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Insurgency and cross-border terrorism in South Asia, focusing ethno-religious, cultural issues, with special reference to India

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Abstract

The geopolitics is currently dominating international relations both with respect to political as well as economic relations. It is more relevant as far as the political scenario of South Asia is concerned. Geographical location of the Indian sub-continent, its vast size, a population of over a billion and existence of a pluralistic society with multiple religion, culture and language create an environment of conflict between the ethno-nationalistic groups. The problem of insurgency in peripheral areas of India has been rooted throughout history. This is still continuing even after independence from two hundred years of colonial rule. Similarly the various terrorist activities in the border regions of northwest, and northeast are endemic as the breaking up of the sub-continent and subsequent partition of the country based on "two nation theory" The political tensions and continued subversive activities and cross-border terrorism in the border regions of South Asia are not unique. Rather it has worldwide occurrence, more so in post cold war era. The corollary can be drawn from the east European countries especially after the break up of the Soviet Union. The entire east Europe is in a state of flux where several nation states have emerged on ethno-nationalistic lines such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia in erstwhile Yugoslavia. These small nations are strife-torn because of the presence of multi-cultural groups who are suffering from identity crisis i.e. Irishmen in Ireland, Basques in Spain. The conflict between minority-majority groups is dominant in most of the regions mentioned. In all pluralistic societies linguistic and religious identities play a major role in defining political ideology. The ethno-nationalistic groups are thus vulnerable in all respects, being alienated from mainstream development as well as from cultural, political and economic integration process of the nation-state.

In South Asia the problem exists at multi level with overlapping issues of political, economic and cultural attributes among the heterogeneous population groups inhabiting the border regions of northwest, northeast, west and south. The political set up of India with a strong central government and limited regional autonomy are additional factors for escalating tensions based on localism and regionalism. A strong ethnic feeling, group identity in terms of common culture, language and religion exhibits separatism and secessionist ideology. Aiding and abating cross-border terrorism and other anti-social activities in the peripheral border regions for achieving military goals more often guide the foreign policies of SAARC countries. In South Asia there are problems of LTTE in Sri Lanka, insurgent

groups in north-eastern region and Kashmir in India, ethnic strife in Baluchistan in Pakistan, ethnic cleansing in hill areas of Chittagong in Bangladesh. The paper highlights some of the current issues related to insurgency and cross-border terrorism in India in particular. The role of various ethno-religious, cultural, and linguistics groups has also been analysed in abating the conflict for greater interest of the nation-state.

Key Words: *Insurgency, Terrorism, ethno-nationalist groups and under-development.*

Introduction

India is a multi-ethnic and pluralistic society. The political unity is coterminous with the geographical unity of the country. The presence of a heterogeneous population with various nationalities and sub-nationalities owing allegiance to their respective group identities make them fall an easy prey to extremism and subversive activities. There are often controversies regarding the geographic unity of India, which is considered as a sub-continent with respect to both total area and population, it has withstood the multiple challenges arising out of its post-colonial uneven, heterogeneous and fragmented social, economic, and political set up and emerged as a modern nation with a democratic, liberal society.

According to ancient text the indigenous civilization of India dates back to 5000 B.C. when the Indo- European groups invaded India through the northwest and gradually the process of *Aryanisation* started taking place throughout the length and breadth of the country. Similarly, from the northeast Asia through Tibet and Myanmar a large number of Tibeto-Mongoloid and Tibeto-Burman speaking people came through successive historic periods, which continued till recent past. During the period of British rule the entire sub-continent had large frontier areas in the Himalayan mountainous region. There were reasonable degrees of communication between Central Asian countries in the northwest as well as Tibet, Bhutan and Myanmar in the northeast through innumerable mountain passes. A well established trade link between the Himalayan Kingdoms of Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar as well as northwest frontier provinces and Afghanistan, further facilitated the free movement of multiple ethnic groups from the ancient, medieval and right up to the colonial period when the British empire established its control over the sub-continent stretching the entire Himalayan frontier covering a length of 3200 km. After independence the frontiers were overnight transformed into international boundaries and separate nations emerged as India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar and later Bangladesh. There is no natural geographical barrier between these countries and India found having to deal with a porous border in the

northeast, west and northwest surrounded by hostile military regimes to start with. While the indigenous people living in these fringe areas all belong to their respective ethno-cultural groups, often sharing the same language, culture and religion living on both sides of the border of sovereign nations, which had been their homeland for centuries. This brought a multitude of socio-political problems ultimately culminating to insurgencies and terrorism in the peripheral parts of India. The ethno-nationalistic issues played a great role in creating geopolitical problems that are endemic in the truncated form of partitioned India that the British handed over to the Indians at the end of two hundred years of colonial rule. Thus the partition and the geographic distribution of territories remain at the core of the present problem of insurgency and terrorism in different parts of India.

The seeds of discord among the multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-linguistic groups were actually planted by the imperial-colonial power that systematically destroyed the age-old peace of the indigenous groups. The metropolitan –imperial power under a repressive regime continued to ignore the regional ethno-cultural sentiments of the people living at the peripheral areas of the empire. A sustained process of alienation was operative even during the historical past because of diverse interests of a medley groups existing in the fringe areas of Indian sub-continent. The diverse multi-ethnic groups owing allegiance to their respective race, religion and ethnicity never became a part of Indian mainstream population. The multiple factors of inaccessibility, cultural and social alienation, and underdevelopment all played a part in building up of a deep–rooted grievance among the indigenous people. Even after independence the successive central governments failed to address the problem of the people inhabiting the border states of India who suddenly found themselves as border–states merging with international boundaries. As such the issues of cross-border terrorism and insurgencies are very much linked up with internal security of modern India and strategic foreign policies adopted by the secular, democratic government of India.

Ethnic and Religious Conflicts

Ethnic conflicts are conflicts whose protagonists are inspired by a heightened perception of their own and other's ethnicity (Conversi, D.: 2005:48). According to Conversi, ethnic conflicts have become most common after 9/11 and US attack on Afghanistan. The disintegration of multi-national states in the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia permitted the resurgence of long-repressed ethnic identities, leading to civil conflict and even international war (Conversi, D:2005:49).

These conflicts are typically post cold war phenomena taking place in countries like India, Russia, Southeast Asian countries, and in the Middle East, Southwest Asian countries and others. The ideological enmities based on socialist-capitalist cleavage are being largely replaced by cultural cleavage based on ethno-religious, ethno-linguistic identities that provide the fuel for conflict and separatist movements. The increased intolerance among various groups are

sometimes imposed or indoctrinated by sustained terror campaigns. Ethnic conflicts are thus conflicts in groups that define themselves using ethnic or national criteria and on this basis claims are made on behalf of collective group interests against political actors, including the state. Ethnic conflicts have a correlation with religious belief in that ethnicity's subjective belief in a common descent carries with it a sacred focus of group attention. Usually religion becomes a source of conflict and war once particularistic and intolerant outlook are adopted (Encyclopaedia of Conflicts, vol. 1&2, 1999).

Modern states have five politically active ethnic groups namely, ethno-nationalists (independent identities seeking to re-establish their own state), indigenous people (primarily concerned with protecting their traditional lands, resources and culture), communal contenders (one among a member of culturally distinct groups on plural societies that compete for a share of power), ethno-classes (desirous of equal rights and opportunities to overcome effects of discrimination resulting from their immigration and minority status, militant sects, (politicized minority people defined wholly or substantially by religious beliefs (Encyclopedia of Conflicts, vol. 1&2, 1999).

The prevailing ideologies and political movements within state systems influence ethnic conflict. In recent years, however, a new kind of resistance to the monopolistic state system has left unaffected only a few regions of the world, India not being an exception. Regional disparities, economic under-development, communications technology all being part of the modernization process have accelerated the insurgency and terrorist activities in different parts of the country. Political agenda of the minority sects are most evident in case of Kashmir, and Khalistan movement in Punjab during the eighties.

Communal contenders are evident in the Gorkha and Kamtapuri movements in North Bengal and Bodo movement in Assam.

Ethno-religious factors have played a major role in case of Kashmir militancy. Here while religion may seem to be prime motivating factor especially since Islamic fundamentalism and Hindu rationalism are involved, various forms of nationalism and ethnicity are the more important causative forces at work here. Pakistani nationalism is based on "two nation" theory and as such her central argument has been that Muslims and Hindus in South Asia each constitute nations and not religions. The violence that started here in 1947 and is still continuing, the type of conflict, therefore, can be stated to be arising out of invasions resulting into border disputes that are further complicated by ethnic-religious factors. At present though, Kashmiri insurgents are in rather an unusual position of strength, as of 1998 since when they are getting active support from Pakistan, a nuclear power.

The *Sikh* uprising that started in 1973 and continued till 1993 in Punjab popularly known as Khalistan movement was also ethno-religious in nature. This has been and still is one of the most prosperous states of India, yet there was a feeling of alienation among the Sikh minorities, which to an extent helped the movement although there

were definitely political issues involved into this.

Where governments possess the political apparatus capable of achieving flexible, accommodative, formulas for satisfying the political demands of territorially concentrated ethno-cultural/ ethno-linguistic/ ethno-religious minorities within their national corpus, dissidence tends to recede and remain below the threshold beyond which the sense of collective frustration and desperation nourishes terrorism (Gould:) The reverse of this formula on the part of the government gives rise to locally concentrated terrorism. A number of non – Indian examples are north Ireland, Bosnia, Kosovo, East Timor and a number of African states. The natures of these conflicts are of two typesmamely insurgency and terrorism.

Insurgency and Terrorism

There are evidently some difference between insurgency and terrorism although both are forms of extremist politics. Insurgency means a rising up, rebellion or insurrection, while terrorism is defined as organized system of intimidation (Tripathy, 1987). It is further stated that terrorism is a predictable and natural response to historical injustice, persecution, and hopelessness; terrorism is the weapon of the weak, and terrorism does not lead to major political achievements. Terrorism is defined as a synthesis of war and theatre, a dramatization of the most prescribed kind of violence--- that which is penetrated on innocent victims---played before an audience in the hope of creating a mood of fear for political purposes (The Encyclopedia of World Terrorism, 2002). The Encyclopedia of Social Science defines: "Terrorism is a term used to describe the method whereby an organized group or a Party seeks to achieve its vowed aims chiefly through the systematic use of violence". Terrorist acts are directed against persons, who as individuals, agents or representatives of authority interfere with the consummation or the objectives of such a group. In the political life of the sub-continent terrorism has become a vital issue. As far as the geopolitics of South Asia is concerned cross-border terrorism has become a major concern in international relation determining the foreign policies of several countries. Successive governments of India from 1990 onwards have drawn attention towards increasing violence in both fringe as well as core areas of India that resulted in disrupting peace and harmony in affected areas.

Geographical Areas and Terrorism

The border states of Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab in the north and northeastern states of Assam, Nagaland, Mizoram, Mauipur, Tripura, and Arunachal Pradesh have had the problem of insurgency and cross-border terrorism from time to time. In the recent years the secessionist movements in Jammu & Kashmir and Assam has resulted in huge loss of innocent lives and has become a major internal and external security concern for the government of India. Other states namely, West Bengal, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, have also faced insurgent, secessionist movements. Geopolitical factors as well as ethnic, cultural, social, and economic factors have played decisive

roles in the origin and continuation of these movements.

Ethno-nationalist Terrorism

It has been observed that during the post cold war period non-state actors obtained the potential to significantly tilt the balance of power in contemporary conflict (Gunaratna, 2002). The formation of transnational links between transnational communities has enabled these groups to develop propaganda, fund-raising, training procurement, and transportation networks. An integral component of the terrorist strategy is to mobilize their transnational communities into politically and economically supporting their nationalist and separatist/irredentist campaigns.

The various ethnic groups in the northeast i.e. Nagas in Nagaland, Meiteis in Manipur, Bodos in Assam, Mizos in Mizoram, not to mention the various hill tribes inhabiting the territories of Arunachal, Meghalaya, all have very strong ethno-cultural sentiments. Thus the issues of regionalism, territorialism, get merged into a pan Indian nationalism of which these "ethnes." have never been a part. The term "ethnie" is now used in lieu of ethnic group to define a group's cultural-ancestral heritage. According to Conversi ethnic conflicts have become most common after 9/11 and US attack on Afghanistan. The disintegration of multi-national states in the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia permitted the resurgence of long-repressed ethnic identities, leading to civil conflict and even international war (Conversi, D:49)

The right of self-determination has come into the political life even before independence, as a result of injustice, repression, and mischief of a colonial regime interested only in maintaining a status quo as far as the metropolitan interests were concerned. Most insurgency movements in the northeast started initially because of economic underdevelopment, inaccessibility leading to alienation and political disputes. After independence the successive central and the state governments of Assam had also failed to address to the specific problems of the Nagas, the Mizos, the Meiteis, and the Tripura hill tribes. The problems of hill people are different from the problems of the plains. Those indigenous groups i.e. the Bodos, the Mishings, the Sonowals, the Ravas, and the Tiwas have completely integrated with the mainstream people of Assamese origin. They have been gradually alienated due to a hegemonic policy of the majority Assamese ruling elite. The subsequent insurgency and terrorist movements by the ULFA., the ABSU# etc. are related to this suppression of minority by the majority. On top of all these came the Bangladesh war after which the pouring of Bangladeshi refugees in hundreds through the porous border of the adjoining borders of Mizoram, Tripura, and Assam aggravated the ethnic problem manifolds. In Tripura the indigenous tribal people became a minority and the Bengalis from across the international border constitute a majority. Thus the emergence of the insurgent groups i.e. TVF, TNV, TUJS#, has come up in the recent years. The solution of this complex problem is yet to be reached. These sentiments were later fanned by subversive elements

from across the international border i.e. the Chinese, the Myanmarese and the Bangladeshis at different points of time to suit the individual country's geopolitical and geo-strategic equations. It is further observed that although the governments oppose the activities of terrorists within their own border, they encourage guerilla movements using identical tactics in other regions of the world. This also applies to the South Asian countries (Hasan, 2004). The practice of a double standard regarding war against international terrorism has to stop immediately before any solution is reached. Thus the foreign policies of individual countries also determine the nature of cross border terrorism and insurgency.

Causes of Insurgency and Terrorism

The causes of insurgency and terrorism in different parts of India are as varied as its geographic heterogeneity. There are regional variations in the nature of insurgency and terrorist movements in different regions based on economic, social, cultural, political, and finally historical factors.

In India religious fervour and economic deprivation made a highly combustible mixture (Gupta 1998), Punjab perceives its prosperity as the basis for looking for more. In Jammu and Kashmir it has been conceded that while the state received privileged treatment, it is the intervening political element, which caused alienation, for despite the accommodation of 'Kashmiriyat', a Kashmiri has a lyrical and historical desire for freedom. In the northeast, the factors are multiple as mentioned above. Here gee-strategic locations, demographic pressures, struggle among evolving linguistic identities, the performance of All-India political class, the process of underdevelopment and finally the lack of integration, account for the rise of insurgency. In the case of political unrest in Manipur, particularly the Naga- Kuki struggle the cross border narco-trafficking and trade in arms and weapons escalated terrorist activities. The main objective of the cross- border terrorism is initiating a proxy war. The foreign terrorist outfits that encourage Indian insurgent groups from across Bangladesh, are Islamic Chhatra Shibir, Inter Service Intelligence etc. The Indian terrorist groups engage-d in various types of destructive activities in the northeast are ABSU, NSCN, PLA, TNV, ULFA, HNLC, UPDS, # etc.

These outfits operate by illegal infiltration through the 4500 km of porous border as sleeping agents and then get completely intermingled with the local indigenous people and then strike at vital installations during appropriate time to spread terror among the civilian society.

There are many types of insurgencies being operative in India not all of them are of separatist / divisive in nature. Some of these have a demand for a separate statehood / autonomy, depending on multiple ethno-cultural issues. The secessionist groups i.e. KIO*demand autonomy based on ethnicity, GNLF* basically wanted an ethno-linguistic identity whereas PWG* are a terrorist group fighting for an ideology.

Terrorism is now acknowledged as one of the revolutionary strategies. This form of terrorism is Russian in origin. Terrorism and insurgency have been directed against both dictatorship and democratic societies

and have been practiced by the extreme left, the radical right and also quite frequently by nationalist-religious separatist movements (Tripathy: 1987: 16, 23).

Political cause of terrorism is stated to be an image of a state as soft or hard towards repression of terrorism. In this respect India presents a soft image, as democratic states are better targets in conducting such operations. In India, the political system and processes are regarded as a cause of alienation, which in. turn leads to terrorism. The basis of such alienation may arise from a sense of identity with a cultural group from across the international border as is the case all along the Indo- Myanmar border where a number of ethnic groups i.e. Shans, Kachins, Karens, Chins and several others live. The historical texts reveal that from 2000 BC onwards, great hordes of people belonging to the Mongoloid stock allied to the Bhutanese and Tibetans, speaking Tibeto-Bunnese and Man-Khmer languages were migrating into Indian territories ceaselessly. Therefore, identity movements may have a sense of regionalism. The political boundaries between the Himalayan countries have always remained loosely identified. The concept of boundary what we understand today is a modern one necessitated by present day international political and economic compulsions. The rising population of modern states, trade relations, administrative and judicial works etc generated a need for dearly demarcating international border Thus it becomes evident that the solution of insurgency and cross border terrorism lies in a wise and sensitive handling of multiple issues.

Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

It is felt by the experts that an overall economic and regional development of the fringe areas and Border States would solve the problem of alienation of the indigenous people to a great extent. Experience shows that all these terrorist movements and various insurgent groups operating in different parts of India have agreed to political dialogues with the Central Government as well as the respective State Governments and some of the grievances of these people have been solved through a peaceful negotiation with the Government of West Bengal. As far as the external security is concerned the solution may be related to the defense policies undertaken by the Central Government. The National security advisers have suggested that, fencing along the international border and greater surveillance would bring down the number of infiltrators considerably. As far as the foreign policy of India is concerned the development of a friendly relation with neighbours based on exchange programmes of cultural and social nature would improve the level of people to people contact. In the economic front development of trade and commerce between the South Asian countries would be of mutual help. As far as contentious issues are concerned, like settlement of border disputes, demarcation of actual territorial limits, sharing of river water, etc, these should be solved bilaterally with the respective countries. More importantly, the people living on the border areas should be given the right of free movement across the border so as to allow a greater interaction with the people

having similar culture, ethnic and religious backgrounds. In other words a more pragmatic approach may bring peace and harmony in the peripheral parts of the sub-continent

Abbreviations

ULF A: United Liberation Front of Assam,

ABSU: All Bodo Students Union,

TNV: Tripura National Volunteers,

TUJS: Tripura Upajati Juba Samity,

TVF: Tripura Volunteer Force,

NSCN: National Socialist Council of Nagaland,

PLA: People's Liberation Army of Manipur,

HNLC: Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council,

GNLF: Gorkha National Liberation Front,

UPDS: United People's Democratic Solidarity,

KLO: Kamtapuri Liberation Organization,

PWG: People's War Group.

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