

Problem of Insurgency in North-East India: A Long-Standing War with few Prospects

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The purpose of this study is to locate the situation of existing insurgency in India's northeast region and determine the policy options for effective containment. It is believed that after Kashmir northeast India is the most volatile and insurgency-affected place in the country. This region is mainly composed of eight states; it is a hilly region of charming beauty and amazing biodiversity. It is also an area with an equally rich multiplicity of tribes, ethnic groups, languages and religions. However, this region has been troubled by insurgent movements ever since independence. Widespread conflicts which are related to the geography of the region, the multi-ethnicity of its population and grounds of discontent economic feeding are the characteristic features of this region. Different factors perpetuate insurgency in this region like the political history of Naga Hills, Merger Agreement of Manipur, economic underdevelopment and autonomy cause of Mizo Hills, an unjust attitude of the central government towards Assam, demographic imbalance of Tripura, violent incidents in Tirap and Chaglang districts of Arunachal Pradesh, and demographic and economic transformation of Meghalaya. Besides these causes, there are other factors which are responsible for the sustained insurgency in these states. In the above context, this paper tries to relocate the strategies and policy initiatives to contain the insurgent and militant activities in the region.

Keywords: Ethnicity, India, Insurgency, Northeast

The northeast states of India have been widely recognized for their weak economy, underdevelopment, ethnicity, political immaturity and insurgency. The insurgency factor has come up as a threat to India's national security. India's north-east is where south and south-east Asia meet (Upadhyay, 2006). The northeastern region, comprising of eight states, is the most backward region of India in comparison to other regions of the country. The growth rate of the regional economy is very slow. The inadequate infrastructure, low level per capita income, a limited financial resource of the State Governments, and non-availability of trained manpower are some of the contributory factors associated with its slow growth. Around 98% of the borders of the northeastern region are with other countries, namely Bangladesh, Bhutan, China and Myanmar (Banik, Chakraborty, & Chakraborty, 2015). Strategically the Northeast region of India is important. It has close to 5,200 km of external borders, some of which are still unsettled. China lays claim to the entire state of Arunachal Pradesh and does not recognize the existing boundaries. As both India and China grow and compete, the border dispute remains a potential flashpoint. Seen in this context, internal instability in the Northeast is a major strategic vulnerability. The Northeast is also the gateway to the ASEAN countries and is central to India's 'Look East' policy (Haokip, 2015). Unlike other parts of the country, this region holds an important and vital place from a strategic point of view.

Ever since the British withdrawal from South Asia in 1947, India's Northeast has been scarred by sustained separatist insurgencies, mass agitations, ethnic riots, and heavy-handed state response were resulting in continuous bloodletting. The fragile situation in the Northeast region has been the result of the

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<https://www.gapcritique.in/problem-of-insurgency-in-north-east-india-a-long-standing-war-with-few-prospects/>

Received 26 February 2019; Received in revised form 16 March 2019; Accepted 28 May 2019, Published 2 July 2019

terrain, the state of socio-economic development and historical factors such as language, ethnicity, tribal rivalry, migration, control over local resources and widespread feeling exploitation and alienation (Bhaumik, 2007). The insurgent movements are partly the result of historical factors that have their roots in British colonial policies and partly the result of a lack of strategic vision and good governance post-independence. Nagaland was the first state where armed groups seeking secession surfaced in the 1950s. Mizoram followed this in the 1960s, Manipur in the 1970s, Assam and Tripura in the 1980s and parts of Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya in the 1990s. A striking feature about these groups is that they are invariably drawn along tribal and ethnic lines.

In the very recent times, the insurgency in northeast India involves multiple armed factors operating in this region. There are a number of demands of different factions in northeast India some favour a separate state while others seek regional autonomy, some groups demand complete independence, others wanted religious law. As per reports of Union Home Ministry, Government of India the militant activity in the Northeast is on the decline, with Tripura and Mizoram emerging as the most peaceful states in the region (Times of India, 2018).

Genesis and Factors of Insurgency in the North-east Region

The insurgency in the Northeast region of India began at different points. In the very onset, it started in Naga Hills which is now an independent state of Nagaland. Angami Zapu Phizo led the Naga movement, who did not want to join the Indian Union. He claimed that Nagaland had never been a part of Indian territory. Thus, on the eve of independence, the idea of insurgency took shape in the Naga Hills and thereafter it spread in the region (Rao, 1991, 261). In the Northeast of India, conflict generally arises because the existing state systems may not be able to satisfy the basic interests and needs of people of this region. Certain groups of the populace are excluded from opportunities to participate equally in the life of the country or to live in the way they prefer. Such inequalities generated grievances which lead to one of the reasons for creating conflict or insurgency (Datta & Bhuyan, 2007). The history of insurgency in northeast states of India can be traced separately at the threshold of different states of this region:

Nagaland Soon after the Independence of India from British colonial rule in August 1947 the de-

mand for the establishment of the sovereign independent state of Nagaland by Naga people in the countries northeast region with armed conflict (Singh, 2013) was the biggest challenge. The first to challenge the nationhood of India in the post-independence were the Nagas. The construct of Pan-Naga nation evolved out of political, territorial and social consciousness, which eventually led to the formation of Naga club in 1918. This was a significant event in the history of Naga resistance movement representing the first organized political movement in Northeast India (Shimray, 2005). Naga identity grew stronger with the formation of the Naga National Council (NNC) in 1946. This council started a movement for local autonomy and a separate electorate for the region (Chadha, 2009). NNC submitted a memorandum to the British in February 1947, wherein a demand was put up for an interim government. This resulted in a nine-point agreement, which recognized the right of Nagas to develop themselves according to their freely expressed wishes. However, due to a difference of opinion over the last point in the agreement between the central government and Phizo, the revolt was raised against the Indian government on 14 August 1947.

Under the leadership of Phizo, NNC gained momentum after the referendum, popularly known as the Naga Plebiscite, was conducted on 16 May 1951 where 99.9 per cent voted for independence of Nagaland. However, the veracity of plebiscite remains debatable. Subsequently, the split of NNC into varied factions and its breakaway function, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) also broke into two factions; those factions were the Isak-Muivah faction (NSCN-IM) and the Khaplang faction (NSCN-K). These organizations have continued separate violent struggles for Nagaland's independence (Kumar, 2018). In a very recent peace accord between Naga insurgent groups led by National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah) and Government of India in August 2015, there was a hope to end the long-standing separatist movement in the state (Wangchuk, 2018).

Manipur The roots of insurgency in Manipur are found in the instrument of accession, which was signed by the King of Manipur. However, the King did not join the Indian Union, and he introduced the Manipur Constitution Act of 1947. Accordingly, elections were held based on adult franchise. However, when the King refused to merge with the Indian union, he was arrested and was forced to sign the 'Merger Agreement'. Consequently, the agreement was signed on 02 September 1947. Accordingly, elections were held based on adult franchise.

However, when the King refused to merge with the Indian union, he was arrested and was forced to sign the 'Merger Agreement'. Consequently, the agreement was signed on 02 September 1947. As a result, on 15 October 1949, Manipur was merged with the Indian Union (Sinha, 2000). This incidence sowed the seeds of autonomy in the minds of people of Manipur. A communist leader, Irabot Singh, opposed this agreement and formed a 'Red Guard Army' to fight for an independent Manipur. However, he failed to achieve the goal as he died in the following years, but he sowed the seeds of Meitei sub-nationalism. Insurgency¹⁵ in Manipur began when the Manipuri communists under the leadership of Hijam Irabot wanted to secede and introduce communism in Manipur on the lines of Maoism. Irabot failed to achieve his goal and died in 1955, but the 'Revolutionary Government of Manipur' which started its spadework of insurgency in March-April 1969, followed the line of insurgency set by him (Singh, 2004). In 1964, Meitei secessionist insurgency began its operation in the state when the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) was formed under the leadership of Samarendra Singh.

Today Manipur is not only suffering from armed movements of many underground organizations but also from a complex ethnic crisis. Being inhabited by different groups of people which can be classified broadly into Meitei, Naga and Kuki, a harmonious existence of the state is being threatened as the interests of one group clash with the other. This has given rise to an assertion of group identity; intergroup competition for resources, political instability, insecurity and underdevelopment (Sharma, 2016). In a very recent report of Economic Times, November 2018, affirms that an early solution to the insurgency problem in Manipur is complicated given its complexity due to a multiplicity of militant groups and their different sets of demands.

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Mizoram: The disturbance and unrest that existed in Naga Hills and Manipur spread further to Mizo Hills, which led to revolt. An uprising in the Mizo Hills begins in all of a sudden. A devastating Famine (Mautam) was an explosion which started in 1959 when the people inhabiting the Lushai Hills woke up to bamboo death (Mautam). The Mizo National Famine Front (MNFF) formed by some Mizo soldiers, began mobilizing Mizos, but once the need was addressed, MNFF became the Mizo National Front (MNF) this front started 'Operation Jericho' to capture towns in Mizo Hills (Bahumik, 2007, 13). In Mizoram, insurgency developed through three distinct phases. In the first phase, there was an outbreak of insurgency, which reached its peak intensity during 1966-71. During the second phase, there was a decline in the intensity after Calcutta Agreement of 1976 and took place the first breakup in MNF as a result of surrender. In the third phase, there were irregular aggressive actions and periodic negotiations after 1977, which finally led to the settlement in 1986 (Mizoram.nic.in). There are still some leftover insurgent movements in this state, and extortion remains an issue. Still, ever since the agreement, the state has remained relatively stable compared to other northeastern states.

Assam: The background of the unrest in Assam were quite complex. First, as with other states in the Northeast, a significant portion of the local population held no particular loyalty to the central government after Indian independence. In common with the Naga insurgent movements, the main Assam insurgent group, the United Liberation Front of

Asom (ULFA), claims that it 'never is a separatist or secessionist movement' since 'Assam was never a part of India at any point of time in history' (Cline, 2006). The insurgency began to spread in Assam soon after the Assam agreement of 1985. Various insurgent groups emerged in the post-agreement period on ethnic and communal lines with their own agenda. For instance, National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) fought for an independent Bodoland, whereas Islamist Insurgent groups operated their missions in the areas which were dominated by Muslims to safeguard the rights of Muslims (Basumatary, 2014). At present all the major insurgent groups from the state are on the negotiation table with the government of India.

Tripura: The insurgency in Tripura has its roots in demographics imbalance of the state. The history of insurgency in Tripura can be traced to the formation of the Tripura Upajati Juba Samiti (TUJS) in 1971, followed by Tripura National Volunteers (TNV) in 1981. There have been other organizations caring insurgent activities in the state, include National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) and National Holy Army and All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF). After a decade of violence, an agreement in 1988 ended the insurgency. Between 1996 and 2004, the insurgency in the state grew in magnitude (Sahaya, 2011). Today, the intensity of the violence created by these insurgent groups is low in the state. There may be the chances that these groups would resume severe violent activities henceforth need is to negotiate the issues.

Arunachal Pradesh: Arunachal Pradesh primarily has faced 'overflow' insurgent operations by the NSCN-IM and the NSCN-K. Both Naga groups have conducted significant attacks in the state, both against security forces and against each other. The NSCN factions have also reportedly set up training camps inside Arunachal Pradesh, both to train their members and insurgents from other groups. Reportedly, the ULFA has also expressed interest in setting up camps in the state after being evicted from Bhutan. The state is affected by the spill-over militant activities of insurgents belonging to the NSCN in Tirap, Changlang, and Longding districts of the Arunachal Pradesh. Recently, the parliamentary standing committee on home affairs, in its latest report on Security situation in the eastern states of India-said, "the Committee is also constrained to express its concern that unlike the overall northeastern region, which shows a declining trend of insurgency-related incidents and casualties suffered by the civilians and an improvement in the security scenario, Arunachal Pradesh has seen a rise in the number of such incidents" (Sarma, 2018).

Meghalaya: The demographic and economic transformation of Meghalaya has resulted in the insurgency in the state. Meghalaya has been relatively stable in comparison with other states in the area. The Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo, most of whom are Christian, form the three major ethnic groups in the state and comprises of 86.15% of its population. Once the "role model" of peace and democracy, Meghalaya has witnessed rising insurgency and terrorism since the 1980s and especially since 2009 (Saldanha & Mohan, 2018).

There was a fear among these major indigenous tribes, being swamped demographically, culturally as well as economically by the non-tribal (Lyngdoh & Gassah, 2003). Inspired by the logic of "anti-foreigners" agitation in Assam led by All Assam Students Union (AASU) in the 1970s, Khasi Student Union (KSU) spearheaded the agitation against the non-tribal's with the tacit support of the traditional elites started in the 1980s (Srikanth, 2005). It was against the backdrop of tribal-nontribal dichotomy that insurgency movement started with a motive of driving out the "dkhars" (outsiders) from the state. The Hynniewtrep Achik Liberation Council (HALC) was formed in 1992 to safeguard the right of the tribals comprise of Khasi, Jaintia and Garos in Meghalaya. The outfit split into two factions: Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC), representing the Khasis and the Jaintias, and the Achik Matgrik Liberation Army (AMLA) representing the Garos (Cline, 2006). Recently, the GoI has revoked the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) from Meghalaya. This move was the result of coming down of insurgency-related incidents by 85% from the levels recorded at the peak of militancy two decades ago (Jain, 2018).

Factors responsible for the insurgency in the north-east region of the country are many. The underlying factors, prevalent as they were, required just a spark to ignite the tension-ridden atmosphere in the region. The culmination of latent and immediate factors resulted in a successive wave of insurgency across the northeastern region are (Deka, 2015):

- i. Political mileage is considered as one of the main reason for the turmoil in the region. There are objections by civil society that separatist outfits in north-east India were born and grew at the will of the bigoted political leaders for their ends
- ii. Mall-Practice of bureaucrats is considered another cause for recurrence of insurgency in the region

- iii. The support of media for the cause and ideology of many insurgent groups has turned out to be another powerful ground for flourishing insurgent activities in northeast India.
- iv. There are reports of transnational assistance from many neighboring countries to the insurgent groups. The insurgents receive funds, arms and ammunitions, training and shelters in the surrounding foreign countries. The names of Pakistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar are very often spoken in this context.
- v. Unequal distribution of socio-economic developmental assistance by the central government is also one of the leading factors for the growth of insurgency in the region.

The factors responsible for insurgency-related activities in the region are not limited to the above-stated causes. There are other factors which place a vital difference some of these include demographic isolation, factional rivalry, and lack of developmental assistance from the centre etc.

Fatalities and Violence

There are no estimates of insurgency-related violences and fatalities pre-1992 period in the northeast region. As per the reports of Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, from 1992 to 2015 there are about 15600 fatalities reported from each of these states, though the actual number seems to be higher (Kumar, 2018).

Fatalities related to insurgency in the Northeast region are testimonies of the fact that there is a persistent continuation of insurgencies, which is alarming. During the years 2010-2019, the Northeastern states of India have recorded 2203 fatalities. Maximum casualties, within the above mentioned period, have been recorded in Assam, which is followed by Manipur, Meghalaya and Nagaland. It can be seen from the table that the insurgent groups have been targeting innocent civilians as well as security forces. Such a terrible situation has kept the local population under constant threat of their life. However, the fact remains that the innocent civilians are being killed and the threat of violence is being used to create psychological fear in the minds of the local inhabitants.

As per the recent statistics published by Ministry of Home Affairs compared to 2017, the insurgency in the region has declined by 36% year-on-year. The year 2018 also witnessed a jump in the deaths of ci-

vilians and security forces (Nagaland Post, 2019).

Way Forward for Peace and Reconciliation

The problem of insurgency, as discussed, in north-east India has complex and multifaceted dimensions including socio-economic and political aspects. In order to alleviate the problem, it is important to understand the relative deprivation, justification of political action and the balance between discontented people's capacity to act and the government's capacity to redress the plight of the rebellions (Gurr, 2011). The capacity for peace can be developed through economic empowerment and reconciliation by the society to maintain peace through people's initiatives. It is very unfortunate that in Northeast there is no initiative either by civil society or by the government to encourage the process of negotiations among the diverse ethnic groups to come on a common platform (Kumar, 2017). Nevertheless, the following options may be placed in the forefront to tackle the issues of insurgency in the region.

- i. Inclusive development of all ethnic groups shall be given priority. The differential in development between the hill and the valley areas is glaring and promote insurgent activities.
- ii. The central government should formulate negotiation with all stake holders. Mere talks with rebels should not be taken as final and ending.
- iii. To promote harmony and peace in the region the religious organizations should use the policy of mitigation and education.
- iv. Clean bureaucratic practices may promote peace. It is assumed that mal-practice of bureaucrats promote recurrence of insurgency in the region.
- v. Security force operations using the army, paramilitary forces, and police forces should be considered the last source of containment; peace talks must be given first priority.
- vi. Civil society groups in the northeast have played key roles in the conflict management and resolution in the region. It is essential to promote these organizations to bring down the problem of insurgency.

Conclusion

There stands the fact that India's Northeast is a region of great differences and complexities. Some of the major root causes behind most of the conflicts and insurgencies in the region are uneven development, regional deprivation, internal colonialism,

cultural oppression and lack of integration. Several of the states have in fact seen significant declines in insurgent operations, and various negotiations and ceasefire agreements have made considerable progress. But fatalities related to insurgency in the northeast region are testimonies of the fact that there is a persistent continuation of insurgencies. The number of rebel and ethnic groups with competing goals is unlikely to recede quickly, and new insurgent groups are likely to emerge. The need of the hour is to provide a reliable and developmental strategy to tackle insurgency-related activities. This will surely promote the peace process in the region and will further elaborate the opportunities to build trust in the centre.

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