

Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency

Agenda for Peace in India's North-east

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India's north-east, situated on the foothills of the Himalayas and surrounded almost on all sides by neighbouring countries — Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh — is connected to mainland India through a narrow piece of land measuring only 33 kms on its western side. The northeastern region, abounding in rich flora and fauna, gushing rivers, fertile valleys and green clad mountains, is the habitat of about 38 million people, the majority of whom belong to the mongoloid race. The region comprising of seven states (Indian provinces) has over 150 indigenous communities, speaking over 420 languages or dialects.¹ Although some of these communities had cultural and economic ties with the Indian subcontinent, politically they were never the subjects of empires or kingdoms that ruled India before the advent of the British. It was only after its annexation by the British that the region was politically integrated into British India in the second half of the 19th century. The policies initiated during the colonial rule did bring about radical changes in the structure and demographic composition of the north-east, contributing in many ways to today's ethnic tensions in the region. The anti-colonial struggle led by the Indian National Congress and the Communist Party of India had some influence on the plains of Assam, Manipur

and Tripura, but the hills inhabited by indigenous communities, officially designated as tribes, remained largely uninfluenced by the pan-Indian national movement. Naturally in 1947 when the colonial rule came to an end to give birth to the sovereign Indian State, the native communities in the north-east responded in different ways to the new Indian ruling elite's efforts to make the region an integral part of the Indian Union. Through its carrot and stick policy, the Indian State was able to merge almost all regions, communities and princely states in the north-east into the Indian Union. However, right in the early 50's the efforts for strengthening the nascent Indian nation state met with resistance in the form of Naga insurgency. In the subsequent decades, some other indigenous communities in the north-east also took to insurgency. Next to Kashmir, it is the turbulent north-east that continues to pose potential challenge to the nation-building process initiated by the Indian political elite. The present paper aims to explain the nature and dynamics of the insurgencies in the north-east that threaten the integrity of the Indian nation state and examine the strategies and tactics adopted by the Indian State since its independence to counter the threat of insurgency in this region. Highlighting the limitations of insurgencies and counter-insurgency, the paper argues for making the indigenous people aware of alternative ways for looking at and resolving the issues that gave birth to insurgency and counter-insurgency in the region.

Insurgency in the North-east

The intelligence sources identify more than hundred groups actively engaged in militant activities in India's north-east. There is a tendency among academics and the official circles to brand all these militant outfits as insurgent groups. However, if by insurgents, one means only those groups that take to arms against the Indian State with the avowed objective of seceding from the Indian Union and establishing their own sovereign states, then one is compelled to conclude that the militant groups that are actually engaged in insurgent activities in the northeast are not many. More than a half of the groups identified as militants are insignificant, defunct and sometimes fictitious.² Of other groups that are still active in the region, many do not speak the language

of insurgency. For example, militant groups like Adivasi Cobra Militant Force in Assam, United Bengali Liberation Front in Tripura, Bru National Liberation Front (BNLF) in Mizoram etc., came into existence to protect their respective communities from the attacks of more powerful militant groups and communities operating in the region. Certain militant organizations like SULFA (Surrendered ULFA) owe their presence to the active support of the governments in power who wanted to use them against more powerful insurgent groups operating in those states.³ Basically, groups like United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), Kaphlang and Isaak-Muivah factions of National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN-K and NSCN-IM), National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLTF), United National Liberation Front (UNLF), National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), People's Liberation Army (PLA), People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK) etc., can be designated as hardcore insurgent groups. Although some other smaller militant outfits like Dima Haram Daoga (DHD), United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS), Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC), Achik National Volunteers Council (ANVC), Kuki National Volunteers (KNV), Zomi Revolutionary Army (ZRA) etc., also declare independence from India, these outfits appear to be concerned more with protecting the interests of their particular communities against the real or perceived threats of the so called outsiders. They borrow the language of the secessionists more as bargaining strategy to secure more autonomy for their communities within the Indian Union.

Unlike the communist insurgencies, which are inclusive in their disposition, the insurgent groups — big as well as small — operating in the north-east India are mostly ethnic in character. Only insurgent groups like ULFA and PLA claim that they uphold the interests of all the inhabitants of Assam and Manipur respectively. Most others, whether active in particular regions within the existing states (for example, DHD, UPDS, NDFB operating in Assam) or have their base in more than one north-eastern states (NSCN, KNV, ZRA etc.), basically represent the interests of their particular communities. Identity and security of the communities to which they belong are their major concerns.⁴ They usually feed on the belief or the myth that historically, racially and culturally the indigenous communities in the

north-east are different from the Indians and that they had nothing to do with India before the arrival of the British. They hold the Indian State responsible for the dilemmas and sufferings of their communities and try to seek the support of their community people by convincing them that only through armed struggle they could secure independence from or autonomy within the Indian Union. Saving these features common to all insurgencies in the north-east, in other aspects such as their geneses, social base, leadership, organization, style of working, field of operation, and each insurgency is unique in itself. Hence talking in general about insurgency in north-east India is often misleading, especially when one fails to understand the particularities of each of these insurgencies.

Causes of Insurgency

The geneses of insurgencies in the region cannot be attributed to any single factor. In the South Asia the birth of post-colonial states created the material base for the rise of some of the insurgent movements. Because of the partition of British India and the demarcation of the boundaries of India with Burma and Pakistan, the indigenous communities like the Nagas, the Kukis, the Paites, the Khasis etc., found themselves divided among the newly formed nation states. As these hill communities did not identify fully with any of these nation states, they found it difficult to accept the new territorial arrangements imposed on them by extraneous factors and events.⁵ Having lived under the paternalistic protective umbrella of the British in the so-called 'excluded areas', the indigenous hills communities like the Nagas and the Mizos had little or virtually no contact with the Indians living in the plains. Naturally, they had their doubts and suspicions about the consequences of joining the Indian Union. Without paying any regard for the feelings and fears of the indigenous communities, the Indian political elite sought to integrate them either through deception or force. Such arrogant and big-brotherly attitude of the Indian political leaders provoked the Nagas to rise in revolt against the Indian State.⁶ Unlike the Nagas, the Mizos led by Mizo Union showed their willingness to join the Indian Union, as the then emerging educated Mizo elite found in it an opportunity to get rid off the oppressive native tribal chiefs.

After a decade and half, the same people felt let down when the Government of Assam failed to come to the rescue of the Mizos when the Lushai Hills was hit by the worst food crisis during the mid-sixties. The Mizos then extended their support to Lal Denga whose Mizo National Front (MNF) rose in revolt against the Indian State demanding independence.⁷ In the valleys of Assam where both the masses and the leaders had actively participated in the anti-British movement led by the Indian National Congress, there was virtually no organized opposition from the Assamese people to Assam joining the Indian Union. It was only in the late seventies, after the All Assam Students Union (AASU) started the agitation against the Bangladeshi immigrants that a radical section within the Assam movement formed ULFA in the year 1979 and started fighting for sovereign Assam.⁸ In the erstwhile princely states of Manipur and Tripura, both the people and the newly emerging political leadership were considerably influenced by India's freedom struggle. Inspired by the Indian nationalist movement, the people in the two states also led powerful anti-feudal struggles in the forties. In Tripura although the pro-Indian sentiments were voiced mainly by the non-tribal people, at the time of Indian independence there was hardly any opposition from the indigenous tribal communities to Tripura joining the Indian Union. It was only when lakhs of Bengali immigrants/refugees from the erstwhile East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, started coming and settling in Tripura after the partition that the indigenous communities began to feel that they were becoming minorities in their own state.⁹ In the princely state of Manipur the Machiavellian tactics that the Indian State adopted to integrate Manipur into the Indian Union had left deep scars in the minds of a section of the Meiteis, although that did not lead them to insurgency at that point of time. The insurgency broke out only in the seventies, following the deep dissatisfaction among the educated middle class Meiteis, who felt let down when both the state and the central governments failed to bring about overall development of the state and its people. It was more to gain public support and sympathy for their insurgent activities that the Meitei militant groups chose to remind the people of the manner in which the Indian State forced the King of Manipur to merge the princely state of Manipur with the Indian Union in 1949.¹⁰ Apart from the Meitei militant groups, Manipur has also become the host of

different Naga, Kuki and other ethnic insurgent groups. The Bodo movement in Assam initially began as a reaction against what they described as the big-brotherly attitude of the Assamese elite and the Bodos initial demand was "Divide Assam Fifty-Fifty".¹¹ When the Assam Gana Parishad government tried to suppress the movement brutally, a section of the Bodo leaders took to militant and terrorist means to bring pressure on the state and the central governments to negotiate with them. In Meghalaya the insurgent activities started only in the 1990s and the region saw the rise and the demise of a couple of Hynniewtrep and the Achik insurgent groups. At the moment ANVC and HNLC have some presence in the Garo Hills and the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya. In Arunachal Pradesh both NSCN (K) and NSCN (IM) are operating in the three Naga inhabited districts. These basic facts about the geneses of the insurgencies in the different states of the north-east make it clear that the insurgencies broke out at different points for different reasons.

Internal Bickering and Alliances

Almost all insurgent groups in the north-east seek to mobilize the people on ethnic lines for achieving their goals. At times their ethnocentric mobilizations bring them in conflict with other insurgent groups representing the interests of other competing ethnic groups. For example, the NSCN (IM)'s demand for Nagalim, a homeland for all Nagas living in the north-east, meets with stiff resistance from Meitei insurgent groups in Manipur who are keen on upholding the territorial integrity of Manipur.¹² The UPDS's goal of achieving self-rule for the people of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills comes in conflict with DHD's objective of achieving 'Dimaraji', a separate state for the Dimasas living in North Cachar Hills. One may also mention here the conflicts between Naga and Kuki militants in Manipur, between HNLC and ANVC in Meghalaya, between DHD and Hmar People's Convention-Democracy (HPC-D) in North Cachar Hills and between UPDS and KNV in Karbi Anglong. Apart from inter-ethnic tensions, one can also see conflicts between the militants claiming to be the representatives of the same ethnic groups. Mention may be made here of the fratricidal fights between NSCN (IM) and NSCN (K), Bodo Liberation Tiger (BLT) and NDFB and between All Tripura Tigers Force (ATTF) and National Liberation

Front of Tripura (NLTF). More than ideological differences, personality clashes and inter-ethnic/religious rivalries lead to bitter quarrels among these militant groups.¹³

However, the realization that no group would be able to succeed in achieving its objectives single handedly compels the insurgent groups to look for internal and external allies. At one time the Naga and Mizo insurgents sought support from China. At present militant groups like NDFB, ULFA etc., have their hide-outs or training camps both in Bangladesh and Bhutan.¹⁴ According to the security forces, the Tripura based militant groups such as ATTF, NLFT and the dissident NLFT faction led by Nayanbasi Jamatya have developed closer contact with Muslim fundamentalist outfits including the Jamat-I-Islami, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and Al Qaida to preserve their bases across Bangladesh.¹⁵ Some Bodo, Meitei, Naga and Kuki insurgent groups have contacts with Myanmar based insurgent groups such as Kanchin National Army, Shan Independent Army, Karen Independent Army and Karen National Union.¹⁶ The Baptist Church, which wields a lot of influence in Nagaland, mobilized international support for the Naga militants and acted as contact between British intelligence and the NSCN militants. The Indian intelligence agencies maintain that all the main insurgent organizations in the north-east get material and training support from ISI. In the name of giving shape to the united national liberation struggles, powerful insurgent groups encourage and sponsor certain other militant groups. For example, NSCN (IM) supports small insurgent outfits like HPC, DHD, UPDS, ZRA, MULA, etc.¹⁷ The Meitei insurgent groups established contacts with NSCN (K) and a few Kuki militant groups. ULFA and the UNLF together formed a loose pan-Mongoloid coalition in May 1990 called the Indo-Burma Revolutionary Front (IBRF). ULFA has also established alliances with NDFB, NSCN (K), ANVC and Kamatpura Liberation Organisation (KLO).¹⁸ Through such strategic alliances the major insurgent groups seek to open up multiple fronts and compel the counter-insurgency agencies like police, army, intelligence, etc., to wander and dissipate their energies. Such alliances also help the core insurgent groups to mobilize additional resources from areas beyond their sphere of influence and secure necessary support for its operations in different ethno-social milieus.

Mass Support

The relations that the indigenous people have with the insurgent groups vary from one ethnic group to the other. Even though all insurgent groups claim to represent the interests of their respective communities, only a few among them enjoy mass support. In those communities where the insurgencies emerged as by-products of the political movement of the people for self-determination or as off-shoots of prolonged agitation against real or perceived injustices done to their communities, the insurgent groups enjoy some amount of legitimacy. But among communities that did not experience such movements, the insurgent groups lack mass support and the people obey their dictates out of fear of the gun. At one time in Nagaland, the Naga National Council (NNC) enjoyed the support of all major Naga tribes. But after the splits in NNC and later the NSCN, no Naga insurgent group seems to have the support of all Naga tribes. NNC still has some base among the Angami, Chakesang and Sema communities. The more powerful NSCN (IM) is supported by a section of Aos, Semas, Zeilangs, Anals, Maos and Tangkhuls. It has established its supremacy in Wokha, Phek, Zunebphoto, Kohima, parts of Mokokchung and Tuensang districts. It has also extended its influence to the Naga-inhabited northern districts of Manipur, North Cachar Hills and Karbi Anglong districts of Assam and some parts of Meghalaya. On the other hand, the Khaplang faction of NSCN enjoys support among the Konyaks of both India and Myanmar, the Pangmeis of Myanmar, the Aos of Mokokchung district, the Phoms and Yimchangers of Tuensang district and also among the Angamis, the Semas and the Lothas. It commands influence in parts of Nagaland, Tirap and Changlang districts of Arunachal Pradesh and Hemei and Pangmei settlements in Myanmar.¹⁹ In Assam during the initial years of its rise, ULFA enjoyed considerable mass support in many villages of upper Assam. It had hold in Dibrugarh-Tinsukia sector and was active in Sibsagar, Nagaon, Darrang and Nalbari. The villagers appreciated and supported the ULFA cadres for implementing developmental and welfare activities in the villages, but the Assamese people don't appear to have ever cherished the ULFA's dream of sovereign Assam. A few years after its rise, ULFA lost much of its popularity because of its unpopular moves such as

the killing of a popular NGO activist, Sanjoy Ghosh, developing links with ISI and taking an anti-Indian stand during the Kargil War. Among the Bodo militant groups, BLT, which had no secessionist agenda enjoyed more support among the Bodos than NDFB that continues to talk of sovereign Bodoland. In Manipur the Meitei militant groups, which have their base in the valley, attracted many young and educated middle class youths. Although they could get some support among the Kukis also, the Meitei militant groups failed to win over the Nagas living in the hills. In Tripura although the tribal militant groups claim that they represent all indigenous communities, there also they also appear to have support only among particular communities. Further, the fact that insurgent groups have some influence among particular communities, does not lead to the conclusion that all the people belonging to those communities support them. Certain incidents that occurred in the year 2003, such as the public outrage against the NSCN (K) and NSCN (IM) in Mokokchung and Tuensang towns in Nagaland, lynching of two NDFB militants by villagers in Dhubri district of Assam, mass protest against the kidnapping and killing of an eight year old daughter of a state minister in Manipur by certain unknown persons claiming to be militants and the people's resentment against the ban imposed on Hindi films by seven militant groups etc., clearly indicate the limits of the insurgents' hold over the people in the north-east.

Political Linkages and Sources of Income

Quite a few insurgent groups in the northeast have links with the government officials, politicians and NGOs.²⁰ Initially AGP maintained relations with the ULFA and after a few years the AGP leadership took the help of SULFA to fight against the ULFA militants. In Nagaland the former Chief Minister, Mr. S.C. Jamir was close to the NSCN (K), whereas Neiphiu Rio, the present Chief Minister, seems to have the support of NSCN (IM). In Arunachal Pradesh Mukut Mithi was alleged to have the support of NSCN (K), whereas Gegong Apang is said to have come back to power with the support of NSCN (IM). D.D. Lapang, the Chief Minister of Meghalaya, made a public statement saying that some MLAs in the state have links with the ANVC. In Tripura the Congress (I) party aligned with the Indigenous People's Front of Tripura

(IPFT), which is assumed to be a wing of NLFT. At one time, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) was suspected to have used ATTF to fight the Tripura Upajati Juba Samati (TUJS) aligned to the Congress party in Tripura. In Manipur the militants have a well-knit relation with politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen. Militant groups like Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL) openly declared that they maintain relations with ministers, politicians and bureaucrats and seek their support for their activities.²¹ There are several incidents where the public vehicles and houses of the politicians were used for militant activities. A few ethnic students and youth organizations and the local human rights associations operating in some of the states of the north-east also appear to have links with one or the other insurgent groups.

For meeting the organizational and other expenditure, the insurgents take recourse to different means. The tea estates in Assam have been the major source of sustenance for ULFA and NDFB. Several militant groups in Assam, Manipur and Meghalaya extort money from non-tribal contractors, businessmen and professionals. A few militant groups indulge in illegal trades and criminal activities to secure funds.²² In collaboration with the local politicians and businessmen, some militant groups have developed effective mechanisms to make money by sabotaging the government sponsored developmental programmes. The Bodo and the Karbi militants extract money from the non-tribal peasants belonging to Bengali, Biharis or Nepali communities. In the areas of their dominance, Naga, Meitei, Karbi and Kuki militant groups impose 'taxes' based on the calculation of one's actual incomes and extract money from different sections of the people, including the government employees. In those regions where more than one militant group operate, the people end up paying 'taxes' to all groups to buy peace.²³ The more powerful insurgent groups like the NSCN (IM) use smaller militant groups such as DHD and HPC to collect money. Many insurgent groups abduct tea garden employees, government officers, development workers, petty traders, doctors and teachers and demand lakhs of rupees as ransom for their release. Many militant groups collect money from the vehicles carrying goods or raw materials into or from the north-east. There is some truth in the allegation that militancy has become a profitable industry in the north-east. Many unemployed youths join the insurgent groups for lure of money.

Most militant groups do not feel it as their responsibility to inform the people as to what they are doing with the money they are collecting or amassing from different sources.²⁴ At times the quarrels over the management of the finances and the sharing of the booty lead to resentment, desertions and splits in the militant groups. In the absence of transparency, a feeling is therefore growing among a section of the indigenous people themselves that whereas the cadres had to suffer in the jungles, their leaders are leading luxurious lives in other countries.

The budget estimates of the insurgent groups indicate that they collect crores of rupees every year to procure sophisticated arms and ammunition essential for waging guerilla war against the Indian State. Different kinds of weapons, including AK-47 and AK-56 assault rifles, mortars, 40mm rocket launchers, pistols, revolvers and grenades are smuggled into the north-east from South East Asian markets through Myanmar and Bangladesh. Some of the north-east based militant groups have opened up fake companies in the South East Asian countries to enter into deals with the arms dealers.²⁵ The insurgent groups help one another to ensure that arms consignments reach the north-east. All major insurgent groups in the north-east seem to have their bases and training camps in Bangladesh and Bhutan. NDFB, ULFA and PLA received training from the Kachins in Myanmar. NSCN also gave training to several smaller militant groups in the north-east. ULFA is alleged to have received training in Pakistan under the supervision of ISI agents.²⁶

Terrorist Tactics and Unethical Means

The insurgent groups which leave no stone unturned to expose the violations of human rights by the Indian Army and the paramilitary forces, have themselves got involved in several acts of terrorism, violating the rights not only of the people considered by the insurgents as outsiders and hence their enemies, but also of the people belonging to their own communities. It is difficult to say which militant groups of the north-east did not involve in terrorist activities. In the main, ULFA and NSCN train their guns against the Indian security forces and sometimes against individuals like Sanjoy Ghosh whom they suspect as Indian agents. But their hands are also smeared with the blood of

several innocents. In 2000, ULFA militants killed several innocent Biharis and Marwaris to send a political message to the NDA government in Delhi to impose President's Rule in Assam.²⁷ In 2003 taking advantage of the public anger against a few Biharis who attacked the Assam bound passengers traveling in the trains via Bihar, ULFA gave quit notices to all the Biharis living in Assam and indulged in brutal killing of a number of innocent Biharis. On August 15, 2004, ULFA carried out a blast in Dhemaji killing several innocent children who came to participate in Independence Day celebrations. The Naga militant groups supported the killing of hundreds of Kukis in Manipur during the nineties. The ethnic cleansing drive that continued from 1992 to 1996 resulted in the death of 824 Kukis, destruction of 350 villages and displacement of 54,500 people from their villages.²⁸ After the controversial Shillong Accord of 1975, around 2000 Nagas were exterminated in the fratricidal conflicts that continued amongst the rival Naga militant groups.²⁹ In pursuit of their demands, the Bodo militants massacred thousands of Santhals and neo-Assamese Muslims in Barpeta, Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon districts. The persons killed by them were no exploiters. In November 2000 they attacked woodcutters, tied them to trees and tortured them before killing them with spears, machetes and guns. The Bodo militants became so intolerant that they not only attacked the so-called outsiders, but also killed their own brethren who did not support their policies and programmes. The gunning down of Binneshwar Brahma, a prominent moderate Bodo leader, indicates their level of intolerance.³⁰ The Karbi militants killed several people belonging to the Nepali and Bihari communities in the name of protecting the Karbi people from domination of the outsiders.³¹ The insurgent outfits in Tripura frequently attack non-tribal villagers and kill innocent men, women and children. In the month of May 2003, Manik Sarkar, the Chief Minister of Tripura, informed the State Assembly that the militants killed 1150 people in 1576 attacks throughout the state since April 1998. Besides, the militants kidnapped 155 people during the same period. Eighty-nine persons were physically disabled in the attacks. Twenty-one militants were killed in the internal clashes.³²

During the initial years of their rise, the insurgent groups make efforts to create an image that they are not like the mainstream political parties. By publicly denouncing administrative

corruption, economic exploitation and opportunist politics they attract the masses. However, as time passes and the organizations develop, most groups find it difficult to maintain that high ethical and moral postures that they initially upheld. Once affected by individualism, power and greed, the leaders learn to become 'pragmatic' in their day-to-day dealings. They then do not even feel that it is essential to set high ethical and moral standards in their personal behaviour and life-styles for others to emulate. Of course the level of degradation that sets in differs from one insurgent group to another. Some groups are no doubt better than the others. But no group, which has been operating for more than a decade or so, could claim that it is not tainted by the vices of mainstream politics. Recently formed groups like KYKL and Manipur Human Right Protection Guild talk of punishing the corrupt officials, teachers and politicians. But outfits like HNLC, ANVC etc., instead of exposing the corrupt, only bleed them to fill their coffers.³³ Another disturbing thing about the insurgent groups in the north-east is that almost all the groups are patriarchal in their attitudes and behaviour. Except a couple of organizations like ULFA, PLA etc., in most others the women members are conspicuous by their absence. At best they are allowed to play supportive roles outside the organization. Their patriarchal attitudes also become apparent from the attempts of some of the insurgent organizations to impose dress codes for women. In 2003 donning the roles as cultural and moral guardians, recently seven insurgent groups imposed ban on screening of Hindi films in the north-eastern states on the pretext that such a move has become necessary to fight against the invasion of hybrid Indian culture through Hindi films, which have dangerously undermined the strength of their socio-cultural roots.³⁴ Again, except ULFA and a couple of Meitei insurgent groups who rise above their ethnic base and claim to represent even other indigenous ethnic groups living in their states,³⁵ most other major and minor insurgent groups in the north-east speak only for the communities to which they belong. Their ethnocentric worldviews prevent them from looking beyond the narrowly defined interests of their particular communities or ethnic groups. Further, their conservative and communal character also becomes apparent when we see some of them talking in terms of maintaining the purity of their race, religion, tradition and

culture.³⁶ Even though some groups vaguely talk of queer types of socialism, none of them seem to have a clear idea of the future society that they would like to build once they succeed in seceding from the Indian Union. From their writings and actions, one cannot make out how their future 'sovereign states' would be different from the Indian State, which they usually portray as colonial, exploitative, authoritarian, communal and degenerated.

Counter-Insurgency Operations

A study of the factors that led to the growth of insurgencies makes it clear that apart from the unintended consequences of the formation of new nation states in South Asia, the coercive diplomacy that the Indian State adopted to integrate different areas of the north-east into the Indian Union also did provoke insurgencies in some parts of the region. Apart from these factors, other subsequent post-independence developments like influx of Bengali refugees from East Pakistan/Bangladesh, growing scarcity of land, failure to generate alternative sources of livelihood, problem of unemployment, escalation of competition for control of limited resources, growing sense of insecurity and relative deprivation, rising aspirations of the middle class, corruption and inefficiency of the administration, growth of identity politics etc., have also contributed in their own ways to the spread of insurgencies in different parts of the north-east. Dealing with such insurgencies, which have deep historical, social, economic and political roots requires a variety of resources, sensibilities, experiences and skills. Since each insurgency in the north-east is unique in itself, there cannot be one single solution applicable to all. In view of the specificity of each insurgency, one needs to devise different strategies to deal with different insurgent groups. The study of counter-insurgency operations in the region shows that the Indian State took a long time to understand and devise effective strategies for dealing with the insurgent groups.

Repression

In the fifties when the Naga insurgency started, the political and administrative elites in India had a limited knowledge of the

people, society, traditions, culture and geography of the northeast. Unaware of the character and dynamics of the insurgencies taking shape in the region, they looked at insurgency basically as a law and order problem created by a few anti-nationals with the connivance of India's external enemies. They believed that the Indian State was capable of crushing any rebellion through its military might. This perception led the Indian State to rely on its different repressive organs to eliminate the insurgents. The Assam Rifles, a paramilitary force used by the British for protecting their colonial interests, was primarily entrusted with the responsibility of dealing with insurgency.³⁷ Other paramilitary forces like CRPF, BSF etc., were also deployed to deal with law and order situations arising out of insurgency.³⁸ The armed troops were called on different occasions to assist the police and the paramilitary forces. Various black laws were enacted by both the central and the state governments and were used extensively in all the states in the name of containing the terrorist activities. Through acts such as the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958, the Prevention of Seditious Meetings Act, 1911 and the Disturbed Areas Act, the security forces were given special powers and privileges to undertake counter-insurgency operations.³⁹ The government imposed ban on several militant organizations declaring them as terrorists or anti-nationals. In certain states the Unified Command system was brought into operation and the police and the paramilitary forces were instructed to work under the directions of the army.⁴⁰

In the 50's and 60's the Indian State heavily depended on its repressive organs to quell the Naga and Mizo insurgencies. During this period, due to lack of knowledge about the people and the terrain, and also owing to inadequate experience in guerilla warfare the Indian security forces suffered considerable losses. But in course of time, with improvements in communication and transport facilities, growth of intelligence and development of technical skills like driving the vehicles on the narrow hill tracks, conducting unorthodox small scale operations etc., the counter-insurgency operations became more effective. To impart effective training and guidance to the Indian security personnel in the guerilla warfare in the northeast, in the year 1970 a Counter-insurgency and Jungle Warfare School (CIJWS) was established in Vairengte village in Mizoram state. Besides acquainting them with the art of

the guerilla warfare, the school familiarizes the trainees with the terrain, climate, flora and fauna and the history and language of different communities living in the northeast. The school, which has as its motto, 'Fight the Guerilla like a Guerilla', emphasizes on practical, flexible and unconventional methods to combat the guerillas.⁴¹ The CIJW gives pre-induction training to companies of paramilitary forces. Improvements in their capabilities have to some extent enhanced the competence of the security forces in containing the insurgent activities within reasonable limits. The security personnel have been given training in the use of modern communication devices and other sophisticated weapons and technical instruments. Through *Pratividrohi*, the organ of CIJWS and *The Custodian*, the organ of Assam Rifles, the senior level officers share their ideas and knowledge concerning several vital aspects relating to counter insurgency such as modus operandi of the guerillas, employment of small arms, training of drivers in counter-insurgency operations, use of intelligence and conducting of psychological operations. In recent years the Assam Rifles has also begun providing guidance and training to the state's armed police forces in counter-insurgency operations. The Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) is also planning to set up its own counter-insurgency school to impart training to its forces.⁴² The state government of Tripura has taken a decision recently to impart commando training to the jawans of Tripura State Rifles. As a result of these steps, the security forces have been able to nab many leaders of different insurgent groups and destroy their logistic support bases. Through regular patrols, raids and ambushes, the security forces have been making efforts to segregate and squeeze the insurgents and starve them of information and material support. According to an estimate, between the years 1992 and 2001 the security forces killed as many as 3,672 militants in the north-east. In Assam alone 1,418 cases of deaths of the militants have been recorded during this period. Since the Congress came to power in Assam in June 2001, more than 500 insurgents have been killed in the encounters. Although the militants' attacks on the public property and on the civilians could not be controlled, direct attacks on the security forces have come down drastically in recent years. In comparison to the number of civilians and militants killed, the number of security personnel, including the state police, killed in the counter-insurgency operations has come down considerably.⁴³

Due to the intensification of the counter-insurgency operations, many militant groups had to leave their headquarters in the north-east and take shelter in the neighbouring countries like Bangladesh and Bhutan. The Government of India is using diplomatic channels to pressurize the neighbouring states not to allow their countries as bases of militant groups operating in the north-east. Realizing that the absence of fencing along the Indo-Bangladesh and Indo-Myanmar borders help the illegal migrants and also the insurgents, efforts are on to strengthen the border posts. In 2003 the government has taken a decision to entrust the task of border policing along the Indo-Bangladesh borders to BSF and asked the Assam Rifles to man the Indo-Myanmar border.⁴⁴ By 2006 the central government expects to complete the construction of fencing along 4096 kms of international border in the north-east.⁴⁵ The talks are on with the Myanmar government to undertake joint operations to curb the insurgents and construct fencing along the Indo-Myanmar border to control the movement of the insurgent groups. The Indian intelligence now has a better knowledge of how the small arms are smuggled into the north-east from the South East Asian markets through Myanmar and Bangladesh. In recent years, the security forces have successfully foiled the attempts of the militants to smuggle the weapons into the Indian Territory.⁴⁶

Human Rights Violations

More often than not, counter-insurgency operations fail to win over the people not only because a section of the people sympathize with the cause of the insurgents, but also because in their attempts to nab the militants the security forces tend to terrorize innocent people.⁴⁷ Measures such as forcible regrouping of the villages, imposing restrictions on the movements of the people, cordoning and search operations, banning of meetings and public processions, arresting and detaining persons on mere suspicion, torturing and killing of innocent persons during interrogations, destruction of private property, use of abusive and foul language and misbehaviour with women and the old persons add to the further alienation of the people and make counter-insurgency operations unpopular. Taking advantage of the special privileges that acts such as the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act would

give them, some army and paramilitary personnel turn to fake encounters, vandalism and rapes. When such human rights' violations by counter-insurgency agencies are exposed by the press or by the human rights' organizations, they considerably tarnish the public image of the security personnel. Further the ethnic composition of the Indian army and the paramilitary forces also makes it difficult for the local people to relate themselves with the security personnel who look different and talk in a language not familiar to them. Moreover frequent deployment of the army and their presence in every nook and corner of the north-east take away the psychological edge that army enjoys elsewhere as the protector of the nation from the external enemies. The excessive involvement of the central armed forces will have adverse impact on the morale of the state police. All these limitations of the counter-insurgency agencies give an opportunity for the insurgents to project the Indian security forces as the alien oppressors.

Understanding the negative impact of the excessive use of force, the government and the security forces at times adopt Machiavellian tactics to corner the insurgents. The use of renegades in counter-insurgency operations is one such tactics.⁴⁸ In some north-eastern states the ruling parties and the bureaucrats themselves encouraged the formation of pseudo-insurgent groups with the help of the militants who deserted the insurgent groups and used them to eliminate the leaders and supporters of real insurgent groups operating in their states. The ex-militants were used to get information on the strategy, hideouts and linkages of the insurgent groups. Operations through such pseudo-militant groups would enable the government and the security forces to escape the legal hurdles in dealing with the insurgents. In Assam SULFA was used by the AGP government to engineer secret killings of the kith and kin of ULFA leaders. In Manipur a couple of Kuki militant groups were instigated to fight against the Naga militants. Although this tactic has certain advantages, excessive dependence on pseudo-militant groups would backfire, as it happened in Assam where SULFA's activities tarnished the image of the AGP and contributed to the fall of Mohanta's government. Another tactic used in counter-insurgency is to use the media to arouse suspicions in the minds of the cadres and supporters about the leaders of the insurgent groups. By

spreading news about real or imaginary differences among the militant leaders and by highlighting the factional fights taking place within the insurgent organizations, the state machinery tries to create confusions in the minds of the supporters. Tarnishing the image of the insurgent groups is another effective ploy exploited by the security agencies. In the north-east the Indian State effectively exploited the insurgents' links with ISI, Pakistan and Bangladesh to whip up nationalist feelings and to generate fear psychosis among the people about the possible influx of the Bangladeshis into their states.⁴⁹

Welfare and Developmental Role

From the experiences of insurgency and counter-insurgency operations in different parts of the world, the Indian security forces have learnt the lesson that unwarranted use of force and deception would only alienate the people and strengthen the insurgents. Some of the writings of Indian military officers show that they are aware of the need to win over the people to their side during the counter-insurgency operations.⁵⁰ Having become aware of the need for people's support in counter-insurgency, the security forces are taking up different remedial measures to improve their public image. In order to project itself as friends of the people of the north-east, the Assam Rifles is involving in various welfare and developmental activities such as construction and repairing of roads, running of schools, providing primary health care facilities, helping the people at the time of floods and other natural calamities, implementing water lift schemes and imparting technical training for the unemployed youths.⁵¹ Having become conscious of the fact that the misbehaviour of the security personnel would bring bad reputation to the forces, human rights education has been made a compulsory component in their training both at the level of induction and later for promotions. In their organs meant primarily for internal circulation, one can see several articles written by the senior officers giving guidelines as to how the security personnel should behave with the masses.⁵² Instructions are given to the security personnel to work in collaboration with the civil authorities and the police. Although it is difficult to state how much of what is written in their organs and mentioned in their training programmes are

properly received by those who are actually involved in the operations at the ground level, one should acknowledge that efforts are indeed made to make the security personnel understand that the common people should not be unnecessarily harassed during the CI operations. On certain occasions when allegations of human rights violations by the army personnel were reported to them, the officers ordered inquiries to ascertain the truth from the victims and punish the guilty. The Assam Rifles claims that it has even paid compensations to victims as and when ordered by the High Court.⁵³ In recent years the top army and paramilitary officers are actively participating in different seminars and symposia discussing the issues concerning insurgency and human rights and expressing their viewpoints in public. Realizing the importance of publicity and propaganda in the war against the insurgents, they have been sponsoring and also actively participating in public meetings and rallies aimed at mobilizing public opinion against insurgency. Like politicians, one can often see the army officers making public appeals to 'the misguided youth', meaning the militants, to eschew the path of violence and join the mainstream. They offer to provide vocational training to rehabilitate the surrendered militants. Whenever militants come forward to surrender themselves, the security agencies give wide media publicity on such occasions. The Kargil War came as handy to the Indian Army to improve its public image. The army officers from the north-eastern states who were killed in the Kargil War are given the status of martyrs and their martyrdom was used to secure positive image for the Indian army. In recent years conscious efforts are being made by the army and the paramilitary forces to recruit the local youths. The positive response of the public to the recruitment rallies taking place at regular intervals in different parts of the north-east partly speaks of the growing image of the Indian security forces in the minds of the local people. Although the people are still not comfortable with the presence of the army in their vicinity as it curtails freedom and creates a sense of fear, the aversion that they had at one time against the presence of the Indian security forces is partly overcome in some north-eastern states because of these image building exercises. The facts that the local people in different parts of the north-east are coming forward to receive education, health and other relief measures provided by the security forces and that the indigenous

communities have unconsciously started looking towards the army and the paramilitary forces to stop infiltration and to curb inter-ethnic conflicts within the region show the good will that they could gain in recent years, despite the efforts of the insurgents and their supporters to project them as occupation forces.

Choking the Finances

Insurgency cannot be put down merely by killing the militants and their supporters. As long as their financial base remains strong, the insurgents will not face any problems in going ahead with their recruitment, training and procurement activities. Choking the funding channels of the militants and destroying the financial support base of the insurgents are essential requirements of counter-insurgency.⁵⁴ The Indian intelligence has gathered considerable information about the sources of income of the insurgent groups operating in the north-east. Yet it could do little to squeeze those channels, as they operate with the active connivance of the politicians and the bureaucrats. The people's lack of confidence in the abilities of the forces to provide security for their lives and property compel them to buy peace by complying with the demands of the militants. A couple of years ago the Assam police brought to light the story of how the Tata Tea estate financed the hospital expenditure of the ULFA militants. Even after knowing very well that they do finance, no action could be taken against any tea estate owners, as the Assam government finds it difficult to stop the militants from abducting and killing the tea estate managers. Although everyone knows that the insurgents are collecting 'taxes' and resorting to extortions, some of the state governments show no will power to curb them. However, in 2003 the Government of Meghalaya took stern measures to attack the financial support base of HNLC by arresting several bureaucrats, businessmen and professionals who have been financing the militants in Meghalaya.⁵⁵ A little later, following the killing of a student by the NSCN (K) cadre, the people in Mokokchung district in Nagaland took the decision not to pay 'taxes' thereafter to any of the militant groups in the state.⁵⁶ Reading the writings on the wall, the NSCN (IM) immediately banned 'tax collection' by any individual or organization in the Naga areas where it has some influence. Whether other state

governments and the people of other regions would follow these examples or not, is not clear at the moment.

Economic Development and Political reforms

Despite such positive gains, the Indian security forces are aware of their limitations. They know that through their efforts they can at best flush out the militants and restore law and order in the region, but they cannot eliminate the economic and political roots of insurgency. Hence one can see even the army officers publicly supporting the idea that once the law and order situation improves, the government and the civil administration should take over the responsibility of creating other necessary social conditions for strengthening peace in the region.⁵⁷ The Indian State has also become aware of the socio-political and economic roots of insurgency and understands the limitations of the military operations. The policy makers in Delhi are aware that like insurgency, counter-insurgency should also become a total war, fought simultaneously on different fronts — military, economic, political and psychological. The Indian government is therefore making positive efforts to bring about economic and political changes in the region. Apart from allocating crores of rupees for modernization of police and paramilitary forces and reimbursing the security related expenditure to the state governments in the north-east, the Government of India is evincing considerable interest to initiate economic development in the region. Realizing that economic backwardness and underdevelopment generate the feelings of alienation and relative deprivation, the Government of India has pumped in crores of rupees with the intention of stimulating economic growth and development in the region.⁵⁸ The North Eastern Council (NEC) has taken up several projects for the development of basic infrastructure in the region. The Government of India has given a "special category" status to the north-eastern states. The National Development Council (NDC) has earmarked 10 per cent of total Plan allocations for special category States as central assistance to north-eastern states. The north-eastern states receive 90 per cent of Plan assistance as grant and just 10 per cent as loan, as against the norm of 30 per cent grant and 70 per cent loan for other states. Favoured treatment is also given with respect to the sharing of central tax revenues.

The indigenous people living in the hills have been exempted from paying income tax. Since the 1990's Prime Ministers of the country have been announcing special packages for the development of the north-eastern states. Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda promised a Rs. 600 crores package. I.K. Gujral, his successor increased it to Rs. 700 crores. On the eve of India's 52nd Republic Day the former Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, announced a Rs. 10,271 crores development package for the north-eastern states. Sufficient allocation has been made for the fencing of the borders, which would help in preventing illegal immigration and in controlling the movements of the militants. With an eye to encourage other states, a special peace package was announced to the state of Mizoram, which has given up insurgency and opted for peace. In his recent visit to Nagaland, Mr. Vajpayee announced that his government would allot Rs. 365 crores as special assistance for the development of Nagaland. Apart from such economic concessions and packages, the Indian State has also taken political initiatives to deal with the insurgents. Conceding statehood to Nagaland as early as in 1963, upgrading of Union Territories such as Tripura, Mizoram and Manipur into states, creation of the new states of Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh and decision to provide the benefits of the Sixth Schedule to the Bodos living in the plains, readiness to include Manipuri and Bodo languages in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution, entering into cease-fire agreements, inviting the insurgent leaders like Lal Denga and Muivah for talks at the highest levels and visiting the insurgency prone states by the top level Indian leaders are some of the significant political decisions that the Indian State took to contain the spread of insurgency in the north-east.

Limitations of Counter-Insurgency Operations

Five decades of experience in counter-insurgency operations, has taught many a lesson to the Indian State as to how it should deal with the insurgent groups. The scholars familiar with the theory and practice of counter-insurgency⁵⁹ understand that the Indian State is simultaneously adopting two strategies — the one of repression against the insurgents and their supporters and the other of welfare and development aimed at winning over the indigenous people. Although this two-fold policy was able to keep the

insurgent activities within reasonable limits, it has not succeeded in striking at the roots of insurgency. Several factors such as lack of proper coordination among different organs of the State, differences in the perceptions of central and state governments, conflicts among the state governments and pragmatic/opportunistic political considerations of both the national and the regional parties make it difficult for the Indian State to deal with insurgency in a consistent manner. The growing corruption and inefficiency in the state administration and the continuing nexus between the politicians and the insurgents also stand as obstacles to the success of counter-insurgency operations. Further, due to the absence of necessary conditions for good governance, crores of rupees that the central government has pumped into the region all these years only benefited a small section of the local population and left majority of the people untouched by the fruits of development. It is often alleged that a part of the money allocated for the developmental programmes reach the coffers of the insurgent groups through the corrupt politician-bureaucrat-contractor networks.⁶⁰ More than all these deficiencies, it is the failure of the Indian State to stem the social roots of ethnicity and identity politics that continue to breed insurgent groups in the region.

Prospects of Peace in the North-east

Does this understanding of the nature and dynamics of insurgency and counter-insurgency provide us any clue as to whether there could be permanent peace in the north-east in the near future? The accord with BLT, the conclusion of cease-fire agreements with both factions of NSCN and the interest evinced by a couple of smaller insurgent groups like DHD, ANVC, UPDS etc., to negotiate with the government and the ongoing talks with NSCN (IM) do raise such hopes. On its part, the Indian State also realizes that although it could keep the insurgency within the bounds of control, it does not have the capacity to put an end to the insurgent activities. It is aware of the cost factor involved in counter-insurgency operations. The Indian State feels that it cannot afford to deploy more and more army battalions in the north-east for counter-insurgency operations, when the tensions are mounting on its western borders. Moreover, its policies of

liberalization and globalization have been compelling the Indian capitalist class to eye on the East and South East Asian markets. As the north-east region becomes a crucial link in India's relations with East and South East Asian nations, the Indian State recognizes the need for ensuring peace and development in the region for the success of its 'Look East Policy.'⁶¹ On the other side, some of the insurgent groups have also started becoming conscious of the fact that in the existing national and international situation, there are little possibilities of waging successful insurgency against the more powerful Indian State and winning freedom through armed rebellion. The groups began to recognize their own weaknesses and understand the difficulties in forging unity among different competing nationalities/ethnic groups against the Indian State. All insurgent groups reluctantly admit the truth that the decades of association with the mainland India did lead to gradual assimilation of a sizeable section of the indigenous people of the north-east into the Indian national mainstream. Non-coercive processes like the region's integration with the Indian market, the spread of higher education, the impact of Indian national TV channels and Hindi films and the growth of transport and communication networks did succeed in generating pro-Indian sentiments among a considerable section of the indigenous people of the north-east. The native people still have fears and suspicions about the outsiders and have sympathies for the insurgents who claim to be fighting for their cause. But the insurgents' slogans for secession and independence have lost much of their popular appeal and attraction. Some of the insurgent groups who have become conscious of these developments realize the futility of continuing insurgency in these changed conditions and are looking forward to an honorable political settlement with the Indian State. Thus constrained by their own reasons and compulsions, in recent years the Indian State and some of the insurgent groups have started chanting peace mantra in the north-east. These compulsions of the Indian State and the insurgent groups to look for peaceful means to settle their problems may not necessarily coincide with the interests and aspirations of the people of India and more so of the people of the north-east aspiring for peace, justice and development. For that reason it is desirable that the people, while welcoming the peace overtures, make their own efforts to develop and articulate their perspectives and agenda

for peace and bring pressure upon the Indian State and the insurgent groups in the north-east to pay attention to their feelings and concerns.

Several changes have taken place in the nature and dynamics of insurgency and counter-insurgency in the north-east during the last fifty years. The region as a whole experienced many a new development in economic and political spheres. Attitudes, aspirations and expectations of the people of the north-east have also changed considerably. So it is necessary that the future of the north-east be decided on the basis of the ground realities of today. It is counterproductive to harp on what has happened in history, for both the Indian State and the insurgent groups have had their own omissions and commissions and none of them is above criticism. In their own ways both have terrorized the common people and violated their fundamental rights to existence. The face-off between the insurgents and the Indian State has left thousands of innocent people killed, their rights and liberties curtailed and their prospects of development thwarted. All these years the common people have just kept quiet, while the Indian State and the insurgent groups went on justifying their actions in the name of national integrity or the communities' interests. But the realization that they have paid heavy price for remaining silent and for allowing others to speak on their behalf should now compel the people of the north-east to assert their rights and autonomy vis-à-vis both the Indian State and the insurgent groups.

Limits of Ethnicity and Identity Politics

While attempting to develop a people's perspective for peace, it is essential to arrive at consensus on issues relating to identity politics and self-determination. The people of the north-east know very well that they do not constitute a homogenous group. The region is composed of different tribes, ethnic communities and nationalities, each with a history, culture and dialect/language of its own. All communities take pride in their traditions and seek to preserve their identities. Ethnicity and identity politics dominate the politics of the region. It is true that ethnic sentiments do help in keeping their respective communities united, but at the same time they stand as barriers to developing harmony and friendly relations with other groups inhabiting the same region

and depending on the same sources for survival. The ideology and politics based on ethnicity and identity politics generate animosities and suspicions, and will not allow the people to look at the problems of their community from a broader perspective. Feeding on the fear of the other, the ideology and politics of identity have generated the conditions for the rise of different militant groups in the north-east, each one pursuing what it considers to be its community interests.⁶² Far from giving shape to a united struggle against the Indian State of different nationalities and ethnic groups of the north-east, the rise and growth of such groups has led to the intensification of ethnic conflicts and weakened the unity of the people of the north-east. Hence it helps the indigenous people of the north-east if they appreciate the limitations of ethnicity and identity politics. In a situation of mutual suspicion, ill feeling and mistrust, no community or group could pursue its interests without meeting resistance from other communities or insurgent groups. In the absence of trust and consensus, no negotiations between the Indian State and the insurgent group could lead to a fruitful solution. It is therefore necessary that the people's demand for continuing the official level talks should be accompanied by their efforts to encourage negotiations and reconciliation within and across different communities and insurgent groups. It is good that such a process has begun among the Nagas wherein the civil society organizations initiated Naga Reconciliation Committee to bring warring Naga tribes and insurgent groups together. Although not yet successful in their efforts, some attempts are made to bring Naga and Meitei social organizations on a common platform to initiate dialogue between the two communities. In 2003 some leading Naga intellectuals undertook the journey to New Delhi to communicate to the rest of Indians about their points of view. But this process of dialogue and reconciliation is still at an early stage. It is essential that the churning process, which has just begun, be able to involve the people of all communities, groups and states in the north-east. More than communicating their views and ideas, what is essential for every community or insurgent group is to learn to appreciate others' points of view and realize the limits of their own aspirations and demands. On December 20, 2001, at a launching of Naga reconciliation programme in Kohima the Presidents of Naga tribes took the pledge that "we, my tribe, will go beyond

seeing only where others have hurt us and be ready to see where we too may have provoked them to hurt us, so that forgiving and being forgiven will become possible".⁶³ All communities in the north-east should take such a pledge and make sincere efforts to reflect on their own deeds and misdeeds and stretch their hands of friendship, forgetting and forgiving all that the others have done to them. Unless the people succeed in building bridges across communities, it will not be possible to find solutions to their particular or common problems. At one level the lack of unity and understanding among communities and the insurgent groups in the north-east creates problems for the Indian State in negotiating settlements with the insurgent groups, but at another level it also gives the Indian State an opportunity to pit one community or group against another and evade exploring solutions for the problems confronting the north-east. For this reason also conscious and enlightened people belonging to different communities should take the lead in creating a congenial atmosphere for a meaningful dialogue at different levels — between the Indian State and the insurgent groups, between the insurgent groups and the communities they claim to represent, and between different ethnic groups which perceive each other as competitors and enemies.

Secession Vs. Self-determination

The other subject that the people of the north-east should deliberate on is the issue of the right to self-determination. It is true that there is nothing sacrosanct about Indian nation or its national integrity. Every ethnic group that has already developed into a distinct nationality has the right to determine its future. But self-determination does not always necessitate the formation of independent nations. The demand for secession is only one form of assertion of right to self-determination. Like several developed nationalities in mainland India which voluntarily decided to be a part of India, the Mizos have also exercised their right to self-determination when they decided to give up insurgency and become a part of the Indian Union. The people belonging to different communities in the north-east need to be clear as to whether by self-determination they mean secession from the Indian Union or autonomy/separate statehood within India. Here

one needs to be aware that the right to self-determination of nations basically refers to the communities that have already developed as nationalities and not to the communities that are predominantly tribal. In the north-east, we come across local leaders who call their communities at times as tribes and some other times as nationalities and even nations. But the fact is that a community cannot be a tribe and a nation at the same time. Terms such as tribe, ethnicity and nationality refer to different stages in the development of a community. In the present international situation, it is very difficult for pre-capitalist states to uphold their sovereignty and survive as independent countries. Experiences in Asia and Africa show how the countries that are predominantly feudal or tribal in their character, ended up becoming puppets of one or the other imperialist nations. Nationhood is not just a subjective idea; it is a social construction based on particular material base. The people should, therefore, make an objective study of the present stage of development of their respective communities and see for themselves whether they have historically reached a stage in which they have the necessary material conditions and capacities to stand as independent states in this world of nations. This is not to say that just because some of the communities have not yet developed as nationalities, they should continue to bear with the oppression and exploitation of the dominant communities. At certain moments in history, for the very survival of the communities — whether they be tribes or nationalities — it becomes essential to fight for independence. Insurgency is justified if the state machinery or the dominant nationality of the given country exploits and subjugates the smaller nationalities or ethnic groups and denies them civil and political rights on par with the citizens belonging to dominant nationalities. To decide as to whether such a situation does really exist in the north-east, the people should seek answers for the following questions: Has the Indian State foreclosed all options for the communities in the region to live honourable and dignified lives within the Indian Union? Are the indigenous communities so oppressed and their resources so exploited by the Indian State and by the people of the rest of India that there is no future for them within the boundaries of the Indian Union? Does the Indian State really use force to homogenize all the communities and refuse to guarantee autonomy to them? Does

the secession from the Indian Union really benefit the indigenous communities, or only profit their community elites? While seeking answers for such questions, it is necessary to keep one's eyes and ears wide open to all arguments and views and resist the temptations to swallow simplistic assertions of the Indian State or the insurgent groups.

This plea for concrete understanding of the situation is not meant in anyway to justify the mistakes or limitations of the Indian State. No strategy against the Indian State succeeds without understanding the reasons that compel the ruling classes in India to take a hard stand against smaller nationalities or ethnic groups fighting for independence. Undoubtedly oil and tea produced in Assam are important for India, but as far as the other areas of the north-east are concerned, economically India has little to gain from them.⁶⁴ Even if the insurgencies succeed in their mission and all these areas get separated from the Indian Union, being land locked, those 'newly formed sovereign states' cannot but depend on India for markets or for transit *a la* Bhutan and Nepal. India, being the most powerful country in the sub-continent, it can still continue to have economic hold over the smaller and less developed neighbours, even if they succeed in becoming politically independent. As such for the Indian State it is not the economic considerations, but political and strategic compulsions which force it to hold on to the north-east. It is true that the peripheral regions in India, as in many other capitalist countries, remain backward and they become markets for the Indian big business. But the existence of underdeveloped regions in capitalist countries need not necessarily be due to the operation of internal colonialism or centre-periphery relations, as some scholars in the north-east do believe.⁶⁵ Uneven and sporadic development is a characteristic feature of all capitalist nations. The very nature of operation of capitalism leaves certain regions in the country underdeveloped. Within capitalist framework, it is not possible to develop all regions of the country uniformly. The only way then left to escape underdevelopment is to break with the capitalist path of development. But as we have seen, fighting against capitalism has not been the objective of the majority of insurgent groups operating in the north-east. Mere creation of new capitalist states will not solve the problem of underdevelopment. Hence the people of the north-east should explore other alternative options open to them.

It is true that India's bourgeois democracy has several limitations. But the positive side of it is that India has not yet become a full-fledged fascist state. India is a multi-nationality nation state where there is no single dominant nationality that also has the capacity or resources to exercise its will over others.⁶⁶ India's federal structure allows considerable autonomy for different nationalities and ethnic groups. To the extent India's sovereignty is not questioned, the Indian political elite does not hesitate to initiate certain political reforms and developmental activities in the region, of course all within the parameters of a capitalist framework. By exercising pressure through united popular movements, the indigenous communities can seek whatever freedoms and rights the bourgeois society assures to its citizens. Considering that the possibilities of insurgencies succeeding in their mission are remote and that even if they succeed, given the ethnocentric, conservative and authoritarian nature of the majority of insurgent groups, there is virtually no guarantee that the sovereign states that they establish would not be more democratic and egalitarian than India, the indigenous people of the north-east should think as to why they should support the insurgent groups that can at best create only replicas of the Indian State. Instead why not they choose to remain a part of the Indian Union and join the struggles of the common people of India to transform the very nature of the Indian State through united democratic struggles? The people of the north-east aspiring for peace need to deliberate on such questions.

Responsibility of Progressive Minded Indians

The question of peace in the northeast is not an issue that should concern only the indigenous people of the region. Although not directly, the people of the rest of India have also borne the brunt of the ongoing insurgency and counter-insurgency operations in the north-east. They have lost hundreds of their men in the battle against the insurgents. Thousands of poor Indians who migrated to the north-east in search of livelihood have become the targets of different militant groups, who see all migrants without distinction as outsiders and therefore exploiters. Thousands of crores of rupees allocated by the central government for military operations or for developmental activities in the north-east are

actually contributed by the Indian taxpayers. For these reasons, the people of the rest of India also have a stake in the peace process. They too can become catalysts in the peace process, provided they correctly understand the ground realities of the north-east. But unfortunately most of the Indian citizens living in the mainland have very little knowledge about what has been going on in the region in the name of insurgency and counter-insurgency. While the common people tend to believe in the official description of militants as anti-nationals, criminals and terrorists, we also come across certain progressive sections in the mainland India who uncritically accept what the insurgent groups say and project the insurgencies in the north-east as revolutionary national liberation struggles directed against the reactionary Indian State.⁶⁷ The need of the hour is to look beyond what the state elite or the insurgent groups would like us to see and plan out people's strategies for ensuring peace and development in the region. A strong public opinion needs to be created in the rest of India against violation of human rights of the civilian population in the north-east by the Indian army and paramilitary forces engaged in counter-insurgency operations and bring pressure on the Indian State to respect the indigenous people's right to live with dignity and self-respect. At the same time they should demand the Indian State to take stern actions against those militant groups that involve in terrorist acts like killing, abduction and extortion and subject the civilians to harassment and distress in the name of insurgency. The Indian public should pressurize the central government to ensure that the money pumped into the north-east is not pocketed by a few undeserving elites, but is properly utilized for the development of the region and for meeting the needs of the local people. Instead of leaving everything to the politicians and bureaucrats, the people living in mainland India should take initiatives to win over the hearts of the people of the north-east by being sensitive to their feelings, fears and concerns. Through their words and deeds, they should make the people of the north-east realize that all the Indians are not exploiters. Efforts should be made to convince the indigenous people of the north-east that they gain more than they lose by being a part of India. The people of rest of India should play their part in helping the indigenous people overcome the sense of alienation and the fear of outsiders, so that they voluntarily and

consciously choose to say 'no' to the politics of ethnicity and identity that breeds insurgencies in the north-east. Once the efforts to win over the hearts and minds of the people succeed, the charm that insurgency holds would also disappear. While expecting things to move this way, one should not ignore the possibility that despite the positive efforts to integrate the indigenous communities into the Indian mainstream, because of the failure of the Indian State in handling the peace process, one or two communities — not just their self-styled communities' leaders — might make a conscious choice to continue their struggle for independence. Such a decision no doubt disheartens the Indians, who wish to see all indigenous people of the north-east accept to be part of India. Yet that disappointment should not drive them towards reactionary politics and ideologies. They should learn to respect the wishes of the natives and not stand as an obstacle to their legitimate desires and aspirations. It helps if one realizes that in the long run, having friendly and peaceful neighbours proves to be more beneficial than wasting ones' energies and resources to keep disinterested and hostile communities forcefully within the Indian Union.

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2. During the NDA's rule at the centre the Indian Intelligence and the Ministry of Home Affairs talked of the existence of several ISI sponsored Muslim fundamentalist organizations in the north-east. It was alleged that these organizations encouraged infiltration of the Bangladeshis into the north-eastern states with the avowed objective of cutting of the region from the rest of India. Not much of evidence is however visible at the grassroots level which can justify the government's contention.
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