

Secessionist Movement in Northeast India

Anisha Kar

BA, LLB, KIIT School of Law, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India

Abstract

The secessionist movement in North East India is a movement which remained in this region for quite a long time but lack of public support gradually faded the significance of this movement. This project work delves deep into the reasons of such movement and the dynamics of this movement which gradually lost its sheen. This paper examines the complex interplay of ethnicity, ideology and religious identity in shaping the insurgent movements in northeast India and examines their external linkages.

Introduction

Northeast India once upon a time was known as the most volatile and insurgency affected place in the country after Kashmir. The region has eight states namely- Meghalaya, Manipur, Assam, Mizoram, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Sikkim. These states are gateways to five neighbouring countries namely Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, China and Nepal. Having a 4,500 kilometer (2,796 miles) international border; the region is connected to India through a narrow land corridor of 22 kilometers only. It occupies 7.6% of India's land area but holds 3.6% of the total population of India. A total of 475 ethnic groups and 400 languages/ dialects are found in this region making it the most diverse region in India.

Even the Constitution of India has taken special care of the northeastern regions by making various provisions. Article 244 (1) provides that – Provisions of the 5th schedule shall apply to the administration and control of scheduled areas and scheduled tribes in any State other than the States of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram. Article 244 (2) provides that – Provisions of the 6th schedule shall apply to the administration and control of schedule areas, in the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram to create Autonomous Districts Councils in these states. In pursuance of these provisions, the various autonomous district has been created to contain the demands of various ethnic groups like Karbi Anglong, Khasi hill district, Chakma district, etc. Under Article 371 (A) Nagaland has been accorded special status.¹

¹. Drishti IAS, *North East Insurgency*, DRISTI, (2019, May 10), (last visited April 02, 2021), <https://www.drishtiiias.com/to-the-points/paper3/north-east-insurgency>

The Northeast region of India has been almost an isolated patch geographically and no foreign ruler has ever controlled it. Even the mainland Indian rulers have never ruled over this area until the advent of the British. The British decided on limited administration of the Northeast. This autonomy has often made them feel socially and culturally different from the Mainland.

Except the travel of common citizenry to these places for various purposes, there was hardly any strong linkage found between the people of mainland and that of Northeast India. Mainland cultural influence was only limited to Assam, Manipur and Tripura. The uninterrupted freedom from mainland, the region's racial distinctiveness, made the people of this region feel as if they are different from the people of mainland. The steady population flow from mainland India, particularly from undivided Bengal, accentuated the ethnic and religious diversity and introduced a nativist-outsider element to the simmering conflict.² The complex interplay of ethnicity, ideology and religious identity shaped the insurgent movements in northeast India. External forces have also given vent to this movement.

This insurgency once upon a time was getting huge support from the native population as they were voicing the grievances of natives such as alienation, lack of development and an apathetic attitude of the central government etc. In recent years, however, this influence has been reduced. Nevertheless, in most of the states in the northeast, anti-government militants retain significant nuisance value and often indulge in successful strikes against government interests.³

History of Conflicts in NE

Armed resistance against outsiders was prevalent even before the arrival of British. The Ahom rulers and the Tripura kings had fought against the invaders even before the advent of the British. Even the British force had to encounter fierce resistance in the Naga and the Mizo hill regions in Manipur. When the British left India, the first insurgency started in Tripura. However, soon the leaders of the uprising decided to stop militancy and started electoral politics. Unfortunately, from 1980 onwards riots started to take place once again, with the Bengali refugees being the main target. In case of the Naga uprising, it went through a lot of ups and downs often leading to a number of splits, and over time it lost its sheen. It was in the year 1966, that protests/uprisings erupted in the Mizo Hills followed by the prevalence of more and more guerrilla bands in the states of Manipur and Tripura. Most of these militant groups were funded by Pakistan and with the defeat of Pakistan in the 1971 war, the rebels lost this support and got dismantled.

2. SubirBhaumik, *Ethnicity, Ideology and Religion: Separatist Movements in India's Northeast*, in RELIGIOUS RADICALISM AND SECURITY IN SOUTH ASIA, Asia-Pacific Centre for Security Studies, (2004), <https://apcss.org/Publications/Edited%20Volumes/ReligiousRadicalism/PagesfromReligiousRadicalismAndSecurityinSouthAsiach10.pdf>
3. Mofidul Islam, *Insurgency Concerns and Issues in Northeast India: Causes, Consequences and Recent Development*, JOURNAL OF CRITICAL REVIEWS, Vol 7, Issue 08, (2020)

It has been found that often foreign forces especially neighboring states like China, Pakistan and Bangladesh have trained and funded these rebels. China has been involved in training and supply arms and ammunitions to the Naga, Mizo and Meitei since 1966. However by the early 1980s, China stopped providing all the help and support to these rebels. Bangladesh has emerged as yet another supporter of the militant tribes, reaching out to the Nagas, Mizos, Meiteis and Tripuris. Recently it has extended its help to rebels in the state of Meghalaya.

Causes of Insurgency

The factors that led to the emergence of the different insurgent groups in the region are as follows:⁴

Militants in their formative years voiced genuine grievances of the people. Some of the regional issues such as unemployment among youth, illegal migration and thus competition for jobs and capturing of business by the migrants, competition for resources and land, lack of development and an apathetic attitude from the central government led to various conflicts and demands of secession/ autonomy.

The sense of alienation among the native population is yet another cause for demand for secession. "Large scale migration has created a fear in the minds of people that they will be reduced to minority in their own states or regions. Migrants threaten their culture and traditions and also occupy already limited employment opportunities. Migration of Muslims has also imparted it a communal color. Lack of economic opportunities and governance deficit making it easier for people to feel alienated and left out and thus providing support for insurgency."

Geographical separation and the racial differences has always given rise to a feeling among the native population of being separate from any other Indian and thus a demand for secession. However, with time and vested interest of various groups, these have taken forms of insurgencies across the region. More than 50 rebel outfits/groups are entrenched in the area. Some of these groups wanted a separate identity of their own, but there were many such ethnic groups who have made it a business of having easy money without any political ideology.

Some of the general conditions favoring Insurgency in Northeast are:

- i. Porous international borders and easy availability of arms,
- ii. Difficult terrain and weak infrastructure facilitating insurgents involved in conflict,
- iii. Human right violation and excesses by security forces.

⁴. Drishti IAS, *North East Insurgency*, DRISTI, (2019, May 10), (last visited April 02, 2021), <https://www.drishtiiias.com/to-the-points/paper3/north-east-insurgency>

State-wise Insurgency in North-East

“The first sign of Naga resistance was seen in the formation of the Naga Club in 1918, which told the Simon Commission in 1929 to leave us alone to determine for ourselves as in ancient times”.⁵

Nagaland was the first state in Northeast to experience militancy in demand for autonomy. Under the leadership of the Naga National Council (N.N.C.), headed by A.Z. Phizo, Nagas declared independence from the larger Assam in the year 1951. The N.N.C. was later on formed into National Socialist Council of Nagaland (N.S.C.N.). The N.S.C.N. got split into two factions into two factions: Isak-Muivah faction (N.S.C.N.-I.M.) and the Khaplang faction (N.S.C.N.-K.).

Mizoram

Mizoram remained as an integral part of greater Assam till the year 1986 and the separate State was created after carving out the Mizo areas from Assam. This ended the decades long demand (since 1966) of Mizo National Front led by Laldenga for a separate State. In 1987 it was granted a statehood However the militant activities due to unresponsive attitude of the Central government during difficult times like the massive "Mautam famine".

Tripura

The cause of growth of militancy in Tripura is due to the migration and dominance of Bengalis from East Bengal over the native tribal, reducing the indigenous tribal people in the state to minority status. This led to militant groups in the state demanding the restoration of the tribal rights from the Bengali population.

Assam

The reaction against illegal migrants domination in the state sparked a furore also among the indigenous Assamese. This led to a movement demanding the deportation of the illegal migrants by the militant outfit the United Liberation Front of Assam (U.L.F.A.) in 1979. Later on other militant groups like Bodo Liberation Tigers, National Democratic Front of Bodoland (N.D.F.B.), the United People's Democratic Solidarity (U.P.D.S.) were created and these all groups fought for deportation of illegal migrants.

⁵. Samudra Gupta Kashyap and Praveen Swami, *Explained: Everything you need to know about Nagaland insurgency*, THE INDIAN EXPRESS (New Delhi), April 03, 2021, Front Page, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/everything-you-need-to-know-about-nagaland-insurgency-and-the-efforts-to-solve/>

Manipur

The cause of Militancy in Manipur was the forcible merger of the former Manipur Kingdom with India. United National Liberation Front formed in 1964, with an objective of ending the discrimination against Manipur, which was accorded statehood only in 1972 nearly 23 years after its merger.⁶

“Violence by the Naga groups has also spilled over into Manipur, a substantial part of which is claimed by the Isak-Muivah faction of National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM). Manipur is one of the worst affected states in the Northeast where at least 12 insurgent outfits were active. Manipur had been declared a ‘disturbed area’ in 1980 and the Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA) 1958 was imposed in the State on 8 September, 1980”. This resulted in an uproar and protest including the infamous “mothers’ nude protest” and Irom Sharmila protest against the Act. The state witnessed a series of serious protests starting in July 2015, following demands for the implementation of the Inner Line Permit (ILP) system in the State once again which require outsiders to obtain a special pass or permit to enter the State. The ILP in Manipur region was in force until 1950, when it was revoked by the then Commissioner of Assam, whose jurisdiction also covered Manipur. “Since Manipur, which attained Statehood in 1972, is not officially a tribal State, there are constitutional challenges to implementing the ILP system.”⁷

Meghalaya

“The Meghalaya state was carved out of the Assam state, with an aim to address the unique needs of the major tribes in the region: the Garos, the Jaintias and the Khasis. The rise of aspirations of tribal autonomy led to the emergence of several insurgent groups in the state, like Garo National Liberation Army (GNLA) and Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC).”

Arunachal Pradesh

Historically Arunachal Pradesh has remained relatively a peaceful state as compared to the other North Eastern states. But the proximity of the state with Myanmar and Nagaland border is gradually afflicting insurgency in recent time. The only case of indigenous insurgency movement in Arunachal Pradesh was the rise of the Arunachal Dragon Force (ADF), which was rechristened as East India Liberation Front (EALF) in 2001.⁸

6. Drishti IAS, *North East Insurgency*, DRISTI, (2019, May 10), (last visited April 02, 2021), <https://www.drishtias.com/to-the-points/paper3/north-east-insurgency>

7. Nehginpao Kipgen, *The fractious demand for ILP in Manipur*, THE HINDU (e-paper Chennai), March 29, 2016, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/columns/comment-article-of-nehginpao-kipgen-the-fractious-demand-for-ilp-in-manipur/article7583276.ece>

8. Ibid (6)

Change of Forms

Evidences show that the Militant groups over time change their form. The huge financial flow for purchase of arms change the original ideology of these groups. They behave as purely terrorist entities without having any ideology or objectives. Reports of infighting among the militant groups and attack on innocent tribal population became frequent in these operations. "In Nagaland, most fatalities are recorded as a result of the infighting between the two factions of the N.S.C.N., rather than from government forces. Militant outfits in Tripura, the National Liberation Front of Tripura (N.L.F.T.) and the All Tripura Tiger Force espousing the tribal cause have indulged in a number of attacks on the tribal population."⁹

Military Operations and AFSPA

Under Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) special powers were bestowed on armed forces to deal with emergency conditions. It is there in the whole of Assam, Nagaland, most of Manipur, and some areas of Arunachal Pradesh. Several Military operations in these states to neutralize the militancy have taken place in these states in the past. For Example in Mizoram the army launched air strikes to neutralize the M.N.K. cadres though it had resulted in many fatalities and subsequent displacement in civilian population. Similarly, two military operations, Operation Rhino and Bajrang, had taken place in Assam during 1990s against U.L.F.A. militants. Assam rifle has been given the task to deal with insurgents in Assam. The pro-active role of the Central government has drastically reduced tension in these areas. While there is almost no insurgency left in Tripura and Mizoram, there has been a marked improvement in other States of the region. The lifting of the AFSPA from all areas of Meghalaya on 31st March 2018 is an indication of restoration of normalcy in the North Eastern region. "In Arunachal Pradesh also, areas under AFSPA have been reduced from 16 PS/Outposts areas bordering Assam to 8 Police Stations, besides Tirap, Changlang and Longding districts."¹⁰

The combined operation of the army, state police and the paramilitary forces have brought down militancy in these areas. "Military operations in Mizoram, where the army reportedly launched air strikes to neutralize the M.N.F. cadres, resulted in several fatalities and displacement among the civilian population. Military operations in Nagaland, too, resulted in civilian fatalities and large-scale displacement. In Assam, in the beginning of the 1990s, two military operations, Operation Rhino and Operation Bajrang, were launched against U.L.F.A. militants. These forced U.L.F.A. to move out of the state and even outside the country. However, such operations have not been able to post conclusive gains against militancy in any of the states."¹¹

9. Drishti IAS, *North East Insurgency*, DRISTI, (2019, May 10), (last visited April 02, 2021), <https://www.drishtiiias.com/to-the-points/paper3/north-east-insurgency>

10. Sanjay Kumar, *The Origins and Causes of Insurgency in Northeast India*, May 3, 2018, *Geopolitics*, <https://thegeopolitics.com/the-origins-and-causes-of-insurgency-in-northeast-india/>

11. *Ibid* (9)

Peace Talks

Peace talks at several points of time have been initiated by the Central government to resolve the issue. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi had initiated such talks with the militant students of Assam, the separatist Mizo National Front (MNF) and the Tribal National Volunteers of Tripura. Dialogue with the M.N.F. finally culminated in ending militancy in Mizoram in 1986. Other peace deals such as the Shillong Accord in 1975 with the N.N.C. in Nagaland, the 1988 agreement with the Tripura National Volunteers in Tripura and The Bodoland Autonomous Council agreement of 1993 with the Bodo militants in Assam were also effective to some extent. The process of peace talk is still going on. “Whereas ceasefire agreements with different groups have led to a reduction in the militancy-related fatalities in their respective states, the Union government has not been able to carve out a road map toward a situation of permanent agreement.”¹²

Role of the Neighbours

It has been alleged by the Government of India that these Militants are being provided with all kinds of support by the neighbouring countries like China, Myanmar, Pakistan etc. despite the fact that these militant outfits have originated from the Northeastern states itself. Pakistan, through its intelligence agency the I.S.I., is believed to have assisted the militant groups in terms of training and finance. China too has provided assistance to groups such as the N.S.C.N. in the 1980s. The militant leaders have confessed to have traveled to China and secured help for their movements.

Bhutan is the only neighbouring country which has helped India by dislodging several militant camps of the northeastern groups through a military operation launched in December 2003. “A number of cadres of U.L.F.A., N.D.F.B. and the Kamatapur Liberation Organization, an outfit operating in the North Bengal area, stationed in the country since the early 1990s, were either arrested or were forced to flee following the operation launched after several reminders by the Bhutanese authorities failed to force the militants exit.”¹³

Bangladesh has been providing support and shelter to most of the separatist groups namely, Nagas, Mizos, Meiteis, Tripuris, etc. Since the 1980s, Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) has also used Bangladesh to establish contact with some of the rebel groups from Northeast India. “Surrendered insurgents have said the ISI has encouraged them to take on economic targets such as oil refineries and depots, gas pipelines, rail tracks and road bridges. By the early 1980s, the whole region was gripped by large-scale violence. There were fierce riots in Tripura and Assam. Separatist movements intensified in Mizoram, Nagaland and Manipur, later spreading to both Assam and Tripura.”¹⁴

12. SuhridSankar Chattopadhyay, *A Ruthless Hit Squad*, Frontline (Chennai) January 16, 2004, Cover Page, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/cover-story/article30220752.ece>

13. SubirBhaumik, *Insurgencies in India’s Northeast: Conflict, Co-option & Change*, Jul. 1, 2007, East-West Centre, https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep06478?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents

14. Drishti IAS, *North East Insurgency*, DRISTI, (2019, May 10), (last visited April 02, 2021), <https://www.drishtias.com/to-the-points/paper3/north-east-insurgency>

Consequences of Violence

Militancy in northeast has not only resulted in many civilians fatalities, but also resulted in stalling the prospect of economic activities in these states. It has also failed to link the economy of the northeast with the neighbouring Southeast Asian countries. Despite its scenic beauties, tourism industry suffered the worst like that of Kashmir, due to the spurt in militant activities in the region. Fear of extortion by the militant groups on the national highways has blocked the movement of goods and labour from one state to another creating shortage of essentials goods and hence high prices of essential commodities. The future of the children and youth are affected due to the impact of militancy on education sector. Threat of militant attacks lead to frequent closing of schools, colleges and other institutions involved in educational activities which makes the future of the younger generation uncertain.¹⁵

Though militancy has been curbed in many states due to military operation by the government, absence of initiatives for economic development continue to alienate the people from the mainstream. The region still suffers from the indifferent attitude of the Governments both at the Centre as well as at the States. No attention has also given by the national or the international media on various issues of the area.¹⁶

Administrative Arrangements

Various administrative arrangements are made for all round development of the region. The Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER) was established in 2001 to function as the Central Government's nodal agency to deal with all socio-economic developmental activities including those relating to the planning, execution and monitoring of development schemes and projects in the region assigned to various agencies and councils constituted for the purpose.¹⁷ Respecting the sentiments of the native population, restrictions are imposed on the entry of outsiders to states of Mizoram, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh and outsiders are not allowed without ILP.

¹⁵ Sanjay Kumar, *The Origins and Causes of Insurgency in Northeast India*, THE GEOPOLITICS, (May 03, 2018), <https://thegeopolitics.com/the-origins-and-causes-of-insurgency-in-northeast-india/>

¹⁶ Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region, *About Ministry*, Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region, Govt. of India, <https://mdoner.gov.in/>

Suggestions

To stop insurgency in Northeast, a couple of measures need to be taken. Effort should be made to not only curb militancy through combined military operation, efforts to link the northeast with the mainland should be done at the earliest and the feeling of alienation of the native population should be changed by bringing good governance, development and jobs. Some of the concrete measures that need to be taken for bringing back normalcy in this region are given below.

- Improvement of communication and connectivity, infrastructure development for better integration of the region with the mainland.
- Greater coordination between central forces and state forces for better tactical response.
- Scope to be created for cultural interaction with the mainland and greater holistic inclusive development.
- Decentralization with greater administrative power to the states to take care of regional aspirations, improvement of administrative efficiency, good governance, etc.
- The judicial machinery in the states should also be strengthened for quick disposal of cases relating to insurgency and militancy.
- A close watch on the porous borders connecting the neighbouring countries that support insurgency should be kept.

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