

Insurgency in Northeastern States of India: An Overview

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Abstract – The North Eastern States in India are well known for their cultural and ethnic diversity. The region comprises more than 200 ethnic groups, which have distinct languages, dialects and socio-cultural identities. This kind of diversity here is due to a constant flow of different tribes from the east, during the pre-British era, and their incomplete racial assimilation. A steady ingress of population from the West specifically from the then Bengal resulted in diversity. However, the Partition of India in 1948 was a breakthrough event that led to a rise in the flow of migrants and refugees, from East Pakistan had a significant contribution for the demographic change in the states of Tripura and Assam specifically. For a plethora of perceived reasons, the peace and normalcy in the region remain elusive. Though life continues to be normal the menace of terrorism and insurgency have yet to recede fully.

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Recognizing the uniqueness in the tribal way of life in various areas of the region the lawmakers of India worked out various modalities to give a political identity to the geography of North East to administer this region under the special institutional arrangements granting them a significant degree of self-governance through various Autonomous District Councils under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. The process of Reorganisation of the States in India post- independence years fueled the demands for aspirations of the statehood in the North Eastern Region (NER). These demands later on led to a gradual rise to the formation of states of Nagaland (1963), Meghalaya (1972), Manipur (1972), Tripura (1972), Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram (1978).

However, the question still prevails despite of the division of the NER into separate states as per the modalities employed legally given by the constitution of India why do the tribal groups of the region feel unsatisfactory and went up to hold on to the insurgent path to keep up their demands?

While several administrative and institutional arrangements ranging from the creation of different tribal States and Autonomous Councils, show considerable attention given by the government to reduce conflict in the region, these measures, however, fell short of adequately fulfilling the aspirations of various ethnic groups.

This resulted to the resentment that turned into an assertion of specific cultural and ethnic identities demand for autonomy ranging from the idea of autonomous self-governance to one of a sovereign

nation. Moreover, alliances between some major insurgent groups increased the complexity of the North Eastern Region's security situation, which has remained vulnerable.

This article does focus on the modus operandi used by the insurgents to get a survival in order to keep their demands through an armed struggle.

THE REGION OF CONFLICT

This conflicts of self-identification and self-determination is grouped under the terminology of *Insurgency in North Eastern States of India* for all practical and theoretical use by the Governments both at centre and the states, armed forces, security Forces and other law and order apparatus, Academicians in their research literature and the media etc. Thus, the insurgents specially the Under-Ground (UG) militant outfits indulged in violent terrorist activities, and confronted security forces and people with arms. It is reportedly confirmed that they maintained safe havens and camps in neighbouring countries, sought cross-border support, procured arms and weapons, recruited and trained their cadres, and indulged in unlawful activities.

Conflicts in the region were broadly of *three types*:1

- (i) "National" conflicts based on the demands for a separate and sovereign nation.
- (ii) "Ethnic" conflicts based on the differences between smaller less dominant tribes and

politically and culturally dominant tribal groups.

- (iii) “Sub-regional” conflicts based on assertion of sub-regional aspirations against the State Governments and autonomous councils.

As a result, most of the North Eastern States have suffered the scourge of ethnic conflicts, insurgency, separatist movements, communal violence and illegal immigration for a long period of time.

THE OPERATIONAL FEATURES OF INSURGENTS OF NORTH EASTERN STATES

Jointness: The insurgent groups in the North East have a unique feature of jointness at their advantage to carry out their insurgent modules to achieve an upper hand in the region. Many existing outfits have demonstrated a tendency to operate jointly and coordinate their activities. The United Liberation Front of Assam (Independent) ULFA I, CorCom and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland – Khaplang faction (NSCN-K) are part of a broader alliance of non-ceasefire

signatory insurgent groups in the region that have increasingly conducted joint operations and exploited the porous border with Myanmar.²

The most recent development of jointness can be witnessed in the formation of a greater Alliance called United National Liberation Front of Western South East Asia (UNLFWS) in 2015 by the NSCN-K and the ULFA-I along with the Kamtapur Liberation Organisation (KLO), which operates in North Bengal and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), which operates in Assam.³ Both ULFA and CORCOM continue to coordinate their operations and have resolved to carry out joint operations against the security forces. The UNLFWS has been responsible for a number of spectacular attacks on the security forces including the killing of 18 army personnel in Manipur's Chandel district in June 2015. These groups had carried a joint armed action on the 13 Assam Rifles vehicles at Jagun-Jairampur of Warabasti, Tinsukia district of Assam which killed 3 jawans and injuring 4 others while also claiming to have recovered three weapons (2 AK Rifles and one INSAS rifle) in 2017.⁴

Cross border operation: With the increase of counter insurgency operations in the region has been forced the insurgent outfits to shift their strategies towards the conduct of cross-border strikes in areas adjacent to the international border. There is a decline in the support base within their respective states as a result of which the security situation is increasingly under the control of the Security Forces deployed in the region so carrying out operations deep inside the states has become difficult. Tirap, Changlang and Longding in Arunachal Pradesh, Tinsukia (Assam), Chandel (Manipur), and Mon and

Tuensang of Nagaland witness major insurgent attacks. The biggest advantage to the insurgents is that these districts including those bordering Myanmar allow the insurgents easy egress after carrying out the attacks. Other reasons being the proximity to NSCN

– K controlled areas in neighbouring Myanmar and second being a very difficult terrain that makes patrolling a hurdle for security forces in these areas.

Bangladesh has been propped up as yet another ‘Terrorism Support and Export Centre’ patterned after Pakistan. Most important factor borne in mind here is the fanning of Islamic terror into Indian soil. It is presumed that 145 training camps of terrorist groups belonging to some of the North Eastern States especially of Assam in Bangladesh. Meghalaya, Cachar (South Assam) and Tripura have an IB with Bangladesh with the terrain and people being most inhospitable and hostile.⁵

Tripura shares boundary with Bangladesh. However due to unfortunate geographical circumstances, its security considerations should never be neglected, delayed, postponed or pushed under the carpet. Though Arunachal has an IB with Tibet and Myanmar after death of Mao in any case, Arunachal is not known to have any effective indigenous insurgent group but notwithstanding a vulnerable exploitation of people of Arunachal Pradesh by NSCN groups using the lower slopes as safe havens.⁶

MODALITIES

The insurgents thrive on the income earned through Extortion and kidnappings. The menace of extortion or ‘tax collection’ by Underground Groups (UGs) has assumed dangerous proportions in Northeastern Regions. Extortion is a rampant practice by the Nagas, Kukis and Meitei groups in the state which costs life of all the people. Manipur has no railway linkage which is principally connected by roads, to the rest of the country and to Myanmar, by national highways NH-2 (lifeline to link the state with rest of India) and NH 37. The extortion is made here. Extortion has become a flourishing industry in the state along with others in North East which is an easy source of Income of insurgents which is used by the leaders of the UG cadres basically.⁷

Attacks through Improvised Explosive Device (IED): Explosion of IEDs is becoming a predominant mode of attack on the security forces. This underline the importance attached by the insurgents to minimize cadre losses. Most of these IEDs till now (barring the one which was used on 18 February 2018 in Meghalaya) have remained crude and hence, their impact low scale. However, with technological upgradation, IEDs have the potential

of emerging as a lethal weapon, especially in the challenging geography of the northeast.

The most recent 2018 Suspected Ulfa (Independent) militants triggered an improvised explosive device, targeting an army convoy in Arunachal Pradesh's Namsai district which targeted a two- vehicle convoy of the 11 Grenadiers Regiment was passing through the Piyong-Kumchaika road although there were no casualties or damage to any vehicle as reported by the news agencies.[8]

THE POLITICAL – UNDERGROUND OUTFITS NEXUS

The nexus among the politicians, underground outfits (UG) and contract builders who take development projects in the state is also a reason to add fuel in the armed struggle has affected the development work. The majority of the construction works in the valley and hills of Manipur is undertaken by the contractors. The contractors form the surrendered insurgents of various groups. But these contractors have affiliations to their parent groups and it is these people who help the raiser of funds for its survival.

The UG fund is also been pumped in by the compulsory contribution of the income of the government employees, private companies and businessmen. No company or project work dares to function without a donation to the UG. If this rule is defied by any of these their houses would be bombarded or destroyed by killing them. The echo of gunshots is a daily occurrence in the valley areas.[9]

From the tea stall owner to the senior civil service officers, everyone pays a percentage of their income to the various insurgent groups as protection tax.[10] The insurgents are running a parallel government in the state where the confidence of the masses in the state governance has eroded due to failure to ensure security in the state. At the village level, whether it is a case of a land dispute or marital discord, the valley-based insurgents, mainly the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) and Kanglei Yawol Kanba Lup (KYKL) are known to intervene.[11] Economic development in the state has come to a standstill and insecurity has intensified with the increasing violence.

The security forces are aware of the extortion of money by the insurgents. The inability of the state police, even though backed by the central forces, to stop this has led the common man to lose faith in them. Moreover, even some police force personnel and higher officials, including from the civil services, are suspected of having a nexus with the insurgent outfits.[12]

Recruitment: ULFA-I has been able to successfully recruit youths from various districts. Although the scale of such recruitment is not alarming, this steady

flow of new cadres prepares the outfit to make up for the neutralized cadres. As a result, the cadre strength of the outfit continues to be in the 'hundreds' in spite of security force successes. ULFA has an estimated strength of 150-250 militants, mostly new recruits and are militarily organized into three groups - the biggest Myanmar based formation Rongili (the cheerful lady) and a small Bangladesh based Lakhimi (the homely lady) and Kopili (the speedy river), the new identity for the erstwhile 27th battalion, now temporarily based in Majuli, located in Jorhat. [13]

The split within the NSCN-K and an anticipated internal revolt against the new leadership following the death of its leader K K Khaplang notwithstanding, the outfit maintains at least 2000 cadres.

CONCLUSION

The genesis of the problem has been made amply clear and transparent. The need of the hour is to address the problems and reasons identified in a logical, compassionate and systematic manner. Prosperity and peace in neighbouring countries will automatically curb the menace. Sanitisation of the IB is a must by physical means and the creation of artificial obstacles wherever possible. Expediency and urgency needs to be shown to stop Islamisation emanating from Bangladesh in all directions. The Northeast should become a hub for a Look east policy. It should become a gateway for ASEAN countries. Good governance coupled with doing away with the notified area clause and extension of transfer subsidies by yet another five years is recommended. Tourism, health, and IT should be included in the concessional package.

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