

BOOK REVIEW

*Terror Sans Frontier:
Islamist Militancy in North
East India*
by Jaideep Saikia
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Rene Wadlow*



Jaideep Saikia is a security analyst concerned with the role that Islamic ideology and movements play in the politics of Pakistan and Kashmir, in Bangladesh, and in this book in North East India, particularly Assam. As he notes "Terror Sans Frontiers is a book about militancy and not religion. The word 'Islamist' has been used as a prefix

only in order to separate the militancy it engenders from ethnic militancy movements"

There have been in North East India ethnic-based movements for total independence or for greater autonomy since the independency of India in Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur, and Tripura. The movement in Nagaland is the best known. However each North East state has its own minorities who wish autonomy for ever smaller units. As Nirmal Nibedon wrote in his book *North East India* "It is the ethnic explosion. Make no mistake about it. Have no doubts about it. World governments, more so in India and the South East Asian countries, will have to closely study the case of the ethnic minorities, whether they are Kachins and Karens of Burma, the Mizos or the Ahoms of India. The ethnic minorities of India, particularly those of the Mongoloid stock, will

**Rene Wadlow is the editor of the online Journal of World Politics
www-transnational perspectives.org and the representative of the Association of
World Citizens to the United Nations, Geneva.*

deserve more attention.”

These inter-ethnic tensions have grown worse due to the routes taken by the drug trade from Burma (Myanmar). In addition to the destabilizing impact of ethnic-based movements, the North East states have received ethnic refugees from the conflicts in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. More numerous than these refugees, the North East States have also seen an increasing migration, largely for economic reasons of people from Bangladesh seeking land and greater economic opportunity.

A former governor of Assam is quoted on the geo-political dangers of Bangali migration “The influx of illegal migrants is turning these districts into a Muslim majority region. It will then only be a matter of time when a demand for their merger with Bangladesh may be made. The rapid growth of the international Islamic fundamentalism may provide the driving force for this demand. In this context, it is pertinent that Bangladesh has long discarded secularism and chosen to become an Islamic state. Loss of Lower Assam will sever the entire landmass of the North East from the rest of India and

the rich natural resources of that region will be lost to the nation.”

A strong sub-theme of the book is the growing power of Islamisation in Bangladesh in part due to the need for the votes in Parliament of the Islamist political parties to make a ruling coalition. Saikia quotes Bertil Lintner of the *Far Eastern Economic Review*. “A revolution is taking place in Bangladesh that threatens trouble for the region and beyond if left unchallenged. Islamic fundamentalism, religious intolerance, militant Muslim groups with links to international terrorist groups, a powerful military with ties to the militants, the mushrooming of Islamic schools churning out radical students, middle-class apathy, poverty and lawlessness – all are combining to transform the nation.”

Saikia outlines some of these militant groups in Bangladesh and their efforts to influence Bangali settlers in North East India. There are also training camps in Bangladesh who train young people in military techniques. This youth could be used in the North East.

Behind the Islamic political parties and groups, as well as active

in the training camps, Saikia sees the hand of the Pakistani Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) and its Bangladesh counterpart, the DGFI. Although Bangladesh won its independence from Pakistan in a difficult conflict in 1971, some of the military intelligence people had served together and so there remains a sort of "old boys network" largely anti-Indian in orientation. Saikia quotes Indian intelligence sources that the "Inter Services Intelligence of Pakistan are forming 'modules' inside Assam, which are comprised of ten to twenty illegal migrants from Bangladesh. These 'modules' that are to act as 'sleepers' have been given huge Although the 'modules' have not yet been activated, the role that they are reported to play is quite sinister. According to reports that are available, the 'modules' are being activated sums of money and arms and ammunition, and every so often, the ISI minders make trips to ascertain the readiness of these 'modules'. Although the 'modules' have not yet been activated, the role that they are reported to play is quite sinister. According to reports that are available, the 'modules' on being activated will start a communal riot, act as 'agents saboteurs' in a situation, and even target members of the Muslim community in order

to arouse communal passion."

It is always difficult to say how much of intelligence reporting is self-serving. If there are no threats why have an intelligence service? Saikia asks "Is the game plan, therefore, to steadily expand the Islamist fundamentalist confederacy into North East India, and thereby take the crucial step in the creation of a greater Bangladesh? After all, the situation is ripe for such a picking." Saikia continues "Islamist militancy in North East India is a phenomenon that is shrouded in relative concealment — little is known about it and even less has been written."

We have to see what role North East civil society can play in reducing tensions, as there have been civil society and NGO efforts in the North East ethnic-nationality tensions. Civil society can play a crucial role, especially in chronic conflict situations. Unless the civil society has a real stake in conflict reduction, one can not expect a lasting peace. This has been particularly true in the Nagaland conflicts. Basically civil society can be understood as any organized group whose aim is the welfare of the society, private welfare, and

BOOK REVIEW

whose members are drawn on a voluntary basis. However, business groups, whose basic aim is profit, can also play important roles so that the concept of civil society must not be narrowly defined.

The questions are: who in the

community has influence and how does he use it? Can such influence be used for peacemaking?

North East India merits watching, and Jaideep Saikia has given us some of the basic elements for further research. ■