

Security of the North-East

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INTRODUCTION

It is indeed a matter of great privilege for me to address this august gathering on a subject which has been a matter of great concern to us for a long time. When I was asked by General Sinha if I would venture to talk on any aspects of the North East, initially I hesitated.

My hesitation was on three counts, one, that parts of the North East have been in the focus for a considerable period - since mid fifties - and by now, lot has been said and analysed by scholars as well as critics, by now most of the observers have formed firm views, two - personally, I feel that it is difficult to communicate on issues which can only be felt or experienced. North-East is one such issue. Lastly, the issues involved are complex and highly sensitive, some of them cannot be debated in an open forum.

My talk today aims at presenting the NE, as I have experienced and understood, as an observer, as also, a soldier in different colours of uniform, that is Army and Assam Rifles. My involvement in the NE has been restricted to only four tenures of postings, one each in Assam, Arunachal Pradesh (erstwhile NEFA), Nagaland and last one, dealing with all the States, from Sikkim to Arunachal Pradesh. Each tenure gave me a feel of the area in a decadic time frame i.e. sixties, seventies, eighties and the nineties, in an ever expanding horizon and elevation in perception levels.

By no stretch of imagination, you should attribute authority in my exposition. I tried all along to study, understand and appreciate the region, its people, their culture, ethos, attitudes and value systems and thereby their problems and a possible approach to resolve them.

I propose to present all the issues in a broad perspective - these are many and complex.

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SCOPE

I would be dealing with the subject under the following parts :-

- (a) Geopolitical and socio-economic appraisal of the NE states.
- (b) The Problem.
- (c) An Approach

**GEO-POLITICAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC
APPRAISAL OF THE NORTH EASTERN STATES**

Looking at the map of India, an average Indian from the heartland tends to view the North East (NE) as a composite regional entity. Consequently, the perceptions relating to the NE get viewed from the same plane and bias. Few scholars have indeed analysed individual issues from a rational approach. As regards politicians and bureaucrats (both civilian and military), it is generally a region best avoided; if contact is compelled, it is marginal or minimal. Todate, a posting to NE in civil department is viewed by the systems as a means to ease out an errant official; for the individual, it is an indication of being out of favour, in fact a punishment.

At the outset, it needs to be appreciated that the North East is not a homogenous region with common political problems or social systems and customs. Even physiographically, the region consists of mountains and hills, plateau, valleys and plains. Not many are perhaps aware that Shillong, the Scotland of the East as is known, is not a Himalayan Hill Station, but is located on a plateau separating the Himalayas from the wide plains of the Brahmaputra valley. Connected to the rest of the country through a narrow strip of 50 km in North Bengal, NE States share borders with Tibet (China), Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Historical developments in this region warrant a close scrutiny to understand the present situation. Assam was linked to the rest of India, prior to the commencement of the Christian era; had an immense impact of the Bhakti cult of the saint reformer Sankardev in the 15th-16th century; was administered as a British-Indian province since its occupation by the British in 1826; and its people actively participated in the freedom struggle. Guwahati was the venue of a general session of the Congress Party in 1926. Consequently, political leaders from Assam, the bastion of the Indian nationalism in the NE, counted in the national politics.

The present Meghalaya came under British rule by a process of take over of Jaintia Hills in 1832 and Garo Hills sometime in mid 1850s (1822-1869). The extension of authority over the present Arunachal Pradesh was rather slow (commencing from the 30s of last century) and marginal. It was treated as an Excluded Area thinly administered. Political control over the Naga tribes was established only by 1874; however, there was no assertion of actual sovereignty over the areas inhabited by them. Kohima was occupied in 1878. The Mizo Hills came under British control after a series of punitive expeditions, in 1889.

The British concept of annexation of territories in the NE did not envisage extension of administration, due to these being inaccessible and of little consequence, economically and strategically. Aim was perhaps to provide protection to the plains people. These areas saw no interference/disturbance in their social practices, customary laws and even system of ownership of land. The cordiality of relations was further ensured by promulgating Inner Line Regulations framed in 1872-73 and still operative in Arunachal, Nagaland and Mizoram. Since Meghalaya was part of Assam with capital at Shillong, it was treated differently. Manipur and Tripura, the two princely states were merged in 1948-1949.

DIVERSITY

The region's population totalling approximately 26 million has extra ordinary diversity - ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural. There are over 200 main tribes/subtribes (Kukis alone have 37 subtribes). The people belong to, atleast six different ethnic groups. The diversity in religious persuasion extends from Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity in main - to animism and certain traditional religious beliefs and practices.

The multiplicity of languages and dialects is indeed amazing; they number over 420, out of a total of 1652 or so, in the whole country. Even in the small state of Meghalaya, of the two main tribal communities, while Khasis belong to the Austric ethnic group with language of Mon-Khomer Branch of the Austric Asiatic family, the Garos and their language belong to the Tibeto-Burmese family. There is no comparable diversity to be found in any part of the country.

It, therefore, emerges that the North East is not a homogenous region. Each of the states in the region has a distinct character, personality shaped by the composition of its people, its culture, traditions and history.

It therefore follows that, the NE cannot and does not have a common

political or social problem; each of the states has its own differentiated problems requiring different solution. In spite of a plethora of problems of the NE, there is a common basic requirement of the region - our ability to view the region in a proper spirit and understanding.

STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF THE NORTH EAST

The strategic imperatives of the NE region having common borders with China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal are more than obvious. I need not elaborate further. As a part of the British Empire and British rule in India, the NE region had no foreign power on its borders. There was Tibet in the North, across the Himalayas, where Chinese de jure suzerainty was accepted, but till 1949, China was too preoccupied with her internal problems. Arunachal Pradesh now faces China all along its northern borders. Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram now share borders with Myanmar since its Independence in 1948. Partition of India in 1947, resulted in Tripura, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Assam having to share borders with a foreign country - Bangladesh (then East Pakistan). Sharing border with friendly Bhutan and Nepal has its own problems, albeit on a different plane.

GEO-POLITICAL FACTORS

Geopolitical factors have been the root cause of some of the most serious problems of the NE region. The single biggest concern has been the demographic upheaval the region has undergone and is still going through, as a result of partition and turmoils across the borders. The acute fear of being swamped by an alien culture and losing dominant position due to influx of the migrant population, needs to be appreciated, and resolved, although, presently with no workable solution in sight. The fact is, considering the condition astride the borders, the influx would continue indefinitely, with varying degree, trickle to floods.

DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS

The following demographic characteristics of the regions need to be taken a note of:-

- (a) The growth rate of the population is 3.5 percent (All India 2.5 percent).
- (b) Low population density - 104 per square km against All India average of 216. In Arunachal Pradesh it is the lowest - 8. There is uneven spatial distribution, eg, Assam has 75 percent of population but 31 percent of the region's area.

- (c) High literacy rate except in Arunachal, Assam and Meghalaya.
- (d) High concentration of scheduled tribes. Meghalaya (80.54 percent), Nagaland (84), Arunachal Pradesh (69.78), Mizoram (93.52), Assam (10.9), Manipur (27.30), Tripura (28.45).

Unlike rest of India, tribal societies have no caste structure - but are by and large egalitarian, though certain ranking prevails. Also evident is community spirit and self reliance. The traditional economy is mostly geared to consumption and subsistence. Market economy is a recent phenomenon.

SOCIO-POLITICAL FACTORS

As a result of impact of impulses especially those emanating from the Centre, the traditional rural elite is being displaced by a new urban ruling politico-bureaucratic elite. Impact of the modern education is obvious. Traditional values, social and work culture are under severe strain. The educated youth are shunning physical work, seek a place in the new social order, disregarding the traditional norms/customs. In certain tribes whereas the last generation is wearing no clothes - the next generation is attired in 3 piece suits.

Traditionally the NE tribal societies have been self governing communities, based on clan/tribal structure. In this, administration was decentralised to individuals according to precedents and practices. The centralised administration ushered in, during pre as well as post Independence years, has had a rough interface with the traditional. Hence the compromises such as autonomous district councils, the tribal courts (examples - Shillong - Mon). We therefore need to explore possibilities of a happy mix. Outright imposition of a pattern from the Indian plains would not work.

ECONOMY

Although each State is autonomous in managing its financial affairs (budget), there has been an effort to tackle the problem of the region as such, by setting up North East Council (NEC) - an advisory body for economic, social, interstate projects and security matters. Incidentally, as DG Assam Rifles, I was ex-officio Security Advisor to the NEC. Apart from various aberrations and non-functioning for certain spells, the NEC is playing a major role - it is indeed a bold experiment. Unfortunately, a regional plan has taken a long time to emerge. Working against all odds and impediments, areas in which impact is being made are transport, communications, power generation, horti and agriculture and industry based on local resources; the last but the most important one is security.

Frequently, the question is raised as to how long the Centre will continue to treat the states of the NE as Special Category States and 'spoonfeed' them. What is perhaps not understood, the entire gamut of conditions in the NE - social, economic, cultural, political, the tangible and the intangible. We also need to take a note of the take off stage in 1947, impact of education, need for integration and lastly the political processes working in the rest of the country. Wastefulness in financial management need not be the monopoly of few. Efforts for integration need not be treated as appeasement. History has to be understood in the fullness of its past, present and future.

THE PROBLEM

INTERNAL THREATS AND NATIONAL SECURITY

National security has various facets, threats to national security from across the borders, in the form of an open aggression, are better appreciated, get duly analysed and planning to counter or checkmate these take place in a reasonably comprehensive manner. However, threats emerging from internal turmoils, starting from the low, i.e., collapse of law and order to the high, i.e., insurgencies and secessionist movements traditionally get response, only as a reaction and not as a deliberate preplanned 'action plan' and seldom as a strategy. Our approach to developments in Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, GNLF, Assam, Punjab and J & K is a pointer.

I am not certain if adequate thought is given to the glaringly obvious trends in the border areas, which have the potential to give rise to Low Intensity Conflicts (including insurgencies) warranting as serious, if not more attention, than the classical threats to the national security from across the International Borders.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE NORTH EAST

The North-Eastern region, comprising of the plains of Assam and tribal states bordering Tibet, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan have continued to be a matter of concern of varying degree of gravity, from the 1950s. For the people of the heartland, there has always been a hesitation to look at the Mongoloid tribes as any other Indian, their psyche and behaviour pattern seldom understood. The attitude of most of the Indians is 'better avoid a contact with the North-East', be it a casual or as a 'tenure of posting'. The only exception being the business community generally referred to as Marwaris. For an average person arriving in the region, acceptance of the underdevelopment, isolation and privation is a difficult proposition and the countdown for the unavoidable tenure starts from Day One. There is little cheer and no involvement in the assignment.

INSURGENCIES IN THE NORTH EAST

For the average citizen of the country, insurgencies and NE have been closely related and perhaps synonymous, and hence just accepted as a matter of fact. However, emergence of insurgencies in the Punjab or J&K evokes a different feeling/response. It is time we look at the entire nation as one and appreciate turmoils in every region with as much sensitivity.

I do not think I need to analyse the history of each of the insurgent movements in the North East. It would be a separate and fulltime exercise. Suffice it to say that, each one appeared as problems in various states, localised in nature, i.e., affecting the individual state or communities, with negligible or marginal spill over to the adjoining states, and never to the whole of the region. The approach adopted by the Central authorities in dealing with each of these turmoils, was therefore individualistic. Traditionally, the decision makers hoped to seek resolution for individual issues varying from agitations (peaceful or violent i.e., Law and Order problem) to terrorism and insurgency (secessionist movement) by deploying police forces, local or ex CPO in the initial stages and armed forces (Army and Assam Rifles) in extreme cases. Concurrently, opening up dialogues with the dissatisfied elements on the political front was found to be adequate, to keep the individual turmoils under check or at acceptable levels. Full resolution was seldom achieved and certain residual activity was accepted. And by mid 1980s, a view emerged that perhaps the internal situation was well on the way to stabilise and by the year 2000 AD, various insurgencies and secessionist movements would simmer down to purely law and order problems and hence within the purview of police forces, the concerned states and at best Ministry of Home at Delhi.

Obviously, the emerging trends were not taken a note of, in making assessments and deciding course of action, be it from economic, socio-political or security point of view. The signing of accords with Nagas, Mizos, TNVs, GNLF and Assam was taken as a positive development in resorting normalcy and bringing each state of the region out of isolation and into the national mainstream.

The developments in Assam i.e., emergence of the ULFA, its phenomenal growth in strength and support base from the masses need to be viewed in a different manner. The situation has been further aggravated by the formation of the Indo-Burma Revolutionary Front (IBRF) which has in fact taken form at the instance of ULFA by forging an alliance with the NSCN and UNLF with a view to liberating the entire Indo-Burma region, comprising North-East India and North-West Burma. Claiming to be a separate

and cohesive social and cultural group with distinct identity, the movement has avowed to deal with India, the main and the only enemy.

Within a brief period after its inception, ULFA was calling the shots in Assam, had established bases in the neighbouring states, had rendered the political and administrative process in the state irrelevant and was successful in running a parallel Government or perhaps the very Government itself. For the first time, a secessionist movement, instead of offering a challenge had posed questions to the people and suggested an alternative, albeit, nebulous. Even without an armed struggle, ULFA had been successful in the establishment of a people's government.

The issues involved are not merely ULFA, Assam or IBRF. Assam is the nerve centre for the North-East - the lines of communications and supply, viz, roads and railway lines for sustaining the entire North-East, pass through Assam. These are extremely fragile and marginal, and if chocked, as had been happening lately, had disastrous effects in terms of economy of all the states, as also, for the security of the entire region.

It is obvious that the philosophy of tackling the insurgency problems individually, that too, as 'graduated response' and not as prevention by foreseeing events would cause disaster. An integrated approach on a wide front, encompassing the entire North-East, involving all the Government organs, (political, administrative as also law enforcing) is called for.

A relatively recent development is the increased flow of drugs in the North-Eastern region from across the border. The Myanmar narco-mafia appears to be making inroads into the North-Eastern States. Besides providing the transit route for the international markets, the North-Eastern region is also facing a growing drug addiction problem. The region, therefore, needs to be adequately strengthened to deal with, both drug trafficking as well as addiction problems.

REASONS FOR CONTINUED TURMOILS IN THE NORTH EAST

For many, it would appear that there is also a spurt of fresh insurgent activities in the five outermost states of India in the NE, i.e., Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura. In reality, it would be seen that, we did not achieve full resolution and accepted certain residual activity. Further, concurrent to signing the accords with individual groups, serious efforts were not made in appreciating the factors which gave rise to the secessionist movements, for deciding the future strategy and approach to

ensure that the root cause were tackled and the people of the region brought out of isolation into the national mainstream.

Silently, we have permitted the numerous tribal groups seeking independence/autonomy, inhabiting the remote region astride our borders with Myanmar to gain strength and seek polarisation. All these groups, whether of Indian or Myanmar origin, continue to find safe sanctuaries in the hill tracts of Myanmar out of reach of the Govt at Rangoon, and obviously India.

Since the fires were not fully extinguished and causes for their appearance in the past ignored, the subdued embers are getting periodic fresh leases varying between glow to leaping flames. There is no dearth of fuel in the shape of grievances against the Union Govt, either genuine or perceived (at times latter more appealing than the former).

Although the earlier insurgencies were politically motivated, presently, the apparent cause is lack of attention by the Centre and inadequate resources allotted for the development. An honest analysis indicates that the real reasons are :-

- (a) Collapse of state organs including the police. In fact most states created the police forces only as an employment avenue. No effort has been made in the past to shape them into effective law enforcing agencies. The untrained police force, poorly led by incompetent local officers brought up in tribal/clan loyalties are a sad picture.
- (b) There is a genuine feeling that the North East is least understood by the decision makers in Delhi, that they are being taken for granted and in the scheme of priorities they do not feature or at best, at the lowest.
- (c) There is growing unemployment in the region. With increased aspirations, youth shun hard work, seek only white collared jobs (not work), indulge in drugs/liquor. Accessibility to easy money (ex Central Aid) is fuelling the fire.
- (d) Excess flow rate of central aid gets siphoned off before reaching the target population. A new class i.e., corrupt politician and ineffective bureaucrat has emerged which is being resented by the people. Hence, a desire for change implying anti establishment attitudes.
- (e) Easy availability of new and sophisticated weapons. Old weapons continue in the area.

At this stage, it would be essential to review the developments and trends in the NE.

DEVELOPMENTS IN ASSAM

Presently Assam continues to be at the focal point of the entire North East. ULFA, the youngest, is setting the pace for other insurgent groups. Although not all money extorted from tea gardens, businessmen and bank robberies has landed in the ULFA treasury (a sizeable portion appears to have been used by certain individuals for their personal benefits - cars, trucks, and such other commodities), amount spent on training of the cadre under the NSCN and procurement of weapons has helped them to create a dedicated and ruthless core. There are reports of formation of a suicide group including even girls. Linkages with NSCN(N), NSCN(S), as also Punjab and J&K terrorists, and LTTE have enabled ULFA to establish pipelines for procurement of sophisticated weapons from international market as well as Pakistan.

The ULFA, without offering a direct challenge to the elected Govt in the State or an outright fight with the security forces, has been able to build a reasonably broad support base amongst the population thereby affording the extremists, security and mobility. This is substantiated by the fact that the top leadership, the hostages and the cadre in general have been able to find secure shelters, and complete shielding albeit partly under threats of reprisals. This support base is from a wide cross section of the society - intellectuals, students, upper castes, plains tribals and housewives. This support base is essentially derived by propagating the cause of neglect and apathy by Delhi, which sell well. The stated objective of the ULFA, namely independence, perhaps is an overstatement of the point. While quoting history in staking the claim for a separate mongoloid nation state, what is ignored is that the very theory of Nation State is irrelevant in the Indian context, it is too recent. Such a view held by ULFA perhaps is not shared by various tribal groups in Assam, who are merely seeking adequate political and economic benefits within the Indian constitutional framework. It is also doubtful, if the ULFA's view and philosophy is shared even by the non-tribal Assamese other than the caste Hindus in Upper Brahmaputra Valley - which are presently the main support base of the ULFA. And last but not the least, it is a matter of conjecture if this thought process of the young Robinhoods has the acceptance by the elders of the society, who have abjured their responsibility in such vital matters of state.

Interaction with various elements and groups from Assam indicates that the strength of the ULFA, which enabled them in the past to adopt any

tactics and selective violence against the so called enemies of the people, is on the wane.

There is a distinct possibility of wresting the initiative from the ULFA on a selective basis, by tackling various factions, separately. This does not involve application of force but on the contrary by reaching out to them by human approach.

At this stage, although we need to review the status of other insurgent groups in the NE, due to the paucity of time, I will skip it. For this talk, it is not imperative.

HUMAN RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Activities of advocates of Human Rights and some so called Indian intellectuals are indeed a matter of concern. They are adding fuel to the already broken out wild fire on the subject. Foreign agencies and countries who are seriously interested in destabilising India, have found it convenient to manipulate the Indian Human Rights activists and supporters of the insurgent groups for internationalising the issues at various platforms and thus malign the image of our country. We cannot accept the UN also to be such a forum. Functioning of the anti-national elements, in the name of 'Right of Self-determination', seeking active help of the International Forum and their cause, i.e., 'Liberating the struggling smaller nationalities against the oppressive, colonial rule of Govt of India', needs to be curbed firmly.

APPROACH TO THE NORTH-EAST

It is apparent that the Indo-Burma Revolutionary Front (IBRF) although taken form at the instance of ULFA, may not achieve its goal of carving out an independent state comprising North East India and North West Burma, claimed to be separate and cohesive social and cultural group with distinct identity. It is however, a good forum for polarisation of various insurgent groups in the region. Although both India and Myanmar are affected, the absence of Myanmar authority in its NW Region implies India being the main and only enemy. Further, each of the groups is working in a complimentary manner, thereby enhancing their overall reach and capability. NSCN(N) providing safe bases and training facilities, ULFA the bankers, NSCN(S) arms procurement ex international markets. Khalistanis and LTTE also appear to have made their contribution. Finally, the international drug mafias are forging their channels through the North East luring the entire population to easy and fast buck and thus exposing them to all the attendant evils.

Thus, ULFA cannot be viewed as problem of Assam alone. The growth of ULFA would not only cause collapse of Assam but with its linkages with other insurgent groups in the region, the entire NE would be sucked in this vortex of ULFA. Assam is the nerve centre for lines of communications and logistics for the whole NE. These are fragile and marginal, and if chocked, can cause disastrous effects on the economy of all states, and would also degrade the ability to employ security forces even at the borders.

The philosophy of tackling the insurgency problems individually in a compartmentalised/isolated manner and that too, as 'graduated response' and not as prevention by foreseeing events needs a review. An integrated approach on a wide front, encompassing the entire North-East, involving all the Govt Organs (political, administrative as also law enforcing) is called for. Shedding the distanced and stand off attitudes, the approach must ensure involvement of the people, taking into account their sensitivity.

For instance, while tackling ULFA, the critical centre in the North East, steps need to be taken to break the nexus of various insurgent groups amongst themselves, with the foreign powers/bases supporting them and the masses on own side.

CONCLUSION

Analysis of each of the movements individually as also collectively indicates nexuses amongst themselves as also of more serious a nature with the prominent personalities in public life. This is a matter of concern. Although all such issues need political involvement and solutions, the present involvement is not with a view to seeking resolution of the problem through dialogue but for deriving mileage for power base.

While working out a model, earlier models of neither the North East nor from other regions can be recreated. These may not find acceptance or throw up solution. The grievances harboured by the people are complex in nature and a mix of genuine and perceived (latter ones more often posed as genuine). Since segregation may not be feasible, these will have to be tackled together.

The developments in the NE states, cannot be treated as a mere law and order problem and thus left to individual states or ministry. It is a problem of national security.