

## **Insurgency Movements in North-Eastern India**

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Even after half a century of independence, the North-Eastern region of the country remains the proverbial area of isolation and backwardness, spawning unrest and alienation. It is not that the Centre and the State Governments have lacked opportunities to confer, consult and decide on the blueprint for development at any stage of the continuing turmoil in the region. On the contrary, there have been many initiatives and accords to end insurgency and bring about lasting peace in the region (Shillong Accord, 1975; Assam Accord, 1985; Mizoram Accord, 1986; Tripura Accord, 1988, Bodo Accord, 1994). The failure to integrate the North-East into the national mainstream is largely due to the Centre's wrong perception of the region's multitude of problems, characterised by political apathy, arrogance and hypocrisy. Regional movements and identity aspirations have become some sort of anathema to national leaders and mainstream political parties.

### **Why Insurgency?**

Why seeds of insurgency and alienation never die in the North-East? Why are all movements for socio-economic redressal potential insurgencies? Why is growing ethnic and cultural consciousness often threatening to spill over into ethnic nationalism? The reasons are not far to seek. Historically, some areas of the North-East were never part of pre-colonial India. They remained for centuries outside large centralised empires like the Maurya, Gupta and Mughal during the ancient and medieval periods of Indian history. The colonial incorporation of the region also came about much later than the Indian sub-continent (Assam in 1826, Garo tribes in 1873, Naga Hills in 1889 and the Lushais in 1971-89). The 'inner-line' system introduced by the British kept the populace isolated. The colonial government used the region's dualistic compositions (tribals-non-tribals, hill people-plains people) and its cultural diversities as a convenient line of division to rule the region.

The oldest case of insurgency is provided by Nagaland. The Naga National Council raised the banner of independence way back in 1946. The colonial power adopted a policy of non-interference in the area's tribal customs, and values. It even refrained from interceding in the tribal economy and tribal administration. However, the induction of the Nagas in the two World Wars brought awareness among the people about the need to assert and demand their position within the existing administrative framework. It thus became the forerunner of Naga nationalism and paved the way for the formation of a political forum to articulate their problems.

There is also a fairly strong undercurrent of sub-nationalism in the North-East. The Naga and Mizo sub-nationalisms, for example, are deeply rooted in their traditions and socio-economic facets of life. The different segments of the population are known for their diverse ethnicity, language, culture and religion. Prior to the British annexation the area occupied by these tribes were free from any external control. They were governed only by their respective village administrations.

The growing assertion of ethnic identity and search for autonomy are essentially the result of a desperate *cri de coeur* in defence of a particular way of life and value pattern.

### **The Demographic Changes**

The continuing influx of people from across the border has led to a demographic change in certain states like Tripura and Assam. It has created apprehension in the minds of the people of being swamped by alien culture. The Assam movement, the Bodo agitation and all other movements for political autonomy and the preservation of their distinct ethno-political identities essentially represent sometimes real and sometimes distorted manifestations of the unresolved nationality question.

### **Emergence of Insurgent Groups**

In the past four decades or so, the North-East has seen the emergence of a number of insurgent groups. Insurgency may be smouldering in some State and may be incipient in others at given points of time, but the entire region has all along been in ferment, so to say. The best-known insurgency is the Naga revolt, which continues even to this day. The National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) has the best-trained cadre and every other active insurgent outfit in the region has received moral and material help from it. The Mizo National Front (MNF) plumped for secession in the late 1960s and the Meiteis of Manipur and the Tripura National Volunteers (TNV) in the 1970s. The MNF, which captured the main town of the Mizo Hills, Aizawl in 1966, had even declared their independence. However, the prolonged spell of insurgency gradually eroded MNF's credibility, and the 1971 war of liberation in Bangladesh made the situation extremely difficult to carry out the hit and run raids in Mizoram.

Most of these movements such as in Mizoram and Tripura have abated following political accords. The United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and the Bodo Security Force are the youngest of the insurgent groups. Both have established relations with the NSCN. While the ULFA is divided between moderates and extremists and between pro-talk and anti-talk groups, the Bodo Security Force is more cohesive and is capable of hitting where it hurts. In this canvas of an insurgency-prone North-East, only Arunachal Pradesh has remained peaceful (See the Table).

### **Major Militant Groups Still Active in the North-East**

Assam	- United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) - Bodo Security Force
Manipur	- National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muivah Group) - People's Liberation Army (PLA)/ Revolutionary People's Front (RPF) - United National Liberation Front (UNLF) - People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK)
Meghalaya	- Achick Liberation Matgrik Army (ALMA) - Hynniewtrept Volunteer Council (HVC)
Mizoram	- Hmar People's Convention (HPC)

- Nagaland
  - National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muivah Group)
  - National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Khaplang Group)
  - Naga National Council (Adinno)/ Naga Federal Government (NFG)
  - Naga National Council (Khodao Group)
- Tripura
  - All Tripura Tribal Force (ATTF)
  - National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT)

The various insurgent groups in the North-East fall under two broad categories, those espousing secessionist rhetoric and those demanding a better deal either by way of statehood/councilhood demands or by way of cultural autonomy. The NSCN, MNF (till the 1986 Mizo accord), UNLF of Manipur and the ULFA have all raised the banner of sovereignty and independence at some point or the other. While the NSCN's espousal is not merely tactical; it is also based on conviction, the ULFA's brand of secessionism is largely rhetorical. Insurgency in Nagaland is essentially autonomous in character, while the ULFA and Bodo Security Force are an outgrowth of political movements. Both ULFA and Bodo Security Force have only sought to fill the dangerous void created in the polity.

Tripura insurgents, particularly the Sengkrak in the 1960s and the TNV in the 1970s also resorted to secessionist rhetoric but that was essentially for a better deal. Tripura is one State in the North-East where the original inhabitants have become a minority in their own land. The successive waves of migration from the present day Bangladesh (particularly from the districts of Comilla, Chittagong and Sylhet) and continuous infiltration from across the border have disrupted the matrix of social relationship and polarised the polity. Tripura tribals have thus been alienated from the political and economic process.

Tripura insurgents are somewhat unique in the region. Extremist movements in the State have thrived more on poverty and under-development than on ideology. It was because of the tribals' growing marginalisation that the Tripura Upajati Juba Samiti (TUJS) was formed in 1967. Many joined the new party leaving Congress and the CPI-M since it has a platform to protect the perceived frame of tribal interests in the State. However, the growing support for the radical ideology expounded by Bijoy Harangkhawl brought the leadership of the TUJS to a crisis situation. The radical elements within TUJS broke away and formed the TNV in 1977. The TNV espoused a radical ideology with secessionist demands.

The CPI-M in order to neutralise the TUJS sought the active help of TNV. Subsequent developments, particularly the communal riot of June 1980, soon transformed the situation. It was precisely at that time that a new outfit, All Tripura People's Liberation Organisation (ATPLO) came to the fore. It even gave a call for the armed struggle. Tripura insurgents established links with the Mizo National Front (MNF) and received material support from Bangladesh. The TNV leadership made efforts to internationalise the issue and established operational links with other insurgent groups such as the NSCN.

Insurgency continued until TNV leaders signed a pact in 1988 with the Centre. Harangkhawl said he was driven to revolt because people were afraid of being swamped by the Bengali migrants. Other insurgent groups in the State have also prospered on such perceived threats. There is near unanimity among all the political parties active in the region on the threats posed by illegal

migration. The North-Eastern Coordinating Committee of Congress (NECCC) has often seen Bangladesh as the “real bridgehead of conquering the eastern region of India by a natural spillover of population which nobody can prevent”. But the Centre has so far done precious little to address the problem.

As we have noted earlier, it is the Naga insurgents who have been harrying the Indian Army with their hit-and-run tactics, ambushing trains steaming past the Naga Hills and raiding and terrorising villages on the plains ever since they took to arms. The Mizos followed suit in the sixties under Laldenga’s leadership. However, the Naga insurgents began to be weary of the protracted armed struggle. The elder statesmen among the Nagas realised that short of a serious international conflict the Nagas were unlikely to achieve their goals unaided, and there was also concern at the rising casualty figures.

Angami Zau Sapu Phizo, of course remained intransigent, but he was away in England and developments now outstripped even his astute command. Repeated peace efforts eventually bore fruit in the Shillong Accord of 1975. The hard-core terrorists, at least the majority returned to settled life and constructive politics. The old generation of Naga insurgents was thus suppressed, bought off and reconciled to integration with the country. But a fresh crop of insurgents arose and continued insurgency. Those who denounced the 1975 Shillong Accord as a “sell out” and “betrayal of the Naga people” are heading the NSCN which is the “mother of all insurgency” in the North-East.

The belief that the NSCN’s strength had declined following a split in 1988 among Nagas of Indian and Myanmarese origin, has hardly been borne out by the upsurge of violence in Nagaland. The NSCN has become increasingly belligerent. Whereas the NSCN (Khaplang Group) is operating close to the Myanmar border, the Muivah Group is active in the hill districts of Manipur and adjoining areas in Nagaland. Even the once dormant Naga National Council (NNC) is building bridges with the NSCN. Nagaland is thus poised to witness yet another phase of escalation of insurgency.

Insurgency in Manipur is no less intense than in Nagaland. Besides the NSCN, which is operating from Manipur for tactical reasons, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), the People’s Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK) and the Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP), all based in the Manipur Valley, have been playing havoc with the people. The Naga-Kuki clashes have only added a new dimension to insurgent violence.

Coming back to the two categories of insurgents, the smaller groups like the ATTF in Tripura, the HPC in Mizoram and the Kuki National Front in Manipur have only raised statehood demand. The Bodos and Karbis in Assam and the Zeliangrong Nagas have their own aspirations of distinct homeland which is essentially a reflection of the retribalisation process in the region, focussing on the splintered identities of ethnic groups in sharp contradiction of major ethnic formations.

There is also an international dimension to insurgency, especially of secessionist varieties. Nagaland shares the international frontier with Myanmar inhabited by hostile tribal formations like the Kachins, the Karens and the Shans. Naga insurgents could find not only arms but also safe sanctuaries in East Pakistan and Myanmar. The Mizo insurgents also had training camps and bases

in East Pakistan. Most of the senior ULFA leaders are still living in Bangladesh. Insurgency in Tripura fizzled out because it has no borders with Burma. The Mizo insurgency also lost its vitality after the liberation of Bangladesh. The Bodo Security Force often takes refuge in hideouts in Bhutan after committing crimes in Assam. The only exception has been Arunachal Pradesh, which has remained largely free from insurgency despite sharing a long international border with China to the north and North-East, Myanmar to the east and Bhutan to the West.

### **Insurgency: Some Plausible Reasons**

Insurgency movements in the North-East can be explained and understood in terms of the “relative deprivation theory”. The growing sense of deprivation, both political and economic and, above all, the realisation that no redress of the long-standing grievances could be had by lawful means, have led to the eruption of violence of frightful intensity in the North-East. Insurgency is thus an expression of people’s disillusionment with the non-performing development model resulting from years of political manipulation, economic neglect, and bureaucratic bungling and rampant corruption. To that extent insurgency is only the symptom of a grave malaise deeper down.

The politics of opportunism has also undermined people’s confidence in conventional politics. In fact, the ferment has been provided by the complex variety of socio-economic, political and ethnic aspirations of hundreds of tribes inhabiting the area, their unsullied aspirations being the base of disaffection, which often push forth through acts of rebellion. Frustration with the non-performing model has generated aggressive thinking. The vulgar display of money power in elections as also in ministry formation is an ugly facet of politics in the region. There have been instances in Manipur when the Congress won only a dozen odd seats in the 60-member Assembly and yet it formed the Government, eventually increasing its strength through horse-trading to two-thirds. The effective strength of the Manipur Assembly is around 55. And the number of ministers now functioning is 28. It shows the level of absurdity to which the concept of representative government has been stretched in the State. And yet, any sense of outrage is missing.

The regional leaders and tribal politics are no better. The ideology of most militant groups and students’ organisations is simple xenophobia. They mouth slogans and cliches to stir up the sentiments of the people by holding the Centre responsible for all their ills. They exploit demagogically outdated cultural forms instead of building something new. The regionalism they advocate can scarcely break down the structural hurdles to development. But in so far as they play on the perceived sense of neglect and alienation and project the aspirations of the common people for a better standard of living, the regionalist plank becomes formidable.

Since there is no other political ideology in the region, youth and student leaders use regionalism, or rather, ethnic separatism to grab power. Having attained power often clinching a deal with the Union Government, the same politicians who once swore by independence, sovereignty and the colony syndrome, are content with Central grants. They use government offices to sponge on developmental funds, while the poor and the marginalised people are left to fend for themselves.

Economic development is one of the major instruments of social change. But as far as per capita income, communication network, irrigation facilities, consumption of power and other indicators of development are concerned; the North-Eastern region has remained far behind the rest of the

country. For the British the region was simply a source of wealth to be plundered and exploited. Four decades of independence has made little difference to the economic order, which has remained essentially colonial. It is still dominated by the tea, oil and timber industries, which have little spin-off for development of local enterprise. Capital formation is still very low and sluggish. No doubt, sufficient resources have been transferred to the region, but the ill-conceived development strategy has failed to link up resource mobilisation and developmental investment policies with the structural specificities of the region. The benefits of modest development have not percolated to the intended beneficiaries as they have been cornered by outsiders and a small group of well-off natives.

Traditional economy in most parts of the North-Eastern region is geared to consumption and subsistence. The problem of land alienation in Tripura and the Bodo-dominated areas of Assam are the principal cause of tension between tribals and non-tribals. Pressure on land in Assam is among the highest in the country. Such is the irony of the situation that while the majority of Assamese is engaged in subsistence agriculture, other labour requirements especially in the tea gardens are met by cheap labour from outside the State.

The sense of deprivation and glaring economic disparity among different sections of people have given rise to much of the resentment and militancy among the youth today. Education in the region has far outstripped economic development. As a result, the problem of unemployment has gradually turned into one of educated unemployed. It would not be wrong to say that a largely economic problem has turned into a political one. Only by remodeling of the existing development strategy, which should give primacy to employment generation, the root cause of simmering social tension and accumulated frustration among the youths can be removed.

The North-East Congress Committee meeting held in Gangtok some years ago made a very pertinent observation. It said that the boldness displayed in the political revamping of the region is yet to be backed by an equally bold economic programme or a “new deal” which is what the region, hard hit by the partition, needs most. *The key to peace and harmony in the region lies not in merely signing accords but in the rapid economic development and the widening of economic opportunities. No less important is the need to understand the tribal ethos and psyche and to forge an empathy with them.*