

## Security Issues in India's North-East: A Political Geography Perspective

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### **Growing Complexities and Emerging Reality**

Continuation of political instability provided a favourable environment for perpetuation of crises in the northeast. It not only retarded the pace of socio-economic transformation of the regional polity but also set in the processes having trans-regional ramifications. These became serious internal security concerns for the country. Northeast is the immediate western neighbour of the insurgent zone or the Golden Triangle, which at one time extended up to the eastern coast of Vietnam. Inhabitants of the Golden Triangle continuously opposed any form of political control or authority. The thickly forested mountainous terrains encouraged their activities. Isolation and inaccessibility provided the initiative needed to maintain a confrontationist posture. The peddling of drugs and narcotics and arms smuggling and so on became the viable alternative sources of economic gain and revenue for the inhabitants. The region became very important during the Vietnam War as it provided sanctuaries, transit facilities and rights of passage to other insurgent groups of the adjoining countries. There has not however, been a visible change. With an active frontier policy adopted by the regime in Myanmar, counter insurgency operations were able to gain ground and were successful in containing insurgency especially in upper and northern Myanmar. Insurgent groups like those of the Kachins, Shans, Burmese Communist Party and the Red Karen for example found the contemporary situations restricting their activities. Even their efforts to seek refuge in the

forested northwestern Thailand were of little help in the face of sustained Myanmar military operations. These activities had sufficient impact on the insurgency situations on the Indian side of the frontier through denial of sanctuaries and transit for men and material.

Trans frontier developments restricted alternatives for the insurgencies in the northeast. New avenues were explored and found favourable. The extensive southern frontier with Bangladesh was thinly populated, thickly forested and scantily policed. This borderland enabled various insurgent groups to use the area as an easy passage to their sanctuaries and training grounds in Bangladesh, Myanmar, etc. This frontier was also used for cross-purposes, for illegal immigration into the less densely populated northeast, narcotics movement, gun running, etc.

However with increasing inter governmental contacts and cooperation, the use of these southern insurgent sanctuaries have been to a substantial extent curtailed. Consequently the forested swampy Indo-Bhutanese border became the rallying point for insurgents based in the lower Brahmaputra valley. These were effectively neutralised in 2003. Correspondingly, the hill districts of the state of Assam also came under increasing insurgent activities. Moreover with the insurgents targeting maze of the minority groups, new insurgent outfits emerged in the region. Even the once docile immigrant labour force in the tea gardens and the immigrant groups initiated action to safeguard their interests in the face of persistent threats from the valley based insurgent groups.

When these developments left restricted trans border movements and compelled the armed groups to operate within a defined space the resultant interaction could be anything but stable. Subsequently terrorism, extortion, kidnapping and factional infighting became common. The insurgent groups partly to strengthen their weaponry and finances and partly to restore stability within their respective organisations initiated these. Moreover by forming parallel administrations in their areas of influence they were able to neutralise the regional administration's efforts. The regional governments initially treated these as law and order problems but with the passage of time began to seriously reorient

their perspectives. Consequently much of the regional governments' development/budgetary allocations were diverted to maintain semblances of law and order and stability in the respective states. Economic development took a back seat. To this extent the insurgents were successful as they were able to force the continuation of stagnation in the socio-economic landscape and maintain their hold on the populace. It is this that created serious internal security concerns.

### **Need for policy Alternatives**

Closing decades of the twentieth century indicated convincingly how fragile political phenomena were, how easily legitimacy of political institutions could be eroded and how easily the earlier conclusion could be proved totally wrong. Signs of change conducive to political instability cropped up in the region. Compared to what used to be the case during the 1960's, 1970's, 1980's and the 1990's, there emerged strong opinions demanding changes in governmental policy and decision making machinery that influenced the structure and patterns of political and economic relations in the region.

The criticism reflected the loss of credibility, as it was increasingly equated with declining social and economic returns. Even natural assets such as the abundant forest resources and established industries of petroleum and tea, failed to bring economic transformation in the region. These developments fell short of the expectations that were raised and failed to meet the minimum requirements of the galloping population in the region. As a consequence, conflict parameters expanded in scope. Competition for the few opportunities increased manifold and confrontation became inevitable. These encouraged the growth of demands for autonomy and separation in the region.

Disenchantment with the existing structure, frustrations of the populace due to the lack of social and economic opportunities, and the denial of the local voice to be heard, manifested through the formation of new political parties or political movements which increasingly began to include a militant wing. This suggested that

the existing political and economic fora could not accommodate the new cleavages or the reappearance of the old ones. From the sixties onwards, political situations had undergone little change. In the mid seventies traditional political parties faced some new challenges. Not only were they challenged by the new political parties and new political movements, but they also had to adapt to an environment for political life that was growing more complex and more uncertain. Traditional ideologies and economic systems had to be reinterpreted to give new direction to the issues of development administration. In a way, these encouraged non-traditional alternatives to dominate the sub regional transactions.

One of the transactions that continuously maintained its significant impact was the economic interdependence, the consequent specialisation and the division of labour that occurred within the boundaries of the region. Introduction of administrative reforms, impact of modernisation processes strengthening of transport linkages and networks, etc., rapidly transformed the age-old equations and relationships. The changing regional geopolitical and environmental factors called for corresponding adjustment in the societies in the region.

The economic factor, particularly the growing linkage with the national and global trends had also exerted sizeable impact on regional activities. Yet one cannot deny the efforts and investments that were consistently aiming at expansion of linkages, connectivities, reinforcement of network facilities and diversification of economic bases in the North-East. The increase in participation and representation and the awareness of the interdependence gradually left its impression on the landscape of the region.

All these suggested that modernising elements within the boundaries of the region looked for their own institutional and organisational mechanisms for evolving their development perceptions. But the conflicts in priorities and interests made the process of change within and integration at all scales weak. These priorities and interests impacted the politico- geographical processes and the regional insurgency scenario.

### **Emerging Imperatives**

Resistance to effective central authority has been the most pronounced characteristic of the northeastern India. Frontier history is replete with such instances and bears ample testimony to the nature, extent and scale of discontent and instability. As long as the frontiers remained vague and the boundaries undefined, resistance to authority was expressed through armed confrontation, incursions, raids and heightened inter and intra group tensions in the frontiers. Space and time were coterminous with survival of distinctiveness. Space came to be designated in terms of fulfillment of requirements for survival and defined in terms of distance and accessibility. Consequently, the frontier areas exhibited economic stagnation and decline and political instability.

But with the gradual extension of modern system of administration, frontiers were defined. Significant boundary conditions were introduced and imposed. This defined their scope of action. Their cumulative impacts compelled the inhabitants to interact with change and exposed them to the vagaries and impact of centrifugal tendencies. All these introduced an entirely different ethos and made the regional environment dynamic and volatile. The obvious responses were those of confrontation and resistance. These areas also succumbed to extra mural influences.

Literature on pre-1947 movements clearly suggests that the central authority was frequently caught by surprise, particularly on the scale of the uprising, and it took them considerable time and force to restore status quo. These events coincided with the national movement that made mass mobilisation one of the pillars for challenging the colonial authority.

Be that as it may, exposure to global political processes enabled many of the inhabitants to realise the need for evolving a framework of loose functional unity among the diverse ethnic groups in the region. This was achieved through charismatic personalities who projected a common goals for mass mobilisation. In the post-1947 phase this enabled the Naga confederations under Phizo and much later the Mizo confederation under Laldenga, to challenge the central authority. These challenges stretched the resources of the

federal authority and succeeded in mobilising the masses. An explanation- that reasonably argues as to how such a framework could come about even for a short time when each one of the social groups in the coalition at one time or other was in a constant state of rivalry, antagonism and confrontation with another- is yet forthcoming. In fact the leaders were able to manage an effective coalition and to ensure a common front with which the federal authority later negotiated. Several other mass mobilisations of this nature evolved with a common purpose but immediately splintered, as they did not possess the charismatic leadership. However ground realities soon overlooked the mass politics, and fissures within these coalitions surfaced. The protracted nature of the resistance stretched a precarious resource base and inability to maintain the initial advantage and gains undermined confidence and the ability to prolong such an instance. Such- problems, which these insurgencies created, were overcome through the efforts of the federal authority to restore normalcy. These hastened breaking point thresholds, and under the weight of their own contradictions these coalitions broke into numerous splinters. Such hastened breaking threshold points were reached within every insurgent group in the region, as it happened in Nagaland.

In Manipur between 1947 and 1960 there were a series of unsuccessful attempts to mobilise the masses for resistance. Like their northern counterparts, these mobilisations broke down due to inbuilt contradictions. Mobilisations under UNLF, PREPAK and so on were temporary phenomena that could not sustain them for long. Small splinter groups emerged to dominate and to complicate the situation. In Mizoram, political short-sightedness and economic neglect made mass mobilisation to transform itself into armed confrontation. It was a coalition *par excellence* and encompassed the entire state. It enabled the confrontation to continue for two decades before resolutions to end the resistance were affected. Tripura continuously faced the brunt of uncontrolled immigration, which over time converted the local inhabitants into a minority. This resulted in the emergence of armed resistance, but this too over a period of time like the others, succumbed to fragmentation.

In Meghalaya the resistance movements were responses to economic stagnation and increased immigration. However, the region retains its distinctiveness and the resistance movements remain yet localised.

In Assam the exodus after partition, the language issue and continuous immigration became the rallying causes at both the state and the sub regional levels. In the initial stages numerous sub regional political and cultural fora emerged to campaign for locality wise interests. These fora formed loose coalitions, particularly after the administrative reorganisation of 1971, to put up a common front against what has come to be known as the foreigners issue. They launched sustained movements from 1979 to 1985 till the Assam Accord was signed. It was at this point that the movement began to reflect deep fracture planes that came about due to cleavages within and between the diverse populations of the valley. All resistance movements splintered due to inherent contradictions. ULFA, Boro Liberation movements etc soon succumbed and fragmented. This increased the scale of factional antagonism.

Moreover with the 1980s and 90s becoming eras of turmoil, more parties felt compelled to become a party to the instability. Immigrants and other minority groups who over time had identified themselves with the valley society resorted to mobilisations to protect their specific interests. In Arunachal Pradesh armed resistance emerged as a response to Chakma resettlement after 1965.

All these instances in the northeast started as loose coalitions and ended as numerous splinter groups that not only challenged the central authority but also continued fratricidal factional confrontations. These clearly indicated the overriding importance of locality based interest and group specific ideology. It resulted in demassification and was indicative of the fact that they had reached the end of the line for mobilisation. In time, these mass mobilisations became unsustainable. The need to start another became imperative. Indeed the change and consequently the responses to such approach had necessarily to be radical so as to arrive at normalcy and not status quo.

Despite the break up of unified resistance and the emergence

of numerous insurgent factions and the formation of a broad regional front, the growing economic stagnation did not permit federal and regional authorities to seek conflict resolution even in the demassified scale. The numerous insurgent factions also failed to realise the fact that their lack of cohesiveness had in fact diluted their effectiveness. In the process, they were neither successful nor were they allowed the administration to improve material life conditions of the people. What they cumulatively were able to achieve was allowing the dissipative tendencies to retain a stranglehold on society, economy and the territory.

In addition fragmentation of insurgent groups also suggests increasing diversity that cuts deeply across politics and power. In fact, politics has begun to exhibit tickle and fragile power sharing arrangement with collapse and sustained uncertainty looming constantly in the horizons. These provide the mosaic for fractured transactions and are evidence of clearly discernible widening of cleavages within the movements. And perhaps the same can be said of the conflict resolution attempts that constantly strive for a broad understanding and settlement of the problem, with possibly little hope. Or does all these provide the distant analogy that the diverse interest groups are content with the status quo?

This situation in the region was complicated further with increasing unemployment, corruption, overt and covert centralisation and so on. These were ideal conditions for encouraging the use and unimpeded transborder movement of drugs and narcotics and arms smuggling. These also provided the required finances for inducting sophisticated weaponry into the region. Their impact is amply evident from the widespread prevalence of the AK-47 culture and drug addiction in the northeast. People, territory and the economy of the northeast now became more susceptible. Already some of the states in the region, like Manipur and Mizoram acknowledge the gravity of the drug menace and along with it the scourge of AIDS. These indirectly encourage the growth of crime in the region. Thus the regional governments as well as the federal government faced the unenviable task of dealing with the expanding law and order issues, for which they are permanently short of

manpower, weaponry and finances. And with politics rapidly becoming an exercise for keeping oneself in power or sharing it with a select few, the efforts at stability lost teeth and effectiveness. In a way then insurgency movements acted more as catalysts for a series of interrelated crises. These continuously undermined the social and economic fabric on the one hand and on the other, exposed the region to the full brunt of geopolitical compulsions. Besides, response to the wider regional, national and global impulses in a geopolitically sensitive environment contained potential for transforming the peaceful conditions of the region. This suggested that consolidation of this nature marginalised traditional geopolitical adversaries and replaced them with newer participants representing diverse interests. This system while catering to the administrative requirements introduced significant rearrangements in political, social and economic relations of and between the territories and their respective inhabitants.

In this challenge of politics and economics on a regional geopolitical canvas, the participants usually gathered in coalitions in which the most promising groups seemed to have the long run strategy. Organisations on ethnic lines were not the only alignment. But they became effective only when they indicated greatest adaptability to a competitive world. And so long as the competitive institutions continued to prevail, sub nationalism could mobilise more people and organise them more effectively than any other competing type of organisation. Thus to develop the economic and other territorial resources it was necessary to bring the people together in a formal network of communications complementarily based on broader participation of the populace. In all these instances, the elite and the pressure groups reacted with strong assertion of sub nationalism and of allegiance, to their language, culture and history. But these manifestations of self-expression needed to be put into proper perspective. Firstly strong expression would occur in the least developed and least modernised parts, and secondly the impact of the new conflicts would be trans-national in nature. They could perhaps suggest the emergence of new equations with economics as the new axis of interaction.

Are all these developments unique to the region? Or do they have broad similarities with patterns emerging in other parts of the country as well as in the immediate regions? Predominant underworld operations in Mumbai, private armies in Bihar, mafia dons of the coal belt- all indicate broad similarities with the situation in the northeast. So is the situation in Jammu & Kashmir and Punjab. Differences that exist in the movements in these regions perhaps lie in their respective locations, in ideology and in the quantum of extramural support.

Thus while politicians, bureaucrats, academics and others treat these developments as distinctly separate phenomena, there is perceptible connection and interrelation between continuing peripheral position in the national body politics, economic stagnation and acute sense of relative deprivation, intense social unrest and highly politicised transactions in the northeast. One can also draw similar inferences to the country as a whole today. However, in the case of the northeast these vast historical developments spring from many roots and no single explanation can either account for them or provide a tailor made solution. Then to treat history abstractly and to reduce it is in fact to ignore the complexities of the geopolitical factors, individuals and many other variables behind the contemporary development and regional security concerns.