

## **INSURGENCY, MILITANCY AND INSECURITY**

### **Roots and Its Ramifications**

TARUN BIKAS LAHIRI

---

#### **The Region and Its Unique Distinctiveness**

With rugged terrain and torrents, the mighty Brahmaputra Valley, with dense forests, people having diverse ethnic-socio-cultural characteristics, with international frontiers all-around except the narrow isthmus in North West, the connecting corridor with mainland of India; N.E. India is a remarkably distinctive region of the Indian Union.

The region referred to as seven sisters covering the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura has an area of 2.5 lakh sq.m., habitat of 38.5 million persons (2001). Thanks to dominantly rugged physiography, N.E. region has an apparently favourable land-man ratio. The region covers about 7.8 per cent of geographical area of the country but holds about 3.7 per cent of India's population (2001).

However, in spite of its valuable natural resources, scenic grandeur, substantial advance in literacy levels, cultural wealth of some communities, the region has remained backward, a formidable retarding factor being the internal strife between the communities, at times eroding as under-current at times highly destructive through violent eruptions.

Human behavioural characteristics may not be viewed in

isolation. It has roots in family lineage as well as larger societal mind-set. Disquiet in the North East too has also manifold linkages.

### **Historical Retrospection**

Though in epic like *Mahabharata*, the region found a noteworthy place and there is also mention of Kamrupa on the Allahabad Pillar inscription made at the time of most powerful emperor of the Gupta Dynasty, i.e., Samudra Gupta but N.E. Region by and large was never under the hegemony of the central rulers of India in ancient or medieval eras. Only once Mira Jumla, the General of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb defeated the Ahom King in the Brahmaputra Valley. But the success was short-lived, Ahom Kings recaptured their kingdom soon.

However, Ahom Kings did not enjoy supreme power over the entire region. Power of governance was shared by the dynastic kingdoms of Manipur, Khasi and Jaintia Kingdoms, Manikya Rulers of Tripura. Bodos at one time occupied a large part of the Brahmaputra Valley though they had not been able to set up a dynastic rule. In Nagaland, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh various ethno-cultural-religious principalities ruled in their respective segments. Though, Ahoms at times extended their influence over marginal area of others' territories in the hills of the N.E.

Thus, the North Eastern region was never under a unified command either centrally or regionally.

### **Desperate Ethno-Cultural-Linguistic Affiliations**

Widely desperate ethno-cultural composition of the population of N.E. Region was the dominant factor for simultaneous existence of virtually independent principalities having suzerainty in their respective habitats.

N.E. Region has absorbed waves of migrations from Myanmar, Tibet and Thailand. Considerable admixture took place between two major ethnic groups, viz. the caucasoid and mongoloid. Most migrants brought various Tibeto-Burman languages. Mention may also be made of Austric language represented by the people

of the Khasi and Jaintia hills of Meghalaya. However, the dominant population group constituted by Ahoms—a mixture of caucasoid Aryans and mongoloid migrants from Myanmar—in course of time was Hinduised and adopted Assamese language derived mainly from Sanskrit. As a matter of fact, 'Asom' is a Sanskrit word which means peerless or unparallel, socio-cultural influence of the Ahoms was paramount in the Brahmaputra Valley where they ruled from 1228 to 1826. Grahgaon, the Capital of the Ahom Kingdom was the important power centre of N.E. Region in pre-colonial era.

### **Colonial Era: Radical Change of Guard**

The British took over control of Assam from the Ahom King Purandar Singh in 1838 with tacit support of Myanmar. Under the British rule in India, for the first time, almost the entire North Eastern Region was brought under the umbrella of the Central Command located at Delhi. In the sensitive frontier region South of Macmohan Line (Arunachal Pradesh), for effective control, the British organised Frontier Administrative Service. The officers under this service, played the role of soldier-administrators. They also performed a kind of paternal role model particularly along the Macmohan Line, boundary line with Tibet (China).

But unlike the Ahom Kings, the British adopted a very successful strategy of consolidation of their influence by promoting large-scale baptismation of the tribals. They termed the process of conversion of tribals into Christianity as 'humanising' initiated by David Scot, the first Commissioner of Assam appointed in 1836. Christian converts developed a negative perception of Indians from other parts of the country which gave rise to separatist tendencies. Christianisation of the tribal population vastly changed their native socio-cultural characteristics. By and large, they adopted English as the medium of instruction.

Loyalty to the British, was amply demonstrated by the Nagas, almost wholly converted to Christianity. During World War-II, they actively supported the British and offered stiff resistance to the Japanese-INA force during seize of Kohima in 1944. Divisive

policy of the British gradually eroded whatever friendly relations existed between hills and plains people. Previously Daylas, Mismis etc. of Arunachal had trade with plains people and they could speak in Assamese.

### **Unrest on the Eve of Independence**

However apparent peace and unification of the North East under colonial rule started witnessing early tremors by disintegrating forces as stranglehold of the British showed signals of retreat in near future.

In connection with visit of the Simon Commission, Khasi National Durbar pressed for Khasi State. In 1945-46, Khasi States, People's Union also demanded Khasi State. Naga Hill Council led by Mr. Phizo, demanded even a sovereign Naga State at the time of Indian Independence in 1947. Mizos too wanted recognition of their separate identity. On the whole, separatist tendencies kept under the carpet during colonial rule surfaced again on the eve of and after independence. Only the Brahmaputra Valley leaders who participated at the freedom struggle and Maharaja Virchandra Manikya Bahadur, the enlightened tribal King of Tripura willingly joined independent Indian Union. Rest of the tribal ethno-cultural affiliations had no positive attitude towards new-born Indian Union.

### **Constitutional Provisions Made**

Certain constitutional provisions were made to satisfy urge of the tribal principalities for autonomy. The VIth Schedule of the Constitution granted regional autonomy for hills people. It was followed by the N.E. Act of 1971 which in course of time saw the birth of tiny states—Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram. Arunachal Pradesh, previously designated as North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) was also granted statehood. Tripura and Manipur too were recognised as autonomous states. Size of erstwhile Assam Province (later on state) was very substantially reduced. The geographical area of the North Eastern Region is now divided into seven autonomous states, referred to as seven sisters though

love relations between the sisters, if exists at all, are often under clouds.

### **Reorganisation of States could not bring Peace**

North Eastern Region is still an active area of insurgents and militants. Separatist strifes here are xenophobic manifestations of deep-rooted ethno-cultural and emotional differences.

Facets of ravaging hostilities in the North East may broadly be grouped as below:

All the tribal groups are united in their feeling against non-tribal people and resentment against Central Government. However, negative attitude of the tribals towards non-tribals is not confined to North East States only. Perhaps out of the feeling of mistrust and sense of insecurity, all India presents a polarised dwelling pattern of tribals. Generally speaking, about three-fifth of tribal population in India live in districts where they are either in majority or from very substantial minority. But, outside North East, mutual distrust between the tribals and non-tribals has not yet led to conflagration.

Apart from tribals *versus* non-tribals, there are hostilities between tribal factions, clashes for territorial expansions and in economic interests. Rivalry between tribals and plains people is also related to these factors.

### **Insurgent Groups and their Goals**

The National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN-IM) is the largest, best equipped and most dominant insurgent group in the entire region. It is regarded as the mother insurgent group feeding other militant outfits in the region like United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), the two Bodo Groups in Assam, People's Liberation Army (PLA) in Manipur. The Smaller Naga faction followed Khaplang, a Hemi from Myanmar. This factor is referred to as NSCN(K). NSCN's activities are spread over Nagaland, Manipur, Assam and Tirap-Changland region of Arunachal

Pradesh. The objective of the insurgency is to create a sovereign independent Greater Nagaland called 'Nagalim' covering all the areas where Nagas live.

Currently conflict between Meiti plainsman and Tangkhul Naga hill tribes in Manipur has assumed serious proportion. Meitis with Vaishnavite culture is very different from Tangkhul Nagas who are devout Christians. There is a clash of economic interests also. Meities cannot acquire land in hill areas where Nagas live. But Nagas are acquiring properties in Meiti areas in and around Imphal Valley of Manipur. Nagas demand that parts of Manipur where Nagas live should be included in Nagalim.

Tribes fighting against tribes is yet another aspect of unrest in the North East. Kuki Naga clashed are at times quite violent. Paradox is that both Kukis and Nagas are Christians and tribes. Kuki National Army (KNA) and Kuki Liberation Organisation (KLO) were organised to protect Kuki villages from the onslaught of Nagas. Both the tribes are fighting each other to monopolise control of the narcotics trade along Indo-Myanmar border with centres at Morch (in India) and Tamu (in Myanmar).

The root of Kuki-Naga problem was rooted in the shrewd British policy of governance. They baptised and patronised Nagas. But to check ascendancy of Nagas, promoted migration of Kukis living in Chin Hills of Myanmar into India in the 19th Century.

Assam is the theatre of operations of three militant organisations, ULFA wanted a sovereign Assam. Bodo Land Tiger Force (BLTF) and National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) want a separate state out of Assam along the north bank of the Brahmaputra river. Skirmishes between Nagas and Assamese along Assam-Nagaland border contributes to restlessness in the region.

After independence, liberal tribal king of Tripura allowed entry of waves of refugees from erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). That changed the demographic and habitat structure of tribal population of Tripura. Plain lands were mostly occupied by Bengali refugees and tribal dwellings were polarised in hilly areas. Conflict of interests made Bengalis and tribals antagonistic to each other. Confrontation between Bengalis living in plains

and Chakma, Reang and Jamatiya tribal groups living mainly in rugged terrain often take the form of violent clashes.

Mizos are also not easy with Chakmas or Hmars in Mizoram. Rivalry between tribal groups disturb peace in the State.

Taking advantage of relative calm in Arunachal Pradesh, militant outfits NSCN(K), ULFA and Bodos have set up their training camps and operating bases in Tirap-Changlong Region of Arunachal Pradesh.

So, no state in the North Eastern Region is free from clashes between warring groups. Internal strife is being actively abetted by motivated help extended from neighbouring foreign countries.

### **Foreign Factor**

Disquiet in North Eastern Region provided opportunities to Pakistan for opening a subsidiary theatre for its proxy war with India. It has been reliably learnt that Pakistan has set up a network of espionage bases and insurgent training camps in Bangladesh. These camps are mainly located in Chittagong Hill Tracts in South East and Sylhet-Karimganj Region in North East of Bangladesh. Illegal arms are mainly acquired from arms bazar near Bangkok and transported by sea to coastal area around Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh. Supply of arms are passed on to insurgents of N.E. India through infiltrators *via* Indo-Bangladesh-Myanmar borders. Such foreign help is escalating hostilities in North East Region and destabilising India.

ISI of Pakistan is also active inside North East States. Illicit immigrants from Bangladesh provide ISI launching pads. It has also created fundamentalist Islamic Groups with the help of a small local community of Manipuri Muslims (Pangals).

LTTE connection with expatriate Tamil community from Myanmar and its resultant contribution in helping militant activities should also not be excluded from the vista.

Developmental efforts are suffering due to prolonged restlessness prevailing in one or other part of the region. In spite of substantial central assistance and its natural resources, the region has remained backward, its relative development index is

nearly half of national average. Politicians-militant nexus is a constraint for eradication of hostilities.

### **Outlook: Reconciliation and Development**

Recently in January 2003, a memorandum of understanding (MOU) has been signed between the Government of India and the premier and most resourceful insurgent organisation of the North East Region, viz. NSCN(IM) who pledged no more fighting against Indian Security forces, Mr. Isaac Chisi Swu and Mr. Thuingalang Muivah, two top leaders of NSCN(IM) even visited Rajghat, samadhi of Mahatma Gandhi at Delhi and paid homage to the father of the nation. These developments may be the harbinger of long awaited peace in the North East. Though neither NSCN(IM) nor NSCN(K) has deviated from their demand for Nagalim. But NSCN(IM) has agreed to negotiate for it peacefully.

However, Ms. Addino Phizo, President of the Naga National Council, has challenged the authority of Swu and Muivah to sign the MOU on behalf of the Nagas. Ms. Phizo, daughter of late Mr. Phizo who first demanded independent Nagaland in 1947, claimed that the mantle of leadership of the Nagas lie with her organisation only. NSCN(K) has also denounced the agreement reached between NSCN(IM) and Government of India. Notwithstanding these noises, which may not be wholly hollow, the process of reconciliation started should be welcomed as the right step and expression of faith in democracy by both sides. Dialogue and understanding with other warring groups could bring stable peace in the region. But terrorist and espionage activities emanating from foreign lands are to be dealt decisively where military may have to play the major role—in the context of the present geopolitical scenario of the subcontinent. Otherwise, outside agents will continue to fuel latent terrorist tendencies.

Side by side of political processes, all possible avenues need to be followed to step up development efforts and its true percolation at the grassroots level. In this connection, performance of Army Development Groups (ADGs) first created after 1962 and revived in 1990s at the initiative of General Shankar

Roychowdhury is noteworthy. ADGs carried out basic civic developments in the frontier locations of the North East Region. The group teams were composed of construction engineers, medical and veterinary officers, electrical and mechanical engineers and educational corps. They built foot tracks on the hills, arranged water supply, health care, primary education and other community facilities, all in very remote and difficult areas. The soft face of the army has earned appreciation of population vitally important for the army. ADGs, operating in limited areas for short periods were successful as they were corruption-free. However, Army Welfare Missions cannot cover entire population, neither it is the primary role of the army. It is the job of elected civilian leaders who may take some guidance from the approach of ADGs which rested on twin pillars, viz. right choice of programmes and no corruption.

#### REFERENCES

- Deb, Bimal J. (ed.) (2002), *Development Priorities in North East India*, Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi.
- Hazarika, Sanjoy (2003), "A major step forward," *The Statesman*, Kolkata Edition, February 1.
- Roy Burman, B.K. (1971), "Distribution of Scheduled Tribes in India," Paper included in *An Indo-USSR Collaborative Study*, Census of India.
- Roychowdhury, Sankar (2002), *Officially at Peace*, Viking Penguin India.
- Vidyarthi, L.P. (1993), *Art And Culture of North East India*, Publications Division, Government of India.