

Terrorism in Northeast India

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Abstract :

Terrorism in Northeast has challenged the democratic setup of India since independence. Terror, strife and violence have become an integral part of the area. Militant and terrorist such as NSCN(IM), PREPAK, BLT, ULFA, ATTF and many more proliferated in the region destabilizing the political and economic setup. This paper studies recounts the conditions leading to this terror infested scenario in Northeast

IndexTerms - Northeast, terrorism, Militant outfits, Government response.

I. INTRODUCTION

India's Northeast, home to seven states and many more insurgencies, is part of a great tropical rainforest that stretches from the foothills of the Himalayas to the tip of the Malaysian Peninsula and the mouth of the Mekong river as it flows into the Gulf of Tonkin. 'As the crow flies, it is closer to Hanoi than to New Delhi' [1] Sanjoy Hazarika describes the North east as 'Asia in miniature, a place where the brown and yellow races meet and mingle.

The seven states (also known as the seven sisters) that comprise India's Northeast- Assam, Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh are linked to the rest of India by a narrow arm (the 21 Km-wide Siliguri corridor). The energy rich North East has substantial oil, natural gas and coal, much of it remains unexploited because of political violence. Its rivers have huge amounts of water and abundant forest resources. It is nonetheless one of India's most economically backward areas. As usual, the insurgencies have spawned extortion and violence as well as high unemployment in a rapidly growing population.

Terrorism in the Northeast is characteristically of ethnic politics. 'Terrorism in the Northeast may be categorised as an extreme point in the process of ethnicization or, in other words, as one of the end products of the politics of ethnicity.[2] Ethnic mobilization in the Indian subcontinent often leading to separatist and secessionist movements with terror tactics are usually the result of combination of peculiar historical, political and economic realities.

II. MOBILIZATION AND POLITICIZATION OF ETHNIC IDENTITIES

While the British policy of divide and rule led to the alienation of peripheral ethnic groups at different points of time, the post independence period is generally characterized by the excessive centralization of political and economic powers by the ruling classes. This has resulted in political and economic discontent and deliberate symbol manipulation by the regional elite groups. In fact ethnic politicking in the Indian subcontinent is intertwined with the politics of elite competition between the regional and national elite. The educated middle class aligned with the regional elite generally act as a subsidiary force in this conflict. This is the section, which is at the forefront of terrorist organizations almost all over the northeast. [3]

The educated Assamese middle class mobilized the consciousness of 'Axomiya' and was enormously successful in presenting its anti-foreigner outlook under the banner of AASU (All Assam Students Union) and AAGSP (All Assam Gana Sangram Porixod). Later on, this ethnic identity politics was usurped by ULFA, militant organization. In Manipur, the Meiteis (the plains people) fear subjugation by the hill tribals. In Tripura the Bengalis have been ousted in large numbers. In Mizoram, of course, peace could be attained by the Mizo Accord after the initial bloodshed led by MNF. In this process of ethnicization, Northeast witnesses the rise of a plethora of militant organizations having objectives which more often than not, smack of aggressive cultural nationalism based on ethnic and tribal identity.

To placate the Naga secessionists, Nagaland was granted statehood in 1962 and there has been a ceasefire by both NSCN (I) and NSCN (M) but Nagaland is still witnessing fratricide though of a lesser scale than before. Indeed, its fallout can be seen in the neighbouring Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. The NSCN wants a Nagalim (greater Nagaland) which would mean taking territories from Manipur and Assam.

III. THE MILITANCY IMBROGLIO

3.1 NAGALAND

The Nagas had revolted against the Indian government as early as August 14, 1947 led by Angami Zapu Phizo. The Naga National Council (NNC) under the leadership of Phizo demanded sovereignty. The NNC launched a violent secessionist movement with Naga insurgents raiding several villages and police out posts. The army was used to crush the insurgency in what was, till then, the Naga hills District of the State of Assam. Statehood was conceded to, in 1963 to appease the Nagas, as also to improve the conditions of the border state after the Chinese aggression of 1962. Violent activities however continued. Forcing the insurgents to the negotiating table after massive counter insurgency measures, the Shillong Accord was signed on November 11, 1975. The members of the NNC who refuse to be a part of the settlement formed the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN). It was later split in 1988 to form NSCN (IM) and NSCN (K)

There have been individual ceasefire agreements with the union government by the NSCN (IM) in 1997 and NSCN (K) in 2001. However, the ceasefires do not mean peace. In the name of ceasefires the groups continue with their extortions and murders. The interference of the militant groups in the democratic life continues unabated, though the violent secession movements have ceased. The talks between the government of India and NSCN are going on.

3.2 Assam

Another state disturbed by the issue of 'foreigners', is Assam. These foreigners are mainly Bengalis whom the British brought from the neighboring state to serve in the lower rungs of administration. The Muslim peasants from East Bengal also added substantially to the problem of demographic imbalance in Assam.

After their arrival in Assam, Bengalis have dominated office jobs, professions, trade and even competitive jobs. Educated Assamese resent all this as they feel that these opportunities should be theirs. In 1980s, the Assam agitation was at its peak. The dominant force in Assamese society, All Assam Students Union (AASU) and Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) was demanding detection, disenfranchisement and deportation of foreigners' (The term 'foreigners' may be read as 'outsiders', as non-Assamese speaking people) in early eighties. But today the dominant force is 'United Liberation Front of Assam' (ULFA), with comprises of fanatically disciplined, heavily trained, well funded, well armed and ruthless activists who want Assam to secede from India.

The peculiarity about ULFA is that " it is the first organized separatist group that belongs to the geographical cultural mainstream of Indian society[4] and not to any religious or linguistic minority group as in Punjab, Kashmir or to any cultural group as in Nagaland, Mizoram, Tripura or Manipur.

A similar demand was voiced in Assam by the 'Bodos' or the 'Kacharis' - the tribals of the plains, for the creation of a separate state of 'Bodoland'. The Bodo Security Force (BSF) renamed the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) came into being in 1989, and resorted to terrorism to secure an independent Bodo nation. Another terrorist group, the Bodo Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF) has been fighting for a separate state of Bodoland within the Indian Union. The accord to solve this problem through the creation of Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) within Assam was signed in 1993. It however proved unworkable.

The tea-tribes in Assam have also armed themselves and formed militant outfits. Muslim migrants in Assam have also voiced themselves through Muslim United Liberation Front of Assam and various other associations.

The recent history of the fissionary trend in which every tribal, linguistic, religious or cultural sub-group demands separation from the others, compounded by the rhetoric of ethnic sub-nationalism, radical demographic shifts, central government's role and a long history of poor governance, make this state, perhaps more than any other region in the country a potential source of increasing mass strife over the coming decades.

3.3 MANIPUR

The discontent of the Meiteis (the people in the valley) who do not belong to the Scheduled Tribe category and thus not entitled to benefits which the tribals living in the hills of Manipur have was further intensified when Nagaland was granted statehood in 1963.

The United National Liberation Front (UNLF) was formed in 1964 to achieve independence and a socialist society. Peoples Revolutionary party of Kangleipak (PREPAK) and the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) in 1978 were formed also to achieve independence. Meitei insurgents stepped up their activities during 1979-81. The settlement of Mayangs (outsiders) also became an issue. Ethnic conflicts between Kukis and Nagas and Kukis and Paites also terrorized the state.

Mizoram

Inhabited by highly westernized mizos, the state of Mizoram in North East India also suffered from the problem of influx of outsiders which endangered the Mizo dominance in their own homeland. Therefore, Mizo National Front (MNF) under the leadership of Lal Denga unleashed a violent struggle in the region. (1966-86).

However, the Mizo National front (MNF) led terror campaign came to an end in 1986. The MNF transformed itself into a regional political party subsequent to the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the government of India on June 30, 1986. It also formed the government winning the State Legislative Assembly elections, following the formal declaration of Mizoram as a state in 1987. Since then, no state based terrorist outfit has risen to an extent that would disrupt the overall peaceful environment prevailing in the state.

Intermittent incidents, nevertheless, do occur. These involve terrorist outfits whose primary area of operation is outside the State of Mizoram, but have a presence in the state. These include the Bru National Liberation Front (BNLF), Chin National Army (CNA) and the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) among others. The current situation in Mizoram appears totally peaceful if seen, especially, in the background of the insurgency that lasted for two decades, between 1966 and 86.

3.4 Tripura

The tribal state of Tripura is dogged by the problem of influx of Bengali refugees from Dhaka who came in lakhs from the neighbouring states. The condition was so bad that by 1985, out of a total of 23 lakhs, the tribals numbered more than 6 lakhs.ⁱⁱⁱ This transformation in the ethnic composition of the state was the root cause of militancy in the state. The main militant organisations Tripura Upjati Juba Samiti, (TUJS) and Tripura National Volunteers (TNA) have demanded the restoration of land to the tribals which was taken up earlier by the non-tribals, recognition of language of tribals 'Kakborok' and creation of a separate autonomous district of tribals from 1980's there has been a spurt in violent activities of these groups to achieve their objectives.

On August 12, 1988 the TNV signed a Memorandum of Settlement with the state government and its members laid down arms and came over ground. The main point of the agreement was the restoration of alienated lands to the tribal people. However, there were persistent complaints that the agreement had not been implemented. New militant outfits like National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) and All Tripura Tigers Force (ATTF) have come up and situations remain volatile.

When Assam was fragmented into smaller units to appease the autonomy demands of the insurgents, it seemed like a panacea to all ills, but it hasn't proved so. Smaller and similar ethnic communities still want 'homelands'. The Bodos, Karbis, Brus (Reangs), Hmars, have made this demand.

Both fratricides and collaboration can be seen here. The NDFB (National Democratic Front of Bodoland) which leads the revolt against Assamese dominance and which is engaged in ethnic cleansing of the non-Bodos from the Bodoland areas works in close association with the ULFA. ULFA has even provided arms and training to NDFB. The Kuki-Naga clashes, the Karbi-Kuki clashes, Karbi-Dimasa clashes are all part of the Northeast scenario.

Porous border, together with geographical insulation from the rest of the country have made the illegal migration issue almost a permanent problem. There is a constant cry about the control and domination of the economy by the outsiders, exploitation of rich natural resources and neglect of infrastructural development by the ruling elite. Economic under development has always been given as an excuse for militancy, then why in spite of pumping millions for development into Northeast, the area remains economically backward and stagnant.

Even without delving deep into the caverns of the truth of counter- insurgency measures, one can clearly say that the counter-insurgency measures have not been really successful. The spawning of ever- increasing militia amply demonstrates this.

IV. CONCLUSION

The continuing insurgency/terrorism in North East India suggests the failure of the counter-insurgency strategy in place over the years- Nonetheless, what needs to be explored is but what are reasons for the initiation of militancy. The British policy of governing the territory as a periphery region has continued even after independence. Their policy of governing the least bred isolation. Considering the threats to human, economic and national security that terrorism poses, a re-examination of the strategy of the central government, the presumptions underlying it, their shortcomings and the formulation of an alternative counter-insurgency plan acquires importance. The traditional methods employed by both the state and central government were to increase the number of military and para-military troops, sanction huge funds and last but not the least was the continuation of the spectacular ignorance of the ground realities. The state and central government have both passed the buck to each other without really seeking the solutions to the problems. Their policies have all stuck around winning elections and maintaining power. Both the territorial integrity and democracy of India are in danger because of the uncaring, ignorant and parochial interests of the government, not to say of the mercenary interests of the militants.

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