# Insurgency in North East

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1. Historical Background

- India’s North east region has been land of thousand mutinies. These mutinies have been taking place since pre-independence times. The insurgencies in north east are a reflection of its social, cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity, politico-economic conditions, historical evolution and changes in the environment of the area.
- This is reflected in the pattern of conflicts, which are varied in their nature and causes and the stance of insurgent groups which remain divergent and ever changing. These range from secession to autonomy, movements against foreigners and immigrants, ethnic integration and reaction to perceived imposition of Indianness. The common factor is resorting to violence in articulation and mobilization of the demands.

Conflicts in the region can be broadly grouped under the following categories:

- **National conflicts**: Involving concept of a distinct ‘homeland’ as a separate nation and pursuit of the realization of that goal by use of various methods both violent as well as non violent. Ex: ULFA demand for sovereign Asom, NSCN for Greater Nagaland.
- **Ethnic conflicts**: Involving assertion of numerically smaller and less dominant tribal groups against the political and cultural hold of the dominant tribal group. In Assam this also takes the form of tension between local and migrant communities.
- **Sub-regional conflicts**: Involving movements which ask for recognition of sub-regional aspirations and often come in direct conflict with the State Governments or even the autonomous Councils. Ex: UPDS in Assam.

**General conditions favoring Insurgency**:

- 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.
- Porous international borders and easy availability of arms.
- Difficult terrain and weak infrastructure facilitating insurgents involved in conflict.
- Deep sense of alienation due to human right violation and excesses by security forces.

2. Reasons for conflicts (State-wise)

**Assam**:

- Today there are a number of extremist outfits led by the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). The reasons discussed above have been exploited by the ULFA to instill insecurity among the population and thus mobilize support. However, large scale criminalisation of ULFA cadres in the 1990s and its links with foreign agencies and several volte face in negotiations with government has led to rapid loss of public support.
  - After the crackdown by the Bhutanese Army, ULFA has weakened though the organisation still does kidnappings, bomb blasts and selective murder of migrant workers.
- Another major ethnic conflict in the State is the grievance against the perceived influx of ‘foreigners’ i.e. people with a language and culture substantially different from the Assamese. It can be traced to the early years of the last century when the migration into the region began. Still later, growing unemployment, fragmentation of land and the war for the liberation of Bangladesh encouraged a renewed influx resulting in resentment among the Assamese.
  - While both the Union and State Governments have accorded priority to the process of detection and deportation of illegal migrants, the issue continues to simmer with the ‘original’ inhabitants claiming that for ‘vote bank politics’ effective steps are not being taken, while people sharing the religious-linguistic profile of the ‘foreigners’ claim that they are harassed and unreasonably forced to “prove”
their Indian citizenship. In 2012, Assam experienced widespread rioting between Bodos and Bengali speaking Muslims.

- Capitalizing on the migrant fear a Movement was started by Bodo tribes and insurgent organisation like National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) demanding a separate sovereign Bodoland while others like Bodo Liberation Tiger (BLT) have been demanding a separate state. In response to their demands, a tripartite Bodo Accord was signed between the BLT, centre and the Assam government, and Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) was formed within the state of Assam that provided great autonomy and constitutional protection under sixth schedule.

**Manipur:**

- One fourth of Manipur (which is the valley), is home to more than seventy per cent of its population which predominantly consists of the culturally distinct Meitei community. The State was ruled by Meitei rulers. There was resentment among Meiteis about the merger of the State with the Union, which led to the Meitei insurgency from the 1960s. Also, Meitei influence declined in the socio-economic spheres after Independence as tribals came into the forefront largely due to reservations.
- Tribals account for around thirty per cent of the State's population and broadly belong to Naga, Kuki-Chin and Mizo groups. Insurgency in Nagaland and Mizoram also spilled over to the State. While the Meiteis are Hindus, tribals are mostly Christians.
- There is considerable tension among the tribes themselves over land and boundaries and violence between Nagas and Kukis took a toll of more than 2000 lives during the 1990s.
- The progress of talks between the Union Government and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-IM (NSCN-IM) has reduced violence in Naga areas. The assurance to safeguard the ‘territorial integrity of Manipur’ has resulted in comparative peace on this score.
- In the southern parts of the state some tribes have been waging violent struggles partly for local hegemony and partly for their own enclave in the form of a Union Territory. District Councils in the Hill areas are non-functional since 1985 as most of the tribal communities want these Councils to be brought under the Sixth Schedule. This demand is vociferously opposed by Valley people.

In short, Manipur continues to be an active arena for a multiplicity of violent conflicts. Further lack of industrialization and economic development has not helped either.

**Nagaland:**

The word "Naga" denotes a conglomeration of ethnic tribes living on the Himalayan Range in North East India and Burma. Naga people have been demanding (from the time of British) that they should not be made a part of union of India. Nagaland became the epicenter of this movement.

Dominant insurgent group NSCN has carried the most violent insurgency activities in the past. Disagreement over talks with the government led to split of NSCN into Issac-Muviah and Kaplan faction. NSCN (IM) agreed to ceasefire in 1997. However, the Kaplan faction still resorts to violence.

**TRIPURA:**

- Demographic profile of Tripura was altered in 1947 when mass migrations from the newly emerged East Pakistan converted it from a largely tribal area to one with a majority of Bengali speaking plainsmen. Tribals were deprived of their agricultural lands and driven to the forests. The resultant tensions caused major violence and widespread terror with the tribal dominated Tripura National Volunteers (TNV) emerging as one of the most violent extremist outfits.
- Insurgency in Mizoram also spilled over in state. However, effective decentralisation in the ‘non-scheduled areas’, bringing tribal areas within the purview of an autonomous ‘Sixth Schedule’ Council, successful land reforms and systematic promotion of agriculture have contributed to considerable conflict reduction.

**MEGHALAYA:** Meghalaya is fortunately free from violence of the intensity that prevails in many other parts of the region. Except violence against ‘outsiders’ particularly the Bengali speaking linguistic minority, there have been no major problems in the State.
ARUNACHAL PRADESH: Arunachal Pradesh has remained peaceful after the cease-fire with NSCN which was active in Tirap District. The policies initiated under the guidance of Verrier Elwin (a noted anthropologist) in the 1950s have resulted in considerable cohesion in the area with Hindi emerging as its lingua franca. There was some disquiet with the settlement of relatively more enterprising Chakma refugees from Bangladesh in the State in large numbers which appears to have subsided. However growing income disparities and constriction of employment opportunities still have the potential to threaten the peace in the area.

MIZORAM: Mizoram with its history of violent insurgency and its subsequent return to peace is an example to all other violence affected States. Apathy shown by central government in the dreadful famine of 1959 led to resentment and Mizo National Front (MNF) started a violent movement. However after an ‘accord’ between the Union Government and the Mizo National Front in 1986 and conferment of statehood the next year, complete peace and harmony prevails in Mizoram. The State is recognised as having done a commendable job in the implementation of development programmes and making agriculture remunerative.

3. Recent developments

Assam
- Currently, one faction of ULFA (Arabinda Rajkhowa) is talking with government and they have dropped their demand of sovereignty. However another faction led by Paresh Barua has rejected the talks.
- Assam has been affected by insurgent movements initiated by Karbi and Dimasa tribes, the Adivasis and also the Islamists. Karbi and Dimasas have demanded autonomy for their homelands whereas the Adivasis have demanded greater recognition of their rights. Many small outfits like ‘Dima Halam Daogah’ have also started demanding autonomy in their areas.
- Violence in 2012 on communal lines and recent protests for complete statehood post Telanagana formation has kept the region disturbed. Bodos are not satisfied as their complete demand of statehood has not been met while other communities inhabiting the region resent the dominance of Bodos, thus peace remains fragile.
- Assam also faces challenge on Maoist front. Maoist presence has been noticed in Assam and border areas of Arunachal Pradesh and several maoist leaders have been arrested from Assam.
- In light of above factors government has imposed AFSPA in Assam and continues to be in force.

Manipur:
- In Manipur three Meitei insurgent groups signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the government of India and the state government and joined the peace process.
- After few months of protests of Meitei for Inner Line Permit system to prevent "outsiders" from buying land or settling in the state, the state assembly passed three bills to give more rights to indigenous groups. This was followed by counter protests by the Kukis and Nagas to withdraw the bills resulting in violence and deaths. The tribal groups claim that the new bills, would allow Meiteis to buy land in the hill districts of Manipur where the Nagas and Kukis live. Further they argue that these bills were passed without consulting them. This has led to a tense situation till now.
- NSCN (IM) in its recent peace accord with has given up its demand for Greater Nagaland providing much relief to the Manipuris. But the Khaplan faction still continues to resort to violence and was involved in the attack on the Indian Army along with ULFA and Bodo groups in Manipur in June killing 20 jawans. This was followed by India’s hot pursuit in the Myanmar territory killing about 50 terrorists.

Nagaland:
- NSCN (IM) has recently signed a peace accord with the government and given up its demand for ‘Greater Nagaland’ and vowed allegiance to the constitution of India. The details of the accord are yet to come in public domain.
- Government of India has also made clear that existing boundaries of states will not be altered. But, government is talking with only NSCN (IM) which is not the only representatives of Nagas. Majority of the
Nagas have their own resentment towards Delhi which according to them is pampering a few gun-toting men with little resonance with broad Naga family.

**Tripura:**

- The changing religious composition of tribal groups (particularly, the Jamatias) is giving rise to newer tensions with apprehension of increased inter-tribal conflicts.
- While the tribal non-tribal clashes are on the decline, there is growing resentment among the tribals due to the restrictions on their ‘freedom to use’ the forests and their nominal participation in district development.
- Despite impressive strides made by the State in the last decade lack of economic opportunities and improper connectivity has made situation fragile.
- As a result of Land Boundary Agreement with Bangladesh two disputed land problems with Bangladesh border in Tripura will be resolved.

**Meghalaya:**

Illegal migration from Bangladesh continues to be a sensitive issue.

- The Garo National Liberation Army (GNLA) formed in 2009 is fighting for a 'sovereign Garoland' in the Western areas of Meghalaya. It has links with other militant outfits like ULFA and NDBF. It was involved in violence against security forces last year.

**4. Role of neighboring countries**

**Bhutan:** Bhutan has cooperated with India in uprooting the militant groups from its soil. Sustained action by Bhutan against groups like ULFA, NDBF, BLTF etc has eliminated their support and operations from Bhutan.

**Nepal:** Nepal has co-operated with India in carrying out covert operations in targeting any anti-Indian activity on its soil.

**Bangladesh:** Current government of Bangladesh has been very keen in improving relations with India. The Government has been cooperating with Indian Intelligence in flushing out militants in its territory. It has arrested many terrorists of ULFA, NSCN, BNDF etc and deported them to India.

Signing of LBA will address the issue of porous border and related smuggling of arms and drugs and infiltration.

However, illegal migration from Bangladesh continues to pose a challenge to internal security which needs to be addressed by our neighbor.

**Myanmar:** Many terrorist groups including NSCN (K) continue to operate from Myanmar. Myanmar is itself facing tribal insurgency. Indian militant groups have made a common cause with these fringe groups. Some of these have signed ceasefire with Burmese government including NSCN (K). Despite many efforts Myanmar has failed to take satisfactory action against Indian militant groups. As a result of ambush of Indian army in June, India conducted a hot pursuit in the territory of Myanmar to kill militants. However, this disclosure has put the Myanmar government in the dock and raised questions whether the operation had tacit approval of the government. However, disclosure of such operations by Indian authorities is immature as we have foreclosed the option of a covert operation from the Myanmar’s soil in the future.
5. Way Forward

Although varying in their demands and methods, there is a common thread running through the insurgency infested north-east, that is of identity and development. Hence, some solutions that are common need to be explored with specifics derived from them for specific regions and groups.

- Meeting the political aspirations of groups by giving them autonomy. Implementing sixth schedule provisions in these areas will help them to preserve their identity and culture while giving them greater autonomy.
- Economic development of the area in a calibrated manner. Any development should be sustainable and should have the participation and acceptance by the locals.
- Improving Governance and delivery mechanisms of the government and administration.
- The pre-condition of complete abjuring of violence for holding peace talks is a flawed notion. If violence is discarded and peace is established then the need of peace talks become futile. Dialogue should be ongoing process to reach concrete solutions by involving all the stakeholders and not a single group.
- Coordinating operations with the neighboring countries and use of force only when needed. Draconian laws like AFSPA should be repealed as it is one of the causes for inflating insurgency in north east.
- Rebel groups must also be more pragmatic by seeking greater autonomy within the constitutional mandate rather than demanding newer states and regions based on ever narrowing ethnic and linguistic identities, which are beyond acceptance.
- Centre and states should coordinate in decision making. In the recent agreement of the Centre with NSCN (IM), it did not take concerned state governments and other groups on board. It should be avoided.
- State police and central forces should cooperate on intelligence sharing, investigation and operations against militants. It has been alleged by the army that the June ambush of the army became possible because state police did not share the intelligence about the attack with it. It is unfortunate and counter-productive.