

*Ethnicity,  
Culture  
and  
Nationalism  
in  
North-East  
India*

GR/E

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## Conflict and its Resolution: A Case Study of a Modern Tribal Situation

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Although these acts of lawlessness may not be a serious nuisance to the state, they do seem to me a very real danger to society, and the worst of it is that the longer they continue the loss will be your chance of securing the active cooperation of the population in the detection and conviction of the criminals. I am quite ready to admit with John Bright<sup>1</sup>, at whose foot I sat as a boy, that 'force is no remedy for a just discontent', but bright himself never pretended that this was a reason for allowing from play to the forces of disorder.

—Austan Chamberlain, Secretary of State for India to Lord Charmichael, December 17, 1915, on Bengali terrorism in the early 20th century.

Happy, contented people seldom, if ever, throw bombs and kill innocent people. Though terrorism does not always need a provocative environment, and has occurred with increasing frequency in societies in which peaceful change was possible, it appears that some deeply motivated young people of Shillong have opted for terrorism either because they are faced with unresolved grievances and find no other way of registering protest and effecting change or because they have unwittingly become instrumental in achieving objectives not entirely their own.

The reasons why Meghalaya, while being the nerve-center of the largely secessionist north-east, has remained untouched by the insurgent culture do not perhaps lie in the wisdom of its political leadership or the quality of its administrators. It must be found in the essential ethnic temperament of the tribes inhabiting the State



who have traditionally followed the "live and let live" principle. In their desire to preserve their ethnic, religious or linguistic traditions and characteristics, these tribes have shown a lesser degree of zeal and resistance to assimilation than other minorities in the region and the country. But they cannot remain insular in a world where organization of political activity on an ethnic basis is increasingly commonplace. They are not alone in demanding "protection" and "preferential treatment" on a continuing basis in order to even out some of the imbalances imposed by the past. The problem in north-east India has been that demand for "ethnic protection" has often preceded secessionist activity. This is further complicated by the essence of what the Khasi youth have been seeking in the nature of minority protection.

There is little that these tribes view with greater concern than the possibility of being turned into a minority in their own homeland. Whether this happens on account of illegal foreign immigrants or arrival of other Indians in search of jobs and economic opportunities, the concern remains the same. A minority like the Khasis feel more weakened by the entry of people from outside because non-tribals have traditionally controlled the economic forces in their land.

A leading cause of the present tension in Shillong is the rejection of the idea that tribal minorities in the nation have a right to their homeland to the point of exclusion of those whom the minorities do not want. The second cause of tension stems from trying to find legal solutions to social and economic problems, especially when the arguments deployed by the government are neither firmly anchored in ground realities nor generally accepted. These arguments are often not shared even by individual members of the ruling elite.

The modern Indian view is (which is in conflict with the constitutional scheme) that the existence of different ethnic identities within the nation and the existence of systems to separate these identities are divisions which in themselves are a source of conflict, and, therefore, ethno-cultural assimilation is both desirable and inevitable. But in fact the exact opposite is true. The point about ethno-culturally divided societies is that they wish to remain divided. A Bengali or a Bihari is as determined to retain and preserve his identity as is a Khasi. Each group draws the essence of its being, its group consciousness, from the fact that it is different and that it

wishes to remain different. Those who see division as a source of conflict overlook the fact that conflict arises because of threats to the factors which make for that division—threats to the separate identity, characteristics, or even real or perceived threats to the existence of the group.

Given the above way of thinking, the Khasi youth reject the view (1) that they have the same social and economic problems and aspirations as the rest of Indians; and (2) that they should be treated on a basis of formal equality with other Indians. They resent the remoteness of the State Government which was supposedly created to protect their interests and ethno-cultural identity. They resent the suffocating bureaucracy that seems to be the inevitable accompaniment of that Government. Their anger towards the establishment is intensified as they perceive both the political leaders and the bureaucracy as corrupt and selfish.

Hagopain feels that decadence and ineptitude in the ruling class is one of the short-term causes of revolution.<sup>2</sup> According to him, revolutions can be avoided if better leadership is available for judicious mixture of firmness and reform. The youth of Meghalaya in general, and of Shillong and its suburbs in particular, perceive a measure of isolation, obsolescence, decadence, corruption, ineptitude and irresponsibility amongst the political leaders and the bureaucrats currently governing and administering the State. What is more significant, the tribals in general in the State have come to accept that terrorism is a response to real or perceived injustice, and the only means of reducing the likelihood of terrorism is a reduction of grievances, stresses and frustration underlying it.

These sentiments are praiseworthy, but they are of limited value as a cure against terrorism. As experience shows, a number of societies with least political participation and most injustice have been the most free from terrorism in our time. Only in democratic societies can grievances be more or less freely voiced, even through terrorist activity. And terrorism can grow and sustain itself only in societies where governments are so weak and irresolute that they are not capable of defending themselves against a terrorist challenge. Terrorism has succeeded when political mass movements have used terrorism in the framework of a wider strategy. There is no known case in modern history of a small terrorist group seizing political



power. Terrorism has always been put down, sooner or later. Even third rate dictatorships have shown that terrorism can be crushed with ease. The real problem is the price that has to be paid by liberal societies who value their democratic institutions.

The *Frustration-Aggression* hypothesis was refined in the 1960s by Berkowitz<sup>3</sup>. Frustration, as he saw it, produces an emotional state, anger, which heightens the probability of the occurrence of aggression. But he was aware of the outside stimuli: even if there was frustration and anger the probability that violence will take place still depends on the presence or absence (effectiveness or ineffectiveness) of factors restraining violence. In the instant case, and in the absence of any inbuilt social restraint in the society, this factor is limited to the ability of the administration to deter aggression.

### **Instrumental and Organizational Perspectives**

1. No fixed ideology has preceded the Khasi (HALC) terrorism. Terrorist doctrine is of considerable importance, but it is only one of the motivating forces, and not always the decisive one. Like Faust, the Khasi youth could claim that in the beginning there was the deed. Their terrorism is instinctive—the mood came first, and ideological rationalisation is in the process of formulation. But not all terrorists live up to the ideals of high moral purpose and absence of greed, and the Shillong group has attracted criminals to their fold who use terror as a mode of extorting money to pay for their consumerism.

2. It is an outcome of internal group dynamics and the acts of terrorism represent a strategic choice. The HALC (and sometimes even the FKGJP and KSU) can be perceived in three different roles. (1) They are fighting a proxy war on behalf of disgruntled elements within the ruling party; (2) They are the front organization of a larger and clandestine conspiratorial group out to destabilise the State in conjunction with other secessionist groups of the region; and (3) They are acting on their own to achieve their limited or even confused goals. Very often all three roles overlap.

3. The resort to terrorism reflects the tangible and intangible incentives which the leaders/instigators inside or outside of the organization provide to the actors. The actors' response to incentives



is propelled by (1) their desire to belong to a group; (2) a desire to acquire social status and reputation; (3) personal ambitions and a desire to find comradeship and excitement; (4) their organization's viability and political potential; (5) a desire to change their environment; and (6) a desire to gain material benefits.

4. Because of the above factors, the individual members disagree over ends and means; the means are often logically related to ends and resources; and surprises (like shooting a person in broad daylight) compensate for organizational weaknesses and lack of cohesion. The terrorist action is inconsistent, erratic, and unpredictable; the pattern of terrorism follows an action-reaction process; and the action responds to what the government does to deter terrorist action, or meet their demands, or react to acts of violence.

5. Because there is a decrease in the cost of terrorism and increase in the rewards accruing from terrorism in Shillong, terrorism is likely to continue and even become self-sustaining. It has not been appreciated by the administration that increasing the cost of terrorism (in term of loss of life, freedom and material losses) will make it less likely.

6. External pressures from the NSCN-ULFA and internal incentives from political instigators are tending to strengthen group cohesion, and this may substantially alter the level of armed mobilisation and the strike capability of the group in the days to come.

### The Emerging Scenario

Suppression of groups with rising expectations will increase their sense of relative deprivation, which in turn will increase the potentiality for dissident violence in the future. The legitimacy of the government will decline with continued absence of control, and the loss of this legitimacy is the basic objective of the dissidents. The absence of legitimate government control is leading to the activists usurping the *de facto* control, and the Government is helpless in the face of the public response, both passive and active, to the killings by these groups and the resultant environment of insecurity and instability.

A little repression by the government will increase aggression and instability. Political instability is curvilinearly related to the

level of the coerciveness which a political system is capable of. The probability of high levels of instability will increase with mid-level or half-hearted coerciveness which is insufficient to be a deterrent to aggression, but sufficient to increase the level of systemic frustration. Even democratic protests will escalate into terrorism as a result of weak response from the government to the demands of the protestors and the perceived incapability of the government to deter violence and instability. Protests will provoke government repression. This will produce fresh and more intense wave of protest and violence if the government handling is either weak or the government's efforts are not sustained.

### **The Government Response**

The decline of security which a citizen is guaranteed by the Constitution and the law can be directly attributed to the breakdown of the machinery which maintains law and order. In fact, the whole system of executive accountability has collapsed. The normal law of the country confers wide-ranging authority and discretion on the executive and is subject to limited parliamentary surveillance and minimal judicial supervision. In fact, the police force, as the main coercive arm of the executive, enjoys such authority and discretion under the Code of Criminal Procedure and the extraordinary laws (TADA etc.) currently in use that it is almost totally protected in case of "excesses" committed in the performance of their functions and even when, in the process, they make substantial inroads into accepted civil liberties and rights of the citizens.

A number of questions come to mind. Have we wrecked the district administration by diffusing responsibility and thus rendering the system vulnerable to political manipulation? Do we need a new code containing provisions for all powers which the administration may require to deal with an outbreak of violence or armed subversion, with derogation from ordinary right of the citizens balanced by provision of safeguards against abuse, with procedures dealing with complaints, and with compensation for those who suffer loss or injury as a result? Should the definition of 'abuse' include non-performance or omission to act to protect life and property when these are at risk, or failure to deter those who act unlawfully immediately, without loss of time, and without giving them an



opportunity to continue with unlawful acts? As the keepers of law act on the basis of subjective appreciation of a situation, and their explanations for failure to perform enjoy executive acceptability, is it likely that the government would be willing to subject the actions and chosen measures for maintenance of law to judicial scrutiny to determine the positive and negative 'abuses' of authority and discretion enjoyed by the executive?

The problems of insurgency and terrorism in the north-east at the present juncture are either objectively unsolvable or made unsolvable within the institutional framework due to the ideological commitments of political parties or the identification of problems with interest groups who control vote banks that do not allow the government to negotiate solutions. This has led to the symptoms of a possible breakdown of the system itself. The next and final stage in the breakdown would inevitably be fragmentation of the party system, anti-system critique gaining strength, negative majorities making the democratic political process and elections unviable, defamation of the political class as a whole, acceleration of the political process in a narrow area that prevents the supporters of the government from uniting in its defence, and will ultimately open the door to undemocratic leaders combining legal action with the threat of violence or its actual use. Can this be avoided? The timing of future decisions would obviously be critical and the outcome will differ depending on the social, institutional and executive effectiveness that the Government can project in the process of its consolidation.

It appears almost certain that the dynamics of conflicts affects the decision-making process, and accentuates the egocentrism and short-term interests of fragile political leaders. The seemingly inconclusive debate within the government and administration over how best to deal with the present situation in Shillong is attributable to different processes that have led to terrorism in this State as well as to bureaucratic and personal rivalries within the government. The result is an inconsistent policy that alternates between contradictory extremes. The political liability of confused decisions includes charges of hypocrisy or weakness in confronting terrorism. There is a pattern, and there are discernible causes, to the avoidance of a rational policy which the government might know is likely to resolve



the issues before they are asserted violently or to manage them with the best possible means and speed. The political hesitations reflect both normal caution and an unwillingness to take decisions.

Primarily, there are two approaches to conflict management which influence policy making: the objective and clinically analytical dispositions of the top civil servants and police officers and the subjective operational strategies devised by the officers in the field. Theoretically, and sometime in practice, the civil servants analyse the options for the benefit of politicians so that they can weigh the pros and cons before taking a decision. But what generally happens is different. The process of political consideration is a self-defeating, and often a procrastinating exercise. The decisions are often delayed to the extent that the situation willy-nilly involves the Government in fire-fighting operations, in which one hard option often replaces another. The internal political debate or the ruling party's perception of electoral consequences makes the Government hesitant and cautious to the point of being irresolute. Moreover, as the intensity of violence increases, the Government is faced with the apparent dilemma of choosing between non-selective retaliation, which is the over-reaction often sought by the politicians who instigate riots, terrorism and insurgencies, or flexible response which is often doomed to failure in its inadequacy.

It is significant that most policemen also seem to believe that *Hardline Policies* will prevent terrorism. This approach is attractive because it is conventional, easy to implement, and produces immediate, visible, and direct result. The *Organisational Approach*, on the other hand, is slow to mature, requires outstanding level and reliability of intelligence, demands the highest degree of inventiveness and ability to constantly adjust to rapidly changing environment, and, above all, the capability of officers to influence social, economic and even political decisions of the government.

Both *Pre-emption* and *Prevention* require exceptional intelligence. Given the present organisational capability, it is not possible for the Meghalaya police to get a precise warning in order to pre-empt effectively. Prevention, which takes the form of incapacitating the terrorists, demands an even higher degree of circumventing the disadvantages. Because of the inherent uncertainties of information and because public disclosure will

compromise intelligence sources, it may be difficult for the government to justify the preventive or pre-emptive use of force to the people. Public opinion may also restrain the government in the pre-emptive use of force. Moreover, intelligence warnings alone are rarely decisive and concrete enough to use as a public evidence justifying pre-emptive use of force. Given the terrorist proclivity for civilian targets, for the outrageous and the unexpected, a purely *Defensive Policy* may demand protection of too many weak links, which is not always possible.

In the kind of sustained low level of low intensity terrorism in Shillong, which can escalate into a larger insurgent movement, and in a situation where public opinion is important for defusing crisis or for preventing mass support to terrorists, *Deterrence* may be an effective strategy. Deterrence prevents conflict by convincing the adversary that the costs of the action he contemplates far outweigh any potential benefits he may gain. The government thus influences the opposing organization's decisions by threatening them with damage should an act of terrorism occur. The possibility of the adversary desisting is in direct proportion to the credibility of the government's threat and how effectively it is communicated. *Punishment* or *Retaliation* normally deter a terrorist from indulging in a violent act regardless of the state of the government's physical defences. But given the uncertainty of intelligence or its reliability as well as the possible public outcry in case of excessive bloodshed, symmetrical retaliation against the nervecenter of a leader may not always be possible.

#### NOTES & REFERENCES

1. John Bright, 19th century British parliamentarian and pacifist and father of Britain's trade and electoral racism. He was the original of Mr. Turrkull, the radical character in Anthony Trollope's parliamentary novel.
2. Mark N. Hagopian, *The Phenomenon of Revolution* (New York: Dodd, Moad and Company, 1974), p. 158.
3. Leonard Boadrowitz, *A pression* (New York, 1962) and Trend Lawon edited, *Frustration, Development of a Scientific Concept* (New York, 1965).