

Northeast India

Development,
Communalism and Insurgency

Ramashray Roy ◦ Sujata Miri ◦ Sandhya Goswami

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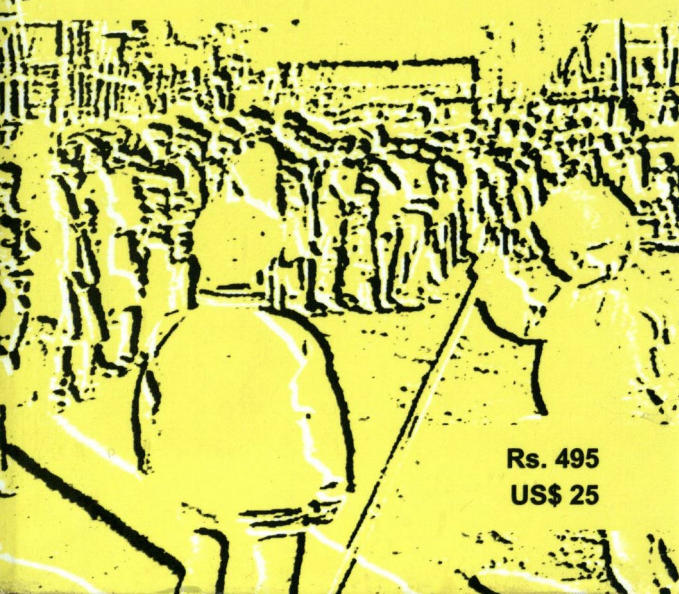


Northeast India: Development, Communalism, and Insurgency represents a pioneer effort in understanding the linkage among the phenomena of development, communalism, and insurgency. Heretofore insurgency has been viewed as pathology of body politic, a prime instance of the breakdown of law and order and a challenge to the legitimate centralized political authority. The present book argues against this partisan view and underlines the fact that to treat it as a problem of law and order is to turn a blind eye to the causes which, when ignored for long, lead to political violence and insurgency.

The cause of insurgency lies in the frustrated aspirations of the people with distinct socio-cultural identities by tardy development; this paves the way for the politicization of traditional socio-cultural referents of identity-formation; this, in turn, paves the way for intense political agitation which eventually graduates into political violence and insurgency if the smouldering discontent is not pacified. The root of insurgency lies in unsatisfied political demands that are considered by the agitators as legitimate.

This is the causal path that *Development, Communalism and Insurgency* traces in the Northeast, although the theoretical paradigm developed in this study has universal applicability. While developing this theoretical paradigm, the book also focuses on some important aspects of political life and relations in Assam and Meghalaya, the two foci of this study, and probes into the subjective world of the people in these two states.

The combination of these dimensions, the theoretical and the pragmatic has made this study a landmark in the study of the linkage among development, communalism, and insurgency.



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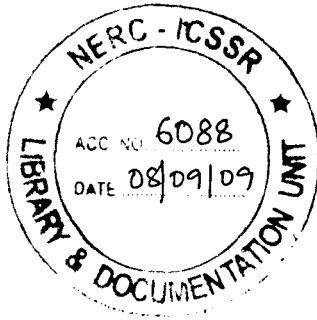
NORTHEAST INDIA

Development, Communalism and Insurgency

Ramashray Roy
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Anshah Publishing House



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Chapter One

A Theoretical Perspective

A study focusing on the phenomenon of insurgency in the Northeast region of India must deal with two sets of questions. One set of questions relates to theoretical understanding of what the term “insurgency” signifies. Needless to say that there has been a plethora of theoretical perspectives that have been utilized from time to time to explain the phenomenon of insurgency. We can identify, at the very outset, three distinct theoretical frameworks. They vie among themselves for gaining primacy as an explanatory device that can also help us in understanding what insurgency signifies. As explanatory devices, they can, it is expected, also help us in laying bare the factors that create conditions which can make insurgency unavoidable. Also, the causal nexus that exists between these factors that are supposed to be instrumental in leading to the end result, that is insurgency, and the phenomenon of insurgency itself, it is claimed, illumines the universe in which insurgency is taken recourse to.

One class of these theoretical frameworks can be broadly identified as those that consider primordiality as the prime cause that culminates, in due course, into insurgency. The second theoretical framework has to do with structural factors insofar as the structure of society with built-in inequality, inequity and potentiality of exploitation and oppression helps in building up a huge stock of resentment, frustration, anger and alienation. If unchecked and allowed to smoulder, accumulated dissatisfaction bursts in unquenchable flame of persistent violence including armed rebellion when it reaches a particular point. The third theoretical framework involves instrumentalist explanation that underlines the functional, utilitarian value of persistent violence either as a way of protecting entitlements or as a way of gaining access to new entitlements. And,

lastly, there is the theoretical perspective that underlines economic and political disparities between minority communities and the major ruling community, on the one hand, and between the minority groups and the state, on the other.

Before we take up a detailed discussion of the issues thrown up by different frameworks employed to explain the phenomenon of insurgency, we need to clarify two broad issues involved with insurgency. One of these issues is terminological, that is, the facile tendency to treat several distinct phenomena as constituting the unitary concept of insurgency. The other issue pertains to the way people look at the phenomenon of insurgency and tend to understand it in a partisan way. To take up the first issue, what needs to be emphasized is the prevalence of several terms that are used to describe a singular phenomenon that we know as insurgency. Terms such as, terrorism, separatism, secessionism and insurgency tend to be inter-changeably used to describe a distinct but organically linked phenomenon. Terrorism, for example, refers to a situation in which recourse to violence is taken by aggrieved minority groups against the state. This can happen when they find their demands for redressal of grievances to have no effect in moving the state for taking ameliorative action. When the act of violence becomes persistent and remains unabated, it is characterized as terrorism. But terrorism has only an instrumental value and becomes the expression of either separatism, or secession or insurgency proper. It has no meaning apart from them.

In contradistinction to terrorism, the phenomenon of separatism covers all aspects of political alienation that include a desire for reduction of control by a centralized political authority.¹ It reflects a situation in which either a minority group or a distinct community feels so aggrieved by the acts of omission and commission by centralized political authorities that it feels forced to claim for itself a distinct socio-cultural entity and demands a separate but not necessarily an independent political existence and organization. Separatism may graduate into secessionism when separatist movement slowly transits into a situation where a particular minority or politically organized community declares its intention to pursue independence² and voices its resolve to work for formal withdrawal from a central political authority.³ Thus, the basic distinction between separatism and secessionism lies in the fact that the former may claim for a minority group or a political unit within a larger political entity a distinct political existence and organization so that it can become a

master within its own particular territorial unit. In contrast, the latter underlines a firm intent for an independent political existence outside the territorial boundaries of the larger political unit.

Thus, secessionism is entirely a different phenomenon quite distinct from either terrorism or separatism. It refers to a formal declaration of intent for a totally independent political existence. Given this distinction, what also needs to be emphasized is that acts of terror or insurgent activities may be carried on for the purposes of not only emphasizing the firmness of the entities which are engaged in these activities, but also in their resolve to get their demands fulfilled. It is also to create an atmosphere of fear in the people so that the state authorities may be convinced that these separatist or secessionist groups are quite determined to get what they feel is their right. It is also the reflection of the "philosophy of the Bomb" in the earlier part of the last century, practiced by Indian terrorists with a view not only to instilling fear in the hearts of oppressors, but also to bring revenge and redemption to the oppressed masses. It is supposed to give courage and self-confidence to the wavering; it shatters the spell of subject race in the eyes of the world, because it is most convincing."⁴ Thus the phenomenon of terrorism is tied up with the intention of a minority community of separation or secession.

This also helps us to understand and appreciate different aspects of terrorism insofar as the question of the perpetrators of terror is concerned. We can, for the sake of convenience, identify two different aspects of terrorism. One of its aspects involves those groups, for example, the believers in the "Philosophy of the Bomb" in India in the last century. They formed only small but fully committed and detached bands of those who sought to strongly underline the need for alien rulers to leave the shores of India. When these small bands of terrorists were suppressed or eliminated, the acts of terror came to an end. But for all that, acts of terror by such small bands of terrorists were sporadic and short-lived incidents. In contrast to such bands, there are larger well organized, and well-armed groups of separatists who are located in a definite territorial unit and carry on terrorist activities as a sustained exercise on a continuous basis. Even if some of its key leaders are caught, imprisoned or killed, some others come forward to fill in the gap. Thus the group of insurgents continues till it becomes extinct for one or the other reason.

The second set of issues about terrorism concerns the perspective from which we view the act of insurgency. What is notable about this perspective is its one-sidedness in the sense that, if acts of terror are committed by those who we do not like, and if the victims of these acts are those who we like we can only say that this bespeaks of a tendency to ignore the impact of violence that is committed in our names. Take, for instance, the acts of terror that are committed by those who claim to be freedom fighters. In such a case, we tend to condone their acts of violence because they have been committed in our name and for our sake.⁵ As Fyodor Dostoevsky notes: "Nothing is easier to denounce the evildoer; nothing is more difficult than to understand him." Violence is evil and those who indulge in it are evildoers. But to become a judge and jury all rolled into one is to ignore the difference between violence done in our name and violence done to us.

This brings to our attention the fact that, despite the powerful and simple emotions that can overcome people at times of political, national or global tragedy, the reality of terror is much more complicated. That is why Reich argues "that terrorism is a complex problem. Its origins are diverse and so are those who engage in it."⁶ And since complex problems rarely have simple solutions, terrorism, too, impugns simple answers since it is a complex phenomenon. It is against this background that we can appreciate why Combs' specification of terrorism as "a synthetic war and theatre, a dramatization of the most proscribed kind of violence that is perpetrated on innocent victims and is played before an audience in the hope of creating a mood of fear for political purposes is simplistic and one-sided."⁷ The obvious reference here is to those acts of violence that are overt, most visible and usually carried out by groups who are fighting to achieve certain well-defined political purposes. Combs seems to be obviously unaware of covert acts of violence and terrorism committed, for instance, by the state or, for that matter, because they are the natural consequences of certain social structural factors.

Seen from the ken of location-specific perspective terrorism appears to be a set of acts done by mad persons. However, terrorists are rarely complete mad men. They have a specific purpose for the realization of which they are led willy-nilly to indulge in acts of violence and terror. Change the cause of terrorism and your acts of

terror that are not only condoned but also justified take on entirely a different colour. One person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter. Thus, what is, then, obvious is that acts of terror are generally perceived from the place one occupies in socio-political spectrum. Moreover, to say that those who indulge in terroristic acts are mad men is also not quite justified. As George Kennan observes: "Wrong a man, deny him all redress, exile him if he complains, gag him if he cries out, strike him in the face if he struggles, and at last he will throw bombs."⁸ Thus, the terrorist has a cause that he can argue and support his acts of terror by argument quoting facts and figures. History itself is a firm witness of this fact. The phenomenon of terrorism has a long history; it shows that principles and socio-political conditions characterizing acts of terrorism have been changing when the course of history has itself taken a new turn.

Changes in socio-political conditions have also made a corresponding change in the perspective from which one can perceive the acts of terrorism both as a justificatory ground and their condemnation. Terrorism "from below" committed by the oppressed and down-trodden has appeared, from time immemorial, for political and social reasons. However, the substantive referents of the terms "oppressed" and "downtrodden" have been changing. Both Plato and Aristotle considered the rule of a tyrant to be oppression. It is not surprising, therefore, that both of them justified tyrannicide.⁹ Similarly, regicide was justified as is evident from classical Indian texts. However, the meaning and context of oppression changed subsequently. For example, when the French Revolution took place, a radical shift in the perspective for the justification of terrorism also took place. The emergent perspective underlined the oppressive social conditions under autocratic or completely inept monarchs and terrorism was seen as the best means of radically changing the patterns of social organization by violent means. Robespierre for example, justified the terrorist arguing that terrorism was "nothing but justice, severe and inflexible." As such, terrorism was, therefore, "emanation of virtue and vital for forging a new society."¹⁰

The French Revolution itself was the violent expression of a new perspective on man and his world. The essence of this perspective is encapsulated in the world-shaking slogan of "*Liberte, Equalite and Fraternite*", the perspective that still constitutes a beacon showing a way to a better world to all oppressed and downtrodden peoples all

the world over. The social and political order that was based on inequality and political dominance became something to be changed radically by conscious human action. Efforts to bring to birth a new social order grounded in the values of freedom and equality came to be mounted in many places. Since the entrenched powers would not easily give in, revolution was considered to be the only alternative for throwing them out along with the system that sustained them and they themselves sustained. Revolutionary struggles of the 18th century, the emergence of new economic forces, and the developing discourse of (human) rights meant that it was time to give a character and a distinct name to terror. Thus, modern terrorism grew, and thrived in the late 18th century. Also a wide range of violent acts came to be labeled as terrorism.

In the 19th century terrorism came to be practiced by individuals and groups mainly to dislodge their political opponents from power. Camille Pisacane has characterized such an attempt through terrorism as propaganda by deed.¹¹ It represented the romantic idea that a single individual or a small group, no matter how deeply dedicated and committed, acting with altruistic humanism using violence could really bring about big changes. This romantic idea represented a frame of mind that accorded a preference to changing the world because it had grown incapable of fulfilling the needs and expectations of man in the modern times. Man was now demanding and pressing for the opportunity of deciding the direction of his own destiny and the content of his creative energies without any restriction or fear, so that he could give a particular shape to that destiny. Thus, what was demanded was the creation of a paradise on this earth where individuals could seek freely whatever was best for them. But since such a paradise was not in sight, it was to be brought about by violent means, through what Martin Buber calls "revolutionary leap."¹² It was equivalent to founding "the kingdom of heaven by unleashing the furies of hell," as Willhelm Weitling puts it,¹³ or forging "humanity through barbarism", in the words of Most.¹⁴

The systematic use of terrorism really comes to the fore in the 1870s with the Italian Unification Movement. The writings of Russian revolutionaries gave it a further fillip. All acts of terrorism were, in fact, justified by those who claimed to stand and avow for "just cause" while the same acts were condemned by those who held themselves responsible for protecting law and preserving order. But,

then, the media tended to brand every act of violence as terrorism with the result that it became very difficult to delineate terrorism. In the 20th century, however, the substantive concern of terrorism shifted to struggles by people in many parts of the world who were engaged in seeking their own country.

The quest for freedom, both from alien rule and within national territories by communities that claimed to be distinct from the larger national community, came to be the justificatory ground of terrorism. It needs to be emphasized that at the root of 20th century terrorism is the spread of democratic ideals grounded in the liberal worldview. The liberal worldview posits the ideal of self-determination¹⁵ as being the greatest value that proves to be instrumental in emancipating human beings from all constraints that society chooses to put on individual freedom of action. Once released from these constraints, the individual can, then, seek ways and means of his own self-development as he supposes to be fit for himself.¹⁶ Self-determination implies, in a very fundamental sense, the impugning of all encroachments from any external source whatsoever on the individual's decision about what he wants to be and what mode he should adopt for becoming whatever he wants to be. This further means that all social and political institutions must aim at protecting and promoting the exercise of basic freedom of the individual and at enhancing his well being as the cornerstone of the good of all. Given this primacy of the individual choice, it also follows that no institutional arrangement in society can be considered to be legitimate if it is not based on the consent of the individual, a consent that is free and freely given.

When consent emerges as the fundamental basis of institutional arrangement of a society, participation of the individual in creating and operating social and political institutions becomes a vital condition and concern in modern times. Individual participation not only in the making of social institutional frame but also in public decision-making becomes *sine qua non*. Thus, collective public decision-making process, too, presupposes individual participation. By the same token, for participation to be meaningful, it must be grounded in the phenomenon of equality implying not only in the material sense but also in the sense of eliminating all differences of social rank by abolishing all graduations and hierarchies. This also implies, as a necessary corollary, that individuals could withdraw

their consent from the institutional structure that they have voluntarily consented to and seek its replacement with the one that they consider to be more appropriate for advancing the collective good. To put it differently, the notion of self-determination incorporates the recognition of the importance of human rights to determine how collective socio-political life would come about and what shape it should take.

The nationalist separatist movements of the 20th century took their inspiration from this worldview. Apart from the use of other peaceful modes of freedom struggle in different parts of the world, violence and terrorism were also used as an effective weapon in many cases. And if separatist movements for national freedom could be justified, then, it is quite fallacious to characterize as separatist movements lunched by those below the national level who claim the right to self-determination. This is what the groups engaged in such struggles argue and in arguing this they too follow the same reasoning that the leaders of national freedom struggles themselves employed and made the basis of their claims to self-determination. Needless to say that the very idea of nationalism is grounded in the notion of separation—that is, separation of a particular national community from all such other communities because it considers itself distinct from all others in certain specific and quite important ways.

Now the notion of community, as Anderson notes, involves an “imagined community”¹⁷ Two aspects of this “imagined community” come immediately to our mind. One aspect pertains to the element of imagination that enters into the formation of a community. This imagination points to the fact that political ideas are not descriptive of reality; instead, they are evocative of reality.¹⁸ This means that the very act of evocation projects the idea of community as something that is desirable in itself to be realized in reality. Thus, the notion of “imagined community” is simply an inhabitant of the world of ideas which needs to be brought down to earth in concrete institutional format and certain practices and procedures necessary for making the idea of community feasibly visible, on the one hand, and cementing the bond of unity and integrity among individuals by overcoming and, if possible, completely doing away with their separation, on the other.

Thus, the idea of “imagined community” is that of bonding of people into a real community marked by commonness of collective

life grounded in the perception of a commonality shared by all the members of the community. The other aspect of “imagined community”, therefore, relates to the basis of community formation. The basis of any community is the perception of the environment from the same vantage point. You change this vantage point and you have entirely different bases of community formation. The source of the conception of the vantage point can be either a transcendental world-view that projects the idea of man and his world derived from particular formulation of the linkage between the finite and the absolute. Or, alternatively, it can be obtained from things phenomenal, such as, the modern idea of culture or lineage or interest or, for that matter, any traditional referent of identity formation such as religion, languages, etc. And in many cases, groups or “imagined communities” based on any of the grounds referred to above are compactly located in a particular, well-defined territorial location. Once these groups or communities become, for any social or political reason, conscious of their distinctive identity separate from the one imposed on or ascribed to them by the larger community, the rise of sub-nationalism becomes inevitable.

Based on von Eotvos’ writing in the middle of the 19th century, we can define nationalism in terms of two prominent characteristics. One of these characteristics is, of course, psychological, that is, the sentiment of the individual to belong to a larger group and the other is derived from the desire to rule.¹⁹ The need to belong to a larger group or collectivity drives individuals to form or imagine a community. And as we have already seen, any ground mentioned above can be the basis of a larger community to which the individual may not have any antipathy. On the contrary, he can lay his claim to be “naturally” belonging to it. In India itself there have been many instances of the emergence of groups that claimed to be distinct from other groups and demanded to be either treated differently or be recognized as separate political communities.

It does not need to be pointed out that there are also several cases in which a political movement came to be launched against an alien ruler fighting for the attainment of the right to self-rule. Such a movement, however, did not represent a single homogenous community. As a matter of fact, in many cases such a political movement was launched and sustained for availing the blessings of self-rule on behalf of several distinct ethnic, religious, or other

communities. Given the plurality of socio-culturally defined different communities, these movements claimed the unity and solidarity of these different and differentiated communities on the basis of nationalism as a unifying device. However, the spread of political consciousness down the socio-cultural line and the perception of a different interest led gradually to the fateful rise of what we can call, for the lack of a better term, sub-nationalism. And sub-nationalism includes a wide range of distinct communities either territorially confined or transcending territorial divides.²⁰ Thus, when sub-nationalism makes its appearance, it may gradually lead to demand by different groups for separation or secession if other means fail to give satisfaction.

Once these demands have been made, they can either be immediately conceded, which, if anything, is rare, or remain active as long as the grounds for raising such demands persist. In such a case, the peaceful method of carrying out political movement may become protracted and may take on a violent form. Once the movement turns violent, terrorism, as a method of pursuing what is supposed by the partisans to be just cause, becomes inevitable. Thus, the fact should not be ignored that those who engage in acts of terrorism do claim to have a purpose that they think is completely just and worthy of pursuit.

They further hold that given the worthiness of the cause they are pursuing, it is inevitable that if it is denied for long and no satisfactory solution to the problems at the root of that cause is forthcoming, by pursuing a course of peaceful struggle, a recourse to a violent method becomes inevitable. It is true that this claim is hotly, in many cases haughtily, contested by those who wield power and deem it their responsibility to keep law and order. Taking their "responsibilities" seriously, the power holders and power-wielders usually use repression to discourage terrorists from pursuing violent action. In many cases, repression does succeed in eliminating the band of terrorists. But repression does not eliminate the cause that makes terrorism possible. However, as Pettiford and Harding observe, demands that the terrorists hold to be just, "cannot be bombed out of existence any more than they can be achieved by bombs."²¹

It is obvious that those who engage in the acts of terrorism show no compunction or hesitation in taking recourse to wanton killing, looting and burning. Even in putting their human targets through the

hell of suffering, they have no moral qualms. They consciously and deliberately set aside all moral prohibitions and take pleasure in acts of terror. It does not follow from this that terrorists are mad men insofar as they have a definite purpose that they can logically argue and factually support. And yet, as Karl Heinzen has observed, "while murder was forbidden in principle, this principle did not apply to politics."²² Terrorists usually justify their violence by arguing that they are simply opposing violence by violence in the name of making freedom from violence possible. The violence they claim to be opposing is state violence reflected not only in the state's arbitrary use of its powers but also the violent repressive acts it lets loose on the terrorists in order to prevent the order of which they consider themselves as the guardian from plunging into disorder and chaos.²³

The trouble, however, is that it is very difficult, especially in the context of violent political contestation, to judge whose violence is justified; anyone can claim that any regime they did not like for whatever reason was inflicting structural violence on them and, therefore, they were entirely reasonable in responding with violence.²⁴ Add to it the fact that the grounds that are advanced for supporting violence are couched in twistable concepts and one could interpret these in whatever way he likes. All this should not detract from the fact that terrorism stems from weakness, not strength, no matter how much determination, firmness of resolve and willingness to sacrifice everything including life itself the terrorists demonstrate.

Take, for example, the term liberty or equality. These terms are pregnant with multiple significations. As such, the waging of political battle for gaining freedom by the oppressed people is interpreted by those in power to be violative of liberty. Therefore, it is referred as a conscious act of disrespect to authority and a conscious act of rebellion to be harshly repressed. Similar is the case with the term equality. It is against this background that it becomes necessary to be clear about what terrorism substantively signifies without becoming confused by political justifications advanced by both antagonists and protagonists. It is here that some of the theories seeking to relate acts of terrorism to their underlying causes can help us, at least, somewhat in obtaining an objective perspective on terrorism. The first thing that we should note is that the conflict that has taken a violent turn may have unique features, its causes and dynamics and the potentiality of solution as well potential solution itself are themselves not unique. As

a matter of fact, most secessionist movements are quite complex, protracted and violent; they are also less manageable.²⁵

The manageability of a secessionist conflict in terms of finding a mutually agreeable solution depends on several factors, one of them, is, of course, the increase in the number of stake holders. The taking by a secessionist conflict of a transnational character depends on several factors. Such factors as location of the conflict, that is, its geographic character, demographic distribution of ethnic population wanting to secede and the location of the camps of secessionist groups in neighbouring countries all these factors have "spill-over" effect and are potentially fraught with the possibility of the escalation of conflict involving transnational peoples. The first obvious example is, of course, religious wars in Europe in the seventeenth century. These wars necessitated several peace treaties culminating finally in the Treaty of Westphalia.

The term "secession" is most often used to refer to a declaration of intent by a minority community to pursue independence.²⁶ This is a distinct and specific kind of ethnically-based political mobilization. Secessionist activities can broadly be classified into two distinct categories. One of these categories has to do with peaceful conduct of secessionism while the other refers to incremental secessionism that involves a gradual transformation of an ongoing peaceful secessionism into increasing violent political activity aimed at independence or some form of autonomy. Given this difference, however, both kinds of secessionist movements must be based in a well-defined territorial location for a collectivity and a sizeable minority to act concertedly.²⁷ A secessionist movement cannot survive for long if it lacks three essential characteristics. According to Heraclides, it must have a degree of in-group legitimization that endorses the aims and means of the conflict. Along with it, it must be capable of posing a viable military threat. Additionally, it should receive some tangible political support from external states.

It must, however, be emphasized that not all incremental secessionist struggles have the likelihood of being possessed with formidable military capability. In such a case, sporadic and random acts of violence can be expected. If the group that is seeking secession happens to be only a small part of the affected ethnic community, it may not get support from the entire community for waging a military struggle. The small group of secessionists will,

then, be forced to limit its activities to only insurgency that relies on random acts of violence for recording their presence and for underlining the intensity of what they consider to be popular desire to acquire political autonomy. However, it is quite likely that a particular secessionist groups, even if small but well organized, disciplined, and infused with a strong sense of solidarity, may be financially helped to acquire enough weapons to be able to launch and sustain a military offensive. However, in a large country where this offensive takes place, it is bound to be a failure since there exists a large disparity in strength between the centralized political authority and the insurgent group. Moreover, if the local population is hostile or marked by multiple ethnic groups, a military alternative may remain an untenable alternative.

Insofar as the question of the factors that are supposed to be causing an ethnic minority or a collectivity to rise in insurgency is concerned, we can broadly identify four distinct theoretical perspectives on the reasons. They are: (a) primordial; (b) instrumental; (c) structural; and (d) politico-economic. The dominant explanation is, of course, the primordial that is considered to be the prime factor in the rise of insurgency. It is argued that people's ethnic and religious identities have deep social, historical and genetic foundations. Furthermore, motivation for ethnic and kinship affiliation comes from these subjective, psychological forces internal to the individual and related to basic human needs for security and, more importantly, survival.²⁸ Primordial ties have something fundamental about them inasmuch as they tie individuals together and provide a sense of bonding lacking in other forms of organization. It is further argued that ethnic conflict has its root in the desire for independence; both of them stems from the systematic denial of minority aspirations, goals, values and needs by the modern state. Focusing his attention on international law, Ryan argues that self-determination is a key legitimizing principle for political management and organization.²⁹

Instrumental perspective, as the very name suggests, refers to those ethnic groups who are led to take recourse to collective action for a particular objective. The basis of collective action is, of course, ethnic identification that is reinforced and brought into active political play as well as maintained through collective action for realizing a well-defined set of objectives. Conflicts arise because certain

demands made by ethnic groups tend to be ignored for long. It is quite likely that certain advantages are denied to these groups simply because their identity is quite different from groups based on class or occupational groupings. And when their perceived grievances arising from a sense of deprivation remain unattended for long, they are compelled to act politically. When such groups act politically, the ground of ethnic conflict shifts from cultural, linguistic or religious interests to political, material and territorial appeals for self-determination. This is indicated by the very term "ethno-political" used to describe this change. The term "ethno-political" is indicative of the politicization of these groups for safeguarding or obtaining entitlements. As a result of this shift, ethnic groups engage in such political actions as protest, rebellion and non-violent action for either protecting entitlement previously enjoyed or as a way of gaining new entitlements. More precisely, these political activities are undertaken also with a view to preventing anyone group from achieving dominance.

The third approach to the understanding of ethnic conflicts is the structural one. This approach underlines certain structural inequalities as important factors in the surfacing of ethnic conflicts. Social order has certain structural properties, such as those that reflect certain principles of organization. These principles may be race, class, merit or any other. No matter what principle of organization is the basis of social order, this principle also influences the pattern of the distribution of certain benefits, such as, social rank, access to societal resources, and power. Since any particular pattern of the distribution of social benefits has ingrained in it a varying degrees of inequality, this gives rise to the perception on the part of those who feel disadvantaged by the pattern of distribution of being discriminated against. When this perception is widely shared by a large number of the members of the disadvantaged group, political action becomes inevitable. In case peaceful political action proves ineffective, the struggle may graduate into violent struggle.

The last approach to be discussed in this regard has been derived from certain factors of political economy. There is no denying the fact that the modern age has seen the gradual emergence of material factors to the position of eminence in human existence. As a matter of fact, the material condition of man is considered to be the key to individual well-being and collective good. It is not surprising,

therefore, that the modern identity of man is characterized by the term *homo economicus* (economic man) who through his entrepreneurial activities ensures his own felicity and personal development as well as that of the collectivity he happens to be a part of. And if economic benefits are not equally available to all, it raises the cry of injustice. Thus, in a situation of the highly skewed distribution of economic benefits, whether actual or perceived, the perception of discrimination on the part of those who have been denied access to these benefits can easily be translated into political action, both peaceful and violent.

It must, however, be made clear that none of these theoretical approaches taken singly is sufficient in itself for explaining and elucidating a phenomenon as complex as insurgency. Each of these approaches focuses on a particular aspect of the relationship between certain social and economic factors and insurgency. It tends therefore, either to downgrade other factors or to miss the dynamics that is generated by the integration of several factors leading to insurgency. Research that combines insights from different theoretical perspectives generally focuses on economic and political disparities between different socio-economic interest groups and minorities, on the one hand, and between the state and the minorities, on the other. For example, Ted Gurr, combining several perspectives, identifies four factors that, according to him, determine whether or not a minority will be forced to launch a separatist movement culminating gradually into the demand for independence.³⁰ The first factor is the degree of social, economic and political disparities between groups. However, deprivation in itself is not enough for launching an ethnic conflict. Three other conditions must also be satisfied. These conditions are: the perception of a common purpose, strong leadership and organizational capacity.

Insofar as the probability of ethnic conflict taking place is concerned, its chances are lessened if there is low cohesion among ethnic groups because of cross-cutting identities, on the one hand, and when a particular ethnic minority is spread out and lacks geographical concentration, on the other. A group cohesion is necessary but leadership to articulate group demands, create an organizational structure to support the movement is also equally important. Finally, ethnic mobilization must elicit response from the dominant group, or the state against which it is waging its struggle. Conflict between dominant groups and minorities usually involve issues of national

identity, the expansion and centralization of the centralized political authority that creates a competitive arena for state-controlled resources, and the recognition of ethnicity as a basis for resource competition and political access. What also needs to be added here is the fact that even if the target of ethnic conflict happens to be a dominant group, the national political authority is automatically involved because it happens to be the supreme authority to resolve the emergent conflict as well as the one that has to bear the brunt of destruction done to its properties.

What is evident from Gurr's account is simply the specification of certain conditions that must exist for ethnic conflict to flare up. It does not tell us anything about the mode of the interaction among different factors that triggers one kind of response by ethnic groups rather than any other. Furthermore, we are not certain which one factor or a particular combination of factors plays a decisive role in influencing the perception of a particular group of people of their own worldly existence *vis-à-vis* other groups in terms of their socio-economic status. Evaluation of one's own existential situation occurs only in relation to other groups with reference to the distribution of certain socially available benefits. There is no doubt that they are socially created, that these benefits are usually unequally distributed among different, socio-economic interests, and yet this inequality is tolerated perhaps for eons. Similarly, other socio-political discriminations, too, remain inert insofar as their potential for triggering conflict is concerned.

This should alert us to the fact that ethnic conflicts acquire their salience only when a particular set of socio-political situations becomes operative in a particular climate of motivations and behaviour. This draws our attention to the fact that something radical has taken place in the life of the people to make them aware of their worldly condition *vis-à-vis* others and locate their own status on a scale of valuation that indicates the comparative position of different groups of people in terms of a distinct and distinctive criterion or when a particular group finds itself quite deprived and disadvantaged in comparison with other groups. When a particular group finds itself in a situation where it feels that it has been denied its rightful access to such social resources, such as, wealth, power and prestige, it takes steps to correct this situation. This creates a dynamic grid of action consisting of perception, intentionality, and action. Once the

perception of deprivation becomes very strong, the evaluation of objective reality steps in to shape intentionality, that is, a definite impetus to a plan to change the objective reality or adapt to it. Out of intentionality is derived the shape of concrete action to change the objective reality. And if the objective reality is changed, it has its commensurate effect on subjective reality.

This is enough to suggest that deprivation becomes intolerable only when it assumes meaning and relevance for human existence evaluated with reference to a scale of valuation. It is, therefore, necessary, first, to delineate the condition under which deprivation assumes relevance and then to move on to explicate a dynamic developmental path leading to ethnic conflict and insurgency. The employment of such a dynamic model of ethnic conflict and insurgency is all the more necessary since no theoretical perspective discussed above is capable of fully explaining the phenomenon of ethnic conflict and insurgency. For example, primordiality is not the cause but the manifestation of the use of ethnic identity for waging political battle since this battle has been provoked by some other cause(s) other than primordialism. Similarly, instrumental approach, too, suffers from a similar blemish since it leaves unexplained the factors that have gone into the determination of certain objectives that propel ethnic groups to politicize their socio-cultural referent of identity-formation, i.e., their ethnicity. Also, the same can be said about structural and political economy approach to ethnic conflict.

It is obvious that traditional socio-cultural referents such as race, language, religion, ethnicity, etc., are not in themselves divisive, but they are pregnant with possibilities of ethnic conflict. These possibilities may remain inert for long unless they are allowed to take shape when some propitious conditions come to exist. For that matter, insurgency is in no sense pathological; it is not a sign of madness. Insurgency is evil and morally condemnable but it does not surface without a reason. What is important in this connection is to link the upsurge of ethnic distinction for political action including violent action to the process of change that has upset the previously prevalent balance in human existence symbolized as some kind of *homonoia*, a harmonious living. Needless to say that traditional societies were almost changeless in which different ethnic or communal groups showed friendship to other groups or tolerated them or were indifferent to their existence and not at least at war. All this changed

when the onset of modernization made the traditional ways of looking at and doing things almost obsolete. In its place, it placed before mankind new values and new ways to looking at and doing things. These values gave utmost importance to the material aspect of human existence and made it the basis of happiness, progress and peace.³¹ In contradistinction to the modern world-view, the traditional world-view projected a life whose springs of motivations and action were imbued with a sense of spirituality or spiritual orientation. All this changed in the modern age and the primacy of materiality took over the reigns of human existence.

Once materiality occupied the centre-stage of human existence, technologically induced economic growth came to be of utmost importance in order to increase human felicity and collective good. In order to increase human felicity and collective good. In order to boost the production of goods and services whose demands rose precipitously, the modern concept of development became necessary to allow the economy to grow in a planned way. Launching of development programmes with their emphasis on acquisition of the wherewithal of good life of modern conception initiates the process of social mobilization. Social mobilization signifies a situation in which major clusters of old social, economic, and psychological commitments are eroded or broken and people become available for mobilization in new patterns of socialization and behaviour. Subsumed under the idea of social mobilization are the linked processes of change in regard to urbanization, tremendous increase and spread of mass media, development of more effective system of production and proliferation of commercial networks and other concomitant or ancillary processes involved with modernization.

The linked process of changes, that is, modernization, is the concomitant of technologically induced and sustained economic growth. Modernization begins to radically change the human landscape in two very significant ways. First, social mobilization means the reorientation of a large number of people to a new system of rewards and paths to rewards in all spheres of life. People's aspirations and expectations change and they are mobilized into the modernizing economy and polity. They come to want these things that make the same good life of modern conception possible. Thus, men engage into conflict not because they are different ethnically or otherwise. Even while they are ethnically different or different

otherwise, they want the same good things of life that others have or want. As such, they are essentially the same. The obvious reference here is to the homogenization process that is set in motion by modernization. It signifies that gradually the traditional differences in values, styles of living and orientations come to be gradually erased and then people become almost similar in what they think and what they want. In other words, people, also want to have the same goodies that more affluent sections of society already have. It is by making men "more alike" in the sense of possessing the same wants for acquiring all those things that make an elegant life style possible that modernization becomes the potential cause of inter-ethnic or any other variety of conflict.

Second, social mobilization means not only the emergence of a new set of motivating values and career paths but also it becomes instrumental in raising demands for goods and services necessary for maintaining the good life of the modern conception. And since the wish to enjoy the blessings that the process of modernization makes available for all, at least, theoretically if not empirically, demands for goods and services for making the good life possible multiply. The steep rise in the volume of demands for these goods and services outstrips the goods and services that can be made available at any time since it is dependent on the state of the economy. This creates scarcities in different spheres of life with the result that competition for access to these goods and services gets accentuated. As a result of this, various elements of socially mobilized population are thrown into direct and very personal competition with one another for different newly created jobs and other avenues of status advancement. Many of these competitors perceive themselves as engaged in a "zero-sum" game in which one man's weakness and failure is considered as other man's strength and success. Weakness, especially in terms of the availability of material resources, is the prime cause of effectiveness for making demand for access to societal resources good. This engenders a profound sense of deprivation.

One way to overcome the sense of deprivation is to view, particularly in a socio-culturally plural society, scarcities and the phenomenon of deprivation incapacitating particularly a very adversely affected community, from a communal prism. When viewed from the communal prism, community bond tends to be solidified for political action. This paves the way for mobilizing

traditional socio-cultural referents of identity formation for the redressal of grievances and removal of disparities. In a situation of acute scarcity marked by a high degree of competition, persons, especially without resources or appropriate social connections, are motivated to utilize the newly created opportunities. However, finding it difficult to exploit these opportunities, they are led generally to depend for their success on their ethnic origin and communal connections. This is so particularly in what Kanchan Chandra calls a communal "patronage state" in which the state holds the monopoly on a large variety of resources that are or can be made available for distribution among people by elected public functionaries. Those who are interested in getting access to state-owned or publicly available resources, take advantage of their ethnicity. Thus, when a person needs some help in getting his son or daughter admitted in a school or getting a bed in a very crowded hospital, many persons, who cannot get it done on their own, usually seek the help of politicians who belong to their own community. And those who offer help to do so treat it as a kind of investment with the expectation that the assistance they rendered will be reciprocated. In short, common expectation of the primacy of communal criteria produces self-fulfilling prophecy of communally oriented competitive strategies in all spheres of social life and relations.

In short, communal antagonisms are as much, if not more, a reflection of change and the blocking of new aspirations as they are of impoverishment. It is in such a situation, that traditional socio-cultural referents of identity formation are politicized. In certain situations, ethnic identity may become the focal point of mobilization while in other situations, it may be language, religion or anything else. It all depends on which vantage point, in terms of the traditional socio-cultural referents of identity formation, is used to perceive the environment by the people suffering from deprivation. It is the vantage point that is used as a political leverage for getting certain grievances removed. It can, therefore, be laid down as a general proposition that in a culturally plural society the competition engendered by social mobilization tends to be defined in communal terms. Also, the probability of communal mobilization and conflict tends to rise if different communal groups show differential rates of social mobilization. This tends to exacerbate communal conflict by multiplying coincidental social changes. It is against this background

that we can appreciate the fact that an environment marked by a high degree of social mobilization and communal competition, communal groups tend to fuse or to expand their traditional boundaries to include groups and individuals with whom they can identify and who might prove useful allies during inter-group conflict. It thus enlarges the field of group hostilities.

In the light of the discussion above, it can be discerned that communalism is the result of intense feeling of deprivation engendered by the assumption of materiality a significant factor in human existence. Once the perception of deprivation is deepened and becomes persistent, the phenomenon of communalism that has lain dormant for long gets activated and begins to make itself felt in the politics that revolves round the quest by individuals and groups for comparative advantage. As such, communalism refers to political assertiveness of ethnically or communally defined groups that have at least two important distinguishing marks. In the first place, their membership comprises persons who share in a common origin, culture and identity. In the second place, these groups tend to be differentiated from other groups by differential access to societal resources. Communal demands and conflicts are politically distinctive in that they reflect a desire for separation and may threaten to alter political boundaries of the larger society. But the transformation of the sense of deprivation and disenchantment culminating into insurgency is neither automatic nor inevitable. There can exist several states of mind induced by the sense of deprivation. For example, there may exist widespread apathy, withdrawal, alienation or resentment in the sense Max Scheler uses it, with or without violent eruptions.

There are, however, several factors, which may combine to ease the course of this transformation. For one thing, if the sense of tribal communal solidarity is very strong and the perception of threats to the maintenance of traditional identity is deeply felt, intervention of certain other factors may make possible the transition from apathetic or politically alienated existence to active insurgency. The very fact that insurgency is directed against some legitimate political authority—local, state or national—makes it necessary to take note of the response the political authority makes to the emergent situation of political disquiet or active rebellion. It is the nature of response that assumes significance in exacerbating or mitigating the sense of

frustration and, therefore, insurgency. We can identify two alternative approaches—legality and legitimacy—by the state authority to contain the emergent situation.

Legality refers to the use of existing constitutional measures, laws and procedures in settling disputes and resolving conflicts. But these provisions, rules and procedures are the outcome of a particular distribution of political power at the time of formulating these provisions rules and procedures. As such, their efficacy is conditioned and limited by the considerations of the normal peaceful tenor of public life that prevailed, on the one hand, and the motivation of maintaining power bases intact, on the other. Moreover, every disturbance in what is considered by the ruling power to be a normal public life is taken to mean a challenge to the awesome authority of the state. And because of this perception, the state authority steps in to restore normalcy by suppressing those who violate law and order. As a result, the usual approach to conflict-resolution adopted by the state authority is punitive rather than reconciliatory. As state repression continues, the position of the agitators hardens and resistance grows and stiffens leading to the escalation of the movement. It is quite possible that the state authority may succeed in repressing a particular instance of conflict, but repression does not eliminate the cause of the agitation. The cause remains unchanged and agitation grows in magnitude.

In contradistinction to legality, there is another approach based on legitimacy. By the term “legitimacy” is meant the recognition of the claims of those who have started the agitation for getting certain demands fulfilled by the state authority. Once the legitimacy of such demands are recognized and the grounds of these are considered valid, then steps can be initiated by the state authority to seek a mutually agreeable solution to the conflictual situation that has developed. Thus, the approach to conflict resolution on the basis of legitimacy calls for the need to pacify the conflict by removing those factors that have led to a particular conflictual situation. It must be underlined that it is only through the recognition of the legitimacy of the demand that normalcy can be restored. Once legitimacy has been recognized as a proper method of conflict-resolution, then, the process of negotiation, bargaining and compromise can be initiated to resolve the emergent conflict. Two factors may, however, prevent the effective application of the method of conflict resolution in settling

disputes about entitlements. One factor has to do with the generation of goods and services. In a situation where this generation falls short of active demands for them, the pattern of power distribution will prevent the recognition of entitlements and their use as a plank for negotiation and possible compromise. The second factor pertains to a situation where there exists a great disparity in the access to different material resources experienced by the socially mobilized groups consisting of disadvantaged groups, legitimacy, again, may not prove effective.

The fact, however, remains that the recourse to legality for repressing the conflict, even if successful, does not avail anything except that it keeps the fire of discontents smouldering. This fire is likely to burst into a violent flame of rebellion if certain other contributory factors make their appearance. For example, if different communal groups show different rates of social mobilization, it exacerbates communal conflict by multiplying coincidental social cleavage. Since communal antagonism and conflict assume the shape of political assertiveness for political gains or divisible benefits that Dahl talks about, certain political factors, too, contribute to the sharpening of communal divide leading to communal conflicts. What is interesting to note is that when competition among communal groups for privileged access to and control over scarce societal resources becomes sharper, political institutions and processes tend to be subordinated to the interests of particular politically powerful groups. This tends to reinforce and politicize communal conflict. This is much more likely to be the case when political institutions encourage mass participation in the selection of leaders or if they are debilitated such that they cannot prevent unfulfilled demands of entitlements from assuming a form of political conflict.

In short, then, it is the differential rates of social mobilization of different segments of the population of the larger society coupled with scarcity of goods and services that leads to politicization of the traditional socio-cultural referents of identity formation. Politicization of these referents signifies political assertiveness by communal groups for getting privileged access to and control over scarce societal resources. Continued difficulties experienced in getting access to these resources lead to alienation and the voicing of separatist demands. Repressive measures employed by the state authority pave the way for insurgency. Once insurgency becomes a

fact of political reality, communal conflicts turn out to be very complex, protracted, and very difficult to solve.

It is this theoretical perspective that we project with a view to apprehending the factors that have entered into the persistence of insurgency in the Northeast region of India. For facilitating this study we chose Assam and Meghalaya for close study. This study is based primarily on survey method that we employed in collecting perceptual and other data from a hundred respondents from Assam and 121 respondents from Meghalaya. However we also thought it profitable to collect aggregate data from both the states pertaining mainly to demographic and economic data with a view to understanding the role economic factors play in promoting insurgency. We have used economic data as a backdrop to the emergence of the phenomenon of insurgency.

The chapters that follow reflect this theoretical approach.

Notes

1. For a useful discussion, see Alexis Heraclides, "The Ending of Unending conflicts: Separatists Wars," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 26, 3 (1997), pp. 679-709.
2. David Horowitz, "Patterns of Ethnic Separatism", *Comparative Study in Society and History*, 23, 2 (April 1981), pp. 165-95.
3. John Wood, "Separatism: A Comparative Analytical Perspective," *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 14 (1981), pp. 107-34.
4. W. Laquer, *The Age of Terrorism*, (New York: Little Brown, 1987), Quoted in Lloyd Pettiford and David Harding, *Terrorism the New World War* (Leicester: Arctus Publishing Ltd., 2003), p. 38.
5. For a useful discussion, see Pettiford and Harding, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-18.
6. W. Reich, ed., *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind* (Cambridge: Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars: Cambridge University Press, 1990), Quoted in Pettiford and Harding, *op. cit.*, p. 15.
7. C. Combs, *Terrorism in Twenty-First Century* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1997).
8. Quoted in Combs, *ibid.*
9. Plato, *Republic* 32c429-347 BC and Aristotle, *Politics*, 384-322 BC.
10. Quoted in B. Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (London: Victor Bolland, 1998), pp. 16-17.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
12. By 'revolutionary leap' Buber means a complete overhauling and restructuring of the social order so that the preferred world could be

- created. It is a leap because there is no gradual or peaceful way of transiting from an undesirable world to a desirable world save through a total destruction of the social order and recreating it *de novo*.
13. Quoted in Pettiford and Harding, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
 14. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
 15. For a very useful discussion on self-determination, see Dov Ronen, *The Theory of Self-determination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).
 16. For a very precise and useful discussion on this point see Charles Taylor, "Growth, Legitimacy, and Modern Identity," *Praxis International*, 1, 2 (July 1981).
 17. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections On the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1985).
 18. For a very illuminating discussion of this idea, see Eric Voegelin. As Voegelin observes: "Ideas, and especially political ideas, are not theoretical propositions about reality, but they are themselves constituents of reality." He notes further that the idea of the community lives "in the mind of the people belonging to the community and in its intellectual creations. There this idea can be experienced directly in the common makeup of the intellectual worlds and persons created by the community in question." The idea is real not only for the outside observer but first and foremost for those living within and creating it. *History of Political Ideas*, vol. VII: *The New Order and Last Orientation*, ed. Jurgen Gebhardt and Thomas A. Hollwek (Columbia: Missouri University Press, 1999), Introduction, pp. 10-12.
 19. See Eric Voegelin, *The Authoritarian State: An Essay on the Problem of the Austrian State, Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 4. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1976), Reprint in 1999. Voegelin refers to Baron von Eotvos' characterization of the phenomenon of nationality by listing its traits: (1) the experience of superiority (2) the will to readership, (3) heredity. p. 112.
 20. In India itself there are several instances of sub-nationalism, such as, Dalit, Muslim, Assamese, tribal etc.
 21. Pettiford and Harding, *op. cit.*, p. 23.
 22. Quoted in Lacqer, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-28.
 23. See R. Sheraton, *Dictionary of Political Thought* (London: Macmillan, 1983), p. 546.
 24. Examples of such secessionist movements in India are numerous: Kashmir, Nagaland, ULFA in Assam, etc., are a few examples.
 25. The case of Kashmir is the obvious example of this. There are Kashmiris on both sides of the dividing line between Kashmir in India and the other captured by Pakistan who have stakes in the struggle. Also, it has from the very beginning assumed a transnational character since Pakistan itself has a stake in it.
 26. David Horowitz, "Patterns of Ethnic Separatism," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 23, 2 (April 1981), pp. 65-95.

27. Alexis Heraclides, "Secessionist Minorities and External Involvement," *International Organization*, 44, 3 (1990), pp. 341-78.
28. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books 1973); Harold Isaacs, *Idols of the Tribe: Group Identity and Political Change* (New York: Harper Row, 1975); Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Revival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Pierre Van den Berghe, *The Ethnic Phenomenon* (New York: Praeger, 1987); David Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); John Stack, ed., *The Primordial Challenge: Ethnicity in the Contemporary World* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986).
29. Stephen Ryan, "Explaining Ethnic Conflict: The Neglected International Dimensions," *Review of International Studies*, 14 (1988), pp. 161-77, and "Preventive Diplomacy, Conflict Prevention and Ethnic Conflicts," in David Carment and Patrick James, eds., *Peace in the Midst of Wars*, *op. cit.*, pp. 63. 92.
30. Ted Robert Gurr, "Peoples against States: Ethno-political Conflict and the Changing World System," *International Studies Quarterly*, 38 (1994), pp. 347-77.
31. See Max Scheler Quoted in Harold J. Bershady, *Max Scheler on Knowing and Feeling* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 9.
32. The concept of social mobilization was developed in the 1960s by Carl Deutsch in 1950s.