Understanding Insurgency and Conflict Resolution in Northeast India

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ABSTRACT

The Northeast region of India has been plagued with insurgency, with both ethnically, politically, and economically rooted implications. A multitude of armed groups seeking autonomy, asserting their identities, and who resent poverty, have challenged state sovereignty for far too long, and the central government in every state has taken a composite approach (which has included security operations, bilateral negotiations, and developmental initiatives) to contain the separatist and insurgent movements. The outcomes have varied by state; the outcomes of certain (notably the Mizoram Accord in 1986, and the continuing Naga peace negotiations) reconciliation agreements illustrate the possibilities and limitations of negotiated settlements. Over the last few years, there has all but been a reduction in violence due to the effectiveness of counter-insurgency strategies and ongoing talking. What cannot be lost in regards to the reduced violence are challenges also still exist including unresolved demands, sporadic violence and absent inclusive governance. Conflict resolution in the Northeast needs to be holistic and consistent in approach by addressing the ongoing ramifications of the reasons for conflict (ethnic dispute, marginalization, and underdevelopment) by fostering belonging and participation of local people, and requires an energetic role of trust building. Lasting peace, requires creating a balance between security requirements, political accommodation, and socio-economic integration.

Keywords: Northeast India, Insurgency, Conflict Resolution, Peace Accords, Ethnic Tensions.

Introduction

India's Northeast is comprised of 8 states and more than 200 ethnic communities—Northeast India is one of the most ethnically, culturally, and biologically diverse, and politically unstable parts of the Indian subcontinent. The region is classified as "strategic periphery"—in this case, not simply on the periphery of the Indian state but a geographic remoteness from the Indian mainland. Northeast India is certainly a unique region as it is the only part of India as a territorial land corridor that connects the Indian state to the Indian mainland (specifically through the Siliguri corridor). The remoteness of the region against those bordering countries (Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh), the worsening regional geopolitical instability, raise serious challenges for domestic-level policies and security issues.

Overall, in many respects Northeast India continues to be a challenging socio-political environment, as the region struggles with several insurgencies that have local histories, and the assertions of ethnicity and the manifestations of economic and cultural marginalization. Since independence, in many cases, the Indian state has become increasingly securitized regarding poverty and freedom, unique to the Indian context, but also manifest in geographic and demographic scale and strikingly appears most controversially to be written in the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) continuing its mandate to justify military operationalization of the "disturbed" areas of the country. Generally, policies such as this ongoing pattern and social phenomenon have led to a type of civil liberty erosion and a local population felt alienation.

At the same time, however, there is a powerful, counter-current— rooted in indigenous justice, community dispute resolution, and anti-colonial peace-building practices. Civil society - especially women's organizations and faith-based organizations - has emerged as an important transformative

force, advocating for justice, reconciliation and dignity. This paper interrogates these two parallel paradigms - the state/ militarized/ hierarchical power paradigm and the community-based, culturally appropriate peace-building efforts, in order to provide are more holistic understanding of conflict and transition in the region.

The origins of conflict in Northeast India can be linked to colonial conditions which recognized many tribal areas only as "excluded" or "partially excluded" areas, and formalized their administrative and political divide from the rest of British India. While colonial practices may have preserved certain pre-colonial customs and practices, these policies also provided a sense of separation which continued after independence.

After independence in 1947, the Indian nation-building process often privileged the Indian identity as the marker of the nation and depersonalized the locale demands for autonomy. The tensions which resulted from the imposition of national identity in place of composite regional identities, can be seen in the sustained Naga insurgency under the Naga National Council (NNC), later modified to the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NCSN). Their insistence on a sovereign Nagalim, which mapped all of the Naga inhabited areas across the eight states of India, became a focal point in the region's rejection of the state's centralizing trajectory.

While this was occurring in Meghalaya, Assam was simultaneously experiencing the turbulence of the Assam Movement (1979-1985), which, amongst other things, protested illegal immigration and wanted constitutional/constitutional safeguards for indigenous people populations. The establishment of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) gave more armed expression to grievances against the state. As for Manipur, with the existence of insurgents based on ethnic lines - Meitei, Kuki and Naga - it demonstrates the highly fragmented and multifaceted complexity of conflict along with competition for land, identity, and political visibility brings about tensions of other ethnic composition.

These movements are reacting to genuine grievances: political representation issues, the extraction of resources without any consent, demographic threats, and perceived cultural erasure. Their emergence and sustenance are reflective of the Indian state's failure in relation to the diversity of its region under sovereignty, and especially in the context of its own federal arrangement. The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 is India's legal basis for its counter-insurgency undertaking in the northeast. Initially put in place for the Naga insurgents, the law provides the armed forces with significant leeway, such as warrantless arrest, shoot to kill on suspicion, and immunity from prosecution.

While some people argued that the AFSPA was necessary for bringing order to an often volatile region, human rights advocates and civil society groups argued that the AFSPA represented the worst kind of draconian authoritarianism. According to a report published by Human Rights Watch, titled "Getting Away with Murder," (2009), there are many human rights abuses under the contentious AFSPA-- arbitrary detention, torture, and sexual violence, without limitation.

In the year 2004, the tragic case of Thangjam Manorama, who was allegedly raped and killed by Assam Rifles personnel in Manipur, caused shock, outrage, and protests at the community level causing much visibility towards human rights violations and calling for justice and accountability against the armed forces implicated, and created a national debate. The Meira Paibis, an organization of elderly women activism staged a naked protest in front of an army headquarters, demanding justice and calling out for the repeal of the AFSPA. As much as the naked protest exemplifies the women's bodies stripped of clothing, they were not stripped of their bodies dignity, which became a significant part of the debate about human rights in the region.

Though it has been recommended for repeal or modification by a number of committees, including the Justice Jeevan Reddy Committee (2005), the Act continues to be in force in many districts. The state's preference for legal impunity to political dialogue demonstrates its incapacity to think about peace other than security. Political theorist Achin Vanaik (2004) observed, "militarized democracies confuse compliance with consent."

While state-directed peace processes have yielded inconclusive outcomes, local communities in the Northeast have developed organic, culturally-relevant forms of conflict resolution. Local peace initiatives derive their legitimacy from the indigenous tradition of consensus-based governance, kinship structures, and the moral authority of women's and religious institutions.

The Nagaland Baptist Church Council (NBCC), as a moral, social, and political voice, has mediated between fighting factions of the NSCN, and their calls for "Naga reconciliation" cannot be viewed as only a spiritual dialogue, but rather a political intervention, based on the church's moral

authority. The NBCC has conducted "common Naga dialogue" consultations, cease fire monitor initiation, and campaigns for the Christian values of forgiveness -- but always reminds us that there is an element of justice to consideration before reconciliation.

The Meira Paibis, and other women's groups inspired by the Nupi Lal movement in Manipur, have consistently confronted state violence, as much as insurgent violence and, historically, they have hit back. These women have done have the work of a visible peacekeeping force, monitoring local neighborhoods, mediating inter-community disputes and supporting the rights of the conflict's widows and orphans. Their peacebuilding work is often characterized as gendered, but example, peacemaking strategies demonstrate that local women, given the opportunity, can be assertive, strategic, and deeply political in their local warfare balances.

Such initiatives are congruent with John Paul Lederach's (1997) vision of "conflict transformation," focusing on building relationships, social/cultural legitimacy, and sustainable change as opposed to temporary political settlements. They frequently incorporate traditional justice processes - e.g., tribal councils (Khaplang in Nagaland or KhulLakpas in Manipur) - which are understood as locally legitimate forms for complaint redressal.

The Indian government generally considers development to be the most suitable response to the issue of insurgency, endorsing the expansive infrastructure programs that are said to be negotiations for future peace. Projects such as the Trans-Arunachal Highway, oil extraction in Assam and hydroelectric dams in Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh, are touted as direct benefits to local community with potential peace-building effects. These development interventions are promoted as a form of incentive for continued participation in maintaining stability in the region, with the state also presenting economic development and increased connectivity as an important strategies to address discontent and create lasting peace in the region. However, in practice the development paradigm often produces new grievances.

In the case of the Tipaimukh Dam project in Manipur, most of the opposition to the construction came from tribal communities and civil society organizations worried about the risk of ecological devastation and cultural dislocation. Increased land acquisition of border trade projects with Myanmar since 2011 have also caused mistrust between companies and various stakeholders via lack of consultation.

In most cases, the kind of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) then mandated by the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) takes place on a rare occasion. Quoting Walter Fernandes (2008), development induced destruction has displaced more people in Northeast India than armed conflict ever has, with little compensation and resettlement.

The distance when examining development on the ground challenges the recognition of "decolonizing development"—defined as a community-led, ecologically minded, and based on cultural values. If not, development becomes structural violence, which perpetuates cycles of dispossession and resentment.

A string of peace agreements have been signed since the 1970s in response to insurgent demands in Northeast India, including the Shillong Accord (1975), the Assam Accord (1985), the Mizo Accord (1986), the Bodo Peace Accords (1993, 2020), and the Naga Framework Agreement (2015) have been signed. While violence has partly declined since those accords were implemented, the accords have declined in effectiveness over time.-they have largely been seen as ineffective.

The Mizo Accord is frequently cited as an qualitatively different success, as it transitioned the former insurgent leaders into the mainstream democratic political process and increased the levels of stability in the region. Other agreements can toggled between having partial success and failure. It is almost a complete ACCESS Road Unik type situation: The Assam Accord did not clearly state the meaning of "illegal immigrants" for this region, which represents Sandy Leung mentioned was potentially hugely consequential and left ample ambiguity for unrest and exclusionary political movements to continue, including the debates about the National Register of withdrawing citizenship and the Citizenship Amendment Act.The Naga peace accords have been unclear and exclusive. Critically, significant people groups, like women's groups and other factions of insurgents, as well as other relevant states, have been left out of the process. The political scientist, Sanjib Baruah (2020), has pointed out that elite capture has reduced the benefits of these accords to a few actors without the broader involvement of the community and acknowledgement of their past.

Thus, sustainable peace must involve not just accords but inclusive processes. Public consultations, truth commissions, and community monitoring are some examples of ways to democratize the peace-building process when longer histories of violence have led to historical harms.

Therefore, a much needed new peace for Northeast India must build on the following points:

- There is an immediate need to repeal, or if possible reform, the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) in a way that is consistent with constitutional values and international human rights standards, and allows true civilian oversight of military accountability and command, with ongoing civil programs that undermine the culture of impunity for military crimes and hold accountable those who commit human rights violations (CIVIC, 2015).

- **Recognition and Respect for Indigenous Authority:** We must recognize tribal councils, customary laws, and traditional spiritual authorities as important and legitimate peace process actors. Because tribal authorities gain their power based on pre-established, community-based authority and sometimes historic continuity, and from its regional perspective it is argued that true tribal authority should supersede or be at least prioritized over centralized, bureaucratic authority. Further, this legitimate recognition of authority for indigenous actors would restore indigenous authority to the future of the region, and enhance legitimacy for a lasting peace.

- **Gender-inclusivity:** Commit to ensuring that women are included as meaningful participants in negotiating and implementing any peace agreement. Women should not merely be seen as witnesses or survivors; recognize women as victims but also to make use of their social and moral authority to make peace valid and sustainable.

- **Culturally Responsive Development:** All development must be undertaken in accordance with the principles of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) that includes genuine consultation with and participation from local communities, seeks local jobs, and finds avenues for environmental protection, desiring development which is equitable and sustainable.

- **Transitional Justice and Reconciliation:** A series of mechanisms for truth-telling, restitution and memorialization are important in dealing with historical injustices. Also engaging with historical trauma is an important factor in genuine healing and rebuilding of trust in the communities and between the region and the broader state.

- **Decentralized Federalism:** Constitutionally mandated advancements in regions should be promoted, as well as further fiscal decentralization and local self-governance, empowering decisions to be made closer to where the communities are and allowing the communities to decide their future.

In summary, this framework requires a continuous commitment to political will and a fundamental change of relational structure by the state - moving from control to dialogue; power to partnership; and authority to dignity in order to move towards sustainable peace and respect.

To sum up, Northeast India is in the process of transitioning from a conflict-ridden frontier that is heading towards peace, dignity and justice. While the level of violence associated to insurgency has decreased with ceasefires and formal talks, the root causes of conflict – denial of identity, political exclusion and economic deprivation – are not resolved for a majority of people. This paper argues that a real shift in conflict resolution requires going beyond binary oppositions: not just state/insurgent, or development/displacement or peace/silence. That is not to say that the complicated relationships between these oppositions should not be acknowledged, but rather that a peace-building paradigm based on community agency, indigenous customs, and incorporating gender justice needs to be accepted.

Many of the people in Northeast India conceptualize their lived experiences in songs, protests, rituals and conversations about peace by framing conflict as an absence of justice, and not as just as absence of violence. Their expressed ability to build and display resilience and innovation highlights the need to prioritize local voices and collective memory in the pursuit of more just and sustainable solutions. By supporting communities, honoring customary governance systems, and ensuring women's engagement at all levels, Northeast India can develop and promote new meaning and practice of federalism and pluralism that will transcend the region.

Ultimately, the Indian state must shift its position from one of control to one of collaboration. It needs to learn to truly listen to local voices and build real partnerships.

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