



**ROOTS OF
INSURGENCY
IN NORTHEAST INDIA**

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J.B. BHATTACHARJEE

Author of ten major works and more than two hundred research papers and editor of fifteen collections, Professor J B Bhattacharjee is a distinguished social scientist and a pioneer in Northeast India Studies. The founder General Secretary of the North East India History Association (NEIHA) and a former President of the North East India Council for Social Science Research (NEICSSR), the foundation of the Institute of Northeast India Studies at Kolkata is his latest initiative in bringing Northeast India Studies into national and global focus. His Presidential Addresses to the Modern India Section of the Indian History Congress (Gorakhpur, 1989), History and Culture Section of the Indian Social Science Congress (Bangalore, 1993), 14th Annual Session of the North East India History Association (Jorhat, 1994) and 3rd Annual Session of the Indian Congress for Asian and Pacific Studies (2000) are examples of the depth of his scholarship. He delivered the Chandrakanta Memorial Lectures at the Asom Sahitya Sabha (Guwahati, 1992), H L Gupta Endowment Lectures at NEIHA (Kohima, 1998), and H K Barpujari Endowment Lectures at NEIHA (Guwahati, 2003).

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PREFACE

The peoples in the north-eastern states of India are living in a state of turmoil caused by insurgency, militancy and movements of different types in various parts of the region for almost half a century. The civil society, which silently suffered the turmoil for a long time for various reasons, is now increasingly getting vocal in demanding that the state of turmoil must end and peace must dawn in the region. In some cases the well-meaning individuals and organizations volunteered to initiate dialogue with the activists for peaceful settlements of the outstanding problems. The emerging scenario demands that the intellectuals of the region should continue to contribute their share to the peace processes academically as a social responsibility. However, the success of the peace efforts would depend on a clear understanding of the root causes of the turmoil. Needless to say, these causes are expected to be identified accurately and impartially only by the academia. This publication is an effort in this direction.

The book emerges from a brainstorming session on 'Roots of Insurgency in Northeast India', organized by the Shillong Centre of the Institute of Northeast India Studies, in collaboration with the Women's College, Shillong, on 26th August 2006. The session was planned in two parts, viz. presentations and interactions. The forenoon was devoted to

presentations, in which eight presenters made their submissions. The presentations were in the oral mode - in the form of extempore, although the presenters used their notes and data in course of the deliberations. These were voice-recorded and the transcripts were made available to the presenters for preparation of the drafts for publication. The afternoon session was devoted to interactions in which a good number of participants opened themselves up in frankly sharing their personal views on the roots of insurgencies and militancies in the region, with or without reference to the presentations made in the forenoon. The entire discourse was voice-recorded and the rapporteur could compare her own copious notes of the proceedings with the recorded version for preparation of the Postscript. The methodology adopted in conducting the brainstorming session and for preparation of the manuscript might explain why the publication took almost a year.

We expect the book to be useful to all those who are involved in the peace processes in Northeast India because we sincerely believe that no problem can be solved without understanding the root causes of the problem. The discourse convinced us that there is nothing like a north-eastern insurgency, and that there are several autonomous or isolated insurgencies, militancies and other movements in different parts and ethnic areas of the region which have over the years created an atmosphere of turmoil or an insurgent situation for the entire region. The roots of the problems vary from secessionism to demands for state or sub-state within India, or regional autonomy for ethnic areas within the states, or protection of ethnic and cultural identities. The economic and infrastructural backwardness, unemployment and lack of opportunities seemed to be common causes in almost all cases of insurgency and militancy. Peace can dawn only when the roots of turmoil are all uprooted. We shall consider our efforts

rewarded if the book can make even a small contribution to the peace process.

Institute of Northeast India Studies deeply appreciates the support received from various quarters in organizing the brainstorming session and in publishing the proceedings in a book form. The initiative for the brainstorming session was entirely from the Shillong Centre of the Institute. Professor D R Syiemlieh, Chairman, Shillong Centre, took keen interest in the programme and did all the ground work for the success of the brainstorming session, although he could not personally attend in the session due to a very important meeting in Delhi on the same date. Shri Debasish Choudhury, Principal, Women's College, Shillong, and his colleagues and staff, provided the space and looked after all the logistics for the brainstorming session. The ICSSR-NERC, Shillong, participated in the effort through a financial support, while Dr C J Thomas, Director, ICSSR-NERC, himself an author of some important publications on insurgency, personally took keen interest in its academic contents. The high academic standard of the discourse was possible only due to the presenters and the participants. They braved the sensitivity of the subject and offered their balanced and impartial views in true academic spirit. Professor L S Gassah, a distinguished Political Scientist of the region, who chaired the brainstorming session, made the discourse absorbingly interesting by his timely interventions and moderations and by his own contributions. The media, the regional press and the local station of the Doordarshan in Shillong, joined the effort by extensively covering the event. A good number of my former colleagues and students in various places in the Northeast talked to me over telephone after reading about the brainstorming session in the newspapers or watching the television informing that

they appreciated the initiative very much and that they would also like to participate if such programmes are organized in future, perhaps without knowing how encouraging were those calls to me and my colleagues in the Institute of Northeast India Studies. Finally, it is Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi, which has been specializing in publishing on the Northeast, came forward to complete the grand finality. In fact, Shri M P Misra, the enterprising proprietor of the House, took interest in the output of the brainstorming session no sooner had the event been over and wheeled speed in the work of the editor by reminding about it from time to time. I am in deed impressed by his love and concern for the Northeast.



Institute of Northeast India Studies
Kolkata - 700129
June 15, 2007

J B Bhattacharjee

PROPOSITIONS

KEYNOTE

—*J B Bhattacharjee*

Northeast India has been passing through insurgencies and militancies of various types for almost fifty years. Beginning in the Naga Hills in 1950s, an insurgent situation gradually spread to various other parts of the region. The number of outfits multiplied over the years, each one with own agenda. The originals broke into new outfits adding to the number, and in course of time, the splinters outnumbered the parent groups. The agenda in all cases are not necessarily challenging the Indian state or a demand for independent or sovereign state, as they include a host of other irreconcilables that range from local autonomy, or protection of cultural identity and economic and political interests, to the expulsion of the outsiders and ensuring that the land and resources in each ethnic area are exclusive preserves of the local community. The latest addition in the motive forces behind the turmoil is perhaps the financial extortion. In some parts of the region, where ethnicity is not a factor, the extortionist onslaught has proved to be the most tormenting. Although all those varieties would not technically satisfy the definitional requirement of an insurgency, each one is popularly identified as 'insurgent' or 'militant' and this has been helping the fictitious groups in creating an environment of

panic and lawlessness to flourish in the region. Nevertheless, the Naga case and a few others (including the Mizo at a point of time) are clearly insurgencies in objectives and methods. The failure of the Indian state to politically tackle the problem at initial stages and to eliminate the conditions for the new demands and groups to emerge is believed to be the justifiable reason for the multiplicity and sustenance of the menace that the region has already suffered for such a long time. The cost of insurgency has proved to be very high, not only for the people of the region but the entire country. The situation has become so tormenting that the silent and the peace-loving majority is also gradually becoming vocal in demanding that the things cannot be allowed to continue for all time to come and a solution must be urgently found. However, a solution is possible only when the roots of the problem are identified and eliminated. This brainstorming session has been organized by the Institute of Northeast India Studies, through its Shillong Centre, as a response of the academia to its social responsibility to help the society and the political authority in resolving such issues in larger national and social interests. The objective is to find out at what point of time, where and under what conditions, the insurgency dawned in the region, and what are the factors that sustained the insurgency and promoted it for such a long time. In other words, why insurgency; where are its roots? We are aware that terrorism or militancy is a global phenomenon today, but we are limiting ourselves to Northeast India, i.e. the region of our immediate concern, to identify the roots that are specific to this region. However, it does not deter us from looking into those factors which might have originated outside the region but influenced the growth of insurgencies here.

Before we proceed to address the key issues, it may be necessary to clarify that we are aware that 'insurgency', 'militancy', 'secessionism', 'terrorism', 'cross-border terrorism' – each of these terms have different connotations, definitions and meanings, but for our purpose here we can take them as one in so far as the basic features and the social consequences remain the same, viz. causing violence, threat of violence and a sense of insecurity in the minds of the citizens. Secondly, we are also aware that there is nothing like one insurgency in the Northeast. In fact, different groups and outfits are working in different states, or more precisely, in different ethnic and linguistic areas within the same state or in more than one adjoining states, with different agenda or mission, and without any common organizational frame or connectivity between themselves. The causes of insurgency or turmoil in different areas within the region are different and in many cases, the groups clashed with each other on the ground of conflicting objectives and interests. The methods and channels of operation are also different for different groups. More importantly, each outfit is autonomous, and fighting its own cause. Yet, we preferred to call it 'Insurgency in Northeast India' because all these 'insurgencies' and 'militancies' have created an 'insurgent situation' for the entire region with common fall-out and ramifications for the common people of the region. The fictitious and self-seeking groups are only taking advantage of the prevailing situation of lawlessness. The ground reality is that everything in the Northeast today goes in the name of insurgency. In short, we are using 'insurgency' in a collective singular sense and referring to the prevailing situation that is affronting the peace-loving masses.

The reason why we thought an intellectual discourse of this nature is necessary is that we come across so many publications, including seminar proceedings, addressed to various aspects of insurgency and terrorism, but 'why insurgency in Northeast India?' does not become very clear from these publications. Recently, 'conflict resolution' became a very popular theme for seminars, but there too the emphasis is more on 'resolution' than on the 'causes' of the conflicts. Even the government, at times, wanted to solve the problem by various methods, which ranged from hard military actions like counter insurgency and unified command to the soft approaches of signing the accords and pumping in money, without identifying the causes of the problem. It may not be wrong to say that these efforts are something like treating the patient without diagnosing the disease. In our opinion, to find a solution to any problem, the causes or roots of the problem should be identified first. Therefore, today we are concentrating only on the 'Roots' of Insurgency in Northeast India.

In any effort 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 North-Eastern 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. In most cases, the polities were limited to village and clan level tribal formations. The spoken languages (mostly

dialects) were too many and the absence of link languages, beyond the immediate borders, was deterrent to larger social and economic relationships. The interactions were limited to contiguous areas and around the markets; the villages and communities playing the role of trade buffer in respect of those beyond them. The raids and ambushes, head-hunting, inter-clannish feuds, inter- and intratribal warfare involving various forms of violence compelled the tribes and communities to maintain distance from each other, while the Mughal invasions in the mediaeval period, and thereafter the Burmese and the British interventions in 18th-19th century, created almost an universal psyche that was prone to easily accepting the existence of so many powerful enemies beyond the region. A sense of exclusiveness and mutual distrust, particularly about the outsiders, might be the result of historical experience of immigration, exploitation and deprivation in the past. It may also be interesting to examine whether the traditions like head-hunting involving raids, surprise and ambushes, or human sacrifices in some of the temples, are in some way linked to the cruelty perpetrated in some of the extremists' onslaughts.

The British colonialization, which had in fact for the first time in history integrated the Northeast in a single political system in the subcontinent, namely, the British Indian colonial state, further promoted and legitimized the isolation within the region by its segregating policies that created blocks and barriers, particularly in the hill region, and infused a hills-plains divide. On the other hand, the early British expansionist endeavours found stiff resistance from the hill tribes and the sporadic armed revolts continued in some areas, in some form or other, from time to time, till the end of the British rule. These revolts may

be good enough examples to suggest that the hill people could not reconcile with the loss of their independence to the alien British rulers. Nonetheless, the historic Indian national movement could not make any significant impact in the hill areas. On the contrary, the demand for independence of the ethnic groups could be heard in some areas at the time of the transfer of power. The Naga case is an example. In the Mizo Hills also the opinion was divided. In Manipur, there was strong resistance from certain quarters to joining the Indian Union under the Instrument of Accession.

The colonial reorganization of Bengal and Assam (1826, 1874, 1905 & 1911) had already created conditions for social tension and social conflicts in the post-colonial phase. When the Ahom Kingdom or the Assamese heartland was annexed in 1826 it was made an administrative division under a Commissioner within Bengal, and thereafter the neighbouring hill areas were taken over in installments and made parts of the Assam Division, except the Garo Hills, which was included in the Cooch Behar Division, and the South Lushai (Mizo) Hills, which was in Chittagong Division. In 1874 Assam Division (including the hill districts) was separated from Bengal and made a Chief Commissioner's Province, and three Bengal districts (namely, Cachar and Sylhet from the Dacca Division and Goalpara from the Cooch Behar Division), with a large indigenous Bengali population, were transferred to Assam to make the new province 'viable'. The Garo Hills and the Lushai Hills were also transferred to this new province. The creation of this multi-ethnic and multi-lingual province, in which the traditional Assamese area and population formed a minor segment, created the initial conditions for future conflicts. In

1905 Bengal was partitioned again and a province called 'Eastern Bengal and Assam' was created with Dhaka (Dacca) as the headquarters. This new province included the erstwhile Chief Commissioner's province of Assam and the eastern districts of Bengal. The Assamese and the tribal communities formed small minorities in this large Bengali dominated province. This period also saw the large-scale immigration of Muslim peasants from Eastern Bengal into the Brahmaputra Valley at official encouragement and patronage, and the process, called 'colonization scheme', continued even after the partition was annulled in 1911 and Assam reverted to its earlier size and status as a Chief Commissioner's province. This 'British Assam' still included the hill areas (Khasi-Jaintia, Garo, North Cachar or Dimasa, Karbi or Mikir, Naga and Mizo or Lushai hills) and three traditional Bengali districts (Cachar, Sylhet and Goalpara). As a matter of fact, by creating a multi-ethnic and multilingual province in which the traditional Assamese area and the Assamese population formed only a minority, and yet by naming it 'Assam', the British colonialists planted the seeds of future discord, and this may be seen as an important root of insurgency in the post-colonial period.

After the independence of India in 1947, the 'assimilation' policy of the Government of Assam to make Assamese the official language saw the alienation of the non-Assamese population and large-scale violence in the Brahmaputra Valley in 1960-61. This also witnessed the beginning of the movement for hill states which ultimately resulted in the reorganizations of Assam. The process does not seem to be over as the demands for more states are continuing. The Government of India proved itself always very slow in responding to the problems of the

ethnic and linguistic minorities, who had to protect themselves and to defend their rights and interests against the dominant group that enjoyed the support of the state authority. It may not be wrong to say that in those cases the fear of domination and loss of ethnic, linguistic and cultural identity led to resistance and resistance led to militancy.

On the other hand, the large presence of a non-local or non-indigenous population, which was tending to become domiciled, - sharing resources and emerging as pressure groups in the democratic polity, was another irritant which resulted in several instances of riots and violence in 1950s and 60s. The slow pace of development, despite the resource abundance of the region, and the intellectuals squarely holding the central government or the Indian state responsible for the economic backwardness of the region in 1960s and 70s, also contributed its share in surcharging the public opinion. The educated unemployed and under-employed youths were most visibly aggrieved and they suffered frustration and disappointment. The 1960s and 70s witnessed the emergences of a large number of regional political parties with regional agenda. These regional political parties championed the issues of economic backwardness, protection of rights and interests of the locals ('indigenous people', 'sons of the soil', etc) and the exploitation by the outsiders. A battle line was gradually drawn between 'we' and 'they'.

The anti-foreigners movements in 1970s and 80s, though peaceful and democratic in contents, were coupled with mutual distrust, social alienation and sporadic violence in Assam, Tripura and Meghalaya. In Assam - the heartland of the movement - the movement was professedly directed against the illegal migrants from Bangladesh and Nepal, but rhetoric of

the movement created a sense of insecurity in the minds of genuine citizens who are from other regions of the country, particularly the Bengalis who are either indigenous in parts of this region or domiciled for two to three generations. In Tripura, the cry against the alarming growth of non-tribal population culminated in the Mandai massacre, emergence of radical tribal political groups, and ultimately, the armed militancy. The economic grievances were voiced in various forms during this period, particularly in Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur and Tripura. The oil blockade in Assam is an example. The accords, which were signed during the course of the movements and after, contained specific provisions for economic development, but most of those promises remained unfulfilled. The Bodoland Movement in Lower and Central Assam and the ASDC Movement in Karbi Anglong-North Cachar Hills gained momentum during the Assam Movement.

To put in a historical sequence, the insurgency in the Northeast first surfaced in the Naga Hills in 1950s, followed by the Mizo Hills (60s) and Manipur (early-70s), with secessionist agendas. The militant outfits emerged in Assam, Tripura and Meghalaya during the years of the Assam Movement (late-70s & early-80s) and the number of outfits increased in the later years (1980s & 90s). The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and the Tripura National Volunteers (TNV) became major players in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam and Tripura respectively. The Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC) and the Achik National Volunteers Council (ANVC) are active in the Khasi-Jaintia and the Garo hills segments respectively of Meghalaya. The insurgents' presence is heard from Arunachal Pradesh as well.

In Manipur initially only one group spearheaded the insurgent activities, but in course of time the number increased by breaking away from the parent groups and the emergence of new outfits. In Tripura, the number is as large as that of the tribes in the state and in the dominant Tripuri group also there are break-away groups and factions. In Assam, the ULFA showed the way, but today there are Karbi, Dimasa, Bodo and other militants. Some tribal and non-tribal outfits are working in the Karbi and Bodo inhabited areas. The Dima Haram Daoga (DHD) is active in the North Cachar Hills and its cadres have been extending their operations from time to time to the neighbouring Barak Valley. The situation has in deed been complicated by the multiplicity of the outfits within the same ethnic areas through divisions in the original groups and the splinters indulging in mutual conflicts and clashes and internecine warfare. A recent media report informed the emergence of new outfits in the two hill districts of Assam, called the 'Karbi Longri N C Hills Liberation Front' and the 'United People's Democratic Solidarity', while the 'Black Window' is a new faction of the DHD. The Black Window is said to be active in the bordering areas of the Barak Valley. The same media also informed that a new militant group, called the United Democratic Liberation Army (UDLA), has started operating in the Barak Valley districts of Karimganj and Hailakandi. The group has already masterminded at least four kidnappings in the Hailakandi district during May-August 2006. It is extorting money from the farmers, traders, teachers and government officials in rural areas in those two districts. The outfit first attracted public attention in July 2006 when it abducted eight farmers from a village under Katlicherra block

in Hailakandi district. The captives could be freed after eight days when the CRPF and the Assam Armed Police Battalion launched an extensive raid in the jungles of Katlicherra block on the Assam-Mizoram border. The report says that the UDLA is being led by a Reang duo (S Moni and Manaraj Reang, aged 30 and 28 respectively) and this small group comprises of only 30 members and possesses some SLRs and only one AK-47 assault rifle. The same report stated that another militant group, called the United Liberation Front of Barak Valley has recently started operating in the Karimganj district. Led by one P Apeto, this group draws its cadres from the Reangs and the Bengali Muslims. These two outfits came up when the powerful Barak Valley Youth Liberation Force, led by Parameshwar Reang, was fighting a losing battle against the paramilitary forces and was rocked by internecine quarrels amongst its own cadres. The Barak Valley is otherwise a peaceful area. Only some extortionist outfits, particularly those belonging to the Reang tribe, have been occasionally involved in kidnapping officials and businessmen to earn ransom. Several cases of abductions of the tea garden officials and businessmen in the Lakhipur area of Cachar district were reported in past few years. The leaders and cadres of the outfits operating the Barak Valley are generally from the neighbouring areas, besides a small number of Reang villages in the remote part of the Hailakandi district. In fact, the Barak Valley scenario is an important example of how the criminal gangs are taking advantage of the prevailing insurgent situation in other parts of the region for the purpose of robbery and dacoity and to what levels the high ideals of insurgency or militancy can degenerate. The presence of the extortionist outfits, which use the militant

names and collect ransom by using militants' method, is heard almost from all parts of the region. As a matter of fact, the extortions in some forms is resorted to even by the genuinely insurgent and militant groups, who have been collecting funds by sending 'demand notes' to rich people and by imposing 'taxes' on the common people to finance their activities.

Another dimension of the insurgent activities, which should not be missed, is the cross-border movements of the militants. Since the problem started in the Naga Hills in 1950s some unfriendly neighbouring countries had been providing the militants food and shelter and safe passage, and even arms and training, which encouraged and promoted the insurgent activities in the Northeast. The reports of training camps for the Northeast militants in China, Burma (Myanmar), East Pakistan (now, Bangladesh) and Bhutan poured in through media almost since the beginning of the insurgency in the region. The militants are also known to be using sophisticated imported weapons in various actions and encounters. These facts clearly reflect on the role of some foreign countries in insurgency or militancy in Northeast India. It is possible that some of these countries, who are India's immediate neighbours and directly border the North-Eastern Region, were actually responsible for instigating some of the ethnic groups to rise against the new-born Indian state to weaken its nation-building processes and economic development. At least, there can be no denying of the fact that the insurgency, which began with one or two ethnic groups, grew step by step over the years by attracting more and more groups and areas and it could continue for such a long time mainly due to external support. This 'external root' of insurgency deserves serious consideration. Nonetheless, this dimension of the problem does not augur well with the articulation of a 'good neighbourly' foreign policy

of the Indian state. This is in deed 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 "*panch-sheel*", are examples). A section of the leaders even talked of a just deal to the neighbours and the South Asian solidarity. One of them, Sarat Chandra Bose went to the extent of proposing a 'United State of South Asia' (USSA) with complete autonomy and internal freedom for the federating units as a new model of federations. Nehru's slogan was "*Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai*". The ground reality is that Pakistan was born as a 'hostile neighbour' with an eye on 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 neighbours, it seems, had been successful thereafter in pushing the border wars into India's own soil to be fought with its own people. Despite India's help for liberation of Bangladesh, the ULFA and many other outfits had no problem in getting shelter and running training camps in that erstwhile eastern wing of Pakistan. The camps sprouted in Bhutan also, and the militants had to be flashed out in an Indo-Bhutanese joint operation only three years ago. All these provide a sad profile of India's foreign policy, particularly towards the neighbouring countries, and this failure may also be attributed as a factor for the rise and growth of insurgency or cross-border terrorism in Northeast India which has a more than four thousand two hundred kilometers of porous international border and is linked with the rest of the country by the less than twenty-five kilometers 'Siliguri neck'.

The domestic policy of the Indian state was no better a success than the foreign policy in so far as the insurgency is concerned. It is said that the government could do well to pacify the handful of insurgents at the initial stages, rather than antagonizing them by hard words and encouraging by soft actions. It is also believed that had the Government of Assam been fair in its policies towards the ethnic minorities the things could be different. Many in the region today recall how the administration ridiculed itself on those occasions. The senior officers in administration and the men in army were almost all of them from outside the region and their knowledge in history, geography, society and culture of the people of the region was very poor. It is believed that they could at least alienate the insurgents from the rest of the society and tackle the problem more effectively. The effort of the administration is said to have fallen much short of what was expected. On the contrary, the indiscriminate harassment and the ruthless torture and killing of the innocent people strengthened the determination of the insurgents. The stories of administrative excesses and the highhandedness of the police and army personnel, including the molestation of young women, spread like wildfire, which provoked the youths to join the ranks of the insurgents in large numbers. The insurgents also gradually earned the support and sympathy of the community for the same reasons. This explains how the insurgency in some areas succeeded in assuming a mass character, at least for sometimes, and it could spread from area to area or community to community, although the roots and circumstances for each could be different. Therefore, the violation of human rights and the administrative excesses and highhandedness of the police and military personnel should be considered among the roots of the later

phases of insurgencies and the growth and sustenance of the earlier ones.

Much before the insurgency broke out in the region in 1970s on a larger scale, the people, particularly the politicians and the intellectuals had been complaining of economic backwardness of the region. They could see that roads and the railway network had remained almost the same as they were laid by the British without any improvement for many years, while agriculture suffered stagnation and deterioration without any modernization; not a single dam was constructed, not even one major irrigation project taken up, and no industry worth the name was being established. The conditions of some of the major internal roads were worse than what these were in the British time, and the once flourishing tea industry was fast getting exhausted. None of the infrastructure required for economic growth was developed in the region. On the other hand, the raw-materials were taken out of the region for processing in various factories, and the two major rivers – the Brahmaputra and the Barak - were creating flood havoc every year. Those who visited other parts of the country and important cities for various purposes could see that the development was taking place in those areas in much faster speed than in the Northeast. They could know through radio and newspapers the claims of the central ministers and leaders that the country was progressing well. The intellectuals in the region highlighted the potential of the Northeast to progress on the basis of its own natural resources and the manpower, while the politicians began to blame the central government squarely for the indifference and step-motherly attitude to the Northeast. These issues were systematically highlighted through media during the years of the Assam Movement and became popular

themes of household discussions. The elders reminded the new generation that during the Chinese invasion in 1962 how the then Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, on a rumour that the Chinese had reached Tezpur, had exclaimed, "My heart goes for the people of Assam". This and several other similar anecdotes went round the press, platform and popular gossips in the buses, streets, tea-stalls and drawing rooms to bring home the point that the Government of India had 'no love lost' for Assam or the Northeast. No wonder, the insurgents in early stages enjoyed the silent support and sympathy from the respective communities. They were looked upon as heroes, patriots and messiahs, who were braving the odds and gallows of the administration for the salvation of the community. The policy of the central government changed sharply in 1980s when they began to sign accords after accords with the various agitating groups promising economic development and solutions of the vexed problems, and in 1990s they began generously to pump in money through special schemes and packages for the economic development of the North-Eastern States. The government asked all the central ministries to spend at least 10% of their budget on the Northeast, revamped the North-Eastern Council (NEC), and finally, created a separate ministry for the Development of the North-Eastern Region (DONER). By then the insurgency had already reached almost all parts of the Northeast, either directly or indirectly. Besides the fact that it is too late a policy decision to prove genuine concern for the Northeast, it sent a wrong signal to the insurgents and the politicians as the weakness of the central government. Many took it as a success of the militancy, and some of the ethnic areas which had not opted for the insurgents' way so far, now regretted not getting a due share of the liberal funding. Some

insurgents (no matter, fake or genuine) began to surrender in groups, and the state governments were justified in asking funds separately for the rehabilitation of the 'surrendered militants'. One is not sure, whether the funds received for containing militancy are not utilized for other purposes. A condition was thus created for a politician-militant nexus to grow for endurance of the flow of funds. Many in the region do believe that had the Government of India given due attention to the development of the region since independence of the country, and enforced accountability and ensured proper utilization of funds, the region would not have been taken over by the insurgents and militants for such a long time.

It must, however, be appreciated that in one area, despite the 'negligence' or 'indifference' of the authority that be, the Northeast made spectacular strides, and that is, education, including higher and technical education. Some good schools and colleges were established in this region during the British period, particularly by the Christian missionaries, and the first university, namely, the Gauhati University, was established in 1948. A large number of schools and colleges, and also few more universities, have come up since then. Today, there are as many as twelve universities, including two agricultural universities, besides the Deemed universities like NIT at Silchar, IIT at Guwahati and NERIST at Itanagar. There are at least four engineering colleges, five medical colleges and three colleges of nursing in the public sector. The medium of instructions generally continued to be English; in the hill areas it is only English. There are about five hundred general degree and junior colleges, most of which were established through private initiative. The literacy rate is higher than the national average. This could be an advantage

of the region over the others. However, the Assam Movement in the Brahmaputra Valley and the associated or parallel movements in other parts of Assam and the region for sometimes affected the academic life in 1970s and early 80s. Nevertheless, the things returned to normalcy within few years. The campus unrest is in deed very rare in this region.

A spectacular weakness in the field of education, however, was the fact that the courses offered in various streams were generally traditional or conventional in nature and no serious attempt was made till 1990s for introduction of professional and vocational courses or to establish industry-university tie-ups for the employment of the products. The things have improved to some extent in the recent years with the introduction of professional course in some of the universities in the region and establishment of some private professional institutes and private medical and engineering colleges. Some of these private institutions are affiliated to universities in the region, while others are running the courses and programmes on behalf of institutes and universities elsewhere and some are working even through the distance mode. The public sector professional institutes are also coming up gradually, and the establishment of the North-Eastern Indira Gandhi Regional Institute of Health and Medical Sciences (NEIGRIHMS), an Indian Institute of Management (IIM) and Institute of Food and Nutrition and Catering Technology (IFNCT) at Shillong are very good examples of the new dispensation. Nevertheless, the industry-institute linkages for employment remains a distant dream as such industries are still rare in the Northeast.

Unfortunately, the progress of education, which could decidedly be an advantage of the region, proved to be a serious

cause of growing unemployment problem, and it became one of the major factors which promoted insurgency in the region. The universities and other institutions went on producing thousands of graduates in various streams every year, but the state and the society failed to employ them. The employment opportunity for the white color job seekers in the region was limited to the government service and teaching in private or public educational institutions only. Within few years of independence the scope in this sector also became dry, as the governments in the states and the central organizations could not create new jobs after a point and eventually imposed a virtual ban on recruitments, and eventually, even ordered withdrawal of the vacant posts. The public sector in this region has always been very small, and the private sector worth the name hardly exists. That the industries did not grow in the region was the main reason for the lack of job opportunities. By 1960s the unemployment had already become a serious problem in the Northeast, and in spite of this resounding unemployment problem, in the years after 1970, more colleges and universities were established. In fact, the 1960s and 70s witnessed a mushrooming of schools and colleges in the region. The result was that every year several thousands of youths were added to the educated jobless category. The youths suffered frustrations and disappointments and they were looking for alternatives. It is a well known fact that this educated unemployed category filled the ranks of the militants in 1970s and 80s. They also launched new outfits in new areas, including the pseudo groups for the purpose of extortions only. The militancy created not only job opportunity but also fetched big income. The cry was that the higher and technical education

which fails to ensure job is meaningless. The frustration percolated downwards; the drop-outs increased in colleges and high schools and many of these drop-outs swelled the ranks of the militants (genuine or pseudo). What is generally heard is that the educated unemployed and drop-outs are more in the extortionist groups. They have nothing to do with the insurgents' agenda of autonomy or liberation, although they give themselves militants' names, including 'liberation army', 'tigers' and so on, use only toy pistols and the like, and involve themselves in abductions and thereafter, in demanding ransoms. They take up this career as an alternative to employment, but they can earn more money than what any employment can offer them. The genuine insurgents are of course different; they have clear agenda and certain principles to follow. Right or wrong, they have a mission to fulfill. Nonetheless, there must be many among the recruits in the ranks of the insurgents, who were frustrated and demoralized by prolonged unemployment after they had completed their education, and it is frustration and anger that impelled them to join the ranks of the insurgents or militants. The governments either in the states or at the centre did nothing to address the unemployment problem or to redress the frustration and disappointment of the youths. Therefore, it can hardly be denied that the educated unemployment problem in the region contributed significantly to the growth of insurgency or militancy. This may not be a root factor, but it is certainly one of the key factors which promoted and sustained insurgency (or militancy) in Northeast India.

It may also not be possible to separate the problem of insurgency from the question of ethnicity in Northeast India. In fact, the ethnic polarization in the region began in 1960 when

the Assam Official Language Act (1960) sought to make Assamese the only official language of the state. The policy was opposed by the non-Assamese, particularly the Bengalis who constituted the second largest linguistic group in the state and more than eighty-five percent of the total population in the Barak Valley. The All-Assam Non-Assamese Convention, held in Silchar in July 1960, was attended by the important hill leaders from Khasi, Garo and Mizo hills and some plains tribal leaders from the Brahmaputra Valley. In the meantime, the language riots were reported from many areas in the Brahmaputra Valley. The amendment of the Act, at the intervention of the central government ('Shastri Formula' authored by the then Union Home Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri) to make provision for Bengali in the Barak Valley and English in the hill districts, did not fully satisfy the hill leaders, who wanted a long term guarantee to their ethnic identity which they realized would not be feasible within the state of Assam in the context of 'assimilation' (Assamese-ization ?) policy of its leaders. The Eastern India Tribal Union (EITU) championed the question of rights and interests of the tribals, while the All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) came into existence to fight for a hill state. In course of time, the hill state movements succeeded in the creation of Meghalaya and Mizoram by way of reorganization of Assam. The linguistic minorities still suffered a sense of insecurity in Assam. The polarization was more clearly manifested in 1972 when Assamese was sought to be made the only medium of instructions in the universities in Assam. Some Bodo, Dimasa and Bengali leaders took initiative in forming the Linguistic Minorities Rights Committee (LMRC), and they were joined by leaders of a number of linguistic groups

in the Brahmaputra Valley. The Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) demanded a state for the plains tribals in the Brahmaputra Valley which eventually culminated in the prolonged Bodoland movement, while in the remaining two hill district in Assam (namely, Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills) movement started for an Autonomous State under the banner of the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC). A section of the Ahoms also raised the demand for a separate state in Upper Assam. Some of the smaller ethnic groups in the Brahmaputra Valley, who were on the process of assimilation, reasserted their identity and raised demands for autonomous councils for the respective tribal blocks and villages. The Assam Movement (1979) was for the detection and deportation of the foreigners, but the participation of the ethnic and linguistic minorities was only marginal. It was in course of this movement, as already said, that several insurgent or militant groups surfaced in the region, including the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). These facts make it clear that the assertion of ethnic identity became a fact of life in the region. The majority group tended to dominate the minority groups, while the minorities wanted the protection of their ethnic identity. In the process, the mutual suspicion and distrust dominated the relationship. The polarization process started in Assam with the 'assimilation' policy of a section of the Assamese leaders and intellectuals which put all other ethnic minorities on guard. Similarly, in Tripura, the tribal unrest centered on the question of Bengali domination and the fear of loss of tribal identity. The insurgent groups were formed on ethnic basis and their demands are also concerned with the respective ethnic groups only. When the Naga Hills district of Assam was converted into the state of

Nagaland, the Tuensang area (a Naga inhabited area) of the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA, now called Arunachal Pradesh) was transferred to Nagaland. However, the Naga areas of Manipur remained in that state. The Naga insurgency took up the cause of all Nagas and the cadres were from all Naga areas, including those in Manipur. The Mizo insurgency championed the cause of the Mizos, and the non-Mizos had no place in the Mizo National Front (MNF). Similarly, insurgency in Manipur took up the cause of liberation of the Meiteis. Although the splinter groups emerged in later years, the Meitei character of the movement did not change. The Tripura National Volunteers (TNV) initially took up the cause of all tribes in Tripura, but ultimately it concerned itself to the Tripuris (Deb Barmans) only when the outfits gradually emerged from other tribes. The ULFA possibly included some Ahoms and plains tribals, but it is basically Assamese and limited to the cause of the Brahmaputra Valley alone. There are Bodo, Karbi, Dimasa, Bru and various other outfits who championed the interests of their respective ethnic groups only. The Khasi-Jaintias and the Garos participated unitedly in the APHLC Movement for the creation of Meghalaya, but the ethnic division - complaints of domination and deprivation - surfaced before long. Today, Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC) is a Khasi-Jaintia outfit, while Achik National Volunteer Council (ANVC) is a Garo outfit. There is nothing like a north-eastern insurgency; the insurgents have never formed even a common front or raised a common demand for the region. Each group is fighting the cause of its own ethnic group. All these facts are related to the ethnic questions in the Northeast - domination of one group over the other and the fear of deprivation and loss of

identity of the others. Therefore, the possibility of an ethnic root of the insurgency or militancy also should not be overlooked.

It may also be necessary to be inward-looking and resorting to self-introspection to understand whether or not some inner contradictions in the local societies are also facilitating the growth and sustenance of the insurgent situation in the region. The progress of education and the process of modernization sometimes effect the division of the traditional societies into forward and backward, articulate and the introvert, rich and the poor, etc. The advance section might have a tendency to monopolize the resources and opportunities, while the backward would feel marginalized, deprived and exploited. The value system or the moral standard may change for the affluent and the new rich, while the marginalized might still adhere to old values and traditions. Both the sections might experience some stratifications within own ranks and files. The forward section is more susceptible to vulnerability and moral degradation due to affluence and the ramifications of a new life-style. The flow of money and corruption at various levels are said to be splendid in the Northeast. The problem of frustration of the youths due to broken families, unattended adolescence and gender inequality are already worrying the intelligentsia in many societies. The instances of drug abuse and HIV/AIDS are also said to be on the increase. Therefore, it may be necessary to examine the possible impact of the social contradictions, particularly the loss of traditional social values, on the insurgent or militant situation in the region.

Finally, the formats and dimensions of insurgency and

militancy in the region are so many that the roots are also likely to be different in each specific case or group of cases. In the meantime, the number of the extortionist groups is also like to be very large. As a matter of fact, these fictitious groups might have already outnumbered the genuinely insurgent or militant groups who are fighting for the cause or causes they feel are genuine and what they stand for. Therefore, a study of the history of the origin and rise of each group involved in the turmoil is essential to understand what causes and issues it stands for. The motivation and the mode of operation of a group will determine its character and the nature of response or reaction it deserves from the state and society. By this method the fictitious or pseudo groups of extortionists can be first identified and dealt with under ordinary law for the criminal activities. But issues of the insurgents and the militants are political in nature and these can be settled only politically through negotiations in truly democratic spirit. It may be easy to dismiss the demands of the insurgents or militants by saying that they are all 'misguided youths', but this may not solve the problem of insurgency or end the sufferings of the silent masses. Any genuine effort to find a solution must start by spotting the roots of tensions and conflicts so that those roots can be eliminated and a civil society is allowed to dawn in the region.

PRESENTATIONS

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PRESENTATION

—*Binayak Dutta*

The recent decades in the history of Northeast India have been gripped by one determining political phenomenon – i.e. insurgency. What comes at the fore of our deliberation today, to my mind, is : what is insurgency? Is insurgency an expression of suppressed voices ? Or, is insurgency a movement or protest against the state for non-fulfillment of a long pending demand? Or, is it a movement against the Indian state to carve out an independent country ? It may be important to underline in this context that the standard definitions of insurgency have tried to describe it as an armed insurrection or uprising against an established civil authority, while the persons engaging themselves in insurgency are called the ‘insurgents’.

There is no doubt that the term ‘insurgency’ has come to symbolize a state of lawlessness and armed revolt against the state. The important element associated with the phenomenon is the fact that neither are the insurgents’ organizations granted any formal recognition within the state structure, nor are their means of expression of dissent recognized as legal and legitimate. On the other hand, the insurgent bodies also do not recognize

the state as in any way a lawfully constituted body; and hence, they have no hesitation in denying its legitimacy. Therefore, the entire process of an interaction between the two bodies is represented by mutual antagonism, or mutual violence. The moot point in this discourse is the question of 'legitimacy' and 'illegitimacy' of their mutually exclusive existence in the fabric of polity, except the occasional violent contacts and confrontations. But today in the contemporary world, insurgency has come to afflict almost every corner of the globe as an expression of dissent and protest. While in the context of the world scenario today the insurgency has come to become almost synonymous with any kind of a protest against the American-led multinational forces hegemony, in the Indian context it has become synonymous with any kind of an assertion of any ethnic group or tribe or community to register its demands or to make its voices heard and the counter-measures by the state to put down such voices. And in Northeast India, the people are living with insurgency for almost half a century. The ground reality in this region is that the strengths and assertions of insurgency are as varied as the targets of the insurgents themselves are. The ethnic groups are too many in this region, so is the number of the insurgent bodies. The conflicts started here in the form of domination of the smaller by the larger groups, and the small groups asserting their ethnic identities and demanding the protection of such identities. The established form of polity, namely, the democracy was not considered as sufficient for such protection, as the smaller groups had lesser or no representation in the constitutional authorities who could decide on the basis of a majority.

Another important element that comes to focus about insurgency is the use of terror as the dominant mode of its assertions or the dominant means of its existence. Hence, most of the insurgent groups have come out to negate the discursive mode of political settlement, or at least, to openly emphasize the futility of this method. The methods of the insurgents are, therefore, at direct variance with the philosophy of any kind of the liberal democratic political order, though their demands had often been to carve out a space for themselves in the liberal capitalist world order. Peace, which is the fundamental bedrock of the liberal capitalist socio-political system, is what is sought to be disrupted by the insurgents. In this sense, the role that the insurgents play is that of offering not only a critique of the liberal world order but in most occasions a challenge to its existence and the norms that it seeks to uphold. The mode of terror adopted by the insurgents, therefore, seeks to produce widespread fear in the minds of the people who are ordinary residents of the liberal democratic space and who participate in the state through the process of voting only. Hence expressions of popular will, or mandate, or support, are opposed by the insurgents as this is opposed to their existence and often are used to justify their unjustifiability. In this context, the efforts to observe certain days as special to the state are seen as an anathema to their existence and ideology. Some of the insurgent groups in the Northeast, therefore, for the past few years have been issuing calls for boycotting the 'Independence Day' (15th August) and the 'Republic Day' (26th January) celebrations, which are so sacrosanct to the Indian State and the Constitution of India. The insurgents' position here is perhaps that the participation in such celebrations would tantamount to the

acceptance of the authority of the Indian State and the submission to its Constitution.

Insurgency, therefore, can be variously classified on the basis of their influence, organization, means of expression, ideology, and their structure. While in some cases ideology emerges as the most determining factor for the establishment of the insurgent body, in many other cases the area of their actual operation could also determine the nature of their demands and hence, their identity. It is a well known fact that in Northeast India all insurgent (or militant) groups are not necessarily anti-Indian or asking for sovereign states for themselves, as some of them are the products of ethnic conflicts and wanted to protect the rights and interests of their respective communities. The time lost by the authority in responding to their demands, in some cases, might have effected changes in their position.

Another very important element of insurgency embedded in their anti-state character is the support that these insurgents receive from various organizations, and other external governments, which also shape the organization of the insurgent bodies. A classical case in point is the movement in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Another problem that is evident in this entire discourse is the dilemma between the domains of claims and counter-claims of legitimacy of ideology and action of the state and the insurgents as the anti-state. The causes or roots of insurgency therefore can be traced to a variety of impetus. While some would claim ideological divergence with the dominant political philosophy of the state as evident in the conflict between the Islamic insurgents of Iraq and the Western

Liberal Government there, the others would merely look at insurgency from the stand point of protest being registered. In this second form, the insurgents have been pushed into this situation by the muted response of the state and its organs to the various demands raised by the society and polity that these insurgents stand to represent from time to time. The fact that some of the insurgent groups in the Northeast do enjoy the support from the neighbouring countries have been beyond any doubt, while there are also some instances of the civil society taking initiative for dialogues and negotiated settlements within the framework of the Constitution of India.

Yet another factor for insurgency seems to be a contest between the elite of the two contesting political and social domains. This position is also attributed to the perception that while the state does not listen, violence forces it to take notice and to negotiate. Another potent factor seems to be the projection by the insurgents of a better tomorrow, which contributes to the perception of the 'better tomorrow for which bloodshed today'. This endears the movement to a section of the civil society from which a part of the support base – financial or manpower – is drawn. It is possibly a combination of the ideological element and the civil society that grants to an insurgent movement its potency and provokes the state to negotiate with it. The recent trends in Northeast India have shown that there is a change in this relationship between the insurgent groups and the civil society, where the civil society which does not cooperate with the insurgents or sympathize with its ideology are seen as representatives of the state that these insurgents stand to oppose.

Finally, it is also a fact that insurgency is a potent means but rarely an end in itself which makes the phenomenon a complex one, and a relevant issue to deliberate. A pertinent point that could be related is the question of Human Rights becoming a cause and causality of insurgency itself. In this context the Human Rights question leads us into a viscous cycle of justifying excesses in the form of violence and counter-violence between the state and the counter-state. The importance of any exercise in understanding the phenomenon of insurgency can hardly be overemphasized. An analysis of the phenomenon, and the organization, ideology and expression of the insurgents, in other words, the rhetoric of insurgency, may help us identify the roots of the insurgency itself.