

Insurgency in North-East: International Dimension

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Two contradictory global trends – the integration, and fragmentation of States – seem to be running concurrently. While science and technology is knitting humankind together and the information revolution is threatening to abolish distance across time and space, while ethnic, linguistic and sub-nationalist identities are reasserting themselves. Whereas cataclysmic general war among the major powers seems literally unthinkable, wars within nations, particularly wars of identities, seem to be multiplying and becoming more intense. As the State weakens, these wars are growing in significance.

The passion for ethnic and regional identity is felt keenly in the North-Eastern States of India-Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur, Meghalaya and Tripura. Ethnic upsurge and political turmoil in the North-Eastern region may seem foul and far away to people in Britain and Europe. And incomprehensible as well. There has been little appreciation of the complexity of problems facing the so-called “seven sisters”, particularly the international dimension of the seemingly intractable problem. Some would tend to ascribe ethnic upsurge and political anarchy to tribalism; others may blame history for the same.

The crisis in the North-East has multiple dimensions. And cases of insurgency too are multiple including historic, geographical, political and the fear of the alien. While western analysts have emphasised the fact that insurgency is born out of a burning resentment of injustice and a commanding vision of a better future. However, little effort has been made, perhaps intentionally, to go into the international dimension of the crisis.

Insurgencies with a secessionist motive tend to take place, as a rule, in territories, which share international borders. The case of North-Eastern States is particularly instructive. Nagaland, which presents the oldest case of insurgency in India, shares the international frontier with Burma, inhabited by warring tribal formations like the Kachins, the Karens and the Shans. Thus, due to such physical proximity, along a permeable border, Naga insurgents have found not just arms but safe sanctuaries in Burma. China, of course, is alleged to have officially backed militants in the North-East till early 1970s when it finally gave up hope of ever making a success of it.

Mizo leader Laldenga had strong Chinese connection. Mizo insurgents also had training camps and bases in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The 1971 war of liberation in Bangladesh made the situation extremely difficult to carry out the hit and run raids in Mizoram. However, Mizo insurgency virtually came to an end with the liberation of Bangladesh. Insurgency in Tripura was immensely manageable for security forces, perhaps because rebels in Tripura did not have any external support. Coming to Assam, the militants operating there have found safe sanctuaries in neighbouring countries. While Bodo militants cross over to Bhutan, once under pressure from the

Army operations, ULFA militants have used Bangladesh territory for arms-purchase and training, besides using these countries as safe havens.

Arunachal Pradesh, the farthest part of north-eastern India, shares a long international border with Bhutan to the west, China to the north and north-east and Burma to the east. And yet, Arunachal has remained largely free from insurgency. Insurgent groups like the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) are trying hard to fuel insurgency in the State. How long the State can defy the regional stereotype is a moot point.

The North-Eastern States, over the years, have undergone a major demographic change. Such demographic disturbances have often generated strong local, regional antipathies in the states in this region. The successive waves of infiltration from the present-day Bangladesh have disrupted the matrix of political and social relationships in Tripura. This is one State where the tribals have been outnumbered by the migrants. We have to remember that the Assam movement was successful because its protagonists capitalised on the apprehensions in the minds of the people of being swamped by outsiders. Thus, while Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) has made the North-East an ideal hunting ground for waging a proxy war against India, infiltration from Bangladesh has even greater destabilising impact on the region. The silent intrusion of refugees from Bangladesh has created a situation, which has been aptly described by an analyst from the North-East as "our land, their living space".

That the ISI is involved in the subversive activities in the North-East is quite apparent. The Pakistani outfit has been actively aiding and abetting terrorists and extremists of the region by setting up armed training camps in Bangladesh and by providing arms and funds to them. The Bangladesh Government has been issuing spirited denials of these allegations in the same way that it has been denying the presence of very large numbers of Bangladeshi infiltrators in Assam and West Bengal. The statement of former Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia that Bangladesh cannot be instrumental in suppressing the "struggle for liberation" in North-Eastern India and her open encouragement of secessionist elements had exposed the nefarious game of her government during the years of her rule.

People in the North-East have no doubts at all about the rapid proliferation of the ISI in the region. It is only Pakistan and Bangladesh that go on pretending that these are wild allegations. A report in the US House of Representatives severely indicted Pakistan three years ago for exporting Islamic terrorism to India. It accused the ISI of helping in the "expansion of ethnic separatist terrorism all over India as its next phase of sponsoring terrorism in this country". According to that report, the most telling impact of the ISI-aided terrorism in the North-East was the emergence, in the summer of 1992, of the United Islamic Liberation Army as the dominant subversive organisation in North-East India, especially in Manipur. Now that the Kashmir situation has shown dramatic improvement, the ISI has intensified its diabolic activities in the region.

According to recent reports Kashmiri militants have been inducted by the ISI to train Muslim fundamentalists for Assam and Manipur in subversive activities in Bangladesh. This was disclosed recently by four youths of the underground People's Liberation Front during interrogation by the police in Imphal. Two other groups that have crossed over to Bangladesh over the past two years are the Muslim Liberation Tigers of Asom and the Islamic Liberation Army of Asom. The ISI is

apparently trying to encash on the cold shoulder turned by the Bangladesh Government led by Sheikh Hasina Wazed to the different insurgent outfits in the North-East following the Ganga Water accord.

In fact, some reports suggest that the Bangladesh Government is yet to take any specific action against dozens of camps run on its soil by insurgents. Dhaka claims that five or six camps have been closed down during recent months. However, the Indian Home Ministry is sceptical about the information. The North-Eastern insurgents have not only received training in these camps; they have also used them as conduits for supplying arms into the region.

Despite the resilience of various insurgent groups in the North-East to survive the intensity of the Army operations because of many inherent contradictions facing the underground movement, insurgency in the North-East is too imperfect to have any chance of success in the near future. First, it is imperfect in spirit as it depends precariously on support from across the border. Secondly, its legitimacy is fragile because everything depends on its success, and success is hard to come by as nearly four decades of experiences have shown.

Those who mouth secessionist cliches will do well to learn from history. Even in a continent like Africa, which has become a metaphor for poverty, decay and tribalism, there is not a single significant movement today that wants secession or a change of borders. Insurgent leaders are perhaps not entirely unaware that their independence will not be viable. Even supposing they become independent entities, some day, they could easily become a geographical buffet for their ambitious neighbours.

The people in the North-East are paying the price for the wrongs of history as well. There was a deliberate attempt on the part of colonial rulers to keep the region isolated from the rest of India and insulated from the national freedom movement. While the “inner-line” system introduced by the British in 1874 kept the populace isolated, the colonial rulers used the region’s dualistic composition (tribals-non-tribals, hill people-plains people) and its cultural diversities as a convenient line of division to rule it.

Even five decades after independence, the economic order in the North-East has remained essentially colonial. For the British, it was simply a source of wealth to be plundered and exploited. Even now, the economy is still dominated by the tea; oil and timber industries, which have little spin off for development of local enterprise. The benefits of development, though lop-sided, have been cornered by outsiders and a small group of well off natives.

The ISI and other forces inimical to India have apparently taken advantage of the unsettled conditions in the North-East as also the sense of neglect and alienation the people suffer from, in this region. The large-scale influx of migration from Bangladesh has already cast a heavy burden on the economic infrastructure of the region. The Indian Government will do well to realise that lack of a credible policy towards the region has made the North-East vulnerable to the machinations of outside forces. Rather than working in fits and starts, it should formulate a comprehensive policy towards the region to foil the game plans of external forces.