

Some Geopolitical Aspects of the Question of Internal Security of Northeastern India

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Insurgency, militancy, terrorism, etc. are all symptoms of socio-economic crisis and political uncertainty. These have irrevocably dominated the Post-1947 State and society. Struggle for improved material life conditions, growing uncertainty and uneasiness in participation and representation, perceived alienation and discrimination, have radically transformed the perception of the regional-national landscape. Confrontation and competition for power has become more of a rule than an exception. These have been translated at inter-group and inter-regional dimensions as well.

These instances of confrontation, frequently laced with ideology, have been successful in expressing societal contradictions, economic dilemmas, political opportunism and territorial paradoxes. In more than one way, this has encouraged entry of new actors and participants into confrontation - competition parameters. One can find a rationale for the human costs involved and reasons for economic stagnation. But it becomes difficult to evolve a framework of justification either for confrontation or continuation of stagnation.

Present day conflicts sans the romantic hues of the anti-Colonial struggle or anti-establishment movements. Neither do they mean to achieve their goals nor have the means to maintain status quo. Every instance of confrontation was a singular event in its history. Its continuation caused innumerable deaths, destruction of economically viable resources and perhaps led to exodus of many. People and territory became the enviable field. Their continuation while compelling socio-economic stagnation blurred the major issues (likewise compelling to restore status quo led to socio-economic neglect). Under these circumstances, one cannot but need to consider the individuals and their personalities, groups, the weight of history, etc., involved in the conflicts.

Uncertainty of unresolved conflicts makes the real issue its first casualty. This is followed by an intentional recourse to past events. These are relevant to the understanding of the complexities of issues of the conflicts. These are prerequisites to grasp the central fact about the Northeastern region, which is a region in revolt. Its past and present events are troubled. This suggests that indigenous factors of instability continued to remain significant. The rivalries and ethnic cleavages/differences were as obvious as the Colonial experience, which left its share of difficulties to the post-1947 State. In doing so, though it created stable boundaries between different administrative units, the Colonial State laid the foundations of future conflicts in the Northeast.

Yet, despite the five decades of Independence, there has been a singular lack of information on (1) many of the revolts of the past-internal rivalries and anti colonial struggles in the various territories of the region; (2) on the traditional perception of the modern State among the populations of the region; and (3) of the people and their territory. Even the regional historians have explained what was only central to Assam valley-even here it falls short of explaining the existing predicaments.

The body of literature that now forms the base of images has emerged during the colonial times, which strengthened the distorted image that colonialism was synonymous with peace image. This is partially reinforced by the fact the colonial

state faced several challenges to its authority and control but was successful in freezing many of the traditional rivalries, which were the features of the pre-colonial society because it disguised its fragility, and dangers of future unrest. Perhaps, such an understanding will help comprehension of the past values - a past untransformed by modernist introduction of alien culture and not marked by any change in the relationships between the various population groups.

The Northeastern Region delineated the rich geographical confusion of tribal groups within and across the frontiers. There also existed chronic conflict between hill and plain sections. Absence of effective central control encouraged revolts. Their forays in the plains were met with retaliation. Consequently, elements in the hills had little choice between the extremes of a wide degree of untrammelled authority and armed defiance of the Centre.

The available regional literature on these aspects indicates that:

One, revolts were resistances to greater political control mounted by the centre that capacity and desire to manifest regional identity through revolt was one of the indices of survival and power of these identities.

Two, a sense of distinctiveness from ethnic group to ethnic group remains the greatest historic feature of the region; the political boundaries and independence have accentuated the ethnic divisions and rivalries. This also suggests the impact of the ethnic-linguistic affinities and impact of historical associations.

Three, Center-periphery conflicts

Four, the revolts were aimed at restoring past values, untransformed by modernist introduction of Alien culture and were not marked by any change in the relationship between the groups.

Five, internecine struggle was more frequent in a direct relationship to the weakness of the State. And whenever the individual emerged, the population of the sub-regions accepted the leadership of the individual. There were in terms of their expectations that such a

leader would transform their world, bring new era in which demands of the present would be satisfied through rich unreal promises of the future fulfilled or-a perceptive change emerged when the elite of these groups looked to the future. Supplanting the traditional approaches by programmatic ideologies, which urged revolt because of virtues of the future.

Six, initial revolts directed against administrative consolidation were with hopes of the capturing values of the past, untransformed by the modernist, introduction of alien culture and not marked by any change in the relationship between the ruler and the ruled.

Seven, the introduction of modernization processes and administrative consolidation /re-organization proceeded side by side were reinforced by specific policy measures. These allowed for disorientation to set in. This was favourable to traditional elite who commanded a general following amongst the derive peoples when the time came to revolt.

Administratively, regional political divisions frequently intensified diversions. There did exist distinct variations in geographic and administrative divisions between the sub-regions in the Northeast. However, the various sub-regions absorbed external influences more than diffusing their tradition, beliefs, etc. In a way, the various uprising during the British colonial period seems to have been almost entirely traditional in strategy and tactics.

All these sub-regions passed through the first five-decade of the 20th Century, with only suggestions of opposition to the Colonial establishment. This aggravated with the realization of imminent Colonial withdrawal from the Sub-Continent. This reinforced the problems of its divided society.

The way in which various societies in the region responded to the Partition and unification introduced new ethos; that is, replacing the traditional forms of appeals by the programmatic forms of appeals. This proved also the growing importance of political organization in pursuit of power. This brought into contact with the individuals belonging to the various sub-groups, who first served as members of labour

battalions in France. This was significant as it increased political awareness throughout the region. These were translated through charismatic leaders who exploited the dichotomies between the traditionalists and nationalists. Yet what has been more important was the reservation which each of the various sub groups displayed toward the other, as well as different approach that each brought to bear upon the other increased the problems of developing membership and establishing viable and dynamic political organization. However, the groups in revolt that showed the possibility were able to exert continuous pressure of security forces through the 1950's and 1960's to eighties and early 1990's.

Thus the scale of revolts in the region was sufficient to disrupt the function of the administration. It was in this administrative vacuum that insurgent groups were able to exploit and establish their influences. However, subsequent movements and the dominance of latest fragmentation tendencies among both the society and territories of the Northeast, made the situation more complex than it looks. The calm that prevailed till early 1950's and 1960's were enforced calm with federal power maintaining monopoly on force.

Further, deliberate policies of colonial power to restrict circulation, mobility and sharing of responsibility with the indigenous population cut the ground from those who sought gradualist solutions. Action and counter actions encouraged groups, which had the organizational ability of maintaining its existence. The protracted nature of these revolts and its alien responses provided a slow-acting catalyst, which brought into play a widely felt resentment of the sub-regional populations. In a way, lack of interferences by the colonial administration with the relationship between the traditional political authority structure and their populations, there was little opposition from the less prosperous members of the society about the disadvantage of their position. This was applicable to the sub-regions. However, institutions, which aimed at transformation of the existing social environment, made major penetration of these societies' cultural relations.

Yet absence of revolt in majority of the region may perhaps be to the absence of effective administration in these far flung areas conditioned by distance accessibility parameters as well as by an absence of major problems of social disorientation—either through disruption of old patterns of society and in terms of preservation of traditional, social and political relationship. Viewing all events in retrospect, one can state that when unrest did set in the region, it was almost solely the perception or fear of being swamped or dominated that triggered of latest divisive tendencies. Yet within themselves, the relations in the traditional plural society were adequate to maintain status quo.

Yet, one does not fail to notice that the reasons for politically troubled region to have closer linkages with the happenings with the immediate borderlands. This to a substantial extent explains how the extra-mural forces and impulses encouraged many of the difficulties and problems that had continuously dominated the regional transaction (and in some instances undermined the regional power balances). The conflicts between inter and intra groups, major and minor or between lowland and highland did not disappear through administration and development. Yet, the changes that were introduced did bring frustration and disorientation that in post-1947 period revived the latent/dormant tendencies among the societies in the region. In a way, then, slow spread of modern education, limited exposure of the people to metropolitan, growing influence of cultural forces, specific policy measures, set the disruptive force to sufficiently influence the regional Governments. Economic limitations and absence of opportunities formed a part of the explanation for the endemic discontent that was and is the dominant activity today in the region. For every instances or outburst of resentment, casualties were the population, with the protagonists and the state, located at two extremities of the development-stagnation continuum.

Change is a gradual process. Inadequacies of the pre and post 1947 State(s) lay in their failure to adequately appreciate and establish a link between rapid change, discontent and disorientation on the one side and in the other between

autonomy, stability, security and growth in the society and territory. It also suggested that were minimum efforts directed to explain the national discourse to the inhabitants. As a corollary, the impact of change in social, economic, cultural and political relations became singularly important. New political philosophy, greater individual (as a citizen) participation in the decision-making through defined system parameters, greater opportunities, etc., emphasized the contrasts between pre and post-colonial orders. New demands - political, social and economic, brought the prospects of change and development at the cost of marginalization of old economic systems and traditional values within the various societies. There were hardly any takers who were ready to accept this challenge(s).

At the same time, one can also notice that the Pre-1947 phase changes, which took place did not significantly influence the patterns and importance of traditional beliefs and attitudes. In fact, this development undermined the efforts of post 1947 developments. Subsequent programmes undermined the elite perception that craved for a status. With the experience and understanding gained through the participation earlier, the protagonists followed a policy of spatial expansion of dissent, isolation and control of far flung areas and isolate moderates to sustain a continued pressure on the state. In a way, they followed administrative and economic collapse with establishment of areas under their control and mobilizing the populations to present a common front against the State. These groups temporarily seized the initiatives to affect their dominance. In the process, they were able to tie down sufficient number of security forces for many years. They were successful to disrupt development and dealt severe blow to the region's economy.

Besides, the region indicated the presence of multiple sources of control. These co-existed with the ones established by the State. There were areas, which were politically under control but outside the purview of normal administrative machinery. Post-1947, efforts began first to minimize the anomalies and then remove these anomalies, so that a common administrative framework emerged in the region that was at

par with the rest of the country. These steps were construed as reflection of continued dominance.

On the other hand, restoration of status quo was essential. Stalemate meant successes and failures for both the protagonists and the State. At a broader level, it became a matter of either perpetuating an arrangement in which political power came to be concentrated in the hands of elite, political party and bureaucracy with the majority, consisting of diverse groups and less advantaged with perceptibly less access to that power.

As a result, many were convinced of virtues of separate status but it would be wrong to attribute this to all of the populace. What appeared to be a common goal in initial stages was the membership will ensure all opportunity to be associated with the organization that would improve their material life conditions as well as provide alternative to the a state in which they had previously found themselves.

Thus insurgencies in the region began to reflect grandiose plans, perhaps unrealistic in the contemporary global and regional political developments. The insurgents passed beyond the first stage of their aims. Their effects till today continue that can be seen in terms of upkeep of large number of security and Para military forces on the one hand, while on the other, that compels the States to divert the much needed finances for development to meet law and order situations. Security measures and banning of insurgent outfits were some of the policy initiatives that allowed a diversion of finances for development.

Lessons, if any, that can be drawn from the events of the last five decades suggest that both the protagonists and the State had continuously reasserted there efforts; a) to dominate the populated areas and to build up a feeling of security. These led to an increasing communication; b) to break the system within the populated area, and c) to isolate and restrict the contestants from their sources of supply and either way, people, territory and economy were held to ransom.

Weapon sophistication, better intelligence and movement reinforced sanctuaries and access, made all these movements of protracted nature. One of the possible explanations can be

lack of involvement of the people of their various sub-regions and their undefined role in the natural society as a whole. Moreover, elements within these societies could hardly garner effective support or were unable to protect the possible role, which their respective societies could play at the national level. Nor were any effort made to fully explain the position of the State. Besides, regional geopolitical compulsions required sufficient understanding of their compulsions and could have well been positively accommodated, had set the colonial policies were continued to a substantial extent.

Yet, success of these movements and counter-insurgency operations can be gauged from the emergence of Nagaland as an autonomous State in 1963 and the Northeastern Administrative Reorganization act in 1971, when composite State of Assam was reorganized.

Despite these developments, one still continues to ask reasons for continuation of the insurgency and its spread to other parts of the region. Is this due to the location and numerous neighbours that the region has? Or is it due to the political, social and economic predicaments, which the region has found itself into? Or is it a geopolitical heritage? These are some aspects that need to be enquired into for an understanding of the region which is in a state of revolt.