

The Dimasa-Hmar Conflict : Another Ember in the Fire

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BACKGROUND

The year 2003 witnessed another sensitive region of the North East going up in flames of ethnic hatred. The North Cachar (NC) Hills district of South Assam has witnessed bloody ethnic clashes between the Hmar and Dimasa tribes. While the roots of the conflict lie in the clash between Dimasa chauvinism and Hmar ambitions, the role of the National Socialistic Council of Nagaland (NSCN), increase in violence in Meghalaya and Tripura, the proposed construction of the East-West corridor in this area and the upgradation of the Lumding-Silchar railway line, vastly complicates the security equation of this remote but sensitive region. Unless a permanent solution is found to this malady, the ripples of ethnic violence will spread.

The NC Hills are bounded by the plains of Assam to the north, Nagaland and Manipur to the east, Cachar district of Assam to the south and Meghalaya to the west. Mizoram, Tripura and Bangladesh are not too far away. The NC Hills have heights up to 1800 metres and are thickly forested, with very few lines of communication (Map 1). National Highway-54 (NH-54), which runs from Lumding to Silchar, is in a poor condition especially between Haflong and Silchar. The lifeline of the NC Hills is a single, metre gauge line running from Silchar to Lumding.

The NC Hills has a population of about 2.5 lakh of which tribals form 66 per cent. Among the tribals, the Dimasas form about 55 per cent, the Hmars and Zeme Nagas 10 per cent each, and the Beities, Jayantias, Khasias and Kukis consist of the rest. The Dimasas are Hindus while the other tribes are Christians. Of the non-tribal population, the Bengalis and Nepalis form the majority. The Dimasas are the traditional

Major Anil Raman is commanding a rifle company in North Cachar Hills.

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Map 1

North Cachar Hills



landowners. The Hmars are the newcomers who have prospered through cash crop cultivation. Commerce is completely controlled by Bengalis. Apart from these three communities, the remaining population is economically, politically and financially marginalised. Thus a divided population, difficult terrain, poor communications and proximity to insurgency afflicted areas as well as Bangladesh, makes the NC Hills an ideal setting for insurgency.

The roots of Dimasa chauvinism lie in their status as the early inhabitants and traditional rulers of South Assam and the neighbouring areas. The 13th century Dimasa kingdom, with its capital at Dimapur, included the entire Cachar, NC Hills, Sibsagar and Nagaon districts of Assam and Nagaland. A series of defeats at the hands of the Ahoms of Assam, however, saw the kingdom shrink and the Dimasas flee the plains and settle in the NC Hills and Cachar. The Burmese invasion of Cachar in 1824 forced the last Cachari ruler Gobinda Chandra to seek the aid of the British, which led to the treaty of Badarpur. This resulted in a blow to Dimasa pride with the division of the Cachar kingdom into Silchar, Karimganj, Hailakandi, Nowgaon, Sibsagar and the Naga Hills. After the assassination of Gobinda Chandra in 1830, the kingdom was annexed by the British under the "Doctrine of Lapse" and remained so till 1947. The Dimasa fear marginalisation, having suffered the trauma of successive defeats and the break up of their vast kingdom. In recent years this gave rise to chauvinism, which manifested itself in the 'Dimaraji' movement. The emergence of the Hmars as rivals due to their political and economical success, and the demand for inclusion of NC Hills in 'Greater Nagaland' by the Nagas have set the stage for further conflict.

Towards the 1980s the Dimasas driven by these insecurities and motivated by the Assam agitation, raised a demand for a separate state, 'Dimaraji'. The Dimasa National Security Force (DNSF) and later the Dima Halam Daogah (DHD) began an armed struggle for Dimaraji fed on the delusions of past glories. The general rise of ethnic violence in the North East, lavish assistance from the NSCN, Issac-Muivah (NSCN-IM), United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and the Bodo outfits fuelled the struggle. However, infighting among the leaders and conflict with the NSCN over

'Nagalim', led the DHD to sign a ceasefire with the government on 01 January 2003.

RECENT SITUATION

The spark which lit the ethnic violence was the suspected killing of three DHD cadres by unidentified militants at the Hmar dominated Zoar village, near Dittokchara in the NC Hills in February 2003. The DHD immediately roughed up Hmar villagers in the area and promised further violence, causing the Hmars to flee in large numbers to Cachar and Mizoram. Violence against Dimasas in the Hmar dominated areas of Cachar followed, leading to Hmars getting targeted all over NC Hills. Three Hmars and a Kuki were lynched in a train by a Dimasa mob. The Hmar People's Convention (Democratic) (HPC (D)) the militant group of the Hmars, led a massive attack on Lodhi Cachari, a site of historical importance to the Dimasa. Thereafter both tribes set about attacking and burning each other's villages in earnest. The HPC (D) and the DHD coordinated the planning and provided the armed cadre for attacks on the rival tribe.

One of the most worrisome features of this conflict has been the systematic attempt by both sides to carry out ethnic cleansing. Isolated villages were burnt and inhabitants killed without mercy by both sides. Neighbours who had coexisted peacefully for decades set upon each other with a vengeance. This completely fractured the society on tribal lines with devastating effects on the functioning of the government and the economy.

The scourge of violence also affected the other tribes in the area such as Kukis, Nagas, Khasis, Rankhol, Beiteis and Veipheis. Many who lived in the violence affected areas fled their villages not knowing what turn the crisis would take. Tribes like the Kukis and the Nagas quickly deployed their own armed cadres to protect their interests. Alliances between these groups have been brokered with the Nagas and the Hmars loosely ranged against the Dimasas and the Kukis. Violent differences resulting from these alliances have already claimed their first victims. It is difficult to predict as to what turn this spiral of violence will take.

Army. While the Army responded quickly to the violence, the remoteness of villages and inhospitable terrain meant that an omnipresent prophylactic presence was infeasible. The prolonged deployment of troops in Operation Parakram and arrival of new troops required intelligence networks to be resuscitated; a time consuming and intricate process. Low troop densities demands a company operating base (COB) to dominate nearly 30 to 40 villages; a difficult order given the terrain and scale of violence.

Police. The number of violent acts, terrain and poor communication overwhelmed the police forces including the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF). The sentiments of the populace resulted in divisions along ethnic lines in the rank of the state police, affecting their impartiality and effectiveness.

Forceful action by the Army as well as peace talks by tribal and political leaders has caused an uneasy calm to prevail since August 2003. However, all refugees have not yet returned to their burnt villages and many are seeking new homes in safer areas. This has caused more demographic changes and fresh tensions. The two sides are using the lull in violence for consolidating and preparing for the next round. The HPC (D) from Mizoram and Manipur has provided sophisticated arms and training to the local Hmars. The DHD has exploited the Dimasa sentiment for fresh recruitment and extortion.

CAUSES OF CONFLICT

The causes for this conflict are varied and complex. While some have roots in the NC Hills, others are symptomatic of the ills in the North East. The net effect has been to produce a crucible for such conflicts to ignite and then linger on.

The North East has remained demographically unstable as waves of invading tribes, attracted by vast tracts of land with insignificant population and immense natural resources, encroached upon earlier settlers. Today invasions have been replaced with infiltration and migration. These changes in demography affected the existing power structure to the detriment of the earlier inhabitants. Vote bank politics translated this instability into conflict and the easy availability of weapons added violence to the disputes. After

independence, large numbers of Hmars from Mizoram and Churachandpur districts of Manipur settled in the NC Hills. The Hmars gained considerable clout due to economic and educational progress and competed with Dimasas for important political and government posts. This has fuelled Dimasa insecurity and set the stage for conflict.

The NC Hills district was made a part of Assam state but was granted the status of an autonomous district in 1952 under the Sixth Schedule. The Autonomous District Council, with elected members, controls all development activity. The representation of each tribe has always been lopsided in favour of the Dimasas. This has led to tardy development and has caused discontentment among other tribes. Dimasas fear that change in share of seats would reduce their power in their own homeland. Hmars have attempted to form political alliances to protect their interests, bringing them into conflict with the Dimasas. After the outbreak of violence in 2003, the Hmars have begun jockeying for a separate council comprising of the Jinam and Jatinga Valleys of the NC Hills.

The Hmars, originally a Burmese tribe, have the misfortune of not being a majority in any state and suffer from negligible political representation. They have strong ethnic, cultural and religious ties with Mizos and had fought alongside them during the Mizo insurgency. However, they felt betrayed by the Lushai after the Mizoram Peace Accord and waged an unsuccessful insurgency against the Mizo government. In Manipur they have a majority only in Churachandpur district. This plight has led to a desire for a separate homeland incorporating Churachandpur district of Manipur, parts of Cachar and parts of northern Mizoram in addition to the Hmar dominated areas of the NC Hills. Naturally this has led to conflict with other tribes in the area and has the potential for greater violence.

Role of the NSCN-IM

There are reports from several sources that the kidnapping of the Dimasas at Dittokchara, which set off the ethnic violence, was the handiwork of NSCN-IM militants masquerading as the 'Assam Commando Group'. As NSCN-IM demands for NC Hills to be part

of 'Nagalim', directly leads to confrontation with the DHD, it has a vested interest in keeping the latter unbalanced. The NSCN-IM helped the Hmars against the Dimasas knowing that getting the latter embroiled in violence would prevent the DHD from taking advantage of the ceasefire and consolidating its hold. They made their support covert after a delegation of Zeme Nagas from NC Hills convinced them that taking sides openly in this conflict would lead to Dimasa retribution.

Religious Differences

While Hindu-Christian animosity has never been a significant feature of tribal conflicts in the North East, the rise of communal feelings in India as a whole has had repercussions. The Hmars are devout Christians while the Dimasas are mainly Hindus. The Hmar church bodies and social networks, including those abroad, have been heavily involved in directing political activities too. The Dimasas lack this external support and are extremely apprehensive and critical of activities of Hmar religious bodies. The unchecked and wide spread proselytism by missionary groups to achieve a 'Christian belt' from Meghalaya to Nagaland has brought them into direct conflict with the Dimasas who are staunch Hindus. The estrangement between the two tribes and religious politicking makes this issue potential for political exploitation.

SECURITY IMPLICATIONS

The implications of this conflict for security are extremely grave due to the strategic location of the conflict zone and its potential for destabilising the entire region. The spread of insurgency and the commitment of the Army for such conflicts within the overall ambit of national security also pose problems.

Strategic Location

NC Hills district is the vital link between the Brahmaputra Valley to the north and the Barak River Valley to the south. The proposed East-West Corridor and the only rail link to South Assam, Mizoram and Tripura passes through these hills. The planned extension of these links to South East (SE) Asia adds to the strategic importance of this region. Its proximity to conflict zones

in Manipur, Nagaland, Karbi Anglong, Assam and Tripura imply that once insurgency takes root here, it will flourish well. In turn insurgents from these areas would find it a suitable safe haven and tax collection base. Its proximity to resource starved and over-populated Bangladesh makes it a potential target for demographic invasion as well. Another affect of its location is its contiguity with Nagaland hence its inclusion in 'Nagalim'.

Spread of Insurgency

A macro view of the region would reveal that over the years insurgency has spread radially from Nagaland and Manipur to all the other States in the North East and to North Bengal. The conflicts for the most part have been driven by ethnic xenophobia rather than a demand for sovereignty. At the first glance this may seem a better situation politically, but in reality it is not given the sheer scale of violence directed at the civil population. The catastrophic division of the heterogeneous tribal society, as exists in the NC Hills, along tribal, ethnic and religious lines has created chasms, which may never be bridged. As one tribe picks up arms to claim its self-perceived 'rights', the others are forced to follow suit. From here it is an easy step to extortion and political manipulation. The debilitating effects on government functioning, which follow, create varying degrees of anarchy and violence, which become self-perpetuating.

The inability of Central Police Organisations (CPOs) to undertake effective counter insurgency has necessitated the Army deployment in South Assam. The need to tackle yet another insurgency will only add to its burdens and detract it from operational preparations. Operation Vijay and Operation Parakram have seen the Army pulling out of the North East for operations in the west leaving a security vacuum behind. Such a situation has the potential for violent exploitation by insurgents.

LOOKING FOR A SOLUTION

World over the resolution of ethnic conflicts has been extremely difficult, time consuming and only partially successful. Conflicts in Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Rwanda, Sri Lanka and our

numerous insurgencies serve as painful reminders of this sad truth. This is because the root of ethnic conflict lies in identity. Political conflicts can be resolved through political and economic solutions; and ideological conflicts can be resolved through compromise, but how can one compromise on identity? The extreme brutality inflicted on each other by cohabiting people is so traumatic an experience that reconciliation becomes very difficult. Physical separation of the warring parties may reduce the violence but the conflict would only have been postponed in time and space. Neglect of the North East over the ages does not inspire much confidence that this conflict resolution will be entirely successful, but there is no option but to try.

Chances of peaceful resolution of the conflict will increase through holistic policies, which address the macro level problems in the North East: alienation, poor governance, and lack of development, unstable security situation and unemployment. The mitigation of these issues would create an atmosphere of peace to germinate and flourish.

Efforts at reconciliation can begin to succeed only if the parties are willing to listen. The idea is to discourage violence and create an environment for talks. They have to be sensitised to the horrors of ethnic violence and the long-term consequences of their actions. This would be a time consuming and repetitive process addressed at different targets like tribal leaders, militant wings, students, women groups and villagers. It would have to be a coordinated effort by neutral agencies like the government, neutral political leaders, non governmental organisations (NGOs) and the security forces (SF).

The most important step to resolution of the crisis is to ensure that existing demography of any area is not changed any further. Traditional inhabitants of an area should not lose power due to the large-scale arrival of outsiders. The large-scale migration of Hmars from Mizoram and Manipur should be strictly controlled. Election cards should be issued only on the basis of proof of residence. The laws to ensure this exist, but politicians have to give up their vote banks and the civil administration has to find the will and the honesty to implement the rules.

Having accepted a demographic freeze, it is essential to ensure that the just aspirations of the Hmar community are met. The insecurity of inadequate political representation must be removed. They should be allotted seats based on their share of the existing population. Neutral officials may conduct a census of the district to verify this.

The present strategy of firefighting with the SF to control insurgency will be unsuccessful. The low density of forces does not augur well for the long-term security of the region. As long as Manipur and Nagaland remain conflict spots, and the Bangladesh border porous, NC Hills will remain disturbed. A viable counter insurgency grid of Assam Rifles is needed to retain control over the area in the long term. Improving the effectiveness of the CPOs in rural counter insurgency is an immediate requirement. The re-establishment of border outposts on the borders of NC Hills with Nagaland and Manipur may also be worthwhile.

Post Ceasefire Strategy

While the Central government can be credited with negotiating ceasefires with many militant groups in the North East, including the DHD, it has not been as successful in effecting a post ceasefire policy for conflict resolution. This has resulted in the SF being reined in, but the militant groups continuing their activities on a slightly reduced scale. The DHD in the NC Hills has used the ceasefire to move its cadre to the affected areas. Free from the threat of retribution from the SF, they pay only lip service to the ceasefire rules and continue to extort money as well as recruit. Camps are being used for training, planning and as bases for anti-Hmar operations. While the Army has not spared the DHD when caught indulging in these activities, sustained pre-emptive anti-DHD operations cannot be undertaken due to the ceasefire. It is imperative for the Centre to implement its post-ceasefire strategy so that the DHD gives up arms and controls its activities, otherwise, the potential for violence only increases.