

COMMENT

Beyond the Border

NORTHEAST MEANS INSURGENCY. Northeast means Armed Forces Special Powers Act and Irom Sharmila's historic fast against that notorious Act. Northeast means grand alienation from mainstream India. In short Northeast means violence. Children are born in violence, they grow in violence and they also die in violence. Ordinary people are dying in cross-fire almost daily. Then there is fratricidal war as Northeast is still an ethnic cauldron. Tribals settle scores in their usual tribal way.

Of late some northeastern states are witnessing serious demographic changes, leading to communal tension and riots. Border regions have always been porous and they have become more so because of massive influx of refugees. Arunachal being a border outpost, is feeling the heat of Chakma refugees who are being systematically persecuted in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh.

And now Burma or Myanmar is in the news for migration of ethnic people to Manipur and Mizoram again for violence in that junta-ruled country and age-old ethnic insurgency.

There are about 100,000 Mayan-marese Refugees in India's north-east, particularly in the states of Mizoram and Manipur. During the reign of Gen Ne Win in Burma of 1968, about 20,000 Kukis from sixty villages in north west Burma, were driven out of Burma. Every year about 500 Manmarese, hailing from ethnic communities leave Myanmar for India's northeast. The Tamarandi Dam, a hydel project on the Chindwin river, a tributary of the mighty Irrawaddy river, is being constructed by the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation of India and Colenco Power Engineering Ltd, Switzerland at an estimated cost of \$3 billion. The Memorandum of Understanding between India and Myanmar stipulates that the dam will be 80 metres high, possessing an installed power generation capacity of 12 MW. The project when completed would supply power to Myanmar and India's north-east border areas. Originating from Hukawng Valley of Kachin state, the Chindwin river flows through Sagaing division in Myanmar. Already 2000 villages have been uprooted, and additionally 45000 villages are expected to be displaced, as construction progresses. The area is acutely earthquake prone. There has been a spate of demonstrations by Kukis from Manipur, demanding a halt to the construction of the dam. The displaced villagers have been temporarily given shelter in Tamarandi Wildlife Reserve. As it is a wildlife reserve, they feel insecure and quite justifiably.

New Delhi's diplomacy towards Myanmar has been in the doldrums for long because India's foreign policy makers never wanted to annoy Uncle Sam. Meanwhile China reaped enormous

harvest, both politically and strategically by nursing good relations with the military regime. As border region serves as a sanctuary for northeast insurgents, including ULFA hardliners, India is now trying to make rapport with Myanmar, hopefully to combat radicals jointly. And Myanmar too has vested interests in clearing forests and urbanising villages to fight the Kachin and Karen insurgent groups. So the joint venture in power sector! Maybe, it is late and yet nothing is too late when it is the question of causing ethnic insurgency. □□