



INSURGENCY AND THE QUESTION OF STABILITY IN ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

An insurgency is a violent, armed rebellion against government. In Assam various sub-national groups like ULFA, NDFB, DHD etc. seem to have been involved and involved for fulfilment of demands for safeguarding their identity, rights over land and resources. It has often been manifested as ethnic terrorism; sometimes, deliberate violence to advance their cause; sometimes, seen as proto-guerrilla terror acts directed against symbolic targets, designed largely to foster self identity as well as development. Whereas, stability for a country where there belongs to different communities, castes, religions, all recognize the fact of unity and integrity for much needed peace and security for development. Insurgency and stability are the two relative terms, though one challenges the other. The insurgency phenomenon has been hampering the process for a long period of time in Assam. The question for its emergence seems to have been the most enigmatic, most destructive; arguably second to none in terms of brutality, savagery, wanton callousness, scope of operation and in terms of challenges it posed to stability and integrity. The conflict dynamics ranges from autonomy to secession and from sponsored terrorism to ethnic violence; mostly generated due to continuous flow of illegal migrants across the borders. The failure of the government in safeguarding the interest of indigenous people by deporting illegal migrants brought obviously insurgency vis-a-vis the question of stability in the state. This paper tries to understand the root causes of insurgency problem in Assam and the concomitant stability problem for bringing permanent solution it created which hampers the socio-economic development in the light of focusing much needed harmony, peace and security in the state.

KEYWORDS : Insurgency, Problem, Question, Stability, Assam

INTRODUCTION:

An insurgency is a violent, armed rebellion against the government for fulfilment of demands, which may be based on ethnic or religious identity; waged by small, lightly armed bands practice guerrilla warfare from primarily rural or jungle camps. Insurgencies often manifested as ethnic terrorism; sometimes, deliberate violence by sub-national groups to advance their cause; sometimes, seen as proto-guerrilla terror acts directed against symbolic targets, designed largely to foster self identity as well as developments. Opposite to insurgency, stability means living in terror-free peace and prosperity without violence. It is a condition where, though individuals of a country belong to different communities, castes, religions; all of them recognize stability for equality, justice, liberty safeguarding the rights of all. So, insurgency and stability are the two relative terms, though one challenges the other. The insurgency in the state Assam hampers the process of socio-political stability for a long period of time. It seems to be the most enigmatic, most destructive; arguably second none in terms of brutality, savagery, wanton callousness, scope of operation and challenges it posed to stability and national integration with its emergence.

Instability is characterized by uncertain or volatile political circumstances, such as conflicts, operations, fear distractions or frequent changes in governments. It impacts business, entrepreneurship, innovations and socio-economic progress, and affects safety, stability, and the overall social environment of affected regions. The conflict dynamics challenging the stability of the state Assam ranges from insurgency for autonomy to secession, from ethnic clashes to state sponsored terrorism and from movement for deportation of illegal migrants to religious fundamentalism. It is generated due to perception of backwardness and identity questions of indigenous people mainly caused by continuous flow of illegal migrants across the borders since the British colonial rulers. The failure of the government in the free Indian constitutional system in safeguarding the interest of indigenous brought obviously insurgency vis-a-vis raised the question of instability in the region.

Objectives:

The basic objectives of this paper are to know the insurgency that challenges the stability in Assam; to evaluate and

highlight the implications of insurgent activities; and to offer measures of solutions by fostering stability to this ugly phenomenon on the basis of its findings.

Methodology:

The paper adopts both primary and secondary sources of data. Data obtained from secondary sources formed the bulk of its tool of assessment. A diverse source such as books, journal articles, newspapers, magazines, internet and observations has been the integral part of the paper. In analyzing and interpreting data the methods used have been historical and analytical bases.

RESULTS:

The multicultural polyglot state Assam has been facing the problem of insurgency out of the demands for sovereign or separate state or Autonomous Councils since long past. Various ethnic groups had started movements of self assertion for identity crisis and some have supported insurgency to press their demands. The transitions of ethnic movements to insurgency have several backgrounds. The naxalite movement of the 1960s identified the Indian states as a 'prison-house of nationalities'. The oppressed ethnic groups got encouragement for armed revolt from the notion of plural nationality. The idea of class struggle takes up the question of identity of socio-economically oppressed class of people. The tactics of peaceful methods of movements with sporadic violence had seen during the Assam movement led by All Assam Students' Union (ASSU) on the demand for detection, disenfranchisement and deportation of illegal foreign nationals residing in the vicinity of local indigenous ethnic or tribal communities. During the Bodo movement for separate statehood led by Bodofa Upendranath Brahma, there were peaceful methods with armed struggle. Same was the case for Karbi and Dimasa movements.

Started in 1979 the Assam movement lasted for six years. It came to an end with the signing of the Assam Accord in August, 1985. The ULFA had strengthened its organizational base during the Assam movement founded in 1979. It was actively involved in insurgencies during the late 1980's. The innocent people suffered a lot in the wheels of desperate ULFA and panicky Indian army operations during the time. Even after 44 years of its foundation, though a faction initiated talks

with the government, the other faction of ULFA led by Paresh Baruah is continuing its activities.

In Assam the demand for separate statehood 'Udoyachal' for the tribes, in the north bank of River Brahmaputra raised by the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) founded in 1967. Due to organizational weakness the PTCA could not move the demand more. But with the end of the Assam movement the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) revived the demand and started the Bodo Movement. This was another mass movement which became the cause of political instability in the state. The movement had undergone a paradigm shift from a democratic and non-violent to armed struggle with the formation of Bodo Security Force (BSF) in 1986. A peace deal was signed by the Central Government for creating the Bodo Autonomous Council (BAC) with ABSU and BSF in 1993. However, another Bodo outfit National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), which had several factions, continued their activities, bowing to fight for sovereign Bodoland through armed struggle. The ABSU stopped the movement only for a couple of years with the formation of BAC; it revived the movement, coinciding with the emergence of another militant group of the Bodos, called the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) in 1996. Following a series of negotiations, BLT gave up the demand in 2001, and reconciled itself for an administrative arrangement under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. They accepted the 'Bodoland Territorial Council' (BTC) by signing an accord with the Indian Government which extended the operational area of the Sixth Schedule to the plain areas by a constitutional amendment. However, the BTC Accord failed to meet the aspirations of the Bodos. The former BLT cadres converted to Bodoland Royal Tiger Force (BRTF) and produced cycles of violence resulting in scores of deaths. They targeted the non-Bodos of Bodo dominated areas and created an anarchic situation that led to impositions of curfew for months. The outbreaks of communal violence in the areas were due to targeted killings and embarrassment between the Bodo and non-Bodos and Muslims and non-Muslims by active insurgent outfits. Taking advantage of the situation Muslim fundamentalists also created communal hatred that led hundreds of people to lose their lives. The NDFB came under ceasefire in 2005 and a faction gave up arms in 2010. In 2020, 1615 cadres of the three NDFB factions gave up arms along with 644 rebels from eight different outfits after signing a peace deal.

The Karbi and Dimasa people started a movement for the creation of an Autonomous State under the article 244 (A) of the Constitution of India in the 2nd half of 1980's. With that the area has been disturbed by insurgencies. In September 2021, the government of India signed peace accords with the insurgent groups of Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao. Talks with several other groups are in progress. The insurgent groups which signed the peace accord include Karbi Longri North Cachar Hills Liberation Front, People's Democratic Council of Karbi Longri, United People's Liberation Army and a faction of Karbi People's Liberation Tigers. One of the most dreaded and wanted militant leaders of Assam, Ingti Kathar Songbijit, who headed the PDCKL, a militant outfit from the Karbi Anglong laid down arms along with 1039 other militants. Recently, Dimasa National Liberation Army (DNLA) came over the ground and deposited all their weapons to the government. They surrendered in three batches with the entire outfit's leadership and cadres totalling 117 persons giving up arms.

In North East India the security forces continue to enjoy special powers under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA). The innocent civilians are the biggest casualty of counter-insurgency operations across the region for AFSPA. Insurgency related killings have been more due the fatalities of either fake encounter, firing between the security forces and militants, mistaken identity or targeted killings by terrorists in

the state. Amidst the use of AFSPA causing both pros and cons the levels of insurgency in the state declined in the last 10 years. Militants belonging to various groups have surrendered and joined the national mainstream. The highest number 2,644 of insurgents belonging to various outfits surrendered in 2020. In December, 2020, former self-styled deputy commander-in-chief of United Liberation Front of Assam-Independent (ULFA-I) Drishti Rajkhowa along with 62 insurgent outfits laid down arms. But, there are also reports of fresh joining to ULFA to continue the state disturbed as earlier. In January, 2022 the pro-talk faction of ULFA expressed doubts over government's sincerity in taking forward the decade-long peace parleys, alleging that there has been 'not much progress' in the peace talks though the negotiations had reached the final stages during former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. During Narendra Modi government 'surrenders have been more, but peace talks are less' they alleged. The peace deal between the government and rebel outfits should go in the right direction.

Over the years the mindsets of the people have changed too, on insurgency. Now the people want peace, not the armed struggle. The insurgent outfits of various ethnic groups are also coming forward responding to people's call. Last year in 2022, 246 militants from two terrorist outfits of Assam, Tiwa Liberation Army (TLA) formed in 2014 and United Gorkha Peoples Organisation (UGPO), formed in 2007, formally surrendered and laid down arms in Guwahati. Members of both the outfits deposited 277 various types of arms, grenades and 720 rounds of ammunition. On 27th April, 2023, 168 cadres of Dimasa National Liberation Army/Dimasa Peoples' Supreme Council (DNLA/DPSC) gave up arms and signed a peace deal in New Delhi in presence of Union Home Minister and Assam Chief Minister. In the past five years, 16 small and big outfits have laid down arms and joined the national mainstream.

DISCUSSION:

People of Assam have seen insurgency by various tribal and non-tribal militant groups. The insurgency problem of the state has links with ethnic identity and underdevelopment. The indigenous people of the state are still fighting against intruders whom they believe one major cause for their sufferings. Some local indigenous people believe that extending support to the insurgency can save them from intruders. Till date some are not making choices in favour of the government. To remove the ground for insurgency at the local level, people should make choices in favour of the governments. The insurgent outfits will survive in the state in some form or other till they get support from the people. Unfortunately, many people are still largely indifferent, who believe that it is because of the government's failure to deliver opportunities for them. They alleged that despite the availability of natural resources in the state, widespread poverty and unemployment make them choose the path of struggles. The ethnic groups like Karbi, Dimasas, Rabha, Tiwa etc. are on the plea that Autonomous Councils are neither able to fulfil the aspirations of them nor could it develop their socio-economic status. The involvements of Adibashi, Rajbongshi, etc. militant groups of the state reflect fundamentally their frustration for remaining backward. So the government must accelerate policy of development in order to weed out the root causes of insurgency. All round development is essential for peace and stability in the state.

As per South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP), at one point Assam had 60 different terror outfits. The policies of the government on certain issues have fuelled resentment amongst them. Issues like National Register of Citizens (NRC), Citizens Amendment Act (CAA) etc. continues to hurt the indigenous people of Assam. Moreover, the youth are easily lured by various insurgent groups in order to earn easy money. A fate they do not deserve, but for the misadventure of a set of

misguided youth, kept hostage to the personal benefit of the insurgent leaders.

Assam is a state of various tribes, ethnicities, religions, customs, languages, etc. Therefore, focus should be more on maintaining the identities including traditional, cultural and linguistic. A peaceful Assam without insurgencies is a strategic necessity for stability. It is important to respond to grievances amongst the smaller ethnic groups, if they are unhappy with the federal authorities or regional power centres like the state government, autonomous councils etc. More substantive, than mere transfer of federal largesse, have to be offered cantering round comprehensive devolution of power and support for development of infrastructure and this has to happen before the ethnicities further goes to armed guerrilla warfare. Moreover, if Indian people believe Assam is part of the country; it is incumbent to push the military to operate with a human face. The Indian army and paramilitary forces must be professionally trained to avoid 'overkill'; intelligence gathering has to be improved to provide precise locations of rebels so that harassment of the civilian population can be minimized. The forces must take part in genuine and not cosmetic civic action programs.

Temporary settlement is unwelcomed and it gives bitter divisions in the ethnic societies that make them susceptible to long term instability and violence. The comprehensive settlement of insurgency is better to be considered than split for solution of the problem of stability. Very often the government takes the divide and rule tactics. That has been useful to weaken rebel groups but the benefits are primarily tactical. It creates multiple contenders for the same political space and fails to bring about a consensus needed for a durable settlement in order to achieve much desired peace and stability. The government solved the immigration problem from nearby Bangladesh. It should pursue actively and persistently the policy that insurgent groups are engaged in talks. It signs peace accords with insurgent groups. At the same time the rapprochement effort by civil society with the insurgent groups must continue. Continual operation against the existing insurgent groups erodes their resisting power. But it is reiterated that a humane approach is imperative for bringing them into the national way of life.

The people of the region in recent years have largely understood the cumulative and disastrous effects of insurgency with the instability concomitant impairing productivity, devastating infrastructure and furthering economic deprivation of the poorer sections. To set things right in the state, it is imperative on the part of the political leadership to sincerely redress the legitimate grievances of the people. It calls for caution by all the parties concerned, including the government and the security forces; so that there is no weaning away of the support of the masses for insurgency.

After all, insurgency is being stoked by foreign inimical forces, which are more determined to carry on the violent campaign to destabilize the state. Neighbouring countries have been the shelter ground of many insurgent groups for which insurgency is continuing in the region.

CONCLUSION:

Insurgency can't be termed as a mere challenge to the state authority. The insurgents neither don't consider themselves as an integral part of the nation nor as a civil member of a composite multicultural society. The collective interests for peace and stability of a state having the problem of insurgency are hardly fulfilled. The complexities of insurgency needed to be minimized for stability under a parliamentarian, secular governmental system. National development is dependable on stable government and a peaceful society. The process is more strenuous, especially where there are people

who are involved in insurgency. The ethnic groups involved in insurgent activities to fulfil their self designed demands are causing further social differences instead of stability by national integration. In the state many insurgent groups have been holding talks with the governments in recent years. But still there are groups involved in their organizational activities. For instance the ULFA-I and Kamatapur Liberation Organisation (KLO) remain active insurgents groups till date. The presence of active insurgents groups are concerned with violence, where the common people are to suffer. So, bringing them in the national way of life for much needed peace and stability should be the prime concern of all.

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