement you envision.



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Babu Krishnamoorthy

NOSTALGIA FROM SIKKIM

- A DOCTOR RECALLS

In Sikkim's Pegong, against the backdrop of the Chungthang Valley, I've had some of the most memorable experiences and valuable lessons of my medical career.

When Colonel David Devasahayam, my husband was posted as Commanding Officer 30 Assam Rifles, we stayed in this beautiful place called Pegong in North Sikkim. It offered very beautiful scenic views, with the majestic Chungthang Valley right below us. In Pegong, I had some of the most memorable experiences and valuable learning of my medical career. I vividly recall some unforgettable and very unique incidents.

Delivering Babies of Tribal Women

Beyond the district, there was no lady doctor other than me. We had opened our 30-bedded hospital to civilians in the area, with an Out Patient Department (OPD) and other facilities. I used to treat a lot of tribal women, some of whom would walk four to five hours from their homes in the surrounding hills to meet me. Whenever there was any complication, especially serious gynaecological problems, I would have to send them to Gangtok, which was easily another 3.5 hours away. So as far as possible, I treated all of them, even a few complicated cases. We would only send the severe cases to Gangtok!



There was a particular lady who was due to deliver her third baby. She attended her weekly check-ups regularly during her last trimester. Since she had gone through pregnancies twice before, she was very confident that everything would go smoothly. She was a cheerful tribal woman, belonging to the hills and very sure of her body. I however, took it as seriously as I would any other pregnancy. When she crossed 40 weeks and her due date sailed past, I told her we could generally wait for another two weeks before deciding on a course of action. Soon 41, and then 42 weeks had passed. During her 43rd week, I told her that in case she didn't deliver that particular week, I would send her to STNM Hospital, Gangtok.

One morning, on my way to the OPD, I saw this lady, post-dated by three weeks, sitting by the stream flowing across the road, washing her clothes. She was literally on her haunches, squatting without a care in the world. I stopped my vehicle and told her to immediately come for her check-up! She hadn't kept her weekly appointment. She gave me a winning smile, said '*Sab Kuch Theek Hoga, Madam*' (everything will be alright, Madam) and continued washing her clothes, cheerfully waving me away. I made a mental note to visit her at home the next day.

Within two hours, she arrived at the OPD complaining of mild pain in her back. When I examined her, she was fully dilated with crowning of the baby. Crowning is when you can see the top of the baby's head through the opening of the vagina. Within half an hour, we had a healthy bonny baby delivered, and both mother and baby were discharged the following morning.

I am sure many of us find the lifestyle of our tribal women a far cry from that of urban mothers, where post-dated deliveries are almost unheard of. Fair enough, they have every right to be concerned about post-dated complications. But the robustness of our tribal women is remarkable. I learnt this first hand. This is annoying at times since we as doctors feel responsible and would prefer "obedient patients" rather than the ones that tell us to "chill" because they know their bodies better.

I must have conducted over 75 deliveries out there, both simple and complicated, and it was a very satisfying experience.

Too Close To Nature?

I remember another incident which involved a child who came in smelling absolutely terrible. The mother brought him in with a green discharge from his right nostril, saying it had been there for a few days. 'Madam, the smell is unbearable now', she said. I took him outside, wiped the discharge and flashed my torch into his right nostril. There, I found a seed that had actually sprouted! One could literally see the germinated root halfway down the nostril. Using forceps gently and under local anaesthesia, I gingerly pulled it out and gave him a strong antibiotic cover. When I reviewed him a couple of days later, he turned out to be okay, but this is definitely not an occurrence one would find in the metros!

The Kindness of Patients

My first delivery in Pegong was extremely precious as I had stayed overnight with the lady after delivering her baby. A couple of days later, during her discharge, the elders of the family who had come to take her home with her little baby, bid farewell to me and say thank you. Her husband had something behind his back, and held it up – it was a rooster and hen pair! This was their way of expressing gratitude since we really didn't charge the tribal people. The elders were extremely adamant and emotional, unwilling to leave until I accepted their token of gratitude. Totally perplexed and having been caught off guard, I consulted my husband and asked him what to do. He thought it was a sentimental gesture, so we could accept it and leave it behind at the hospital as pets there. I thanked the family, handed over the birds to the nursing superintendent and went home. It was a weekend. When I returned on Monday, the hen and rooster were nowhere to be

seen. The staff cheerfully told me they'd used them to make chicken biryani, devouring it all! I was absolutely heartbroken.

So, the next time I received a rooster and hen (this seemed to be a really popular gift!), I actually took them back home. My children were super excited to see them. They became our pets and thereafter multiplied. We saw eggs breaking into chicks, growing into adults and again reproducing. This novelty was so lovely to experience!

One doesn't get to see these beautiful events and experiences in cosmopolitan metros. They really leave a permanent mark due to the love and respect you garner there. No wonder they formed a delegation and met my husband to see if I could stay back when we were posted out. The look on my bemused husband's face was priceless!

These lovely, lifelong memories are cherished indeed.



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Dr.Renuka David

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THREATS GALORE TO INDIA'S SECURITY IN THE NORTHEAST

Geography and geopolitics have a way of imposing strategic importance to a piece of land or country; Northeast India is one such piece of land which is a significant limb of India. Security in the Northeast cannot be divorced from developments around the world and in the immediate neighbourhood.

There is another Great Game being played out in Asia: on the Eastern Fringes of the Indian Subcontinent.....Spies from various other countries have also wanted to keep an eye on developments inside “the forbidden area” in India’s Northeast, long out of bounds for foreigners and strategically located at the crossroads of the Indian subcontinent, China and South East Asia.¹

The evolving geopolitical landscape underlines the importance of the region with ample hints of powerplay, which many analysts refer to as revival of “The Great Game”. Historically there have been several attempts to invade the Brahmaputra valley and this region has witnessed extensive migration from neighbouring areas, some have assimilated into the existing society while others have caused social stress by altering the demography. After independence, India’s Northeast has faced traditional and non-traditional threats which have external as well as internal dimensions. The complex and evolving dynamics of the region need a whole of nation approach for comprehensive resolution of the critical issues.

While India strives to be a developed nation by 2047, the global geopolitical environment is in a state of flux. Despite



Map of modern Bengal (which includes present day Indian states of West Bengal and Tripura and the sovereign country of Bangladesh) highlighted (credit Tamravidbir <https://commons.wikimedia.org/>)

¹ *Great Game East India, China and the struggle for Asia’s most Volatile Frontier by Bertil Lintner (pages xxxv-xxxvi, Introduction)*

growing economic interdependence and globalisation, there is competition, conflict and disruption all around leading to shifts in the new world order. The playing out of Thucydides Trap as China emerges to challenge USA, the existing superpower, is quite evident. Besides the traditional conflict zones of the Middle East, Africa and South Asia, Europe too has been drawn into conflict. The advent of new technologies and exploitation of their disruptive capabilities by nation states and non-state actors has enhanced the reach and lethality of weapons and their delivery systems. Recently Gaza and Lebanon have experienced weaponisation of pagers and Hand Held Radio Sets; and targeted killings of Hezbollah and Hamas leadership.

South Asia has also faced heat due to global pressures with an economic downturn and instability in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Instability in the immediate neighbourhood is not in India's interest as it has the potential to adversely impact our growth trajectory. The Indo-Pacific too has emerged as a major flash point with multiple competing maritime claims and superpower forays in the South China Sea. The Indian Ocean Region, through which 75% of world maritime trade and 80% of Chinese oil import passes, has recorded increased militarisation to protect trade interests of countries as well as to fight piracy emanating from Somalia and Yemen. The evolving dynamics have led to new strategic alliances based on changing priorities of nations. These shifts will surely impact security in Northeast India.

The Northeast shares 99% of its borders with five countries: Nepal, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh, and only one per cent with the rest of India.

Distance from Delhi, the power centre, perceived negligence, and tenuous connectivity through the narrow Siliguri corridor has fuelled and kept alive separatist ideology amongst some sections of society in the Northeast. These challenges are compounded by rising unemployment and lack of development which are exploited by adversaries to add fuel to the fire.

Bangladesh

Though instability in Bangladesh impacts India, it is more pronounced in the Northeast. The uprising and regime change in Bangladesh has brought to fore fault lines of the nation which are spilling over to the neighbourhood. Increased radicalisation, targeting of minorities, including Hindus, and growing anti-India feelings in Bangladesh affects the situation in the Northeast. Release of terrorists and leaders of Al Qaida affiliated Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) from jail by the caretaker Government will surely promote activities inimical to India in the

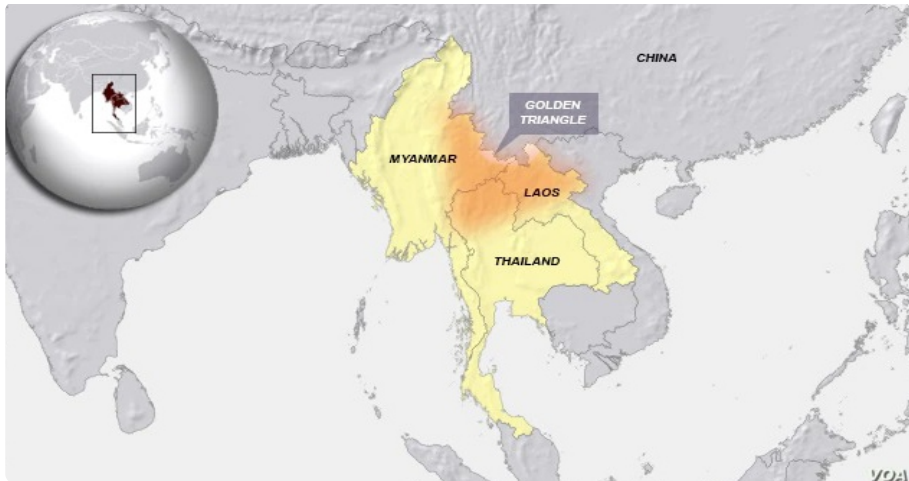
region. The most imminent threats from a turbulent Bangladesh are increased migration into the Northeast leading to social stress, revival of bases of insurgent groups of the Northeast in Bangladesh and a possible nexus of the present Bangladeshi regime with China and Pakistan.

Recent reports of Pakistan Army exchanges with the Bangladesh Army after 1971 do not portend well for India. These high-level military visits between Pakistan and Bangladesh included the visit by Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) chief. Proposed joint production of Shaheen missiles and sale of J 17 fighter aircraft are indicators of future collaboration between the two countries. Abdul Basit, former Pakistan High Commissioner to India, has advocated *Pakistan and Bangladesh must establish a NATO like Crescent Security Initiative (CSI) for the Muslim world.*² Camps of Indian Insurgent Groups may be revived by ISI and the Bangladesh Army signifying an enhanced terrorism threat. The



Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami observed nationwide massive demonstrations for two days protesting the barbarous attack upon the people of Palestinian Gaza strip (source <https://jamaat-e-islami.org/>)

² <https://www.abasitpak1.com/status/1884461087820820718> 29 January 2025



Golden Triangle (South East Asia) (source www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific)

corridor aimed at cutting off the Northeast from the rest of the country is thus a distinct possibility.

Unresolved border disputes with China in Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim may escalate into a major or localised conflict, and the ghosts of the 1962 debacle refuse to die down. Since the border is not demarcated, it gives rise to differing perceptions leading to clashes and skirmishes. The Chinese have been increasingly assertive in border management and resort to creeping tactics or *salami slicing* to establish a new normal along the border. Post the Doklam and Galwan incidents the border has become heavily militarised on both sides with matching infrastructure developments to support

dream of incorporating parts of India's Northeast into Pakistan during Partition is still being fuelled by radicalised elements as borne out by the release of a map of **Greater Bangladesh** which includes parts of West Bengal, Tripura and Assam.

The Chinese Threat

The Chinese influence around the Northeast is visible in many areas. There are reports of many Chinese intrusions in Western and Northern Bhutan. The unresolved issue of Tri-junction between India, China and Bhutan and repeated attempts by the Chinese to move into the Doklam Plateau is a potential flash point. In Eastern Nepal, the construction of Kosi/Mechi corridor and Jhapa economic zone is in the immediate vicinity of the vulnerable Siliguri Corridor, the land link to Northeast India. Siliguri corridor itself is beset with some internal issues like the changing demographic profile, the demand for Gorkhaland and Kamatapur. Though subdued presently, this has the potential to escalate into a secessionist movement. The collaborative hybrid threat to the Siliguri

possible clashes in future. Forward deployment, construction of airfields and helipads closer to the border, rapid construction of dual use infrastructure including border villages by the Chinese enhances their ability to initiate and sustain any future conflicts in the region.

The security threats may manifest in emerging domains like cyber warfare, space warfare, weaponisation of Artificial Intelligence, information warfare, perception management etc. The battle of narratives playing out during the ongoing disturbances in Manipur, with the spread of fake news and social media manipulation, has amply demonstrated the reach and capability of influence operations.

Internal Fissures

Internally also the Northeast is plagued by numerous challenges. Difficult terrain, porous borders, and the process of stabilisation of the Northeast itself have given rise to problems like interstate border disputes and competing claims over resources. Due to physical isolation of the region and lack of development, as well as some legacy issues, there has been a feeling of alienation among the people of the Northeast. The Northeast is populated by numerous tribes which are fiercely independent and protective of their customs and traditions. Failure to meet the genuine aspirations of the tribes is likely to pose challenges.

Illegal migration leading to rapid demographic changes created a feeling of marginalisation amongst the original inhabitants of the region and led to the growth of several insurgency movements. Proximity to the **Golden Triangle**, a known source of the narcotics trade, apart from driving weapon smuggling and drug trafficking has helped the cause of

insurgency movements with unscrupulous transnational actors fuelling the insecurity. Notwithstanding, the security situation has improved considerably in recent years with signing of peace accords and laying down of arms, and return of militant ranks to the mainstream. The violence profile of Northeast from 2014 to 2014 as given in Government of India Ministry of Home Affairs Annual Report of 2023 -24 indicates a declining trend of violence parameters during the last ten years. The violent incidents in the Northeast during the last ten years had fallen from 824 incidents in 2014 to 163 in 2020 but rose again marginally to 243 in 2023 primarily due to onset of Manipur conflict. Similarly, there is a decline in the number of extremists and civilians killed during the last ten years. From 212 civilians and 181 extremists killed in 2014, it has fallen to 38 civilians and 40 extremists killed in 2023. The surrenders, however, have spiked during 2020 to 2023. This has been possible due to concerted efforts of the security forces and surrender enabling provisions by both the Central as well as the State governments.

The violence parameters show a declining trend but the ongoing turmoil in Manipur has highlighted the ethnic schisms within the region. Manipur has been embroiled in insurgency for several decades. The early nineties saw clashes between Nagas and Kukis over land rights and the present conflict has witnessed a complete ethnic divide between Meiteis and Kukis. The problems in Manipur are accentuated by drug smuggling, rising unemployment, contentious land rights, Scheduled Tribe status to Meiteis, easy availability of weapons and other warlike stores and the porous Indo-Myanmar border. Similarly, the long pending Naga Peace Accord needs to come to a close to resolve the longest insurgency movement in the Northeast. The impact of the Naga Peace Accord on

the situation in Manipur will have to be factored as the provisions may clash with the aspirations of Meiteis and Kukis in Manipur.

Engagement with the remaining elements of ULFA (I) and Valley Based Insurgent Groups should commence to stamp out all other insurgency movements. Assam has seen the fruits of peace and development due to an improved security situation but festering issues like Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), unresolved interstate border disputes and unfulfilled aspirations of various tribal groups can disturb the fragile peace. The situation in Mizoram is peaceful but spill over of violence from Bangladesh and migration from Myanmar can cause disruptions which can vitiate the atmosphere in the frontline state. Similarly, the insurgency movements in Tripura have been curbed, but the remnants of various factions of National Liberation Front of Tripura camped in Bangladesh can be revived by ISI in cohort with the Bangladesh Army to create disturbances. Rehabilitation of

the surrendered cadres of various militant groups is extremely important to prevent them from being lured by inimical propaganda. Inability to find permanent solutions to these problems will continue to pose threats of revival of insurgency.

The demographic changes and sustained propaganda by groups with vested interests have spurred the growth of religious fundamentalism and radicalisation in the region, particularly in Assam and Tripura. Sleeper cells of radicalized groups have tried to vitiate the stable environment. The situation has been further exacerbated by the conflict in Bangladesh with growth of anti-India feelings, increased influence of ISI and resultant export of Jihadi elements to the Northeast.

The region also faces numerous environmental challenges that impact its biodiversity as well as development. Located in one of the high-risk seismic zones and ecologically fragile region, systemic and unplanned deforestation



Peaceful protests against the CAA and National Register of Citizens in Assam, December 2019 (Photo P. Surendra / Deccan Chronicle)



Pakistan Army Chief General Asim Munir (R) with Bangladesh Lieutenant General SM Kamrul Hassan in Rawalpindi, January 2025

and environmental degradation over the years have resulted in climate changes and increasing natural disasters. The devastation caused by the Glacial Lake Outburst Flood in Sikkim in 2023 is a grim reminder of one such disaster. The Tsangpo Mega dam project planned by China in Tibet will also have environmental consequences. Rise in human-animal conflict, flooding and soil erosions demand stricter adherence to environmental laws and a holistic approach from the Government.

The civil war in Myanmar since 2021 has affected India's Act East policy and stalled major infrastructure projects like the Trilateral India – Myanmar – Thailand Highway and the Kaladan Multi-modal Transit Transport Project. It also affects the fragile peace in states like Manipur and Nagaland by continued migration, weapons smuggling and drug trafficking.

End Note

The complex and dynamic developments in the world in general and the neighbourhood in particular, and the rapid technological developments necessitate continuous focus and ability to adapt to the

changes. Else, India will be left behind in a world of intense competition for resources and power. In this complex geopolitical environment we have to align with the new realities and work towards self-reliance. The Northeast and the immediate neighbours are faced with numerous challenges with security, economic, environmental and social dimensions.

There is a definite need to balance traditional military security with human, social and regional security. Prolonged instability brought about by regime changes, ethnic insurgency, lack of development, rising unemployment, social tensions caused by migration,

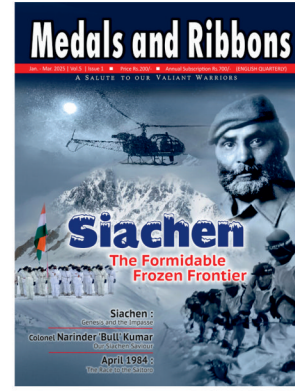
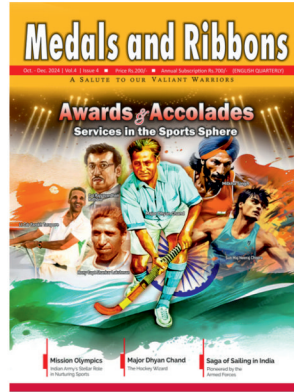
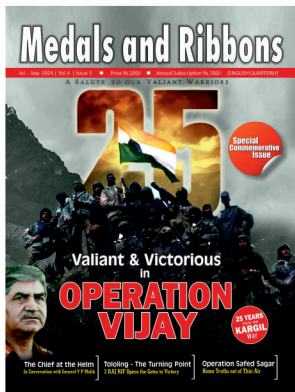
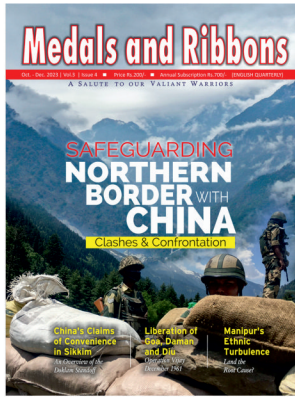
radicalisation and religious extremism have dented overall growth of this region. It's time to change the narrative and attempt all round development of the region by optimum utilisation of the talented human capital and abundant natural resources. Implementation of the **Act East Policy**, focused infrastructure developments, use of culture as a bridge and engagement with all segments of society for collective and equitable growth are some of the key areas that need to be addressed. To meet external aggression, the Armed Forces must reorient, and focus on capability development and civil-military fusion. A stable and peaceful security situation along the borders and the hinterland is sine qua non for the region to march on the path of peace and development – **in sync with India's goal to be Viksit Bharat by 2047.**



Lieutenant General RP Kalita, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, SM, VSM (Retd) was commissioned into 9 KUMAON in June 1984 and served in Army for four decades in some of the most challenging areas. He commanded a Rashtriya Rifles battalion and an Infantry Division in Kashmir, and a Corps in Northeast India. In addition to numerous important staff and instructional appointments, he has served twice in UN peacekeeping missions. He was the Eastern Army Commander prior to his superannuation on 31 December 2023 and has settled in Guwahati. Presently he is working as Chairman 7th Assam State Finance Commission and is a visiting Professor in Guwahati University.



Lt Gen RP Kalita



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