

ISRG JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES AND CULTURAL STUDIES (ISRGJHCS)



ISRG PUBLISHERS

Abbreviated Key Title: ISRG J Humanit Cult Stud

ISSN: 3048-5436 (Online)

Journal homepage: <https://isrgpublishers.com/gjhcs/>

Volume – II Issue- III (May-June) 2025

Frequency: Bimonthly



Militant Insurgency in Northeast India

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| **Received:** 10.06.2025 | **Accepted:** 15.06.2025 | **Published:** 18.06.2025

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Abstract

A complex combination of historical, ethnic, political, and economic circumstances have contributed to the long-standing militant insurgency in north-eastern India. Numerous ethnic groups with unique languages, traditions, and identities call the area home. Demands for increased autonomy, independent states, or even total independence are a result of the cultural and political marginalization that many of these people experience. Mistrust of the central government has been stoked by historical grievances, especially the way some regions were incorporated into India during and after colonial rule. The area is still economically underdeveloped despite having abundant natural resources, with inadequate public services, poor infrastructure, and few job possibilities. A second factor in the area's feeling of alienation is its geographic remoteness, which is connected to mainland India by the Siliguri Corridor. Insurgent organizations have also been able to obtain weapons, training, and safe havens thanks to the open international borders with China, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Myanmar. Local discontent has increased as a result of harsh counter-insurgency policies like the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, which have been accused of violating human rights. Furthermore, many insurgent organizations have split up, continuing to commit crimes or engage in bloodshed, even though some have signed peace agreements. Peace attempts have been made more difficult by the disintegration of armed groups and the external assistance provided in previous decades. In general, security measures alone won't be enough to end insurgency in the Northeast; reconciliation, inclusive development, and meaningful political discourse are also necessary.

Keywords: Historical, Ethnical, Economic Circumstances, Armed Forces Special Power Act, Reconciliation

Introduction:

The Northeast India insurgency refers to a prolonged armed conflict involving multiple militant factions across several north-eastern Indian states. These groups operate under diverse political ideologies, such as separatism, Jihadism, and Christian nationalism, and are engaged in confrontation with the Indian government. The north-eastern region is geographically connected to the rest of India through a narrow stretch of land called the Siliguri Corridor, which is only about 23 kilometers (approximately 14.29 miles) wide at its narrowest point.

This region, often referred to as the Seven Sister States, includes Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Manipur, and Nagaland. Long-standing tensions exist not only between insurgent groups and the Indian central government but also within the local communities—between indigenous populations and migrants from other Indian regions, including undocumented immigrants.

Over recent years, the overall intensity of the insurgency has significantly declined. By 2019, there was a reported 70% decrease in insurgency-related incidents and an 80% reduction in civilian casualties compared to data from 2013.

However, the state of Manipur saw a resurgence of insurgent activity following ethnic clashes that erupted on May 3, 2023, involving the Meitei and Kuki communities. These renewed hostilities have revitalized interest in militancy, leading to increased recruitment in various armed groups operating in the region.

Despite the ongoing tensions, there have been signs of democratic engagement. For instance, during the 2014 Indian general election, the northeastern states recorded an 80% voter turnout, the highest in the country, which Indian officials interpret as a demonstration of the region's trust in India's democratic system.

According to General Anil Chauhan, who served as the Eastern Army Commander and later as India's Chief of Defence Staff, by the year 2020, areas affected by violence had contracted significantly. Most insurgent activity was then confined to a specific zone located at the tri-junction of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and northern Nagaland.

Reasons for it:

Ethnic Diversity

Northeast India is the most ethnically diverse region in the country. Home to nearly 40 million people, it includes 213 of India's 635 recognized tribal communities. Each of these tribes maintains its own unique cultural traditions, languages, and social systems. A major point of contention arises when efforts are made to assimilate them into the broader Indian mainstream, as this is perceived as a threat to their distinct cultural identities. This fear of cultural erosion has fueled resentment and resistance, contributing to the rise of insurgent movements in the region.

Lack of Political Representation

The geographical isolation of the Northeast—linked to the rest of India only by a narrow strip known as the Siliguri Corridor—combined with inadequate political representation in national policymaking bodies, has led to widespread feelings of neglect and marginalization. This perceived political alienation is one of the core reasons behind the recurring insurgencies, as people in the

region feel excluded from the mainstream governance framework of India.

Impact of East Bengali Refugees

The Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 caused a massive refugee crisis, with around 10 million people fleeing East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and seeking asylum in India. A significant number of these refugees settled in the northeastern states, especially in Tripura and Assam. This sudden and large-scale influx of outsiders drastically altered the demographic landscape, escalating economic and social competition between the native populations and the new settlers. This demographic pressure has been a major driver of ethnic tensions and insurgent unrest in these states.

Underdevelopment

Historically, the Northeast has faced systemic economic neglect. Despite its strategic location and rich natural resources, the region has not attracted sufficient investment from either the central government or the private sector. This lack of infrastructure, employment opportunities, and industrial growth has contributed to widespread dissatisfaction and made the youth more vulnerable to insurgent recruitment.

Partition and Its Aftermath

The colonial partitioning of Northeast India by the British was done without regard for the cultural and ethnic unity of the local populations. This resulted in arbitrary borders that fragmented long-standing communities. For instance, the separation of Chittagong from the Northeast weakened historical trade and cultural ties. Similarly, dividing regions like the Kachin-Chin hills and Eastern Nagalim disrupted centuries-old community linkages. Post-independence political interventions—such as those by Jawaharlal Nehru and international entities like the United Nations—further complicated regional dynamics. These actions deepened regional grievances and fractured internal harmony, laying the groundwork for enduring mistrust and rebellion.

Mizoram (1966–1986)

The Mizo National Front (MNF) launched an armed revolt on 28 February 1966, aiming to create an independent country for the Mizo people. The rebellion was rooted in longstanding grievances of neglect and perceived Assamese dominance. After two decades of conflict, peace was achieved through the Mizo Accord in 1986, which ended the MNF-led secessionist struggle. However, some residual unrest continues due to demands from minority groups like the Chakma Buddhists seeking an autonomous region called Chakmaistan, and the Reang (Bru) tribe, which has also faced religious and ethnic marginalization by the predominantly Christian Mizo majority.

Manipur

Once a princely state, Manipur joined India in 1949, but resentment grew when Nagaland was granted statehood in 1963, while Manipur remained a union territory. Though it achieved statehood in 1972, dissatisfaction persisted. The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) was imposed in 1980, signaling the central government's view of the region as a conflict zone.

The rise of Naga nationalism spilled into Manipur through the activities of the NSCN (National Socialist Council of Nagaland), which split into Isak-Muivah (IM) and Khaplang (K) factions. This led to ethnic clashes with the Kuki tribe, who formed their own armed groups. Subsequently, other groups like the Paite, Vaiphei, Pangals, and Hmars also militarized.

The United National Liberation Front (UNLF), Manipur's first separatist group, was founded in 1964, while Marxist/Maoist groups like the PLA, PREPAK, and KCP emerged between 1977–1980.

Since 3 May 2023, violent ethnic clashes between the Meitei and Kuki communities have escalated, resulting in over 120 deaths and 3,000 injuries, and a resurgence in militant activities.

Nagaland

Formed in 1963, Nagaland's insurgency began with the Naga National Council led by Phizo in 1947, going underground by 1956. The NSCN was created in 1980 with a vision of "Greater Nagaland", incorporating Naga-inhabited areas from other states. The group split in 1988 into NSCN-IM and NSCN-K, both of which later entered ceasefire agreements with the Indian government.

Tripura (1978–2024)

Tripura saw rising tensions as tribal natives became a minority due to Bangladeshi migration, sparking fears of cultural and economic extinction. The Tripura National Volunteers (TNV) was the first rebel group, active from 1978–1988. Later, the NLFT (National Liberation Front of Tripura) and ATTF (All Tripura Tiger Force) emerged to defend tribal rights.

Between 1992 and 2001, NLFT attacks killed 764 civilians and 184 security personnel. In 2019, the NLFT signed a peace deal, and in 2024, both the NLFT and ATTF finalized a Tripura Peace Accord. 328 militants surrendered, and the government allocated ₹250 crore for their rehabilitation.

Assam

Assam has long been a hotspot for insurgents due to its porous borders with Bangladesh and Bhutan and tensions between locals and migrants. The ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) was founded in 1979 to create a sovereign Assam through armed conflict. The Kamtapur Liberation Organisation (KLO), formed in 1995, seeks a separate Kamtapur state in parts of Assam and West Bengal to support the Koch Rajbongshi community.

Bodo insurgency movements include:

- BLTF (1996–2003): Fought for autonomy and accepted peace via the Bodoland Territorial Council.
- NDFB (1986–2020): Originated as the Bodo Security Force, demanding an independent Bodoland.

Meghalaya

Created in 1971 from Assam to accommodate Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo aspirations, Meghalaya's statehood didn't eliminate tribal nationalism. Early efforts at unity dissolved as new tribal militias emerged:

- HALC (1992): Formed to protect locals from non-tribal immigration.
- Split into HNLC (Khasi-Jaintia based) and AMLA (Garo-based).
- ANVC later replaced AMLA and demanded an independent Garo state.

The Garo National Liberation Army (GNLA), founded in 2009, is currently the most active militant group in the state. Various external insurgent groups like ULFA and NDFB have also operated in Meghalaya.

Other Insurgent groups:

Assam and Northeast India

1. United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS)

The United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) was established in March 1999 in Assam's Karbi Anglong district, following the unification of two militant factions: the Karbi National Volunteers (KNV) and the Karbi People's Front (KPF). Over time, internal disagreements led to a split within the organization. In 2004, the faction opposed to peace talks broke away and rebranded itself as the Karbi Longri North Cachar Hills Liberation Front (KLNLFF), while its armed wing became known as the Karbi Longri North Cachar Hills Resistance Force (KNPR). Eventually, in December 2014, UPDS formally disbanded after all its members and leaders surrendered to the authorities.

2. Karbi Longri N.C. Hills Liberation Front (KLNLFF)

Formed on 16 May 2004, the KLNLFF emerged from a faction of the UPDS that rejected dialogue with the government. Operating primarily in the Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao districts of Assam, KLNLFF claims to champion the rights of the Karbi tribal population. Its central ideological goal is referred to as "Hemprek Kangthim", a term that translates to self-rule or self-determination for the Karbi people. Although it reportedly maintained associations with the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), the KLNLFF's influence significantly declined in later years, eventually leading to its dissolution by 2021.

3. Dima Haram Daogah (DHD)

The Dima Haram Daogah (DHD) was created in 1995 after the Dimasas National Security Force (DNSF) dissolved. One of DNSF's leaders, Jewel Gorlosa, refused to surrender and instead established the DHD. The group later splintered further after a 2003 peace agreement with the Indian government. This led to the formation of a more aggressive breakaway faction known as DHD(J) or Black Widow, which continued armed activities under Gorlosa's leadership. The Black Widow faction sought to establish a Dimaraji state solely in the Dima Hasao district for the Dimasas people. Meanwhile, the DHD (Nunisa faction) had a broader vision of Dimaraji, aiming to include adjacent areas such as Cachar, Karbi Anglong, Nagaon (Assam), and parts of Dimapur district (Nagaland). A significant demobilization occurred in September 2009, when hundreds of militants surrendered to Indian security forces.

4. Muslim United Liberation Tigers of Assam (MULTA)

Established in 1996, the Muslim United Liberation Tigers of Assam (MULTA) was a radical Islamist insurgent outfit. The group consisted of both indigenous Muslims and Bengali-origin migrants residing in Assam. MULTA's declared aim was the creation of an Islamic state governed by Sharia law within India. Over the years, the organization lost momentum and eventually merged with Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) in 2016, effectively ceasing its independent operations.

Ethnic Insurgent Movements in Surrounding Northeast States

5. Zomi Revolutionary Army (ZRA)

The Zomi people, a collective term for nine tribes primarily located in Manipur, formed the Zomi Re-unification Organisation (ZRO) in 1993 to advocate for their rights. In 1997, the ZRO established an armed wing called the Zomi Revolutionary Army (ZRA). This group's primary objective is to protect the interests of the Zomi community, which they believe has suffered long-standing neglect

and marginalization at the hands of dominant ethnic groups in Manipur. Currently, the ZRA operates under a Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement with the Indian government while pursuing a peaceful political solution for the Zo community.

6. Hmar People's Convention – Democracy (HPC-D)

The Hmar People's Convention – Democracy (HPC-D) was formed in 1995 as an armed offshoot of the Hmar People's Convention (HPC). The original HPC had signed a peace agreement with the Mizoram government in 1994, leading to the creation of the Sinlung Hills Development Council (SHDC) in northern Mizoram. However, a segment of the Hmar leadership found the agreement unsatisfactory and broke away to continue the armed struggle. The HPC (D) recruits members from the Hmar population dispersed across several northeastern states—Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, and Meghalaya. Their primary demand is the creation of a separate administrative entity under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution for Hmar-majority areas.

7. National Socialist Council of Taniland (NSCT)

Initially known as the National Liberation Council of Taniland, the NSCT is a separatist group operating along the Assam–Arunachal Pradesh border. Its members are drawn from the Tani ethnic groups, which include tribes such as the Mising (in Assam) and Adi, Nyishi, Galo, Apatani, and Tagin (in Arunachal Pradesh). The NSCT's primary goal was the establishment of a separate homeland named Taniland for the Tani peoples. However, due to overwhelming public support for India among Arunachal Pradesh's population, the group failed to gain traction and has now become largely inactive or defunct.

Spill over into Bhutan – Operation All Clear:

After India's 1990 counter-insurgency operations (Rhino and Bajrang), multiple separatist groups from Assam moved their camps into Bhutanese territory, especially near the southern border adjoining India. By 1996, Bhutan became aware of a significant presence of militant camps belonging to insurgent outfits like the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), Bodo Liberation Tigers Force (BLTF), and the Kamtapur Liberation Organization (KLO). These camps also sheltered members from the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) and the All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF).

In response, India used diplomatic channels to urge Bhutan to dismantle these camps, offering assistance if needed. Bhutan initially attempted a peaceful resolution and opened dialogues in 1998, engaging in several rounds of talks with ULFA and NDFB. The KLO, however, ignored all overtures. Although ULFA agreed in 2001 to close four camps, it turned out the militants had merely moved locations.

With negotiations failing by 2003, Bhutan's National Assembly authorized military action on 14 July. Following a two-day ultimatum, Bhutan launched Operation All Clear on 15 December 2003—the Royal Bhutan Army's first combat operation. Within weeks, they had killed around 120 militants, detained senior ULFA leaders, destroyed 30 rebel camps and 35 outposts, and forced remaining insurgents to flee into Bangladesh and India.

Between 2008 and 2011, Bhutan continued counter-insurgency actions, dismantling further camps, disposing of explosives, and clashing intermittently with militants.

Spill over into Myanmar:

The porous India–Myanmar border, which splits ethnic communities like the Nagas and Mizos/Chins, has long been exploited by insurgent groups for cross-border movement. Since the 1960s, India and Myanmar have had military cooperation; Myanmar's army (Tatmadaw) intercepted Indian rebels en route to China for training. However, Indian support for Myanmar's democracy movement in the 1980s strained this cooperation temporarily.

After the deadly 2015 ambush in Manipur, India carried out cross-border strikes on NSCN-K camps in Myanmar. Later, in 2019, joint Indo-Myanmar operations—Sunrise I and II—were conducted targeting insurgent groups like ULFA (I), NDFB, KLO, and NSCN-K. In one such operation, Myanmar troops attacked NSCN-K's headquarters in Taga. India simultaneously launched action against the Arakan Army operating in Mizoram.

Militant Alliances:

Coordination Committee (CorCom) – Manipur

A coalition of militant groups in Manipur formed the Coordination Committee (CorCom). It includes:

- Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP)
- Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL)
- People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK) and its Pro faction
- Revolutionary People's Front (RPF)
- United National Liberation Front (UNLF)
- United People's Party of Kangleipak (UPPK)

Listed as a banned extremist outfit by the Indian government, CorCom is responsible for attacks, especially during elections and public holidays.

Federal Government of WESEA

Several Northeast Indian insurgent groups have allied under a broader banner termed the Federal Government of Western Southeast Asia (WESEA). This entity encompasses militants from:

- Manipur (KCP, KYKL, PREPAK, RPF, UNLF)
- Meghalaya (Hynniewtre National Liberation Council)
- Assam and North Bengal (ULFA, KLO)
- Tripura (NLFT)

They are joined by groups in Myanmar like the Kachin Independence Army, Chin National Army, and Naga factions, as well as smaller outfits from Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, and Meghalaya. By early 2024, several factions exploited the instability in Myanmar to declare independence, increasing regional tensions.

United National Liberation Front of WESEA (UNLFW)

In 2015, nine major insurgent groups formed the United National Liberation Front of WESEA (UNLFW) during a meeting in Taga, Myanmar. These included:

- NSCN (Khaplang faction)
- ULFA-Independent (led by Paresh Baruah)
- KCP, KYKL, PREPAK
- People's Liberation Army (PLA)
- United National Liberation Front (UNLF)
- National Democratic Front of Boroland – Songbijit faction (NDFB-S)

The goal of UNLFW is to unify insurgent efforts across the region and coordinate anti-government actions.

Counter-Insurgency Outlook

A 1955 directive from Indian Army Chief Rajendrasinhji Jadeja instructed soldiers operating in Northeast India to treat local populations with respect and empathy. He emphasized that although some had taken up arms, they were still fellow Indians. Soldiers were tasked with protecting civilians from insurgents, not waging war on the local populace. Winning their trust and reaffirming their place in the Indian nation was considered a moral and strategic imperative.

Conclusion:

The Northeast Insurgency is a long-standing and complex conflict involving various ethnic, separatist, and insurgent groups operating in the north-eastern region of India. This region, comprising eight states (Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim), is home to a highly diverse population, with multiple ethnic groups, languages, and cultures. The insurgency has been fuelled by demands for autonomy, independence, ethnic identity, and economic neglect.

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