Peace Accords and Fragile Reconciliation: Evaluating Ethnic Conflict Resolution Mechanisms in Northeast India

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Abstract

Ethnic conflicts in Northeast India represent one of the most persistent challenges to democratic governance and national integration in postcolonial India. Rooted in historical grievances, ethnic identity assertion, and demands for autonomy, these conflicts have generated multiple insurgencies and violent movements since the 1950s. In response, the Indian state has attempted to resolve these issues primarily through peace accords, ceasefire agreements, and negotiated settlements. While such mechanisms have temporarily reduced violence and brought insurgent groups into the mainstream, their long-term effectiveness in ensuring reconciliation remains fragile. This paper critically examines key peace accords in Northeast India, including the Shillong Accord (1975), the Mizo Accord (1986), the Bodo Peace Accords (1993, 2003, 2020), and the Karbi Peace Accord (2021), to assess their achievements and limitations. Based exclusively on secondary sources such as academic writings, government documents, and policy reports, the study finds that accords have largely succeeded in pacifying armed insurgencies but often fail to address deeper structural inequalities, ethnic exclusivity, and developmental deficits. The paper argues that for sustainable peace, reconciliation must extend beyond elite bargains to encompass inclusive governance, equitable socioeconomic development, and the recognition of ethnic aspirations.

Keywords: Ethnic Conflict, Northeast, Insurgent, Accord, Movement.

Introduction

The Northeast of India, comprising Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim, is renowned for its extraordinary cultural diversity and ongoing political challenges (Misra, 2011). Referred to as the "land of seven sisters," with Sikkim later included, this region comprises over 220 uniquely distinct ethnic communities, each characterized by its own individual languages, religious beliefs, and socio-cultural practices (Hussain, 2008). The region's spatial isolation—linked to the rest of India by the Siliguri Corridor and bordered by five countries—further intensifies its peripheral status in the national imagination (McDuie-Ra, 2016).

Since independence in 1947, repeated insurgencies, ethnic violence, and demands for

autonomy or secession have shaped the Northeast's political landscape. These movements originate from persistent grievances, including perceived marginalization by the central government, intense ethnic identity assertions, concerns over demographic changes, and disputes involving resource control and political representation (Das, 2012). Insurgent outfits such as the Naga National Council (NNC), Mizo National Front (MNF), United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), and groups representing Karbi and Dimasa interests have emerged across different historical periods (Weiner, 1983).

To respond to these crises, the Indian state has generally employed a dual strategy: counter-insurgency measures to curb violence and peace agreements to bring militant leaders into mainstream politics (Hazarika, 1994). Today, despite a decline in violence in areas where peace accords have been enacted, the Northeast still grapples with unresolved issues, splits within insurgent groups, and a tenuous atmosphere of reconciliation (Bhaumik, 2009).

The article critically investigates the role of peace accords—such as the Shillong Accord (1975), Mizo Accord (1986), Bodo Peace Accords (1993, 2003, 2020), and Karbi Peace Accord (2021)—in resolving conflicts in Northeast India. It examines the effectiveness of these agreements in promoting stability, as well as their shortcomings in creating durable reconciliation. The analysis contends that peace accords tend to function as elite bargains, successfully reducing immediate violence but often failing to address entrenched social inequalities and the complex aspirations of different ethnic groups (Sajjad, 2017).

Historical Roots of Ethnic Conflicts in Northeast India

Ethnic conflicts in Northeast India can be traced to deeply rooted historical and structural factors that shaped communal relationships and political autonomy in the region. During colonial rule, the British administration implemented exclusionary policies like the Inner Line Permit and demarcated "excluded" and "partially excluded" areas, which fostered administrative isolation and reinforced a sense of distinctness among tribal communities (Misra, 2000). These boundaries often divided kindred ethnic groups across arbitrary lines, setting in motion inter-group and boundary conflicts that would continue into the postcolonial period (Watt, 1887). Along with this administrative fragmentation, migration spikes linked to large-scale plantation economies in Assam created new layers of ethnic insecurity and competition, as incoming laborers altered demographic patterns and stoked fears among indigenous populations (Bhaumik, 2007).

After independence, attempts at state integration frequently reproduced colonial divisions, with postcolonial restructuring based on territorial autonomy sometimes exacerbating local grievances, especially when new administrative units overlapped ethnic boundaries and competing claims. The persistence of special laws such as the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act not only militarized the region but also heightened the sense of alienation among local communities (Phanjoubam, 2016). Ethnic identity became central to political mobilization, animating territorial claims and autonomy movements—such as demands for Nagalim or Bodoland—that generated both ethnopolitical contestation and frequent inter-ethnic violence (Singha, 2017).

Despite being resource-rich, the Northeast has long suffered economic marginalization and neglect, which has manifested in poor infrastructure, high unemployment, and developmental deficits that insurgent movements have effectively exploited to gain traction (Datta, 1999). Additionally, the region's proximity to multiple international borders and porous frontiers facilitated cross-border insurgent networks and interventions by neighboring countries, increasing the scale and complexity of local conflicts (Bhaumik, 2007). These legacies of colonial policy,

demographic manipulation, uneven development, and external linkages combine to perpetuate a volatile environment where ethnic unrest remains both persistent and multi-layered.

Peace Accords in Northeast India: An Overview

Peace accords have been central to the Indian government's strategy for resolving conflicts in Northeast India since the mid-20th century. While counter-insurgency efforts have suppressed much of the armed resistance, durable peace has largely depended on negotiated settlements. These accords typically entail insurgent groups disarming in return for political recognition, concessions on autonomy, or economic incentives. However, their success has been uneven, hinging on factors such as negotiation inclusivity, implementation credibility, and the broader socio-political environment.

The Shillong Accord of 1975 was a pioneering peace effort in the region, signed between the Government of India and members of the Naga National Council (NNC), who agreed to accept the Indian Constitution and surrender arms. Despite temporarily lowering violence, the agreement was seen as a betrayal by many Nagas, leading to the emergence of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) factions that continued the insurgency. The accord is often viewed as fragile because it failed to address the core political aspirations of sovereignty, resulting in prolonged conflict (Rajagopalan, 2008).

In contrast, the 1986 Mizo Accord between the Indian government and the Mizo National Front (MNF) is regarded as a successful example of peacebuilding. It ended decades of insurgency and granted Mizoram full statehood in 1987. The MNF transitioned into a legitimate political party, and sustained development initiatives accompanied the political settlement. This success is attributed to broader consultation during negotiations, credible implementation, tangible political rewards, and the relatively homogeneous ethnic composition of Mizoram, which minimized factional divisions (SATP, 2021).

The Bodo peace process illustrates a more complex trajectory. The initial 1993 accord created the Bodoland Autonomous Council but lacked constitutional authority and failed to satisfy all stakeholders, prompting renewed violence. The 2003 accord, which established the Bodoland Territorial Council under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, granted greater autonomy but faced challenges related to governance, corruption, and exclusion of non-Bodo communities. The 2020 accord aimed to be more comprehensive by including multiple factions and promising significant economic packages and identity protections. Although large-scale violence has declined, tensions over land and identity persist, reflecting the fragile nature of the peace (Borooah, 2020).

The 2021 Karbi Accord marked a milestone by facilitating the surrender of over a thousand insurgents in Assam's Karbi Anglong region. It promised enhanced autonomy and development funding, aiming to integrate fragmented insurgent groups into democratic governance. Nonetheless, concerns remain about inclusivity and grassroots integration, as a lack of these could lead to renewed fragmentations, echoing earlier experiences (MHA, 2024).

Comparatively, accords offering clear political recognition and substantive autonomy, like the Mizo Accord and the 2003 Bodo Accord, tend to foster more durable peace than those demanding unilateral concessions, such as the Shillong Accord. Ethnic homogeneity appears to aid reconciliation, as seen in Mizoram, while multi-ethnic contexts like Assam complicate settlements. Crucially, the success of these accords often depends on sustained implementation, inclusive governance, and tangible development benefits. Despite progress, many accords remain

elite-driven, with limited grassroots participation, rendering reconciliation fragile and susceptible to future disruptions (Rajagopalan, 2008).

Thus, peace accords in Northeast India reflect both achievements and ongoing challenges in transforming conflict dynamics through political negotiation and socio-economic integration.

Achievements of Peace Accords

Peace accords in Northeast India have played a significant role in diminishing armed conflicts and creating avenues for political negotiation. One of their key achievements is the substantial reduction of violence. The Mizo Accord of 1986, for instance, ended two decades of insurgency, bringing lasting peace and stability to Mizoram, which today is counted among the most peaceful states in India (Bhattacharjee & Athul, 2012). Similarly, the Bodo peace agreements of 2003 and 2020 facilitated the surrender of a large number of militants and led to a significant reduction in violent incidents in the region. Regions like Nagaland and Karbi Anglong have also experienced a decline in violence due to ceasefire agreements and ongoing peace dialogues compared to the turbulent periods of the 1980s and 1990s (Baruah, 2020).

Another notable accomplishment of these accords has been the political mainstreaming of former insurgent leaders. The Mizo National Front (MNF), which formerly engaged in armed rebellion, transformed into a legitimate political party and eventually governed the state of Mizoram, demonstrating a successful process of political integration (Lalchungnunga, 2013). Similarly, after the 2003 and 2020 accords in Bodoland, former militants from groups like the Bodo Liberation Tigers and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland entered mainstream politics, taking up influential positions in the Bodoland Territorial Council. This transition reflects the Indian state's capability to integrate former rebels into formal political institutions, promoting governance and stability.

The institutionalization of ethnic autonomy within the Indian constitutional framework is another significant gain. The establishment of the Bodoland Territorial Council under the Sixth Schedule granted the Bodo community substantial administrative and legislative powers. Likewise, the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council was empowered under the 2021 accord with enhanced autonomy and financial resources, enabling local self-governance. Though occasionally contested, these institutional arrangements have given ethnic groups greater political recognition and control over their affairs within the union (Saikia, 2021).

Complementing political and administrative gains, most peace accords have been followed by socio-economic development initiatives aimed at addressing some root causes of conflict. The Mizo Accord set the stage for significant investments in public services and infrastructure, contributing to Mizoram's relatively high literacy and socio-economic stability (Singh, 2017). The 2020 Bodo agreement promised an economic development package worth ₹1,500 crore, while the Karbi Accord allocated ₹1,000 crore for regional upliftment. Though implementation has sometimes been uneven, these commitments reflect an important recognition of the developmental deficits made manifest by prolonged conflict.

Peace accords also embody India's evolving federal accommodation of diverse ethnic identities without compromising national unity. Through granting statehood to Mizoram, establishing autonomous councils in Assam, and legally recognizing ethnic distinctiveness, the Indian state has demonstrated a flexible approach to managing subnational demands. This adaptive federalism has played an important role in preventing further breakdowns in state-society relations,

even in regions with strong separatist undercurrents (Misra, 2000).

Finally, beyond material and political concessions, peace accords carry critical symbolic and psychological significance. Acknowledgment of ethnic grievances and political aspirations fosters a sense of inclusion, which is essential to reconciliation processes. Groups such as the Karbis and Bodos, who have historically felt marginalized, perceive these accords as formal recognition of their distinct identities and rights, contributing substantially to peacebuilding (Phanjoubam, 2016).

In summary, peace accords in Northeast India have achieved clear reductions in violence, facilitated the integration of insurgent leaders into politics, institutionalized ethnic autonomy, promoted regional development, strengthened federal flexibility, and provided symbolic validation for marginalized communities. Continued inclusive implementation and addressing grassroots concerns remain vital to consolidate and sustain these accomplishments.

Limitations and Fragility of Reconciliation

Peace accords in Northeast India, despite achieving notable successes in reducing armed conflicts and fostering dialogue, face significant challenges that undermine durable reconciliation. One major limitation is the incomplete implementation of agreements. For example, the Shillong Accord of 1975 collapsed largely because it failed to meet the Nagas' political aspirations, offering no substantive autonomy and breeding resentment within the community. Similarly, the 2003 Bodo Accord, despite its constitutional importance, encountered delays in devolving financial powers to the Bodoland Territorial Council, while the developmental promises of the 2021 Karbi Accord suffered bureaucratic bottlenecks. These gaps between promises and delivery erode trust, creating openings for splinter insurgencies (Saikia, 2021).

The persistence of splinter groups further complicates peace efforts. The Shillong Accord itself gave rise to the National Socialist Council of Nagaland, which later fragmented into rival factions. The Bodo insurgency witnessed similar factionalism, with some armed groups continuing violent activities despite formal peace settlements. This fragmentation highlights how elite-level deals can fail to accommodate the full spectrum of dissenting voices within movements, undermining the consolidation of peace (Borooah, 2020).

Peace accords have also tended to favor dominant ethnic groups while marginalizing minorities within the same territories. The Bodoland Territorial Council, for example, has been criticized for sidelining communities such as Koch-Rajbongshis, Adivasis, and Muslims, leading to ongoing tensions and limiting broader reconciliation. Similarly, in Karbi Anglong, smaller indigenous communities express concerns about being overshadowed by the politically dominant Karbi group. Such exclusions exacerbate inter-ethnic competition and threaten the stability that accords seek to establish (Baruah, 2020).

Another enduring issue is the persistence of socio-economic inequalities. Although many accords include development commitments, outcomes remain uneven. Mizoram, while relatively prosperous since the peace accord, still grapples with rural-urban disparities and youth unemployment. Corruption and weak governance in autonomous councils like the BTC have diluted the impact of development funds, breeding disillusionment among ordinary citizens. Addressing structural issues such as equitable land distribution and education remains critical for sustainable peace (Singh, 2017).

Militarization and a trust deficit between local communities and the Indian state further weaken reconciliation efforts. The continued enforcement of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) across several northeastern states perpetuates a climate of suspicion and fear. In

Nagaland, for instance, the presence of AFSPA despite ceasefire agreements undermines confidence in the durability of peace processes and fuels perceptions that accords are tactical rather than transformative (Phanjoubam, 2016).

Fragile identity politics and competing territorial claims pose additional challenges. Recognition accorded to one group frequently prompts counter-demands from others, as seen in Assam, where Bodo autonomy-inspired calls for similar rights by other ethnic communities. In Karbi Anglong, autonomy granted to the Karbis led to counter-movements by Dimasas and Rengmas. This dynamic generates recurring cycles of claims and conflict, impeding the establishment of stable reconciliation (Weiner, 1983).

Finally, peace processes have typically been elite-driven, excluding the grassroots populations most impacted by conflict. Women's groups, civil society, and ordinary citizens rarely participate meaningfully in negotiations. This lack of inclusivity often results in accords that suppress violence without fostering the deeper social healing and trust necessary for lasting peace (Bhattacharjee, 2016).

In summary, while peace accords have been successful in demobilizing insurgents and reducing violence temporarily, their long-term effectiveness is undermined by weak implementation, fragmented insurgent groups, ethnic exclusions, persistent inequalities, continued militarization, competitive identity politics, and limited grassroots involvement. Overcoming these challenges requires more inclusive, transparent, and holistic peace processes that address underlying structural and social grievances.

Theoretical Lens: Conflict Resolution versus Reconciliation

Understanding why peace accords often pacify violence but fail to produce durable reconciliation requires a theoretical framework that distinguishes conflict termination from societal reconciliation. Conflict resolution literature offers tools for designing settlements and ceasefires, while reconciliation theory probes deeper socio-psychological restoration of relationships.

John Burton's human needs theory suggests that many ethnic conflicts arise from unmet basic human needs—identity, security, recognition, and participation—and that settlements which ignore these needs will be unstable (Burton, 1990). From this viewpoint, accords that focus narrowly on political bargains without addressing identity, livelihoods, or recognition are likely to be fragile.

Johan Galtung's distinction between negative peace (the absence of violence) and positive peace (the presence of social justice and equitable structures) is especially useful (Galtung, 1969). Most Northeast Indian accords have achieved negative peace by demobilizing combatants and reducing violence, but positive peace remains elusive where structural inequalities and grievances persist.

Practical reconciliation frameworks add interpersonal and institutional layers. Lederach emphasizes multi-level peacebuilding, arguing that sustainable reconciliation requires engagement across elite, middle-range, and grassroots actors, and that peace processes must deliberately build social relationships and capacities for conflict transformation (Lederach, 1997). Similarly, the concepts of procedural justice and restorative justice highlight the need for transparent implementation, inclusive processes, and mechanisms that repair harm and recognize victims' experiences (Zehr, 2002).

Applied to Northeast India, these theories explain recurring patterns: accords often represent

elite bargains that secure immediate cessation of violence (negative peace) but fail to produce positive peace because they do not fully satisfy identity-based needs, lack inclusive institutions, and omit grassroots engagement. When agreements do not incorporate mechanisms for recognition, reparations, or socio-economic inclusion, structural grievances remain, and splinter groups can re-emerge (Galtung, 1969)

Case Studies: Why Some Accords Endure and Others Falter

Mizo Accord (1986): A Model of Successful Transformation

The Mizo Accord is widely regarded as a successful transition from insurgency to stable self-governance. Several factors contributed to its durability. First, the accord offered clear political recognition—statehood—which directly addressed the primary political demand. Second, the agreement included concrete arrangements for the integration of former combatants and administrative reforms that improved governance capacity. Third, localized ethnic homogeneity reduced competing territorial claims, limiting inter-community spillover. Finally, the agreement's follow-through on development investments reinforced its legitimacy among the populace (Lalchungnunga, 2013). Under theoretical terms, the accord combined negative peace (ceasefire) with steps toward positive peace (institutional recognition and development), and involved sufficient breadth of actors to ensure legitimacy (Galtung, 1969).

Naga Peace Process: Enduring Complexity and Incomplete Settlement

The Naga case demonstrates the limits of elite bargains that do not secure broad-based buy-in. The Shillong Accord (1975) demanded acceptance of the Indian Constitution from signatories but lacked consensus among Naga leaders and communities; it provoked the emergence of NSCN and later splintering into NSCN-IM and NSCN-K (Sanyu, 1996). Subsequent negotiations (including ceasefires and ongoing talks with NSCN-IM) have been protracted and complex due to divergent visions—ranging from greater autonomy to claims for "Nagalim" extending beyond present state boundaries—and the transnational dimension of Naga communities in Myanmar (Hazarika, 1994). The Naga process shows how failure to satisfy identity claims and to include the array of stakeholders can prevent movement from negative peace toward positive reconciliation (Lederach, 1997).

Bodo Accords (1993, 2003, 2020): Iterative Settlements and Persistent Fragility

The sequence of Bodo accords illustrates iterative problem-solving through successive agreements. The 1993 pact created a weak autonomous council; the 2003 accord created the Bodoland Territorial Council under the Sixth Schedule—an institutional innovation that offered greater powers. The 2020 agreement attempted to bring more factions and stakeholders into a wider settlement and included substantial economic packages (Borooah, 2020). Yet the region has continued to experience inter-ethnic tensions, especially involving non-Bodo communities, and governance problems have sometimes eroded public trust in local institutions. The Bodo experience underscores that constitutional or administrative arrangements alone are insufficient without robust, inclusive governance and equitable economic delivery (Saikia, 2021).

Karbi Accord (2021): Promise and Caution

The 2021 Karbi Accord, which saw many insurgents lay down arms and promised a substantial development package and enhanced autonomy, illustrates the typical promise-and-peril pattern. While the surrender of cadres and the promise of funds signal progress, the real test lies in implementation, distributional fairness, and the inclusion of non-Karbi groups. If developmental benefits are captured by elites or if minority concerns are sidelined, the accord risks generating

fresh grievances (Saikia, 2021). From a reconciliation standpoint, the Karbi case needs mechanisms for participatory governance and local-level reconciliation to move from ceasefire to genuine social repair (Zehr, 2002).

Towards Sustainable Peace: Policy Recommendations

To achieve sustainable peace in Northeast India, several interconnected policy recommendations are essential to transition peace accords from merely reducing violence toward fostering genuine reconciliation and durable stability. First, it is critical to make the implementation of peace agreements credible, time-bound, and transparent. This involves establishing clear timelines, assigning accountability to designated institutions, and instituting independent monitoring mechanisms. Transparent management of funds and civic audits can curb elite capture and build public trust in the peace process (World Bank, 2011). Without such rigidity, delays and opaque governance fuel skepticism and weaken the legitimacy of accords, as seen in past experiences.

Second, institutionalizing inclusive governance within autonomy arrangements is vital. Territorial councils like the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) and Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) must guarantee representation for minority groups within their jurisdictions and establish mechanisms for inter-ethnic consultation and conflict prevention. For example, quotas, joint decision-making committees, and robust legal protections can ensure minority rights are respected and reduce inter-community rivalry (DeSouza, 2014). This approach combats the historical tendency of dominant groups to marginalize minorities within negotiated territories.

Third, socio-economic justice must be prioritized. Development packages need to target structural inequities by promoting land reforms, expanding educational and healthcare access, and creating employment opportunities, particularly for the youth. Such efforts must be participatory and tailored to the local context with strong accountability measures to avoid corruption and ensure the effective delivery of benefits (Singh, 2017). Addressing these root causes of conflict through inclusive economic development is critical to break cycles of violence.

Fourth, peace processes should expand participation beyond elites to include civil society organizations, women's groups, youth associations, and indigenous or customary authorities. Multi-level engagement builds social capital and local ownership of peace, making agreements more resilient and reflective of diverse community needs (Lederach, 1997). The exclusion of grassroots voices in earlier peace negotiations contributed to fragile outcomes and unmet local expectations.

Fifth, mechanisms to address past injustices through restorative justice are necessary. Tools such as truth-telling forums, reparations, and memorialization projects enable societies to acknowledge and process historical grievances, legitimizing the peace process and rebuilding fractured social relations. Incorporating victims' voices helps repair trust and promotes social healing, which is fundamental for sustainable reconciliation (Hayner, 2011).

Sixth, demilitarization and legal reforms are critical. Reducing the military footprint progressively, including the phased withdrawal of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) from areas where security has stabilized, can help mend the trust deficit between local communities and the state. Coupled with strengthened legal safeguards and human rights monitoring, this fosters confidence that the government's intentions are sincere and supports normalization (Phanjoubam, 2016).

Finally, given the transnational nature of many insurgent movements, enhancing cross-

border and regional cooperation is essential. Bilateral and multilateral engagements with neighboring countries on border management, counter-insurgency coordination, disarmament, and joint development projects can complement internal peacebuilding efforts (Hazarika, 1994). Managing border-related security and socio-economic issues collaboratively reduces insurgent safe havens and encourages regional stability.

In summary, achieving sustainable peace in Northeast India demands a multifaceted approach combining credible and transparent implementation, inclusive governance, socio-economic development, broad-based participation, restorative justice, demilitarization, and regional cooperation. Only such comprehensive strategies can transform temporary ceasefires into enduring reconciliation and stability.

Conclusion

Peace accords in Northeast India have been indispensable tools for ending cycles of armed violence. They have delivered tangible gains—reducing violence, mainstreaming insurgents, and creating new institutional forms of autonomy. Yet the durability of peace has been constrained by partial implementation, exclusionary bargains, persistent inequality, and the proliferation of splinter groups. Theoretically, many accords secure negative peace but fall short of positive peace because they do not adequately address identity-based needs, restorative justice, or grassroots participation.

To transform fragile settlements into durable reconciliation, policymakers must design accords that are inclusive, backed by transparent implementation plans, and linked to socio-economic justice. Reconciliation requires time, resources, and sustained engagement across multiple social levels. Only by moving beyond elite bargains to processes that heal social fabrics can Northeast India hope to convert temporary cessations of violence into long-term peaceful coexistence.

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