

## PRESENTATION

—*H. Srikanth*

---

Before one makes efforts to identify the roots of insurgency in Northeast India, it is essential to be clear as to what one should mean by the term, 'insurgency'. Should this expression be used to refer to all kinds of armed oppositions that are visible in the region or should one confine the term to only those organized secessionist movements which are targeting the Indian State with the avowed purpose of establishing their own sovereign states? Further, it may be useful to spell out whether we would like to describe all activities of different armed groups as insurgent activities, or use the idiom only to the activities of those groups which enjoy some amount of sympathy and support among large sections of people belonging to the communities that the groups claim to be representing. Answers to such questions are important, for the Indian Intelligence sources claim that more than one hundred militant groups are operating in Northeast India. But when start probing deep, one realizes that more than half the groups identified as militant are either insignificant or fictitious. Of the remaining, the groups like Adivasi Cobra Militant Force in Assam, United Bengali Liberation Front in Tripura, Bru

National Liberation Front (BNLF) in Mizoram etc., actually came into existence basically to protect their respective communities from the attacks of more powerful militant groups or communities in the region of their present habitation. Some like SULFA (euphemism for organized surrendered ULFA militants) are the creations of the governments, which wanted to use them against more powerful militant groups challenging their authority. Although some like Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC), Achik National Volunteers Council (ANVC), Dima Haram Daoga (DHD), Zomi Revolutionary Army (ZRA), Kuki National Volunteers (KNV), etc., also talk of declared independence, yet they appear to be working more for greater autonomy or separate state status within the Indian Union. In fact, the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) or Mizo National Front (MNF), which advocated secession initially, gave up their armed struggle and accepted greater autonomy or separate state status within the Indian Union. Seen from this angle, it appears that if by insurgency we mean only those militant armed activities aiming at political independence, the militant outfits, which can also be referred to as insurgent groups are not many. As on today only a few militant organizations like United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), National Socialist Council of Nagalim – Isak Muivah (NSCN-IM), National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-K), National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), People's Liberation Army (PLA), etc., can be termed as insurgent, in the sense that they have not yet given up openly their demand for sovereignty. But if one considers popular sympathy, support and participation also as criteria for calling their activities as insurgencies, it becomes difficult to say how many among them

could be considered as insurgencies, since none of the militant organizations seem to exercise hegemony over the communities they claim to be working for. Yet one can broadly be referred to as insurgent groups, as they have been able to continue their militant activities against the Indian State for independence for several decades with the support of a section of the people belonging to the communities they claim to be representing.

Another issue which needs to be clarified is whether it is correct to use the expression, 'Insurgency in the Northeast'. For what we experience here in Northeast India is not insurgency (singular), but insurgencies (plural) of different kinds. Although certain factors such as geographical location, demographic composition, economic backwardness and colonial history of the region are common to all or to most insurgencies, particular factors that led the communities to insurgencies differ from one to another. Each insurgency in Northeast India is the result of a combination of a set of causes— general as well as particular. Our efforts to understand the roots of any insurgency in the Northeast should therefore concentrate on both general and particular factors.

Several militant groups in the region rationalize their demand for independence, by arguing that their communities had never been part of the empires and kingdoms that ruled the mainland India. The argument is defective because of two reasons: one, India did not exist as a political entity prior to the British occupation and second, there are several regions even in the mainland India, for example, South India, which almost remained independent of the rule of the emperors and

kings that ruled the northern and central Indian subcontinent before the arrival of the British. It was only during the British rule that interior southern parts of India came under the control of external powers. Of course, it is true that the southern India had cultural, religious and economic linkages with northern India. But that is true of the many kingdoms (Koch, Kachari, Ahom, Meitei, and Tripuri) that ruled Northeast India as well. However, it needs to be admitted that before the British colonization quite a few hill tribes of the Northeast had very little or virtually no contact of any sorts – political, economic, religious or cultural - with the rest of the Indian subcontinent. Hence the pre-colonial history cannot be a proper explanation for insurgent movements in the region.

In my opinion, the major factor that made difference to Northeast India was the British rule. After the colonial occupation of the region, the British established direct rule only in the plains of Assam. In Manipur and Tripura the colonizers allowed the native kings to continue their rule, subject to their admission of the British paramountcy. The native rulers were prevented from exercising control of some of the peripheral regions inhabited by the hill tribes. Similarly, the hill areas of composite Assam inhabited by the indigenous tribes were treated as backward tracts and were declared as excluded or partially excluded areas. Those areas were all considerably left un-administered and were politically cut-off from the rest of India. This differential treatment of the regions and peoples of the Northeast during the British rule generated varied kinds of reactions in the region to the freedom struggle that took shape in the mainland India. The Indian nationalist movement did touch the plains of Assam, which were

integrated with politics and economy of the rest of India. The educated middle classes and the peasants in the plains of Assam did identify themselves with India and participated actively in India's freedom struggle. In the partially excluded areas of composite Assam, such as Khasi-Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills, a few educated individuals who had the opportunity to study in cities such as Calcutta came in contact with Indian nationalist movement. But in the excluded areas of Assam and other un-administered hill areas of the Northeast, like the Naga Hills, the Lushai Hills, etc., the indigenous hill people virtually remained untouched by the Indian national movement. In the princely states of Manipur and Tripura, although the emerging educated middle classes were in touch with the political developments in the rest of India, they were more preoccupied with anti-feudal struggles against their own native rulers. Consequently pan-Indian identity among the masses in the princely states was not as strong as in the plains of Assam. In fact the anti-feudal struggles in the princely state of Manipur gave rise to Meitei nationalism. These differential attitudes of the communities and the regions in the Northeast to the Indian nationalist movement became the basis of different subsequent political developments and movements in the region, including insurgencies. Because of the unique colonial histories, the response of native communities in the region to the proposal for integration with the Indian Union ranged from one of active support to indifference to stiff opposition.

The next important factor that becomes relevant to the understanding of insurgencies in the region is the consequences of the birth of three sovereign states – India, Pakistan (now divided into Pakistan and Bangladesh) and Burma (Myanmar)

in the region. Several areas inhabited by the indigenous nationalities and tribes in the region were divided among the newly formed nation-states. For no fault of their own, the native communities like Khasis, Garos, Kukis, Nagas etc., were separated and made the subjects of different nation-states. No efforts were made by the ruling elites of the newly formed nation-states to seek the consent of the native people. Naturally the native communities were resentful of the decisions taken by external powers and found it difficult to identify themselves easily with the nation-states that came to decide their fate. They suspected that their communities do not have a future in the newly formed states. It needed considerable political acumen on the part of the post-colonial elite in the newly formed nation-states to protect their political boundaries and strategic interests and at the same time to conceive of appropriate political arrangements that could douse the fears and suspicions of the native people and accommodate and satisfy the political aspirations of the native communities for self-rule. The failure of the ruling elites of the newly formed states in coming out with pragmatic strategies to deal with the existential dilemmas of the affected native communities, gave birth to ethnic identity movements, some of which later took the shape of insurgencies.

The Naga revolt against the Indian State, for example, is to be seen as the failure of the Indian political elite in creating confidence among the Nagas that their future as a community is safe and secure within the Indian Union. As they had little or virtually no contact with rest of the Indians, the Nagas found it difficult to identify themselves with the Indian State and the Indian people. Naturally, they had their doubts and fears about

the consequences of joining the Indian Union. Instead of being sensitive to their suspicions and feelings, the Indian political elite then acted like a big brother and used its armed forces to integrate the Naga inhabited areas with the Indian Union as against the wishes of the Nagas. Therein lied the beginnings of Naga insurgency.

A section of the Mizos had same doubts and suspicions as the Nagas. But unlike the Naga leadership, the Mizos led by the Mizo Union showed its willingness to join the Indian Union, as the emerging educated Mizo elite then found in it an opportunity to get rid of the oppression and exploitation by the native tribal chiefs. After a decade and half the same Mizos felt let down by India when the Government of Assam failed to come to the rescue of the people in the Lushai Hills, when hit by the worst food crisis during the mid-sixties following the bamboo flowering. The dejected Mizos then extended their support to Lal Denga whose Mizo National Front (MNF) rose in revolt against the Indian State demanding independence. The insurgent leaders used the same language, arguments and rhetoric like the Nagas to justify their struggle for independence. Although the Mizo insurgency continued for more than a decade, it failed to win over the support of all Mizos. Realizing the limitations of the movement, in 1986 MNF leaders accepted a separate statehood within the Indian Union and joined the mainstream politics giving up their armed struggle.

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, who felt that India treated Assam only as a colonial hinterland and that Assam had no future within the Indian Union, formed ULFA in the year 1979 and declared war against the Indian State. The leaders of ULFA cited factors such as economic backwardness, underdevelopment, and decades of neglect of the region by the central government and the influx from Bangladesh and other states of India in justification of their fight against the Indian State.

In the erstwhile princely states of Manipur and Tripura, the native people and the native political leadership were considerably influenced by the developments in the mainland India. Powerful anti-feudal struggle that took place in the forties in both Manipur and Tripura were influenced to some extent by Indian National Congress (INC) and Communist Party of India (CPI). In Tripura although the pro-Indian sentiments were voiced mainly by the non-tribals, the tribal people did not show any organized opposition to Tripura joining the Indian Union. In fact the Maharaja of Tripura himself mooted the idea of Tripura joining the Indian Union. It was only when the waves of Bengali immigrants from the erstwhile East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, came and settled in Tripura in the subsequent decades making the tribal people the minorities in their own state, the tribal insurgency started gaining ground in Tripura. The experience in the princely state of Manipur was bit different. Although the native king did not command much of respect among the common people, the Machiavellian tactics that the Indian State adopted on the eve of independence to

force the native king to integrate the state into the Indian Union had left deep scars in the minds of a section of the middle class Meiteis. But those hurt feelings did not give birth to insurgency at that point of time. The insurgency broke out only in the seventies, following the deep dissatisfaction among the educated middle class Meitei, who felt let down by both the state and the central governments that 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.

The study shows that insurgencies took shape in different parts of the region, among different communities for different reasons. Although some militant groups have given up insurgency, one can still see insurgencies of different types and dimensions in different parts of the Northeast. In recent years the Indian State is indeed making efforts to negotiate with different insurgent groups and to bring them into the national mainstream. How far the peace efforts succeed depends on how effectively the Indian State understands the root causes of each of the insurgencies and finds pragmatic solutions to uproot them through appropriate political, economic and social interventions.

[For his presentation, Dr H Srikanth referred to the following works: H. Srikanth, "Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency: Agenda for Peace in India's North-east", in C. Joshua Thomas ed., *Polity and Economy: Agenda for Contemporary*

*North East India*, Regency Publications, New Delhi, 2005; Lt. Gen. N.S. Narahari, *Security Threats to North East India: The Socio-Ethnic Tensions*, Manas Publications, New Delhi, 2002; Sanjoy Hazarika, *Strangers of the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast*, Penguin, New Delhi, 1995; Sajal Nag, *Contesting Marginalities: Ethnicity, Insurgency and Subnationalism in North East India*, Manohar, New Delhi, 2002; All India People's Resistance Forum, *Symphony of Freedom: Papers on Nationality Question*, Hyderabad, 1996. - Editor].