

# Patterns of Small Arms Proliferation in India's North-East: An In-Depth Assessment of Assam's Security Landscape



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## ABSTRACT

The North-Eastern region of India has historically been a hotspot of ethnic, political, and armed conflicts due to its complex socio-cultural and geopolitical environment. The region's security issues, especially those in Assam, have been made worse by the spread of small arms and light weapons, which have lowered the bar for armed conflict and put human life, social cohesiveness, and national integrity at risk. This essay examines the trends in the spread of small arms, following the origins, sources, and processes of weapon circulation throughout history.

The region's porous international borders and insurgency movements are strongly associated with the origins of small weapons proliferation in Assam. In order to obtain weapons and training, ethno-nationalist insurgencies like ULFA and NSCN have traditionally maintained covert connections with terrorist organizations in Bangladesh, Myanmar, and other nearby nations. There is widespread violence and instability in Assam due to the involvement of numerous parties, including foreign arms networks and local rebel groups (Baruah, 2003, p. 79).

Using a combination of historical, descriptive, analytical, and comparative methodologies, the study draws from secondary sources such as books, journals, and news stories as well as primary sources such as government papers, parliamentary debates, and speeches. The results emphasize the several factors that contribute to the spread of small guns, such as unmet regional expectations, ethnic dissatisfaction, and the socio-political marginalization of communities. The report contends that strict regulation of arms trafficking and a political reconciliation approach are necessary to address the growth of small arms (Basu, 2005, p. 112).

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The North-Eastern states of India have often been described as the “soft underbelly” of the country due to their socio-cultural diversity, economic marginalization, and strategic vulnerability. There have been ongoing insurgencies in this area, driven by sub-nationalist groups and ethnic grievances, frequently with covert assistance from adversarial outside forces. The inability of India's democratic institutions to adequately meet local populations' political ambitions and disillusionment has led to violent mobilization (Hazarika, 1994, p. 223).

Since the anti-foreigner campaign of 1979, which subsequently gave rise to the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), Assam, a crucial state in the area, has undergone numerous cycles of ethnic strife. By using small guns as their main tool of insurgency, the ULFA and other militant groups connected local unrest to regional and

international networks. A culture of impunity has been sustained, civil society has been profoundly destabilized, and the threshold for violence has been lowered by the spread of these weapons (Baruah, (2003, p. 79).

Ethnic conflicts, terrorism, and insurgencies for autonomy or independence are only a few of the many facets of conflict in Assam. These conflicts have become a recurring menace due to the availability of small guns, which has an impact on state politics, law enforcement, and governance. The goal of the project is to methodically investigate these proliferation trends in order to offer guidance for security and policy measures (Basu, 2005, p . 112).

## **2. Background of the Study**

Assam is extremely vulnerable to cross-border arms trafficking because it borders several Northeastern states as well as nearby nations like Bangladesh and Myanmar. These geographical advantages have historically been used by insurgent groups like ULFA and NSCN to obtain advanced small arms and light weapons from Southeast Asia. One of the main causes of the insecurity in the area has been the spread of weaponry, which affects both civilian access to weapons and rebel activities.

## **3. Statement of the Problem**

There are serious security, societal, and political issues in Assam due to the uncontrolled spread of small guns. It has complicated administration, increased organized crime, and decreased the bar for violence. The state is susceptible to recurrent cycles of armed conflict because of the persistence of insurgent networks and porous borders, which allow weaponry to flow despite counter-insurgency measures.

## **4. Review of Literature**

- 1) Basu, (2005), "Insurgency in North-East India", examines the historical causes of Assamese insurgencies, highlighting the ways in which political marginalization and ethnic dissatisfaction have influenced the use of armed conflict. The author contends that socioeconomic disparities and the central government's ongoing neglect produced an environment that was conducive to militant movements. He also emphasizes how local grievances influenced insurgent groups' strategic goals, demonstrating how these movements developed over decades to oppose governmental power.
- 2) Baruah, (2003), "India Against Itself", looks for weapons and assistance from the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and its international networks. He emphasizes that the Assamese insurgency cannot be comprehended in a vacuum because regional and global players were crucial in maintaining the bloodshed. It has been demonstrated that socio-political factors, such as unemployment and ethnic alienation, have given ULFA recruits and local support for its armed operations. The report also addresses how insurgents' operational reach and lethality were increased by cross-border ties.
- 3) Singh, (2010), "Small Arms and Security in India", examines the growth of small arms in Northeast India, describing both legitimate and illegal means of weaponry distribution. He draws attention to the security ramifications for Assam, pointing out that the easy access to guns has escalated hostilities and increased the indiscriminate nature of violence. Singh also highlights how the regional arms market and covert networks support rebel capabilities. The report emphasizes the clear connection between problems with national security and the spread of small guns.
- 4) Hazarika, (1994), "Strangers of the Mist", focuses on the ethnic and sociocultural variety of Assam, showing how these elements interact with small-arms use and insurgency. According to the work, tensions and violent confrontations were caused by historical grudges among various ethnic populations. Hazarika goes on to say that militant mobilization was encouraged by the absence of significant political inclusion and recognition. The report offers in-depth accounts of the societal and human costs of armed conflict in Assam.
- 5) Chakrabarty, (2008), "Insurgency and Counterinsurgency", examines the Indian government's counterinsurgency tactics and emphasizes how ineffective they are in halting the spread of weapons. The author highlights that military actions by themselves were insufficient and frequently unintentionally increased the resistance of the insurgents. He emphasizes that in order to effectively reduce violence, political, economic, and social actions must be integrated. The study emphasizes how difficult it is to provide security without resolving underlying issues.

- 6) Ganguly, (2007), "India's North-East Conflict", looks at how insurgency in Assam and the larger Northeast has historically been fostered by porous international boundaries and outside assistance. He describes how these borders are used by insurgent groups to obtain weapons and training. Ganguly highlights the regional aspect of warfare, demonstrating how cross-border ties make counter-insurgency operations more difficult. His research highlights the strategic weaknesses brought about by close proximity to other nations.
- 7) Raghavan, (2012), "Unrest in Assam", draws attention to the political ramifications of the spread of small guns, demonstrating how armed groups have impacted Assamese democracy and governance. Institutional authority has been undermined by rebel pressure, intimidation, and electoral manipulation. He contends that the spread of weaponry is both a cause and a result of political instability. In order to reestablish democratic credibility, the report highlights the necessity of significant reforms.
- 8) Deka, (2015), "Ethnic Conflicts and Violence in Assam", focuses on the Assamese ethnic insurgent groups, like the NDFB and BLTF, and how they depend on small weaponry to achieve their goals and survive. According to the report, using firearms to negotiate power with the state and assert territorial claims has been crucial. Deka adds that rivalry between groups have increased the flow of weapons. The study connects ongoing instability to the militarization of ethnic grievances.
- 9) Sarma, (2009), "Militancy in North-East India", presents an outline of militant networks in Assam and their methods of arms acquisition, including smuggling and transnational coordination. He underlines the organizational expertise of these groups and the systematic strategy to keeping and delivering weaponry. The study emphasizes how difficult it is for law enforcement to put an end to insurgency. Sarma also finds trends in the usage of weapons in criminal activity and rebel operations.
- 10) Bhattacharjee, (2011), "The Security Dilemma in Assam", investigates how important rebel organizations, especially the ULFA and NSCN, contribute to the continuation of armed struggle and the spread of weapons. He highlights that these organizations not only acquire weapons but also help them proliferate among civilian populations and smaller groupings. The study addresses the cyclical nature of violence in Assam and connects its spread to more general security issues. The author contends that long-term peace is threatened by ignoring armed mobilization.
- 11) Mishra, (2006), "Cross-Border Insurgency", examines the transnational aspect of arms trafficking, describing the covert ways via which guns from Southeast Asia enter Assam. He demonstrates how external actors and local insurgent networks are crucial to the continuation of the armed conflict. The study emphasizes how difficult it is to disrupt these supply lines logistically. Mishra emphasizes that in order to stop future spread, regional coordination is crucial.
- 12) Kalita, (2018), "Arms Proliferation and Governance", talks about the socioeconomic effects of the spread of small arms, focusing on how it affects civil society and law enforcement. He points out that unrestricted access to firearms has made it easier for organized crime to operate, undermined the rule of law, and prolonged societal unrest. The paper also emphasizes how democracy of Assam and governance are threatened by proliferation. Kalita promotes integrated policy strategies that incorporate development, reconciliation, and disarmament.

#### 4.1. Objectives of the Study

- The main objectives of the study are-
- To examine the causes of small arms proliferation in North-East India.
- To analyse the sources and routes of arms inflow into Assam.
- To assess the social, political, and security consequences of small arms proliferation.
- To provide policy recommendations to curb the spread of illicit arms.

#### 5. Research Questions

- 1) What are the primary causes of small arms proliferation in Assam?
- 2) How are small arms acquired, distributed, and maintained by insurgent groups?
- 3) What are the impacts of arms proliferation on civil society and governance?

4) What policy measures can effectively reduce the proliferation of small arms?

## **6. Research Methodology**

Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, the study employs a historical, descriptive, analytical, and comparative research design. Government reports, parliamentary discussions, and political leaders' speeches are examples of primary sources. Books, academic papers, newspapers, and internet resources in both Assamese and English are examples of secondary sources. To find trends, causes, and effects of the spread of small arms in Assam, data are methodically examined.

## **7. Results and Discussion**

### **7.1. Historical Roots of Arms Proliferation**

Ethnic insurgencies that arose during the post-independence era are the historical source of Assam's small weapons proliferation. In Myanmar and Southeast Asia, the Naga National Council (NNC) and later the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) played a key role in creating international networks that enabled safe havens, training, and the purchase of weapons. Other militant groups in the North-East adopted armed conflict as a valid method of claiming political rights and ethnic identity as a result of these early insurgent actions. Insurgent recruitment and the normalization of violence in the area were made possible by the central government's historical neglect and sociopolitical estrangement (Ganguly, 2007, p. 101).

Insurgent organizations had direct access to advanced small arms and light weapons through the entrance routes for arms trafficking, which included Dhuburi in Assam, Sonamura in Tripura, and Garo Hills in Meghalaya. The supply of guns, AK-47s, and rocket-propelled grenades is made possible by these logistical routes, which are still essential to the armed groups' ability to continue operating in Assam. Despite sporadic counter-insurgency operations, insurgent forces have been able to maintain persistent capabilities thanks to the creation of these covert supply networks. Assam's current security dynamics are still influenced by historical patterns of arms purchase, highlighting the structural difficulties in preventing the spread of weapons (Chakrabarty, 2008, p. 56).

### **7.2. Role of Insurgent Groups**

In addition to achieving strategic goals, organizations like ULFA and NSCN have played a crucial role in the dissemination of small guns, empowering allied insurgent groups throughout Assam and surrounding regions. Their cross-border networks made it possible to import advanced weaponry, including as grenade launchers, assault rifles, and light machine guns, which greatly increased the deadliness of regional uprisings. Law enforcement activities were made more difficult by insurgent organizations' use of these weapons to maintain authority over disputed areas, threaten civilians, and impose territorial control. The exchange of firearms between civilian supporters and surrendered militants strengthened the culture of violence and promoted the growth of armed criminality (Kalita, 2018, p. 47).

A self-sustaining cycle of violence and recruiting was brought about by the spread of small guns. In order to maintain a constant demand for weapons and operational capabilities, insurgent cadres trained fresh recruits in guerrilla tactics and the use of small weaponry. In Assam's rural and urban conflict zones, this eventually resulted in the normalization of armed violence, making it harder to distinguish between militancy and criminality. State intervention was made more difficult by insurgents' strategic use of tiny weaponry, which allowed them to maintain social and economic reliance on militant networks while still exerting political influence (Bhattacharjee, 2011, p. 39).

### **7.3. Socio-Economic Drivers of Proliferation**

The spread of small arms in Assam has been greatly exacerbated by economic hardship, unemployment, and a lack of social mobility. Militants often recruited individuals from marginalized communities, offering weapons as instruments of empowerment, status, and personal security. The easy accessibility of small arms made insurgency an attractive option for those seeking economic and social advancement, reinforcing the militarization of social grievances (Deka, 2015, p. 134).

The broad availability of weapons has contributed to the growth of organized crime and extortion by former militants. Weapons that were originally obtained for political conflict have been used for extortion, kidnapping, and smuggling. The demand for weapons has been strengthened by enduring socioeconomic disparities and political alienation, underscoring the necessity of all-encompassing development policies that support livelihood, job, and

education. Therefore, comprehensive socioeconomic initiatives in addition to law enforcement operations are necessary for the effective mitigation of weaponry proliferation in Assam (Sarma, 2009, p. 70).

## **8. Cross-Border Dynamics**

Assam's porous borders with Bangladesh and Myanmar have historically enabled the inflow of illicit arms from Southeast Asia. Militant networks in the region have utilized these borders to develop illicit supply routes, often circumventing state surveillance. The transnational aspect of arms proliferation is crucial since rebel organizations stay in constant communication with suppliers and supporters outside of India, guaranteeing a consistent flow of small arms and ammunition (Mishra, 2006, p. 59).

Local organizations' operational skills have been enhanced by external help from regional insurgency networks. These ties have strengthened insurgencies by facilitating training, intelligence sharing, and logistical coordination for the smuggling of weapons. Therefore, in order to effectively disrupt trafficking networks, counter-insurgency methods must include intelligence coordination, border control, and regional collaboration. It is unlikely to have long-lasting gains to stop the flow of weapons without addressing the sociopolitical issues that fuel insurgency (Raghavan, 2012, p. 88).

### **8.1. Impact on Governance**

Assam's democratic procedures and governance have been seriously compromised by the spread of small guns. Armed groups have directly impacted election results in a number of places by manipulating political outcomes through violence, extortion, and intimidation. This has created a governance vacuum in areas affected by insurgencies by undermining state authority and eroding popular confidence in democratic institutions (Bhattacharjee, 2011, p. 39).

Corruption, collaboration, and a lack of resources make it extremely difficult for law enforcement to manage armed violence. The spread of small guns has reduced the legitimacy of the state while also raising the operational costs of upholding law and order. Conventional policing and military operations alone are unable to address the complex issue of militancy, organized crime, and civilian access to firearms (Singh, 2010, p. 45).

### **8.2. Ethnic and Political Implications**

Ethnic clashes in Assam have escalated due to the proliferation of small guns as various tribes vie for political and territorial dominance. The primary tactic for challenging official authority, negotiating demands, and asserting one's identity is armed militancy. Regional and ethnic tensions continue to feed violence, resulting in conflict cycles that are challenging to end without political reconciliation.

Despite being essential for containment, military operations have not been able to end these deeply ingrained disputes. Sustainable peace requires political solutions such as institutional reform, inclusion, and negotiation. Disarmament efforts are made more difficult by the ethnic component of arms proliferation since guns represent both security and negotiating strength for local populations (Deka, 2015, p. 134).

### **8.3. Human Security Concerns**

In Assam, the prevalence of small guns has significantly raised civilian vulnerability. Everyday occurrences of armed violence interrupt daily life and economic operations by fostering a climate of fear, insecurity, and societal instability. Human security is further jeopardized by the regular abuse of weapons by militants and surrendered combatants for illegal activities like extortion, kidnapping, and intimidation amongst communities (Kalita, 2018, p.47).

Long-term psychological and societal effects of the normalization of armed conflict include trauma, mistrust, and the breakdown of social cohesiveness. Children and vulnerable populations are disproportionately impacted, resulting in generational cycles of violence. Disarmament efforts in conjunction with socioeconomic rehabilitation and community involvement initiatives are necessary to address human security concerns.

### **8.4. Policy and Security Responses**

The proliferation of small guns has not been significantly reduced by government initiatives such as military operations, paramilitary deployment, and policing. Conflict has occasionally been made worse by emphasizing



security measures without addressing underlying political and socioeconomic concerns, which has led to increased insurgent mobilization.

Reducing the flow of weapons requires complementary tactics including border control, community involvement, and socioeconomic development initiatives. Effectively combating cross-border arms trafficking requires regional cooperation with surrounding nations. A multi-pronged approach integrating law enforcement, political reconciliation, and development initiatives offers the best prospect for sustainable peace and stability in Assam (Mishra, 2006, p. 59).

## 9. Major Findings of the Study

The major findings of the study are-

- 1) The spread of small guns in Assam is mostly due to historical insurgencies. Following India's independence, ethnic and political uprisings created networks for training, the acquisition of weapons, and persistent militant action throughout the area, laying the groundwork for the flow of small guns.
- 2) Two important players in the proliferation of weaponry are ULFA and NSCN. The scope and intensity of the armed conflict in Assam were increased by these rebel organizations, who not only obtained advanced weapons but also made it easier for them to be distributed to civilian followers and associated parties.
- 3) Cross-border arms trafficking is made easier by porous borders. Despite counter-insurgency efforts, Assam's borders with Bangladesh, Myanmar, and other nearby areas give insurgents unmonitored avenues to smuggle arms, maintaining insurgent capabilities.
- 4) Armed mobilization is motivated by regional and ethnic grievances. Small guns are a symbol of political strength and empowerment because of long-standing political marginalization and cultural estrangement among ethnic populations, which encourage recruitment into insurgent groups.
- 5) Recruitment into violent groups is encouraged by socioeconomic deprivation. Economically disadvantaged youth are lured into militancy because to high unemployment, poverty, and a lack of prospects; these factors are frequently driven by access to weapons, status, and a means of subsistence.
- 6) The spread of small guns fuels organized crime. There is a connection between militancy and criminality as weapons that were initially purchased for insurgency are increasingly being used for illegal activities including kidnapping, extortion, and smuggling.
- 7) Armed groups frequently have an impact on electoral processes. Election interference by armed and insurgent groups has undermined democratic institutions and state legitimacy by manipulating electoral outcomes through pressure and intimidation.
- 8) Human security for civilians is seriously jeopardized. The easy access to firearms puts citizens at risk of violence, interferes with day-to-day activities, and creates an atmosphere of fear, all of which have a detrimental effect on social cohesion and economic activity.
- 9) Insurgent powers are strengthened by transnational networks. In order to maintain protracted war and operational resilience, insurgent groups take advantage of regional militant networks and cross-border alliances to get weapons, training, and logistical assistance.
- 10) There are structural obstacles to law enforcement's ability to manage weapons. Effective policing is hampered by a lack of resources, corruption, and the intricacy of armed networks, which permits insurgents to continue obtaining small weaponry in spite of security measures.
- 11) Long-term security depends on political reconciliation. Reducing armed mobilization and ensuring long-term peace in Assam requires addressing ethnic, regional, and political concerns via discussion, negotiation, and inclusion.
- 12) It is necessary to have integrated security, development, and diplomatic plans. To stop the spread of weapons and bring stability back, a multifaceted strategy involving law enforcement, socioeconomic development, community involvement, and regional collaboration is required.

## 10. Conclusion

The spread of small guns in Assam is a complex issue that combines transnational arms trafficking, historical insurgency, socioeconomic hardship, and ethnic conflict. Insurgent groups' possession of advanced weaponry has reduced the bar for armed conflict and has a direct effect on political stability, governance, and human security. In

order to stop the spread of weapons, the report emphasizes the necessity of both preventive and corrective measures (Baruah, 2003, p. 79).

Strict enforcement actions along with political solutions are needed to combat the threat posed by small guns. Reducing the inflow of weapons requires regional collaboration, border control, and communication with ethnic and regional partners. Initiatives for economic growth, especially those that target youth employment, can lessen the allure of armed mobilization. The cycle of violence and proliferation is likely to continue in the absence of a coherent strategy, endangering both national and regional security.

In the end, the Assam case shows that armaments proliferation is a consequence of unmet expectations, sociopolitical marginalization, and governance deficiencies rather than just a security issue. Sustainable peace and security in Assam and the larger Northeast area can only be attained by addressing the underlying issues (Hazarika, 1994, p. 223).

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author have declared that no competing interests exist.

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