

## North East India-Insurgency and Other Issues

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### **“Insurgency is The Biggest Business in the Northeast”**

#### **Abstract**

*India is the most volatile and insurgency-affected place in the country after Kashmir. It is the easternmost part of India. The region is composed of eight states namely- Meghalaya, Manipur, Assam, Mizoram, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, and Sikkim. India's northeast connects with five countries — Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, China, and Nepal — by a 4,500 kilometer (2,796 miles) international border; the region, however, connects to India only through a narrow and tenuous land corridor measuring merely 22 kilometers (14 miles). A fact that further jeopardizes mainland India's links with the region is the thriving militancy in most of the northeast states. The demands of the different militant groups range from autonomy within the provisions of the Indian constitution to outright secession. Such militant movements started early with India's independence in 1947. At one point, more than 120 militant groups operated in India's northeast.*

*For instance, the Naga insurgence, which started in the 1950s, known as the mother of the Northeast insurgencies, is one of the oldest unresolved armed conflicts in the world. In total, Manipur, Assam, Nagaland, and Tripura have witnessed scales of conflict that could, at least between 1990 and 2000, be characterized as low-intensity conflicts. However, it must also be mentioned that internal conflicts have been a permanent feature of the Asian political landscape since 1945, of which post-colonial India is no exception. Currently, most of the states in the region are affected by some form of conflict, except for Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, and Sikkim in which the situation is at the moment relatively stable. The reasons for the respective conflicts are wide-ranging from separatist movements, to inter-community, communal and inter-ethnic conflicts.*

*In recent years, the Indian government has had some success in achieving stability in the region, using tactics from negotiations to military operations to root out militants. Nevertheless, the region remains a potential tinderbox.*

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*gain a holistic understanding of the problem that has historical and contemporary dimensions, it is important to assess and understand the various facets of the problem that interact with each other.*

**Keywords**

*insurgency, militants, conflicts, inter-community, constitution, movements, dimensions, operations, potential .*

**Historical Reasons for The Conflict**

The historical connections among the traditional tribes in the Northeast are large of Tibeto-Burman/Mongoloid stock and closer to Southeast Asia than to South Asia. It is ethnically, linguistically, and culturally very distinct from the other states of India. Though cultural and ethnic diversity per se is not causing for conflict, but one of the major problem areas is that the Northeast is territorially organized in such a manner that ethnic and cultural specificities were ignored during the process of delineation of state boundaries in the 1950s, giving rise to discontentment and assertion of one's identity. Whereas, the colonial rulers took nearly a century to annex the entire region, and administered the hills as a loose 'frontier area', with the result, that large parts of the north-eastern hill areas never came in touch with the principle of a central administration before.

Hence, their allegiance to the newly formed Indian nation-state was lacking from the beginning – accentuated by the creation of East Pakistan (today's Bangladesh) – which meant the loss of a major chunk of the physical connection between mainland India and Northeast India. Interestingly, 99 percent of the Northeast's boundaries are international and only one percent is domestic boundary.

**What is Insurgency?**



An insurgency is an armed rebellion against a constituted authority when those taking part in the rebellion are not recognized as belligerents. In the case of the Indian scenario, it can be seen as armed rebellion and violent protests against the Indian Government or authority

### **Causes of Insurgency**

The root causes of the present situation are to be found in many areas of the political, social, and economic realm. Most importantly too, the historical past also throws significant light on the overall discontent and grievances of the people towards the Indian Government. In tracing the causes, it is important to keep in mind how closely the past and present are interwoven and linked together. The deep-seated grievances and dissatisfaction of the people over the years, coupled with other factors of localized importance have given rise to the innumerable problems today.

#### **1. Geographical Situation:**

The entire North-East Indian region is situated around and within the Brahmaputra river valley and a number of mountains. That is the reason why there were less than limited means of conveyance up to 1970. Naturally, this region was nearly cut from the rest of India. This psychological pain troubled the people of this area. The geographical atmosphere was the greatest obstacle in the process of construction roads and laying Rail-lines. This area had very limited air services also. But now this distance is being decreased. Railway lines are being laid and roads along the border are also being constructed. Even then there are so many other places that are still out of reach.

#### **2. Historical Causes:**

In any efforts to spot the roots of insurgency, it may be necessary, to begin with, the historical, geographical, and anthropological factors of insurgency and the historical background of the insurgency itself. The geographical and historical isolation of the Northeastern Region till the British colonial intervention was indeed phenomenal. It was so spectacular that the early state and polity formation processes in the region did not generally go beyond small geographical areas and ethnic boundaries, and in cases where it happened, the distinctions between the ethnic divisions were carefully maintained. The raids and ambushes, head-hunting, interclannish feud, inter and intertribal warfare involving various forms of violence compelled the tribes and communities to maintain distance from each other, while the Mughal invasions in the medieval period, and thereafter the Burmese and the British interventions in the 18th-19th century, created almost a universal psyche that was prone to easily accepting the existence of so many powerful enemies beyond the region.

**Political Causes:**

Politics in this area is also one of the important reasons of insurgency and separatism. All the political parties, small or big, with the object of winning elections, have always encouraged and fuelled the regionalism and enmeshed this feeling at the time of elections. The political situation in this area is also abnormal, Meghalaya and Manipur are experiencing political instability to such an extent that it is very difficult to know as to when the government will fall and which government will come in power. The Northeast has 8% of the total population but less than 4% representation in Parliament. More than 8% of the population has less than 4% representation in the decision-making. The meager voice of the minority of the Northeast cannot influence any decision in New Delhi. The more populous state sends more MPs to the Lok Sabha. In a Questionnaires Survey, the majority of respondents expressed the view that political factors have a lead role in the creation of conflict and violence. 84% supported the above view, 9% opined that it is not the main cause and 7% did not respond.

**4. Socio-cultural Imperialis:**

The major form of insurgency prevailing in the North-East is a result of the inevitable conflict between tradition and the sweeping forces of the modernity in the historical process of social change. Characteristic of a society in transition with shifting values post-1947 has brought immense changes in this hitherto isolated and remote part of the world. Newly emerging values always find difficulty in terms of accommodation and acceptance. The North-East is mini Asia. There are more than 75 major population groups and subgroups, speaking more than 151 than 500 languages and dialects of which there are about 160 in Arunachal Pradesh, 95 in Nagaland, 87 in Manipur, 100 in Tripura, and 200 in Assam, Meghalaya, and Mizoram. One political remarked: by virtue of its location in the transitional zone between east and south Asia, the region characteristically exhibits amalgamation of phenomenon with factors of race, language, and religion; this enabled every sub-region in the study area to display distinct socio-cultural and politico-economic leanings and attributes.

**5. Economic Inequality, Exclusivity, and Relative Deprivation:**

The economic dimension, seemingly liberal in outlook talk about the development perspective and the stark underdevelopment and economic backwardness of the region. Thus, the phenomenon of conflicts and violence is seen in terms of underdevelopment. Both these positions apparently lack historicity as they are underlined by an integrationist motive and assume an a priori integration as the notion that peoples of the region are already integrated. North-East India has a

border with China, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Bhutan. It can form the economic unions in the region to bridge between the rest of India and the booming economics of South East Asia. In the pre-independence period, the North-East was a single economic zone and GDP in the region was more than that of the national average. Today in the post-independence period, which saw economic and political fragmentation of the region, the GDP of the region stands at around 2% that is much below the national average.

#### **6. External factors:**

This 'external root' of insurgency deserves serious consideration. Nonetheless, this dimension of the problem does not augur well with the articulation of a 'good neighborly' foreign policy of the Indian state. This is indeed very disappointing when we recall the dream of 'a comity of nations' and 'peaceful coexistence of our national leaders on the eve of India's independence (Tagore's 'global village' and Nehru's 'Panchsheel', are examples). A section of the leaders even talked of a just deal to the neighbors and the South Asian solidarity, Nehru's slogan was 'Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai'. The ground reality is that Pakistan was born as a 'hostile neighbor' with an eye of Kashmir, while the McMahon line was an irritation for China. The Nehruvian era could not sort out the outstanding issues with China and Pakistan. China invaded India in 1962, while the year 1965 is remembered for the Indo-Pak war. These dates are also important in the history of insurgencies in Naga Hills, Mizo Hills, and Manipur. The unfriendly neighbors, it seems, had been successful thereafter in pushing the border wars into India's own soil to be fought with its own people.

#### **7. Unemployment:**

The insurgents are successful in exploiting the prevailing sense of general deprivation among the people to promote the insurgency activities. Rising unemployment in the region due to lack of industrialization is providing the cadres of the outfits. Even the Union Home Minister has acknowledged that Small Wars and Insurgencies, of employment opportunities other than in the government sector, have fuelled the influx of neo-literate youth into insurgent groups as an act of frustration. Monthly emoluments are available too; the cadres of the outfits are in the range of Rs.2500 to Rs. 5000 (approximately \$ 50-100) per month at a time when most of the states in the region struggle to provide their employees salaries every month in time. In this background, a career in insurgency holds a lot of promises for the unemployed. Thus, the insurgency has become an employment-generating sector. Moreover, the cadres due to the lack of central control can pocket the extortion amount collected by lower rungs cadres in addition to their normal salary.

### **8. Other Causes:**

There are some other causes for insurgency in North East state.

#### **(I) Ethnic Identity:**

People belonging to diverse races, religions, cultures, and languages inhabit the North-East. British colonial interest helped to raise the ethnic issue of the citizens of the North-East. However, the response to colonialism varied from ethnos to ethnos in the unified geo-climatic and bio-geographic environment of the North-East. Earlier tribal animosities in matters of dispute over land, resources, and human relations were settled through mutual avenues of cultural knowledge and banking on traditional norms. Violent clashes, head taking and burning of villages, and attempts at rationalization of authority relations were settled amicably between disputing parties with the participation in mutual rituals and cognition of interdependence. Indigenous people of the North-East have their own distinct identity, culture, and ethos, own way of life, and self-governing system. But it is suffering from social discrimination that was systematically marginalized and pushed to non-dominant entity in the present political system of India.

#### **(ii) Regional Mentality:**

Even community is always proud of its culture. It loves its motherland. This feeling is now converted into a mentality. It is further increased by the spread of education in this area. That is why every tribal group has formed its so-called organization. These organizations always encase this feeling for the benefit of a few people. It is a fact that when the regional ambitions do not find a place in the central stream, or when the central authorities neglect the regional ambitions, these people start shouting separatist slogans to obtain their shelter, and here starts the terrorism. Almost all the terrorist organizations always use so-called injustice to them, as their weapon. This is because they can derive their own benefits by fuelling this regional mentality.

#### **(iii) Migration & Silent Demographic Invasion:**

The crux of the problem in the North-Eastern India has always been the question of identity. The hill tribes have expressed reservations in the question of nationality identifiable as 'Indian'. This difficulty is the result of several factors which have influenced the minds of the people greatly. The inability to be and feel Indian has also been accentuated by the attitude of the plainsmen towards them. It is unimaginable that till recent time knowledge about the North-East was negligible and inconsequential. The men in the street thought of and knew everything beyond Calcutta as just Assam. There was complete ignorance of the rest of the area.

**(iv) Role of Media:**

People from Northeastern India are ever complaining that the newspapers and electronic media do not give proper coverage to them. They say that incidence of killing, abduction, etc. in this area are given wide publicity by these media. But they ignore the specialties and goodness of the people. They further complain that such publicity carries negative information regarding the people of Northeast, which in turn helps the rest of India to form the wrong impression.

**(v) Networks for Arms Supply:**

The insurgent groups have their own separate network with arms suppliers. These weapon networks consist of autonomous mafia modules some of which do not work under any insurgent group. One group may be responsible for the collection of arms, another for its conveyance, and a third for receiving orders and delivery to their insurgent clients. Larger arms collections are usually operations run totally by the insurgent group concerned or with the help of insurgent groups in the neighboring countries e.g. the Kachin Independent Army (KIA) and the Chin National Liberation Army (CNLA) in Myanmar

**(vi) Weak inefficient, careless law and order situation and police:**

The North-East states lack in tight police administration. The police are not efficient enough to create mutual beliefs between the original resident and outsiders. Severe inequality is seen while recording any FIR in the police station. Eventually, recording FIR against the terrorists is stopped. The traders started feeling that it is beneficial for them to continue their trade in these states by satisfying the terrorists.

**(vii) Role of Christian Missionaries:**

The most important impact the British had upon the hill tribes especially in Mizoram, Nagaland, the tribal belt of Manipur, and Meghalaya was the introduction of Christianity. Prior to the coming of the British, the tribal were primarily animists and they worshipped the force of nature. They led simple lives governed by their traditions and customs and attributed living souls to all objects and to natural phenomena. They were also guided by spirit-good and evil-and their lives revolved round in appeasing the spirits.

**(viii) Combination of Student organization and Insurgents:**

One cannot belittle the role of students in spreading insurgency in the North-East. Students of all colleges, as well as universities, have their student organizations. The contribution of the Assam Students Union (AASU) to the Assam Movement was very important. The hardcore group of students from this organization parted from AASU and founded ULFA a terrorist organization. ULFA

is an insurgent organization. ULFA showered its fury in Assam during the hinters. The AASU leader had kept mum about the activities of ULFA. They never spoke against ULFA. On the other hand they, every now and then, tried to blame the army for its so-called atrocities. This created a feeling in general public that AASU and ULFA are two sides of a coin. They work as AASU activists during day time and ULFA activists during night time. A number of such incidences came to light during police as well as army action

**(ix) Mutual understanding between Politicians and Insurgents:**

The role of political parties in the flourishing of insurgency cannot be treated as negligible. On the other hand, their role is as important as that of others. The secret agency has collected proof of involvement of political parties in insurgency. The secret agencies also have proof of shelter being provided to these insurgents by politicians and thereby increasing their morale. The rise of ULFA in Assam and simultaneously killings of a number of Congress workers is, in itself, a proof that Assam Gan Parishad (AGP) had its deep relations with ULFA. Many times AGP and UJLFZ are supported to be two-rider of a coin. The same is the case with other local political parties. These parties do not support their organization openly. But at the same time, they avoid talking about them. Help taken; by their political parties from terrorists' organizations at the time of elections is not a secret fact.

**(x) Army Action:**

The Central Government had to send an army very frequently to North-East especially at the request of the concerned State Governments with a view to curb the terrorism as the state police could not stand to the occasion efficiently. The army which is to be used against the cross-border enemy was required to be used against our own people. Atrocities of Central protection Forces during the Assam movement is a fresh example of this. This ultimately gave rise to discontent against the Central Government in the minds of local people. The army Jawans used their guns against the innocent and peace-loving People just like butchers. Eventually, New Delhi should stop talking about army action to curb the terrorism and should come forward to accept that the centers role in the Northeast in the post-independence period is one of the original reasons for this terrorism.

**(xi) Division of States:**

In early post-independence period the complete Northeast region was known as Assam and was ruled by Assam Government. But the erstwhile state of Assam was divided into seven states for the protection of the culture, and nature of original tribes and because of political pressure. Hence it is evident that wherever and whenever the tribal started and continued the movement for the purpose of separation



from Assam, The Central Government fielded to their terror and furious movements and divided the state of Assam in present states. Assam being the border state, division of this state in smaller states was thought to be strategically necessary. But this division had an adverse effect and eventually, any smaller or bigger tribe rises and undertakes the movement for more autonomy and/or a separate state.

### **Conclusion**

The situation in the northeast has been complex since the colonial era because of the divide and rule policy of the British. Besides, there has been a disparity between the hill areas and the plains in the northeastern region. The hill people of the region are oriented towards community living which implies that the first priority goes to the community and then the individual. Each community is like a well-knit family in which the elders are given their due respect, help is rendered to each other when required, and are willing to sacrifice. The people of the plains in the region have faced problems of immigration from the neighborhood before independence and later to include after the 1971 liberation war of Bangladesh. There have been demographic changes and the states have become a victim of insurgency over the years and the insurgency in this region has been supported by external powers in the immediate neighborhood. The armed forces have an important role to play in the northeast and are doing tremendously good work over the past recent years which have put the warring groups on the back foot. They thus need to exploit this situation to the fullest. The political governance needs to come out with a national security and policy to eradicate the root causes of insurgency and to put into place an effective civil and police internal security mechanism. Till such time this is not in place, the armed forces will continue to be called for 'Internal Security Management', to suppress the level of violence to an acceptable limit.

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