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Purusottam Nayak and P.R. Bhattacharjee

North Eastern Hill University, Assam University

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Vicious Circle of Insurgency and Underdevelopment in North East India

P.R. Bhattacharjee and Purusottam Nayak

Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to assess the nexus between insurgency and underdevelopment in North East India. To achieve this end first various dimensions of insurgencies towards achievement of different goals in different states in the region are narrated. The impact of insurgency on infrastructure, industry including petroleum and tea, and environment are then analyzed. The origin and persistent existence of ethnic separatism in the form of insurgency is explained through the theory of Cooperative Conflicts. The authors state that it is not easy to break the vicious circle of insurgency and underdevelopment. The problem cannot be tackled solely by administrative, political or economic measures in isolation. It requires a holistic approach and a great deal of patience and understanding of the specific problems of different socio-cultural-ethnic groups. Since conflict between equity and efficiency is very sharp in the region, development projects must have social approval at the grass-root level given the diversities of population. Besides, projects must be ecologically sustainable. Centrally allocated fund to the region need to be matched by significant amount of resource generation at local levels in order to make the ethnic groups realize the hazards of wasteful expenditure and the sense of responsibility towards nation building.

The Insurgent Groups: North East India comprising the seven States of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura has earned the dubious distinction for persistent underdevelopment and growing insurgency. The fire of insurgency has been engulfing the region in such a way that there seems to be existence of a parallel authority of the insurgents in many parts of the region as rampant abductions, extortions and killings go on unabated. Consequently, normal life is often paralysed and all initiatives including the socio-economic ones are increasingly crippled as an air of fear and uncertainty pervades the region.

Nagaland has been the epicenter of insurgency in the North East. The Naga leader, A.Z. Phizo raised the banner of revolt at the very dawn of Indian independence, claiming that Nagaland had never been a part of India. Although the sub national State of Nagaland was created in 1963 in order to fulfill the political aspiration of the Nagas, the flame of Naga insurgency could never be doused effectively and now it affects almost all the North Eastern States in general and Manipur, Assam and Nagaland in particular as the Naga insurgent outfits aim at political union and independence of all the territories claimed to be Naga-dominated areas and as these outfits are providing help and training to the insurgents in other States also. The National Socialist Council of Nagaland formed in 1980 (now split into two factions) is the most formidable insurgent outfit in the region.

In Assam, the insurgency has grown out of mass movement over the foreigners' issue starting in 1979. The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) which has been committing terrorist acts with their avowed objectives of forming independent Assam has created a serious internal security hazard. The Bodos are also up in arms under the leadership of the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB). In the North Cachar District of Assam, the Dimasas Halam (DHD) is engaged in insurgency activities. While the declared political ambition of the Bodos is for separate statehood under the Indian Union to attain independence, the objective of DHD is not explicitly made known. Thus, Assam faces a very complicated problem of insurgency.

Manipur is plagued by triple problems. The valley faces the insurgency of the Meitei extremists while the hill areas are affected by depredations by the Naga militants on the one hand and inter-tribal clashes between the Nagas and Kukis on the other. The more prominent outfits operating in Manipur are the People's Liberation Army (PLA), People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK), Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP), Kuki National Organisation (KNO/KDF) and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) (Singh, 2000).

In Tripura, the tribal-non-tribal socio-economic divide has been generating dissension from the very dawn of the State's accession to the Indian Union in 1948. Although socio-economic development of Tripura has traditionally been associated with immigration, the massive influx of the non-tribal refugees from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in the wake of the division of India in 1947 reduced the tribal people into a minority constituting less than one third of the population. As most of the immigrants settled in rural areas, the pressure of population on land was tremendous. The sense of being progressively marginalized gave rise to tribal insurgency in the State. In the 1980s the Tripura National Volunteers (TNV) was a formidable tribal terrorist outfit spreading hatred against the non-tribal and it was mainly responsible for the riots that took place in June 1980. At present there are about 20 tribal insurgent groups in Tripura, the two prominent ones being the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) and the All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF). In the recent past the non-tribal are also being involved in anti-tribal violent activities (Ganguly, 1999).

Mizoram experienced rebellion of the Mizos under the leadership of Mr. Laldenga. But after the Mizo Accord of 1986, there has been no major wave of insurgency in the State. None the less, inter-tribe conflicts and suspicion against the non-tribal are not altogether absent in the State.

Meghalaya has been free from insurgent activities. However, for the last few years Hiniutrap Liberation Council (HNLC) has been organizing disruptive activities in the State on certain occasions in spite of the fact that they do not have mass support. Recently some NGOs and other organizations are joining hands to pressurize the state government through violent means in order to introduce Inner Line Permit (ILP) system for preventing inter-state migration of laborers.

Even Arunachal Pradesh which can be regarded as an island of peace in the whole of the North Eastern Region is not totally free from trouble. The local tribal people refuse to allow the Chakmas to be absorbed in the State's population. A rising trend of ethnic separatism is also absorbed in the State.

Insurgency and Economy: As security is the primary infrastructure of economic activities and social stability and certainty about future are the essential prerequisite of investment, the persistent insurgency atmosphere has been the most important contributor to economic stagnation of the region. It is to be noted that the gateway to the North Eastern Region is the chicken's neck of Siliguri area in North Bengal and all flows to and from the Region on the surface routes have to pass through this neck and the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam, Guwahati being the grand nodal point. Therefore, any disturbance in the Brahmaputra Valley and/or its adjoining hills brings the activities in the whole of the Region to a stand-still position. Also, there is important spill-over effect of insurgency in one State on the contiguous States. Therefore, the problem has to be viewed and tackled in an integrated manner considering its regional external effects, uniformity in its basic nature and also the linkage between the insurgent outfits of different States.

So far as the economy of the North Eastern Region is concerned, the first casualty of insurgency has been its already weak infrastructure especially, its transport system. The subversive activities of the insurgents' damage rail tracks, cause accidents leading to loss of life and property, create terror among the travelers and throw the entire system out of gear. Similarly, vehicles in the State and National highways are often attacked, passengers and transport workers are killed or wounded and sometimes abducted for ransom; and goods are looted. As the region suffers from geographical isolation and faces ravages of Nature in the form of floods and landslides during monsoon, the insurgents' attack on the transport artery represents the last straw on the camel's back.

The next important target of the insurgents is the resource-based industries like petroleum and tea which form the core of the modern organised sector in the region. As the articulated economic grievance hovers around the idea of so called regional colonialism based on the alleged drain of rich resources of the region, any violent political movement makes petroleum and tea as its target. Oil pipelines are often blown up by the insurgents, tea gardens are targeted for extortion and sometimes, tea garden executives are abducted. Tea gardens constitute the soft targets of the insurgents as these are in the vicinity of forests and away from the populous localities.

It is easy to understand that disrupting industrial activities centering on petroleum and tea are bound to block the wheel of progress in the region. The attack of the insurgents on tea and petroleum is bound to convey negative signal to the prospective investors. The potential of using gas reserve of the region will also be seriously hampered because of insurgency situation. It may be pointed out that in the post-liberalization period there is fierce competition between the States for attracting domestic and foreign investments. In this race, the North East which is lagging behind will face further hurdles.

The third, but first from long term point of view, victim of insurgency in the region is environment. On the one hand, insurgents damage forests by taking shelter there and on the other, anti-insurgency operations also lead to denudation of forests. This not only means that conservation activities and other forestry operations are hampered thus resulting in the loss of valuable natural resources but also that a grave threat is posed to the fragile ecology of the region.

Fourthly, insurgency has created serious problems for development of the interior areas. As is well known, the North East is predominantly a ruralised region characterized in many parts by hilly terrain and sparsely populated inaccessible and isolated human habitations. It is extremely difficult to build up rural infrastructure like roads and communication links, power grid, irrigation arrangements etc. It is also equally difficult to build up and administer schools, hospitals, agricultural extension centers etc in such a condition. In other words, rural-urban economic interaction in the hilly and interior areas of the North East has to cross a number of hurdles. The insurgency has aggravated the problem to such an extent that development workers of both the Government and NGOs are utterly discouraged from going to the hilly and rural areas as they face constant extortions and threats of abduction or death. Consequently, insurgency is pushing the backward areas of the region to the darkness of greater underdevelopment and is acting as a

retarding force rendering disservice to rural poor especially the indigenous people whose causes they are suppose to uphold.

Economic development involves structural changes and organisation of new economic activities with new techniques of production. Participation of development organizers, experts and even workers from outside the traditional social boundaries becomes indispensable in the circumstances. The insurgents by breeding a cult of hatred against the supposed or real outsiders are blocking all inflows of resources, ideas, expertise and initiative to the societies of the North East. This is bound to tell upon the future of the region. It is a contradiction to grumble about the state of underdevelopment on the one hand and target the agents of development on the other in the name of protecting the interest of indigenous people. Why is this contradiction generated in the behaviour pattern of the insurgents? Surely, the insurgents cannot be regarded simply as disruptionists as they undoubtedly command some amount of popular support directly or indirectly as they get food, shelter and other assistances in their societies and as they derive inspiration from the autonomy movement in the region. In fact, the insurgents may be regarded to represent the violent stream of the ethnic separatist movement having roots in the socio-economic-political grievances. So, their behaviour-pattern has to be analysed with the help of social theories which is attempted in the following section.

Insurgency and Social Theory: The origin and persistent existence of ethnic separatism as expressed in the form of insurgency may be explained in terms of Amartya Sen's concept of *Cooperative Conflicts*. According to Dréze and Sen (1999: p.11) "In the social relations that inter-alia determines the entitlements enjoyed by different people, there tend to be a coexistence of conflict and congruence of interests. There are in most situations, clear advantages to be gained by different people through co-operation with each other and yet there are also elements of conflicts reflecting the partly divergent interests of the same people. Co-operative conflicts refer to this co-existence of congruence and conflict of interests providing grounds for co-operation as well as for disputes and battles."

Co-operative conflicts may be illustrated from many different fields of social relations. An illustration provided by Dréze and Sen is as follows: Consider the relation between workers and industrialists in a particular industry. If production is disrupted, both the industrialists and the workers may lose, so that it is in the interest of both to cooperate with each other in the process of production. Bu the division of benefits obtained from production may also involve an extensive

tussle between the industrialists and the workers. Another illustration of the working of the theory of cooperative conflict is provided by the relation between different members of a family where cooperation is essential for living together and yet conflict arises in sharing of benefits.

The theory of cooperative conflict is suitable for explaining the insurgency and social dissensions in the North East. On the face of it, insurgency is organised against the Central Government located in New Delhi and the States are targeted because of their link with dependence on the Government of India. The non-indigenous elements of population who are considered as 'outsiders' to the region are also made the targets of attack. But the main grievance arises out of the iniquitous character of the development process which in spite of some measures of welfares for the indigenous people here and there has not been able to tackle their basic problems effectively.

On the one hand, the centralized character of planning has deprived the indigenous people of any meaningful say in determining the nature and contents of development (thus frustrating their aspiration for autonomy), on the other, the predominance of the tertiary sector led by the Government Administration and creation of scattered and a few resource-based industrial islands have left little scope for participation of the indigenous people in the development process and have seriously restricted their entitlements. Therefore, they do not find much gain in cooperating with the Government and the so-called outsiders in promoting development. Neither political stability nor economic development in the present milieu seems to have relevance to their interest as these aims at the development of the geographical areas constituting the North Eastern Region without ensuring significant uplift of the poorest of the poor who constitute the bulk of the indigenous population.

Therefore, although cooperation between different sections of the people and between the people and the Government could lead to development of the region, the political conscious among the indigenous people have chosen the path of non cooperation and violent disruption. What appears to be revolt against the Government of India for attaining either sovereignty or enlarged autonomy is actually a violent expression of grievance against a political and economic structure in which the indigenous people have little share in policy making and from which they do not benefit to the extent as would have satisfied their expectation.

The turmoil is also a result of lack of co-operation between different sections of population. The broad pattern of social dissension takes the form of indigenous versus the non-indigenous or tribal

versus non-tribal or autochthones versus immigrants. But even within the different sections of autochthones, areas of conflict exist as all of them compete for scarce resources like cultivable land, use of forests, lakes and streamlets for economic purposes in a relatively stationary economic perspective.

While in a broad sense the problem of insurgency emanates from underdevelopment, it is the peculiar features of underdevelopment and development in the North East that are crucially important for understanding the causes of insurgency in this region. It is the distribution of burden of underdevelopment and costs and benefits of development among the different sections of the population that are causing dissensions and consequence revolt.

What has been stated in the foregoing paragraphs may well be illustrated with the help of experiences of different States in the region. Let us take the case of Tripura (Ganguly, 1983 & Bhattacharjee, 1993). Economic development of Tripura has been historically associated with immigration from the areas which now constitute Bangladesh. After the partition, refugee rehabilitation made the tribal, the autochthones minority in the State. Much of the political grievances of the tribal and the consequent tribal insurgency are ascribed to this factor. But the present state of affairs could be definitely avoided or at least mitigated if in the post-independence period the tribal economy of the State could be effectively linked with the relatively dynamic segment of economic structure of the State.

The tribal people found that as economic development gathered momentum; they were losing their traditional rights on forests and other natural resources. They also found that they would have extremely limited scope for wet rice farming if they opted for it by giving up shifting cultivation as arable land had already been scarce. They had little role to play in tea plantation industry as it had its own immigrant labour force. The tertiary led by public administration offered some scope to the educated tribal but their participation in this sector was limited by tardy progress in education and attainment of technical and entrepreneurial skill. The potential resource-based industries using natural gas also did not mean much for them.

Naturally they could pin their hope only on the primary sector consisting of agriculture, horticulture, forestry, animal husbandry and fishery etc. Rubber plantation undertaken on family basis could be a growth-booster for the tribal society. But the relatively long gestation period, the skill gap, distrust of the market (generated by the past bitter experience of exploitation) and the urge for producing own food prevented the tribal people from taking advantage of it in a

meaningful scale. Consequently, the tribal were left to the '*jhumia-cum-peasant*' or '*pure jhumia*' status (*Jhumia* refers to shifting cultivator). As they lagged behind, the anger accumulated finally bursting into insurgency.

Assam, the major State of the region has been a classic example of economic development deeply influenced by exogenous factors. Development of Assam has been accompanied with massive immigration caused by both economic and political factors (Goswami, 1988). Her demography has a truly plural character consisting of the following broad social groups:

- (a) Assamese-speaking Hindus
- (b) Assamese-speaking Muslims
- (c) Bengali-speaking Hindus
- (d) Bengali-speaking Muslims
- (e) Indigenous Plains Tribes
- (f) Indigenous Hill Tribes
- (g) Nepalese Settlers
- (h) Population historically linked to Tea Plantation having heterogeneous religious ethnic and linguistic origin
- (i) Businessmen, public servants etc coming from other States of India and
- (j) Others.

Of these groups, the Assamese-speaking Hindus and Muslims with a sizeable middle class have been the dominant group politically. The anti-foreigners agitation mainly aimed against the immigrants from East Pakistan was led by people from this group. The movement was apparently organised to protect the socio-cultural, economic and political interest of the indigenous population. But its economic roots lay in the economic stagnation of the State resulting in the fierce competition among the middle class people belonging to different linguistic groups (especially, the Assamese and Bengalese) for government jobs on the one hand and increasing pressure of population in the State in general and its valleys in particular. Later on, the formidable extremist outfit named ULFA was born with its avowed objective of secession from the Indian Union. Gradually, the wrath of extremists also targeted the businessmen hailing from other States of India and the consequence is a threat to the very future of economic development of Assam.

It is to be noted that the plains and hill tribal people of Assam do not fully feel themselves identified with the movement led by the Assamese-speaking middle class. It is because of this that they have separatist movements of their own like the Bodo insurgency and political movements in the Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills districts. The different segments of the population of

Assam thus have their sectarian interests and their co-operative conflict ultimately expresses itself as a revolt against the local and central political establishments.

In the case of Nagaland and Manipur, the problem of socio-cultural plurality in the population is not as intense as in Tripura and Assam. But the dualism involving the autochthones and the outsiders has gradually emerged as administrative infrastructure expanded and transport, communication and power development took place. The suspicion about the outsider and the peculiar coexistence of modernity and tradition (the former increasing consciousness about rights and the later forming walls of conservatism) made the indigenous people non cooperative with the central establishment. Thus, it is the failure of development policy to get concerted support from the population which has given rise to the insurgency problem.

The Way Ahead: It goes without saying that it is not easy to break the vicious circle of insurgency and underdevelopment existing in the North Eastern Region. It can be nobody's claim that the problems can be tackled solely by administrative, political or economic measures adopted in isolation. It requires not only a holistic approach but also a great deal of patience and understanding of the specific problems of different socio-cultural-ethnic groups residing in the region.

As we have already emphasized, socioeconomic pluralism and inequality in the participation of the development process generating cooperative conflict lie at the root of the insurgency in the North East. Therefore, the distinction between economic development of the geographical areas constituting the region and that of its backward sections must be borne in mind by all those who seek solution to the problem. The conflict between equity and efficiency is very sharp in the region. If equity especially inter-group equity (group referring to a distinct socio-cultural-ethnic identity) cannot be ensured, development effort will be thwarted by social revolt. Therefore, development projects must be such as is able to receive social approval at the grass-root level, given the diversities of population. This means that it must ensure the participation of the masses of all groups in the development process with reasonable equity in the distribution of costs and benefits.

If we agree on the basic feature of development policy noted above, it follows that modernization of the primary sector and a vigorous programme of rural development should be nucleus of all development efforts. Although the region is industrially backward, stress on conventional pattern of industrialization will do more harm than good as this would largely bypass the indigenous

masses at least in the short run. Instead, rural industries must be rejuvenated. If agriculture, animal husbandry, forestry etc are organised on modern lines there is scope for development of a number of processing industries in the region.

It may, however, be remembered that growth of a modern middle class and change in taste and preferences of even the rural people may stand in the way of reviving some of the traditional industries like the tribal loom looms and handlooms. Their place has to be taken by processing industries connected with agriculture, animal husbandry, horticulture and forestry and also service industries related to the rural infrastructure like irrigation, rural electrification, transport and communication, marketing etc. Family plantation units in rubber and tea backed by processing units at corporate level will increase the spread effect of these industries.

Another point to be stressed is that development in the North East must be ecologically sustainable and must not be eco-degrading. Even schemes for infrastructural development like construction of roads and railways and power projects must be so drafted as to involve minimal adverse effects on the ecology. Besides, special attention must be made while going for mining and cement industries. It must be remembered that in the North East the masses are overwhelmingly dependent on forests, rivers and other natural resources for their daily requirements. Even plans for environment protection must be chalked out with the consent of the people and keeping their interest in view (Ganguly, 1996).

Although statehood under the Indian federation cannot be granted to each sub-national group or each socio-cultural-ethnic entity their distinct identities must be respected. The best way to ensure decision-making power to different groups is to decentralize the political and economic administration. Federal principle should be followed not only in the Centre-State relation but also in the relation between the State Governments and local-level political-administrative units.

In the North East, the Panchayati Raj institutions, Autonomous District Councils, and Sub-State Regional Development Councils have not been able to achieve the objective of decentralization in decision-making process as they have lacked real power and modern outlook and efficiency (Datta Ray, 1999). Serious thought must be given to the task of developing a decentralized power structure not only in the North East but also in the whole of India if separatism is to be fought effectively. For the region it is indispensable that the fear of the indigenous masses regarding loss of freedom and identity must be removed.

Lastly, it must be driven home to the people of the North East that they can never attain real political power and development if they depend on the outside funding in all important schemes as at present. Even while accusing the Centre for neglecting the region one cannot deny the fact that most of the State Governments in the region are financially non-viable and they depend largely on the largesse of the Central Government for both plan and non-plan expenditure as evident from their annual budgets.

The way to achieve greater financial and political autonomy and to avoid non-priority expenditures or wastage is local resource generation for local development works. Of course, the resource-transfer from the Centre can never be totally dispensed with. But if Central resource-transfer is matched by significant amount of resource generation at local levels, it will not only reduce inequality and wastage in the region but will also give the people the real taste of political power.

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