

INSURGENCY IN NORTH EAST REGION OF INDIA

Dr. Shantaram Badgajar

Geo-strategically North East Region (NER) of India has immense significance. However, Insurgency in the region has been source of worry since independence. No other part of India or South Asia has been subjected to such a prolonged violent struggle. Therefore, the attempt has been made in this research paper to understand the genesis of long standing Insurgency issue of NER and its present nature. For this purpose the historical approach has been adopted to record the historical development. Moreover, the present paper is mainly based on the secondary sources of information.

North East Region of India:-

The Northeast region of India is located between 22⁰ and 29⁰ North Latitude and 89⁰ 46' - 97⁰ 50' East Longitude.¹ The region is an amalgamation of eight states, viz. Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim.² It covers an area of 2, 63,179 sq. km³ which accounts for 8.06 percent of the total geographical area of the country.⁴ The NER shares 98 percent of its borders with neighbouring countries and just 2 percent of its borders with India.⁵ The NER through Assam connects to India by a narrow corridor of foothill land in North Bengal which is known as Silliguri corridor. As the region shares its external borders

¹ Ved Prakash, Encyclopedia of North East India (New Delhi, 2007), Vol. 1, p.37.

² Except Manipur, Tripura and Sikkim all these states were part of erstwhile state of Assam. Manipur and Tripura were the princely states and Sikkim was not the part of region but it was incorporated in the region recently.

³ NEDFi Databank, <http://databank.nedfi.com/content/general-information>, accessed on 09.06.2011

⁴ Annual Report, Ministry of Home Affairs (Government of India, 2006-07), p. 16.

⁵ Gurudas Das, "Security, Engagement and Development: Development Interest of India's Northeast and the Art of Conduct of India's Relation with the Neighbouring Countries", in C. Joshua Thomas, ed., Engagement and Development: India's Northeast and Neighbouring Countries (New Delhi, 2006), p. 5.

with neighbouring states it is considered as the gateway to South Asia and Southeast Asia. Moreover, NER has vast natural resources and huge economic potential. Inhabitants of the NER have close ethnic and cultural affinity with their counterparts across the border. Such geographical characteristics of a region increase its strategic significance to India. However, despite rich in natural resources, the NER has not been benefitted by converting this resource-wealth into the fruitful development benefits. This is due to the lack of infrastructural development in the region which has kept the region at economic disadvantage.

Genesis of Insurgency:-

The genesis of the insurgency in NER of India varies from state to state. Insurgency problem was first seen in Naga Hills which is now an independent state viz. Nagaland. The Naga movement was led by Angami Zaphu Phizo who did not want to join the Indian union. He claimed that Nagaland had never been a part of India. Thus on the eve of independence the idea of insurgency unfolded in the Naga Hills and thereafter in the region. The Naga insurgent outfits aimed at political union and independence of all the territories claimed to be Naga-dominated areas. After that, within a couple of years, insurgency in Manipur started on the ground of “unconstitutional merger of the state under pressure” with the union of India on 21 September 1949. Naga and Manipur insurgency was followed by insurgency in Mizoram. In early 1960s insurgency in the Mizo Hills which is now Mizoram started due to the famine caused by bamboo flowering and the accompanied explosion of rat population. In Assam, the insurgency has grown out of mass movement over the foreigners issue in 1979. In Tripura insurgency started in early 1980s. The sense of being progressively marginalized gave rise to tribal insurgency in the State. Arunachal Pradesh witnesses the spillover effect of insurgencies from the neighbouring states, particularly Nagaland, Assam and Manipur. Meghalaya also grapples with political uncertainties and problems. One can observe from the above that insurgency, initially, began in the state of Nagaland and then it spread like epidemic all over the region. However, the origin of such conflict varies within different states of the NER. No two situations are alike. For example, the origin of insurgency in the state of Nagaland is quite different from that in the state of Assam.

Toady every state in the North-east region has been affected by insurgent violence and the number of casualties is huge. This violence is against the security forces, communities from

mainland Indian states and within the region such as Bodo-non Bodo conflict in Assam, the anti-Chakma movement in Arunachal Pradesh, anti-outsider movement in Meghalaya, Naga-Kuki and Kuki-Paite clashes in Manipur, Tripuri-Bengali conflict in Tripura and issue of illegal immigrants in Assam. Fatalities related to insurgency in the Northeast region are testimonies of this fact, which is alarming. During the years 1992-2014, the Northeastern states of India have recorded 21,628 fatalities. Maximum casualties, within the above mentioned period, have been recorded in Assam, which is followed by Manipur, Tripura and Nagaland. The insurgents claimed that most of the civilians killed by them were not the original inhabitants of the area of their operation. However, the fact remains that the innocent civilians are being killed and the threat of violence is being used to create psychological fear in the minds of the local inhabitants. Moreover, there are various insurgent outfits, which are not active in the region. However, they re-emerge occasionally and get involved in criminal activities, such as, extortion and racketeering. They commit such unlawful activities because these groups have no ideology or clear agenda. Various insurgent groups from Northeast region have different objectives. They differ in their operational methods and organizational structures. However, they share some common features. These are as follows:

1. Projection of people's representatives;
2. Separatist or secessionist;
3. Clear or vague agenda to attain sovereignty.⁶

Over the years since independence, insurgencies in the region have been sustained and multiplied due to variety of factors involved in it. Some of the important factors are criminalisation of insurgency, criminalisation of politics and role of neighbouring countries in the region. Criminalisation of insurgency has taken root because; the reasons on which they started insurgency movement are taking backseat. They started to measure their success in terms of financial gains rather than any political gains.⁷ Extortion, kidnapping and illicit trafficking in small arms together with narcotics are one of the primary activities of the criminalized insurgents in the region. It

⁶ M. S. Prabhakara, "Degrees of Separatism", *Frontline* (Madras), (22 September 2006), p. 42.

⁷ Ajai Sahani, "Survey of Conflicts and Resolution in India's Northeast" <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/publication/faultlines/volume12/Artivle3.htm> accessed on 24.09.10

provides huge profits to them. It is believed that there is a complex collusive arrangement between various political parties, administrators and officials, on one hand, and different insurgent outfits, on the other.⁸ Insurgent outfits in the Northeast penetrated regional politics in a manner reminiscent of the role of organized crime in other Indian states. In Assam, Nagaland, Manipur and Tripura, tacit associations have appeared between political parties and insurgent outfits.⁹ Moreover, countries that are inimical to India played a great role at various points of time, in providing the much needed support to the various insurgent outfits, in terms of safe sanctuaries, training facilities, weapons and financial and moral support. In these countries, Bangladesh and Pakistan have played very significant role by providing aid and support to the insurgent outfits in the state. Besides Pakistan and Bangladesh, the role of neighbouring countries like Bhutan and Nepal has remained supplementary. These two nations have provided safe shelter as well as transit facilities to the insurgent outfits of the state.

To contain the insurgency from NER both central and respective state governments have been taking counter insurgency¹⁰ measures. It is observed that while tackling with the insurgency, during the initial period army was continuously deployed to counter the Insurgent outfits. However, it has gained little due to lack coordination among the security forces and due to lack of coordinated policy of the government. At the same time, peace initiatives and surrender and rehabilitation policies were introduced to curb the insurgency in the state. Moreover, talks at diplomatic level were initiated with the neighbouring countries for not assisting Indian insurgent outfits. In spite of such diplomatic attempts, many insurgent outfits in the state received help and support from the neighbouring countries like Bangladesh and Pakistan. Also, modernization programme of the forces was undertaken and efforts were taken for the management of borders. While taking these initiatives, army has been continuously deployed in small counter insurgency

⁸ Dhruv C Katoch, "A Viable Strategy to Fight Insurgency in the North East", <http://www.ndc.nic.in/pdf/44-kotach.pdf>, accessed on 19.01.10

⁹ Bethany Lacina, "Does Counter Insurgency Theory Apply in Northeast India?", (Indian Review), vol.6, no.3., July-September, 2007, p.174.

¹⁰ The term 'counter insurgency' implies an action that is taken to defeat insurgent or rebellious forces. The action taken could be military, diplomatic, and psychological.

operations. Other than these initiatives, various attempts were made for the development of the NER. But though the central government of India has been spending a lot of money and a lot more is likely to flow to the NER the desired result is not commensurate with the money spent. This is due to the fact that money was probably siphoned by the corrupt politicians, bureaucrats and insurgents. The preventive measures like Construction of border roads and fencing, Political and diplomatic initiatives also did not produce the desired result.

According to the Annual Report of Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) 2012-13, in the recent years, the intensity of the violence has come down to a large extent. It is because the major insurgent groups from the Northeast region are under the ceasefire agreement with the central government. However, conflict prone situation still exists in the NER because the groups against the ceasefire agreement and the rivalry among different tribes have been responsible for the violence in the region.¹¹

A crucial aspect of violence in the region has been frequent ethnic clashes, which has resulted in heavy loss of life and property. These have also led to large displacements. The prevailing law and order situation has made it difficult for the journalists to work in the region. Ethnic violence has continued in the state due to various issues like racial and regional conflicts, discrimination in the availability of resources and opportunity of development, wherein the state finds itself pulled in different directions and finds no solutions to it. Thus, protest rallies, public curfews and blockade by the students with an active support of insurgents have become inevitable part of life in the state. Thus, it would not be wrong to state that the impact of this insurgency and counter insurgency operations on the country's national security are huge. It has Social, Economic, Political, Military, strategic and Environmental implications.

Conclusion:

The study comes to the conclusion that the root causes of the conflict have not been properly assessed and nor appropriate measures were taken. Hence, the desired result was not seen

¹¹ Onkar Pawar, Internal Security Problems of North East India: Insurgency and Counter Insurgency in Assam Since 1985, (New Delhi, 2016), p.88-90

and the region is still struggling for peace. The best solution to establish peace in the NER is to ascertain the root causes and this would require a strong political will. The weakness of the NER's formal institutions and their inability to discipline both, the political and bureaucratic functionaries, enables violent actors to manipulate the region's government, economy, and citizenry.