

Secessionist Movements of India

Secession in India typically refers to state secession, which is the withdrawal of one or more states from the Republic of India. Some have argued for secession as a natural right of revolution.

Many independence movements exist with thousands of members, however, with moderate local support and high voter participation in the democratic elections. The Khalistan movement in Punjab was active in the 1980s and the 1990s, but is now largely subdued within India. Insurgency has occurred in North-East India, in the states of Tripura, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur, Assam and Nagaland.

India has introduced several Armed Forces Special Powers Acts (AFSPA) to subdue insurgency in certain parts of the country. The law was first enforced in Manipur and later enforced in other insurgency-ridden north-eastern states. It was extended to most parts of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir in 1990 after the outbreak of an armed insurgency in 1989. Each Act gives soldiers immunity in specified regions against prosecution under state government unless the Indian government gives prior sanction for such prosecution. The government maintains that the AFSPA is necessary to restore order in regions like Indian territories Kashmir, Manipur Nagaland and Assam.

Jammu and Kashmir

Historical Background

Maharaja Hari Singh became the ruler of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir in 1925, and he was the reigning monarch at the conclusion of British rule in the subcontinent in 1947. With the impending independence of India, the British announced that the British Paramountcy over the princely states would end, and the states were free to choose between the new Dominions of India and Pakistan or to remain independent. It was emphasized that independence was only a 'theoretical possibility' because, during the long rule of the British in India, the states had come to depend on British Indian government for a variety of their needs including their internal and external security.

Jammu and Kashmir had a Muslim majority (77% Muslim by the previous census in 1941). Following the logic of Partition, many people in Pakistan expected that Kashmir would join Pakistan. However, the predominant political movement in the Valley of Kashmir (Jammu and Kashmir National Conference)

was secular and was allied with the Indian National Congress since the 1930s. Guha, Ramachandra (2008), *India after Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy*, "Pakistan naturally expected Kashmir, with its Muslim majority, to join it. India thought that the religious factor was irrelevant, especially since the leading political party, the National Conference, was known to be non-sectarian." The Maharaja was faced with indecision.

On 22 October 1947, rebellious citizens from the western districts of the State and Pushdown tribesmen from the Northwest Frontier Province of Pakistan invaded the State, backed by Pakistan. The Maharaja initially fought back but appealed for assistance to India, who agreed on the condition that the ruler accedes to India. Maharaja Hari Singh signed the Instrument of Accession on 26 October 1947 in return for military aid and assistance, which was accepted by the Governor General the next day. While the Government of India accepted the accession, it added the provision that it would be submitted to a "reference to the people" after the state is cleared of the invaders, since "only the people, not the Maharaja, could decide where Kashmiris wanted to live." It was a provisional accession.

Once the Instrument of Accession was signed, Indian soldiers entered Kashmir with orders to evict the raiders. The resulting Indo-Pakistani War of 1947 lasted till the end of 1948. At the beginning of 1948, India took the matter to the United Nations Security Council. The Security Council passed a resolution asking Pakistan to withdraw its forces as well as the Pakistani nationals from the territory of Jammu and Kashmir, and India to withdraw the majority of its forces leaving only a sufficient number to maintain law and order, following which a plebiscite would be held. A ceasefire was agreed on 1 January 1949, supervised by UN observers.

A special United Nations Commission for India and Pakistan (UNCIP) was set up to negotiate the withdrawal arrangements as per the Security Council resolution. The UNCIP made three visits to the subcontinent between 1948 and 1949, trying to find a solution agreeable to both India and Pakistan. It passed a resolution in August 1948 proposing a three-part process. It was accepted by India but effectively rejected by Pakistan. In the end, no withdrawal was ever carried out, India insisting that Pakistan had to withdraw first, and Pakistan contending that there was no guarantee that India would withdraw afterward. No agreement could be reached between the two countries on the process of demilitarization.

India and Pakistan fought two further wars in 1965 and 1971. Following the latter war, the countries reached the Simla Agreement, agreeing on a Line of Control between their respective regions and committing to a peaceful resolution of the dispute through bilateral negotiations.

On 31 October 2019 the State of Jammu and Kashmir was transformed into a Union Territory. The state has been bifurcated into a separate union territory for Jammu and Kashmir while the other Union Territory is Ladakh. The decision to change the status of Jammu and Kashmir into two separate union

territories came on August 5, 2019, when the Government of India abrogated Article 370 and 35A. This marks the end of the special autonomous status granted by the Constitution of India. This day also marks the birthday of Sardar Vallabhai Patel.

Factors Responsible for Rise of Secessionist Movement in Kashmir

Secessionist movement in the Kashmir Valley started in April 1988 on account of a combination of various factors, both external and internal, around that time which can be discussed below.

1. External Factors.

Resurgence in the activities of the Jammu & Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) following the return of Amanullah Khan (Chairman, JKLF) from UK to Pakistan in early 1987 and the nexus between the JKLF and Pakistan.

Involvement of the intelligence agencies of Pakistan (Inter Services Intelligence Directorate and Field Intelligence Unit) in giving arms training to Kashmiri youth beginning February 1988.

2. Internal factors

Return of Pakistan-trained Kashmiri youth to Kashmir Valley from around April 1988 onwards.

Leadership provided to the secessionists in initial stages by Shabir Ahmed Shah following his release from detention in May 1988.

Expulsion of the J&K JEI from the Muslim United Front giving a new vigour to its anti-national activities since it was no longer inhibited by electoral constraints.

Tactical alliance of the J&K JEI with the secessionist forces, including the People's league (PL), Islamic Students' League (ISL) and Islami Jamaat-e-Tulba (IJT).

Estrangement between Dr. Farooq Abdullah and Maulvi Farooq (Chairman, Awami Action Committee) in early 1988 driving the latter to adopt a pro-militant stance.

A political vacuum that was created following the alliance between the NC-F and the Cong(I) which was exploited by the secessionist and anti-national forces.

3. Other factors.

(i) Support of People's Conference, Awami Action Committee and Ummat-e-Islami to the movement for the removal of the Farooq Abdullah government.

(ii) Growing pro-Islamic content of the secessionist movement and increasing exploitation of religion by the secessionists and fundamentalists.

(iii) Inter and intra-party dissensions among the alliance partners (NC-F and Cong-I) and inadequate political and administrative response to firmly tackle the situation.

Secessionist Movement in Kashmir: An Overview

Since April 1988, a distinct momentum was imparted to the Secessionist movement, largely on account of the activities of the JKLF and the People's League. Infiltrations were still few and smuggling of sophisticated weapons was still in a nascent stage. Some amount of explosives were however, brought in, using smuggling routes with smugglers acting as conduits. It was after the release of Shabir Ahmed Shah in May 1988 that the various secessionist groups began to take an organized approach in their actions and activities. There was no coordinated leadership as yet, but JKLF elements were being guided and instigated from Pakistan. This was essentially a preparatory stage and the failure of the State administration to take action at the incipient stage was clearly an encouragement to the militant elements.

By the end of August 1988, the JKLF, the People's League and the ISL had acquired a capacity to engage in organised violence. This was well demonstrated by the violent incidents lasting for nearly 5 days, following the death of General Zia. The violence crippled activities in several parts of the Valley. The violent incidents of August were followed by a series of explosions in parts of Srinagar city during September. There was also evidence of better planning and well-directed attacks against individuals. DIG Kashmir, A.M. Watali, was one such target of an armed attack, though he escaped. There was also enough evidence to show increasing interest and directions from the Pakistani intelligence agencies to build up a coordinated movement with a single focus.

There was a qualitative change in the pattern of violence after January 1989. The use of sophisticated fire-arms and extensive use of explosives, mostly imported from Pakistan, greatly transformed the situation. Selective explosions were used to create an atmosphere of tension or panic. The number of infiltrations by Pakistan-returned Kashmiri youth also went up.

1989 saw a succession of agitations by the various secessionist groups. Some of the calls were given by individual groups but almost all were endorsed by the various militant formations. 26 January was observed as 'Black Day'. Considerable violence occurred all over the Valley on 11 February on the occasion of the death anniversary of Maqbool Butt. Serious violence erupted again in several parts of the valley in protest against Salman Rushdie's book despite the fact that the book had already been banned in India. For nearly 5 days almost all activity in the valley came to a halt. Even more serious violence occurred during April-May, the first lasting for nearly a week protesting against the arrest of Kashmiri youth by the police and the second, for 4 days in the name of the 'Quit Kashmir' movement.

Meanwhile, Kashmiri youth continued to cross over to Pakistan and Pakistan Occupied Kashmir in small groups. These youth were trained in the use of explosives to blow up bridges and buildings and were also given training in sophisticated fire-arms. Considerable quantities of sophisticated explosives including timing devices and AK-47 rifles were also made available to these individuals. Guidance by Pakistani intelligence agencies was also forthcoming and it was suggested that the targets should be selective and intended to make the Kashmiri people rise against the Indian government and bring down the State government in Kashmir. Threatening letters were also sent to non-Kashmiris and Hindus asking them to quit the valley. Thereafter, a major campaign began for a pro-Islamic reform movement led by the JEI J&K and its front organisations like Hizb-e-Islami and Hizb-e-Mujahideen. This was accompanied by selective attacks against pro-accession political activists, police/security agencies, government establishments and members of the minority community (Hindus). With the advent of strong reformist threats, the level of subversion went up.

The nature and content of the subversive threat in the valley acquired a momentum of its own. By the last quarter of 1989, the agitations were increasingly characterised by spontaneity, and incidents of violence became extensive and affected larger areas, including rural places. In the Kashmir Valley, Srinagar remained the focus of violence followed by Baramulla, Anantnag, Pulwama, Badgam and Kupwara districts. Following the rise in the intensity of militant violence, including assassinations and intimidation of political opponents, the traditional political parties became inactive and marginalised. As a result, the poll boycott call given by the secessionist groups was successful. Most of the electorate also refrained from exercising their franchise. In the two Poling Centres (Baramulla and Anantnag) where elections were held, the percentage of polling was 5%.

The growing pro-Islamic content of the secessionist movement and the increasing fundamentalism of the J&K JEI provided further fillip to the secessionist movement in the valley. The militant faction of the J&K JEI led by S.A.S. Gillani (ex-MLA) steadily gained ground in 1990-91 and also maintained a rapport with the militants in the secessionist movement. The J&K JEI systematically extended its influence to the Muslim majority districts of the Jammu region, particularly Doda district. In the wake of the increasing fundamentalist thrust, Hindus and their establishments became the targets of attack in the Kashmir Valley as also in Doda district of Jammu region, particularly after the 'Shilanyas' (9 November 1989) at Ayodhya. This created panic among the Hindus in the valley.

The administrative response to growing threats of secessionism, subversion and terrorism, which was inadequate to start with, had by and large collapsed by the middle of 1989. Some initial successes during 1988 and early months of 1989 that resulted in the capture of arms and arrests of Pak-trained militants, could not be sustained. Since the successful observance of a 4-day 'Quit Kashmir Movement' (11-14 May 1989), the subversives gradually acquired full sway over the valley with both the State administration and secular parties in

the retreat. With the growing failure of the State government to meet the secessionists' challenge, the pace of subversion including those in government services - police, acquired momentum and by the end of 1989, it was the secessionist elements whose writ ran in the valley. Efforts to confront them led to large scale violence and resistance.

During January, following the promulgation of Governor's rule (January 19), attempts of the State Government to assert its authority through deployment of security forces and curfew restrictions resulted in resistance and confrontation. Secessionists, in a change of tactics, organised a large number of processions and demonstrations which submitted a memorandum to the UN office at Srinagar. This was followed by attempts to inject elements of civil disobedience affecting the functioning of government offices. Mosques and the clergy gradually became a very significant component in mobilising the support of the masses for the movement. The morale of the secessionists and the people were sustained by a propaganda blitz from across the border, holding out hope of intervention and support of the Islamic world. The feeling of alienation among the common people was further sustained on the plank of alleged excesses by security forces.

Since March 1990, militant violence which was earlier confined to Srinagar city proliferated to rural belts in all parts of the Kashmir Valley. In a bid to wipe out nationalist forces and disrupt political process in the Kashmir Valley, the militants subjected political activists and their property to continuous attacks. The militants assassinated a number of pro-accession political leaders including Abdul Sattar Ranjoor (State C.P.I leader- 23 March) Ghulam Nabi Butt (Ex-MLA, Cong I- 24 March), Anwar Khan (NOT leader- 25 March), Mir Mustafa (Ex MLA- 25 March), Sheikh Abdul Jabbar (Ex Minister- 18 April), Shiekh Mohd Mansoor (Ex MLA NC/F- 11 May), Maulvi Mohd Farooq (Chairman, Awami Action Committee- 21 May) and Maulana Masoodi (veteran NC leader- 13 Dec). The sudden spurt in political assassinations led to large scale resignations from the pro-accession parties. Thus, normal political activities gradually came to an end.

Simultaneously, the militants intensified attacks against government employees and offices to demoralise the administration. By December 1990, around 300 government employees including 131 security personnel were killed by militants. Prominent among those killed were A.K. Raina (Dy Director Supplies- 20 March), H.L. Khera (G.M. HMT Factory Zainakote- 10 April), Prof. Musheer-ul-Haq (V.C., Kashmir University), J.N. Raina (Jt. Director Sericulture, 26 June), Abdul Aziz (Addl Dy. Commissioner, Srinagar- 29 June) and Parvez Qadiri (Conservator of Forests- 20 Aug). These killings generated unprecedented fear psychosis among the government employees and paralysed the normal functioning of the administration. The militants also forced the State government employees to go on strike on one pretext or the other. The last spell of the 72-day strike (15 Sept to 25 Nov) was unprecedented.

Growing communalisation of the secessionist movement in the valley coupled with the killing of Hindus (173 till Dec) by the militants caused panic among

non Muslims leading to a mass exodus. Over 40,000 Hindus and 1500 Sikh families left the valley. Most of them traversed to Jammu causing considerable strain on the communal situation in the city and its environs, besides socio-economic complications.

Proliferation of a large number of militant groups, mostly at the behest of Pakistani intelligence agencies, led to growing confusion and splintering among their ranks during 1990. Efforts to float a United Front, politically through the J&K Tehrik-e-Hurriyat (a conglomerate of 11 secessionist bodies) and on a militant plane, through the United Jihad Council, both pro-Pakistan bodies, suffered due to the JKLF (pro- Independence) remaining outside their purview. Worried over persisting intra and inter group dissensions among the major militant groups of JKLF, PL and Hizbul Mujahideen, Pakistani authorities initiated a series of discussions with Kashmiri militant leaders in Pakistan and Kathmandu after September 1990. Plans to close ranks and coalesce a United Front to sharpen the militant struggle remained major areas of consideration. The higher intensity of violence since August 1990, coinciding with upgradation in induction of sophisticated arms, was generally sustained. This was despite the large number of arrests of Kashmiri militants and increasing recovery of arms. Sustained pressure of security forces to an extent contained the situation and the trend of violence. Despite strengthening border vigil, clandestine movement of men and material continued.

During the period from 2004 to 2008, Prime Minister Singh initiated several confidence building measures with the Kashmiris. In 2006, he organized three crucial Round Table Conferences with the Kashmiri political leadership, although key dissident leaders boycotted them. He also announced the setting up of five working groups to examine various aspects of the Kashmir conflict. The groups were tasked to deal with 'improving the Centre's relations with the State, furthering the relations across the Line of Control (LoC), giving a boost to the State's economic development, rehabilitating the destitute families of militants and reviewing the cases of detainees and ensuring good governance'. By early 2008, there was a feeling that Kashmir was changing for good, especially due to the improved relationship between the Kashmiris and New Delhi, and between India and Pakistan. Even the 2008 agitation, which started out as an agitation by Kashmiri Muslims against the transfer of land to a Hindu shrine, the Shri Amarnathji Shrine Board, by the J&K government, followed by an economic blockade of Muslim-dominated Kashmir by Hindu-dominated Jammu did not fundamentally transform the positive vibes that were visible in Kashmir. In other words, after 20 years of insurgency, Kashmir was changing for the better. The differences between 1989 and 2008 were huge.

Reflecting on these changes, that in 1989, India found itself on the losing side of the Cold War, weak and friendless. The international community was negatively disposed towards India vis-à-vis the Kashmir issue. The Kashmiri dissidents, Pakistan and the militants in Kashmir had managed to 'internationalize' their cause and garnered significant levels of sympathy for it. India was being pushed into a corner. This was no more the case by 2008.

India was an emerging power and considered to be a key stabilizing player in the South Asian subcontinent. The international community was no longer keen to discuss Kashmir or force a solution; it knew India would not be pushed in that direction. Furthermore, unlike in the late 1980s, Pakistan was a much-weakened power in 2008 without many reliable strategic partners and widely feared to be heading for failure, primarily due to the fallout of its promotion of terrorism. And for the international community, Kashmir was no more a pet issue. Over the years, Kashmiri views on Pakistan had changed. Kashmiris had entertained a certain fascination for Pakistan, especially due to the iron hand used by the Indian state in putting down the insurgency. This was also changing in the late 2000s, thanks to the existential problems that Pakistan was facing, the atrocities that Pakistan-sponsored terrorists had committed in Kashmir and the general perception that joining Pakistan may not be the best option for Kashmir. Hence, Pakistan no longer enjoyed much support in the Valley in the late 2000s. More importantly, by the end of the decade (2007–2008), the political climate in Kashmir had also undergone radical transformation. The ‘mainstreaming of dissent’ was a significant phenomenon that started taking roots in the Valley. From being completely anti-India in the early 1990s, separatist politics and ‘azadi’ sentiments became more nuanced, more complex than before and manifested in many forms, ranging from the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC) to the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). Set up in 1999, the PDP was widely seen as a ‘pro-azadi’, ‘separatist’ or even ‘soft-separatist’ party. However, having ruled the state for three years, the PDP was very much a mainstream Kashmiri political party with clear links to the Indian state. On the other side of the divide, the dissident APHC often raised governance-related issues. This crossing of traditional political boundaries by the hitherto opposed political groups indicated the complexity of Kashmir’s new politics. In other words, there was a feeling by the late 2000s that it was perhaps possible to chart a new future for Kashmir given the changes underway in the Valley as well as bilaterally. The events from 2008 until the 2016 uprising indicate that this favourable atmosphere has been wasted. Among other things, the non-serious manner in which the central government treated the reports submitted by the working groups appointed by the Prime Minister’s Round Table Conferences had a negative impact on the Kashmiri polity. There was yet another uprising in Kashmir in 2010.

It was triggered by the killing of three civilians in an alleged fake army encounter. Subsequently, with the killing of a Kashmiri student, Tufail Mattoo in June 2010, Kashmir witnessed an unrest that claimed 130 Kashmiri lives. New Delhi responded by appointing a team of interlocutors to hold discussions with Kashmiris and suggest solutions to the conflict, which they did, but the government refused to act on the report. Then, in February 2013, the Congress government in New Delhi executed Mohammad Afzal Guru, convicted by the Indian Supreme Court in the 2001 Parliament attack case, leading to protests and shutdowns in the Kashmir Valley. The incident deepened the divide between New Delhi and Kashmir, as the separatists and the general public in

Kashmir called Guru a martyr. The LoC and International Border continued to witness incessant ceasefire violations by both sides, with scores of casualties and civilian displacement.

BJP-led Government of Narendra Modi and the Issue of Kashmir

When the new BJP-led government in Delhi came to power under the leadership of Narendra Modi in May 2014, there was some hope that India Pakistan relations would improve since it was believed that it would take a strong leader to make a lasting deal with Pakistan. This belief was strengthened when Modi invited the Pakistani Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, to Delhi for his swearing-in ceremony in May 2014. However, this bonhomie did not last long as terror strikes against India continued, and so did the Cease Fire Violations. But, Mr Modi's surprise visit to Pakistan in December 2015 to meet Nawaz Sharif in a private function was seen as a breakthrough, which took place after the two National Security Advisors started holding private parleys between themselves to iron out the key differences. Kashmiris in the meantime were upset once again when relief from the union government did not reach them in time during the 2014 Kashmir floods. What upset them even more was the PDP, the so-called soft-separatist party, entering an alliance with the BJP to form a government in J&K. Given how vigorously the PDP had campaigned against Mr Modi and his party, many Kashmiris were convinced that this was an opportunistic alliance purely for the sake of gaining power. And yet, when these two ideologically opposed parties came together to form a coalition government in early 2015, there was hope that things would get better for J&K, given the PDP's popularity in south Kashmir and the BJP's historic mandate at the national level. Close to two years since the coalition came to power, there is a great deal of scepticism today about the ability of the coalition to fulfil the hopes of Kashmiris. The PDP leadership repeatedly reminded the BJP of the need to deliver on the promises enshrined in the 'Agenda of Alliance', including 'to facilitate and help initiate a sustained and meaningful dialogue with all internal stakeholders, which will include all political groups irrespective of their ideological views and predilections'. However, the key objectives outlined in the document have not been taken up for implementation by the coalition so far. This has led to a delegitimization of the elected government in J&K. Indeed, according to an account, 'Police records confirm that some of the young men who have recently become militants had actively canvassed for the PDP in the 2014 general elections' .

Since trouble began in July 2016, the Kashmir Valley was under lockdown for several months, mobile Internet services were suspended and curfew was imposed by the government for most part of the day. The agitators, disparate groups and ideologies brought together by their pent-up anger against the Government of India, followed an 'anarchic' protest movement, with uncontrollable crowds attacking security forces with stones. This was often

responded to by the security forces with disproportionate use of force, leading to deaths, thousands of injured and many blinded for life.³ Since July, close to 90 people, including two police personnel, were killed in 2016 alone.

Conclusion

The 2016 uprising has shown that the insurgency in Kashmir is far from over. The key reason why the insurgency, which was contained in the mid- to late 1990s, started getting a new lease of life is because of the failure of conflict resolution between India and Pakistan as well as India's political mishandling of the internal

52 International Studies 51(1-4) dimensions of the Kashmir conflict. Today the Indian state faces a major security threat from the repeated uprisings in Kashmir even though the government in New Delhi does not seem to have seriously diagnosed its implications. The current policy of using force to dissuade protesters and of waiting for them to tire out does not seem like a long-term strategy. An unmanaged rebellion in Kashmir could prove to be expensive for India due to a variety of external factors. Pakistan's behaviour in the past one year has shown that it would utilize any given opportunity to fan the flames in Kashmir, both materially and politically. More significantly, with the new insurgency showing clear signs of being influenced by religious dogmas, unlike in the later 1980s and early 1990s, New Delhi would be ill-advised not to resolve the conflict politically while it still can. The ISIS factor, though not yet a serious threat in the context of Kashmir, could potentially make the insurgency harder to handle in the years ahead. While it is true that the Pakistani involvement has ensured that the Kashmiri demands are still heard by New Delhi and the international community, it is also true that Pakistani involvement has made it difficult for New Delhi to make any concessions due to domestic political/electoral implications. In other words, had the Kashmir issue not had a Pakistan angle to it, it would have been easier for the government in New Delhi to resolve it. Paradoxically, however, it would have not have bothered with Kashmir had there been no Pakistan angle to it. In 2016, the BJP government signed a peace accord with the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muivah) or NSCN (IM), the Naga insurgents in the northeast of the country, which has been demanding for 'a "Greater Nagalim" comprising "all contiguous Naga-inhabited areas", along with Nagaland', including several districts of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur, 'as also a large tract of Myanmar' (Kashyap, 2015). The government in New Delhi was able to make peace with NSCN (IM) because of the lack of domestic political costs and external angle to the issue. But there is nothing to indicate that Pakistan is likely to wind down its involvement in Kashmir in the days ahead making it exceptionally hard for New Delhi to resolve Kashmir. Conflict resolution in J&K is easier said than done. Since the beginning of 2016, and especially the outbreak of the latest uprising in Kashmir, India and Pakistan have hardened their positions. There is hardly any talk about the Musharraf formula nor are the backchannel parlays working. This will pose a major challenge for the bilateral resolution of the conflict over Kashmir

North East India

Assam

Though the Assamese speaking indigenous people of the State, known by the generic name of Assamese, are not the only ethnic constituency in India to have a secessionist group, it is the largest among ethnic groups in the country which have rebel elements practicing armed activities for avowedly secessionist goals. The Government of India (GOI) has shown remarkable flexibility in dealing with secessionist outfits elsewhere – the five-year old cease-fire with the National Socialist Council of Nagaland–Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM), which is yet to renounce secessionism, being the most glaring and geographically proximate example in the context of Assam. By contrast, the proposal for so-called talks with the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) – an organisation whose activities have kept the security forces engaged in the State since 1990 – though much desired by the Assamese, has received only lukewarm response from the Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA).¹ Consequently, the popular perception, presently, is that the GOI is not really interested in solving the problems of Assam, echoing the old, though disputable, refrain of the Centre's 'step-motherly attitude' towards the State. While the MHA might have its own reasons for its apparent intransigence, the continuance of this perception is succeeding in deepening the feeling of alienation amongst the Assamese *vis-à-vis* Delhi. In this context, the old adage 'justice should also appear to be done' may be worth noting.

Contrary to the secessionist movements among some tribes and nationalities in the Northeast since the emergence of independent India, Assam is a late entrant to the arena of separatism. Despite appeals by the then leadership of the Naga secessionists, the Assamese, on the whole, with odd exceptions only proving the general rule,² remained quite satisfied and optimistic about their Indian citizenship in the early decades of independence. In fact, Partition, conceived as a necessary evil in other parts of India, was seen as much-sought-after relief because, with the ceding of Sylhet to erstwhile East Pakistan, the Assamese gained a comfortable dominance over the affairs of the State by virtue of their newfound relative majority in the post-Partition demography of Assam.³

Though the ULFA was founded on April 7, 1979⁴, it came to be noticed as a nascent-armed organisation only in late 1983, when it commenced a series of political assassinations and audacious bank robberies, often abortive.⁵ Following the bulldozing through of elections to the State Legislative Assembly by the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, in spring 1983, secessionist sentiments were rising amongst the normally timid Assamese. Though quite a few secessionist insurgent outfits appeared on the scene in Assam at this stage,⁶ only ULFA survived the Assam Accord⁷ signed between the GOI and the Assamese nationalist leaders of the famous or notorious (as the perspective might be) Assam Agitation against unabated and unchecked illegal immigration

from the erstwhile East Pakistan and present-day Bangladesh. Other linguistic ethnic groups in Assam have since sprouted their own secessionist-insurgent organisations like the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) among the Bodos, United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) among the Karbis and Dima Halim Daoga (DHD) among the Dimasas.⁸ Nevertheless, for the Assamese – the single largest linguistic group in Assam – the ULFA remains the most serious issue. Irrespective of the level of activity of ULFA, not a single week goes by in Assam without the demand being made in one or the other widely circulated Assamese dailies for the GOI to negotiate a settlement with ULFA. It is also to be noticed that, though the ULFA has come up with some uncompromising pre-conditions for negotiations with the GOI, the basic thrust of most of the local commentators, including some leading Assamese intellectuals, is towards the GOI accepting the pre-conditions rather than of ULFA withdrawing them.⁹ Till a few years ago, criticising the ULFA was an assured means of earning unpopularity in Assam.

Statistically speaking, the ULFA does not possess the lethality that other insurgent groups in India have. Its armed activities are, in general, more in the nature of selective assassinations and acts of sabotage against State-owned economic assets like the oil pipeline, rather than aimless terror tactics. Of course, it is known that ULFA did carry out some typical terrorist attacks against the Hindi-speaking people of Assam in year 2000.¹⁰ Though a hitherto unknown group calling itself the Assam Tiger Force claimed responsibility for the attacks, the State government and a large section of the people of Assam believe that the attacks were carried out by the ULFA, albeit clandestinely. The number of deaths resulting from attacks by the ULFA is quite low compared to some other insurgencies. The importance of ULFA lies, rather, in the sympathy it gets from the Assamese or, as M.S. Prabhakara expresses it, "ULFA is a state of mind in Assam."¹¹ Though the strength of ULFA lies more in the sympathy factor it gets among its home-population (despite lack of empathy for its declared goal) than in cadres and weapons, it is believed to have a cadre-strength of around 5,000 trained insurgents and, according to Indian intelligence agency reports, possesses thrice the number of weapons suitable for guerrilla activities.¹²

Continued operations against ULFA by the security forces (SFs) since December 1990 have contained the firepower of ULFA. According to government claims, till date, more than 8,000 ULFA cadres have surrendered.¹³ However, the recruitment of ULFA has also continued unabated.¹⁴ Furthermore, ULFA remains an influential factor in the electoral politics of Assam. Following deliberated strategies, ULFA has extended selective and conditional support to different political parties alternately, or rather, has attacked selected political parties and candidates, thereby restricting the activities of the target party's workers during election campaigns to subvert its poll prospects, thus increasing the comparative advantage of its favoured political party or candidates.¹⁵

Political parties have, more often than not, fallen prey to ULFA's tactics, unable to resist the temptation of securing the tacit support of the insurgents. ULFA

has been able to regularly influence electoral outcomes since 1991.¹⁶ This has led to a periodical breakdown of morale amongst the State police, who are sometimes unsure of their political bosses' inclination towards curbing insurgency. The recurring phenomenon of newly elected State governments going soft on the insurgents has been quite visible in Assam. The invisible but strongly felt power of ULFA to further or hamper individual political careers has often made politicians hostage to ULFA. Similar pressures are also experienced among the local intelligentsia. This unhealthy trend is destroying the democratic atmosphere of Assam and such destruction renders the ground more fertile for insurgency, with the resultant stultifying affect is gradually making important issues like large-scale corruption to be non-issues. ULFA's importance lies more in its all-pervasive effect on the Assamese society than in its immediate armed activities

The militant organization United Liberation Front of Assam demands a separate country for the indigenous people of Assam. The Government of India had banned the ULFA in 1990 and has officially labelled it as a terrorist group, whereas the US State Department lists it under "Other groups of concern". Military operations against it by the Indian Army that began in 1990 continue to the present. In the past two decades, some 10,000 people have died in the clash between the rebels and the government. The Assamese secessionists have protested against the illegal migration from the neighboring regions. Since the mid-20th century, people from present-day Bangladesh (then known as East Pakistan) have been migrating to Assam. In 1961, the Government of Assam passed legislation making use of Assamese language compulsory; it had to be withdrawn later under pressure from Bengali speaking people in Cachar. In the 1980s the Brahmaputra valley saw six years of Assam agitation triggered by the discovery of a sudden rise in registered voters on electoral rolls.

The Muslim United Liberation Tigers of Assam (MULTA), established in 1996, advocates a separate country for the Muslims of the region. The United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) demands a sovereign nation for the Karbi people. It was formed in March 1999 with the merger of two militant outfits in Assam's Karbi Anglong district, the Karbi National Volunteers (KNV) and Karbi People's Front (KPF). The United People's Democratic Solidarity signed a cease-fire agreement for one year with the Union Government on 23 May 2002. However, this led to a split in the UPDS with one faction deciding to continue with its subversive activities while the other commenced negotiations with the Government.

Nagaland

The Nagalim is a proposed independent country for the Naga people. In the 1950s, the Naga National Council led a violent unsuccessful insurgency against the Government of India, demanding a separate country for the Nagas. The secessionist violence decreased considerably after the formation of the Naga-majority Nagaland state, and more militants surrendered after the Shillong Accord of 1975. However, the majority of Nagas, operating under the

various factions of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland, continue to demand a separate country.

2014 General Elections of India recorded a voter turnout of more than 87% in Nagaland, which was the highest in India.

Tripura

The National Liberation Front of Tripura (or NLFT) is a Tripuri nationalist organisation which seeks for Tripura to secede from India and establish an independent Tripuri state. It has actively participated in the Tripura Rebellion. The NLFT manifesto says that they want to expand what they describe as the Kingdom of God and Christ in Tripura. The Tripura National Volunteers (also known as the Tribal National Volunteers or Tripura National Volunteer Force) was founded in 1978 with assistance from the Mizo National Front.^[29]

Punjab

Khalistan

The Khalistan movement aimed to create a separate Sikh country. The territorial definition of the proposed country Khalistan consists of both the Punjab, India along with Punjab, Pakistan and includes parts of Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, and Rajasthan.

After the partition of India, the majority of the Sikhs migrated from the Pakistani part to the Indian province of Punjab, which then included the parts of the present-day Haryana and Himachal Pradesh. Following India's independence in 1947, the Punjabi Suba movement led by the Sikh political party Akali Dal led to the trifurcation of the Punjab state. The remnant Punjab state became Sikh-majority and Punjabi-majority. Subsequently, a section of the Sikh leaders started demanding more autonomy for the states, alleging that the central government was discriminating against Punjab. Although the Akali Dal explicitly opposed the demand for an independent Sikh country, the issues raised by it were used as a premise for the creation of a separate country by the proponents of Khalistan.

In June 1984, the Indian Government ordered a military operation, Operation Blue Star to clear Harmandir Sahib, Amritsar and thirty other Gurdwaras (Sikh places of worship) of armed Sikhs who were with many other pilgrims in Gurdwaras. The Indian Army used 3,000 armed troops of the 9th Division of the National Security Guards, the 175 Parachute Regiment and artillery units, and 700 CRPF Jawans. During this operation, the Indian army had around 700 casualties with 220 injuries, and 200–250 Sikh militants were killed. The handling of the operation, damage to the holy shrine and loss of life on both sides, led to widespread criticism of the Indian Government. The Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her two Sikh bodyguards in retaliation. Following her death, thousands of Sikhs were massacred in the 1984 anti-Sikh riots.^[33] The subsequent Punjab insurgency saw several secessionist militant groups becoming active in Punjab, supported by a section

of the Sikh diaspora. Indian security forces suppressed the insurgency in the early 1990s.

The Secessionist Movement and Insurgency in Assam

Though the Assamese speaking indigenous people of the State, known by the generic name of Assamese, are not the only ethnic constituency in India to have a secessionist group, it is the largest among ethnic groups in the country which have rebel elements practising armed activities for avowedly secessionist goals. The Government of India (GOI) has shown remarkable flexibility in dealing with secessionist outfits elsewhere – the five-year old cease-fire with the National Socialist Council of Nagaland–Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM), which is yet to renounce secessionism, being the most glaring and geographically proximate example in the context of Assam. By contrast, the proposal for so-called talks with the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) – an organisation whose activities have kept the security forces engaged in the State since 1990 – though much desired by the Assamese, has received only lukewarm response from the Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA). Consequently, the popular perception, presently, is that the GOI is not really interested in solving the problems of Assam, echoing the old, though disputable, refrain of the Centre’s ‘step-motherly attitude’ towards the State. While the MHA might have its own reasons for its apparent intransigence, the continuance of this perception is succeeding in deepening the feeling of alienation amongst the Assamese *vis-à-vis* Delhi. In this context, the old adage ‘justice should also appear to be done’ may be worth noting.

Contrary to the secessionist movements among some tribes and nationalities in the Northeast since the emergence of independent India, Assam is a late entrant to the arena of separatism. Despite appeals by the then leadership of the Naga secessionists, the Assamese, on the whole, with odd exceptions only proving the general rule,² remained quite satisfied and optimistic about their Indian citizenship in the early decades of independence. In fact, Partition, conceived as a necessary evil in other parts of India, was seen as much-sought-after relief because, with the ceding of Sylhet to erstwhile East Pakistan, the Assamese gained a comfortable dominance over the affairs of the State by virtue of their newfound relative majority in the post-Partition demography of Assam.

Though the ULFA was founded on April 7, 1979, it came to be noticed as a nascent-armed organisation only in late 1983, when it commenced a series of political assassinations and audacious bank robberies, often abortive. Following the bulldozing through of elections to the State Legislative Assembly by the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, in spring 1983, secessionist sentiments were rising amongst the normally timid Assamese. Though quite a few secessionist insurgent outfits appeared on the scene in Assam at this stage, only ULFA survived the Assam Accord signed between the GOI and the Assamese nationalist leaders of the famous or notorious (as the perspective might be) Assam Agitation against unabated and unchecked illegal immigration from the erstwhile East Pakistan and present-day Bangladesh. Other linguistic ethnic groups in Assam have since sprouted their own secessionist-insurgent

organisations like the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) among the Bodos, United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) among the Karbis and Dima Halim Daoga (DHD) among the Dimasas. Nevertheless, for the Assamese – the single largest linguistic group in Assam – the ULFA remains the most serious issue. Irrespective of the level of activity of ULFA, not a single week goes by in Assam without the demand being made in one or the other widely circulated Assamese dailies for the GOI to negotiate a settlement with ULFA. It is also to be noticed that, though the ULFA has come up with some uncompromising pre-conditions for negotiations with the GOI, the basic thrust of most of the local commentators, including some leading Assamese intellectuals, is towards the GOI accepting the pre-conditions rather than of ULFA withdrawing them. Till a few years ago, criticising the ULFA was an assured means of earning unpopularity in Assam.

Statistically speaking, the ULFA does not possess the lethality that other insurgent groups in India have. Its armed activities are, in general, more in the nature of selective assassinations and acts of sabotage against State-owned economic assets like the oil pipeline, rather than aimless terror tactics. Of course, it is known that ULFA did carry out some typical terrorist attacks against the Hindi-speaking people of Assam in year 2000. Though a hitherto unknown group calling itself the Assam Tiger Force claimed responsibility for the attacks, the State government and a large section of the people of Assam believe that the attacks were carried out by the ULFA, albeit clandestinely. The number of deaths resulting from attacks by the ULFA is quite low compared to some other insurgencies. The importance of ULFA lies, rather, in the sympathy it gets from the Assamese or, as M.S. Prabhakara expresses it, "ULFA is a state of mind in Assam." Though the strength of ULFA lies more in the sympathy factor it gets among its home-population (despite lack of empathy for its declared goal) than in cadres and weapons, it is believed to have a cadre-strength of around 5,000 trained insurgents and, according to Indian intelligence agency reports, possesses thrice the number of weapons suitable for guerrilla activities.

Continued operations against ULFA by the security forces (SFs) since December 1990 have contained the firepower of ULFA. According to government claims, till date, more than 8,000 ULFA cadres have surrendered. However, the recruitment of ULFA has also continued unabated. Furthermore, ULFA remains an influential factor in the electoral politics of Assam. Following deliberated strategies, ULFA has extended selective and conditional support to different political parties alternately, or rather, has attacked selected political parties and candidates, thereby restricting the activities of the target party's workers during election campaigns to subvert its poll prospects, thus increasing the comparative advantage of its favoured political party or candidates.

Political parties have, more often than not, fallen prey to ULFA's tactics, unable to resist the temptation of securing the tacit support of the insurgents. ULFA has been able to regularly influence electoral outcomes since 1991. This has

led to a periodical breakdown of morale amongst the State police, who are sometimes unsure of their political bosses' inclination towards curbing insurgency. The recurring phenomenon of newly elected State governments going soft on the insurgents has been quite visible in Assam. The invisible but strongly felt power of ULFA to further or hamper individual political careers has often made politicians hostage to ULFA. Similar pressures are also experienced among the local intelligentsia. This unhealthy trend is destroying the democratic atmosphere of Assam and such destruction renders the ground more fertile for insurgency, with the resultant stultifying affect is gradually making important issues like large-scale corruption to be non-issues. ULFA's importance lies more in its all-pervasive effect on the Assamese society than in its immediate armed activities.

Bypassing Semantics

Before embarking on an attempt to analyse the insurgency related situation in Assam, one should be clear about what one means by these words. The semantics of non-state armed activity has remained a quagmire of conflicting and overlapping definitions. That is why the oft-repeated phrase that "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom-fighter" circulates. Xanana Gusmao, currently elected President of the newly formed state of East Timor, was a guerrilla commander. He is not, quite justifiably, termed a terrorist by anybody now, but even while he was active in his earlier incarnation as commander of an armed secessionist-insurgent group, the sympathetic Western press did not use the term 'terrorist' for him. Yasser Arafat wears a military uniform and carries a pistol, but the anti-Israeli world does not term him a terrorist. For some, Ariel Sharon is the mad terrorist, while Yasser Arafat is a sinister terrorist leader for others. The subjectivity is starkly apparent.

Moreover, the careless use of terminology by a section of the media and intelligentsia has created a veritable comedy of errors, which does not, however, lead to innocuous mirth. Rebels, militants, insurgents, terrorists are the words which have been used as freely interchangeable nomenclature for any arms wielding non-state group professing political goals. The somewhat overlapping, generally accepted meanings of the words have also not been helpful. If the belief is upheld that proper analysis of a problem is a sure step towards its solution, then definitions should be unambiguously laid down beforehand. As such, without going into pure semantics, it is useful to state what we understand by particular words in the present discussion:

1. **Secessionism:** Desiring secession from a larger sovereign political entity, with the goal of creating a separate sovereign political entity for one's own people, as perceived. It should be noted that secessionism is not necessarily an armed activity. Examples include the ULFA, NSCN (both the factions), NDFB, Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), Hizb-ul-Mujahideen (HM), etc. The left-wing extremist People's War Group (PWG) and Maoist Communist Centre (MCC), practising insurgency through armed struggle to install communism, would not fall under such a definition.

2. **Insurgency:** Active rebellion against the state waged from the territory and population under the declared control of the particular State. Very often, but not necessarily, armed.
Example: ULFA, NSCN, NDFB, JKLF, HM, PWG and MCC.

3. **Armed struggle:** Using collective armed activity as means to an end, normally, but not necessarily, political.
Example: All organisations in the above-mentioned examples.

4. **Guerrilla activities:** Armed activity against enemy combatants and utilities. It should be noted that guerrillas generally hit selected targets only. Though the same armed insurgent individual guerrilla or guerrilla group may practice terrorist tactics simultaneously, guerrilla activities and terrorist activities differ in the matter of targets and methodology. State armed forces may also use guerrilla tactics and often do in counter-insurgency campaigns.
Example: NSCN, to a certain extent ULFA and NDFB.

5. **Terrorism:** Armed activity generally carried out against unexpected and unprepared non-combatants not directly involved with the conflict, instilling a sense of terror among a targeted population, to stimulate coercion. The intentions of spreading fear being given priority over the objective qualification of the targets as the enemy. Armed insurgents tend to adopt terrorist tactics, thereby becoming terrorists, when losing and on the run. The scrupulous guerrilla becoming a terrorist and using terror tactics is an oft-repeated phenomenon. So are the phenomena of state forces using terrorist tactics in counter-insurgency campaigns to subdue populations perceived to be sympathetic to the rebels.

Example: HM, Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) are non-state examples. The killings of some relatives of ULFA members are examples of pro-state terrorism.

Historical Background

For those who are not acquainted with the history of Assam, a brief note on the relevant historical factors, which have contributed to the evolution of the present demographic scenario of the State, might be of use to follow the analysis and argument.

In 1826, the colonial East India Company annexed the erstwhile Ahom kingdom of 'upper' Assam, i.e. the eastern part of Assam, starting from Nagaon to the Naga foothills. 'Lower' Assam, from the western boundary of the Ahom kingdom to the north eastern frontier of the then British province of Bengal was already under British control following a transfer of power by the erstwhile Mughal rulers. Initially, Robert Clive, the British officer responsible for this expansion of the colonial domain, faced disapproval by the Board of Directors of the Company, as the then famine stricken and sparsely populated Brahmaputra valley did not yield enough revenue to cover the administrative costs of retaining the expansion. Quite soon, however, the British stumbled on tea and oil in the Brahmaputra valley and realised the need for labour in order

to exploit the natural bounty of the land. The local Assamese were an easy-going lot contented with the cultivated bounty of the fertile valley. The British entrepreneurs embarked on a policy of actively encouraging landless peasants of the neighbouring populous province of Bengal to migrate and settle in the Brahmaputra valley. Tribals from the Chotanagpur plateau and other parts of India were enticed and often forced to come to Assam to work as labourers in the newly grown tea gardens of Assam. The flurry of economic activity led to the laying down of railway lines in far-off corners of the province. The arrival of the poor Bengali peasants and tribal labourers was of no concern to the rising Assamese middle-class deliberately patronised by the British to counter-act the influence of the erstwhile ruling feudal class of Ahom nobility. Bengali petty officers and clerks, disparagingly called 'Babus' by the British, were the immediate rivals for the residuary scraps of the colonial administration open to the 'natives' for grabs. The British adopted cautious neutrality in the tussle between the Bengali Babus and the Assamese middle-class in pursuance of their notorious policy of 'divide and rule'. Christian missionaries, on the other hand, actively helped the Assamese nationalists in establishing the unique credentials of Assamese language, initially replaced by Bengali language in the courts and offices till 1872. The fond hope of the missionaries of spreading Christianity amongst the Assamese were, however, belied due to the strong influence of the 15th century neo-Vaisnavism prevalent among the Assamese, and the missionaries gradually moved on to greener pastures among the tribes of adjacent hills, where success did not elude them. The rivalry between the Assamese and Bengali middle class continues till date, but the bitter antagonism between the two neighbouring nations has not led to violent clashes since 1983, bringing to an end, it is hoped, the occurrence of violent clashes between the two linguistic communities.

While the immigrants, goaded on by the colonial British, continued to arrive in Assam, the indigenous people ignored this movement since the then-sparsely populated Brahmaputra valley could easily absorb the newcomers. However, the locals started taking adverse notice of the ubiquitous migrant settlements when availability of fallow land diminished noticeably. In their perception, the lack of easy availability of fallow land, crucial for the required expansion of agriculture and grazing of livestock, was related to the ever-increasing number of immigrants.

By the 1920s, the Provincial Council reverberated with heated debates on the issue between Assamese leaders (most of them Hindus) and Bengali leaders (predominantly Muslim). Nearly all the migrant peasants from Bengal were Muslims, naturally because Muslim peasants were the most destitute segment of the teeming population of land-starved Bengal. The rise of the Muslim League in contemporary Indian politics galvanized the migrant Muslim peasants, who rallied around a charismatic, though rustic, leader called Maulana Bhasani. The decade preceding the advent of Indian Independence was an uninterrupted political battle between the Muslim League's Sir Saidullah (scion of an indigenous Muslim family), propped up by Maulana Bhasani, and Gopinath Bordoloi, leader of the Assam Pradesh Congress,

heading the Assamese nationalist camp, dominated by upper caste Hindus.

When Independence and Partition came simultaneously, Assam escaped being clubbed with East Pakistan by a whisker. The ultimate losers were Maulana Bhasani and his followers. Though the pre-dominantly Muslim district of Sylhet opted for Pakistan in a referendum, the Muslims of Brahmaputra valley were left in the Indian State of Assam, where Gopinath Bordoloi and his camp were the unchallenged ruling class by virtue of the new-found majority of the Assamese, after the populous district of Sylhet separated from India. In fact, the Assamese leadership discreetly rejoiced after the result of the Sylhet referendum was declared. At this point of time, Maulana Bhasani, the influential leader of the Brahmaputra valley's Muslim migrants, announced a directive to his followers, which had a far-reaching effect on the demographic politics of Assam, and which is followed to this day. The Maulana, bitter at the desertion by the central leadership of the All India Muslim League, directed his followers to accept Assamese as their mother tongue, and to assimilate into the indigenous population of Assam. The Assamese middle classes, who were more wary of Hindu Bengali Babus than of the lowly Muslim peasants, accepted this overture, much to the chagrin of the Hindu Bengalis.

This demographic equation continued till the late nineteen seventies when a sudden discovery of a substantial number of names of illegal immigrants from the newly created Bangladesh in the voters' list led to a mass agitation against the immigrants. This led to a souring of relations between the migrant community and the Assamese mainstream. The Muslim migrant community who had sought shelter under the Congress umbrella during Indira Gandhi's leadership felt jilted when Rajiv Gandhi reached an accord with the leaders of the agitation and practically allowed them a 'walk-over' to the seat of the State government. They formed their own political party and contested the elections as a separate block. With the gradual erosion in the popularity of the agitation leadership after it became the ruling party, however, their threat perception was significantly toned down. The disaffection among the migrant community, however, seriously affected the numerical majority of the Assamese *vis-à-vis* the Bengali, with many migrants declaring Bengali as their mother language before the census enumerators. Jolted by the 1991 census, the Assamese nationalist camp rediscovered the virtues of the migrants, and deliberate efforts by a changed leadership of the socio-cultural apex body, the Assam Sahitya Sabha, has resulted in a renewed spate of amity between the two socio-political groups. The Assamese-Bengali relation, a constant cause of worry to administrators earlier, is going through a period of unprecedented calm. In fact, from all appearances, one is emboldened to presume that violent clashes between these two formerly antagonistic ethno-linguistic communities are a closed chapter.

The mitigation of traditional antagonisms, however, has been replaced by newly aroused tensions running along perceived ethnic lines. The latest in this series is the mutually irreconcilable stand taken by the Bodos and the Koch-Rajbongshis, both indigenous local ethnic entities, hitherto abiding in non-

antagonistic relationships, over the issue of the formation of the Bodo Territorial Council (BTC) under a revised 6th Schedule of the Indian Constitution. While the ULFA goes on waging a secessionist rebellion for an independent Assam, most of the indigenous ethnic groups of Assam are demanding a separate autonomous territory, if not a separate state. The ULFA rejects these differences of interests among the indigenous people, by conveniently, but unconvincingly, claiming that these problems would be amicably sorted out after the attainment of sovereignty.

Rise and Growth of ULFA

As already stated, the Assamese had neither empathy nor sympathy for the secessionist insurgency launched by the Naga leadership immediately after the advent of independent India. The Assamese never fancied themselves to be any different from the other Indian citizens and States. Gradually, however, the feeling that the Union government is neglecting Assam gained currency after Assam was deprived of major industrial projects being set up by the Indian state to fulfil the Nehruvian vision. It is a fact that the general perception among the policy makers of India was that the Northeast was not a safe place for major industrial ventures, given its proximity to quite a few foreign countries. The feeling of alienation of the Assamese gained strength following a grossly misunderstood speech by Jawaharlal Nehru, the then Prime Minister, when the Indian Army and the administration evacuated the Assamese town of Tezpur, retreating after a debacle at the hands of the invading Chinese. The consolidation of this ambiguous feeling of alienation into full-blown secessionism was achieved by Jawaharlal Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, when, as Prime Minister, she imposed State Assembly elections on the unwilling Assamese in 1983. In the context of the ongoing agitation, the demand of the Assamese was that the issue of illegal immigrants should be solved before holding any election in Assam, since elections would have the effect of legitimising the presence of the names of the illegal immigrants in the voters' list, thereby entitling them to citizenship. Indira Gandhi, however, unleashed brute state power to go through the motions of holding a sham election, with unbelievably low voter turnout, particularly in Assamese dominated areas. The lack of a provision in the Indian Constitution stipulating a required minimum number of votes to win led to a State government duly coming into being. For all practical purposes, this government had no legitimacy in the minds of the vast number of Assamese, the largest ethno-linguistic group in Assam. The Assamese, for the first time since Independence, had no say in the State's governance. Consequently, while the mature segments of Assamese society became vehemently anti-Congress, the youth rejected Indianness altogether. Suddenly, there was a spurt of secessionism in Assam, and a number of separatist outfits announced their appearance through petty violence. The mainstream of the anti-immigrant agitation was avowedly non-violent, officially subscribing to the Gandhian methodology of political mobilisation and protest. Though over-enthusiastic young supporters

of the agitation sometimes engaged in stray violence, the same young men would also dutifully participate in non-violent agitation programmes like hunger strikes. The 1983 elections changed all this. A section of the youth completely rejected non-violent methods of protest and dedicated themselves to preparation for armed struggle. The newfound secessionism and attraction of arms was a heady cocktail and attracted many otherwise-sober and intelligent young men to a dangerous path.

The mushrooming of secessionist outfits dedicated to armed guerrilla methods gradually consolidated into two comparatively well-organised outfits, the ULFA and the Assam People's Liberation Army (APLA). The APLA was larger and better organised at first, and it concentrated on cadre-formation. ULFA, utilising its geographical advantage, gained from having most of its founder members from areas adjacent to the inter-State border with Nagaland, and established contact with the NSCN (then a united entity, before the subsequent split in April 1988). The last days of the year 1983 witnessed the first batch of Assamese youth crossing the international boundary with Burma (now Myanmar), to receive training at the NSCN Head Quarters. The NSCN and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of Manipur, another secessionist insurgent organisation sharing the NSCN camp, received the new rebels warmly. The hosts were aware of the immense advantage of friends in the largest State of the Northeast.

Most of the APLA leaders gave up the path of armed secession following the Assam Accord and installation of the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) government under Prafulla Kumar Mahanta. In fact, the general feeling among the Assamese after the perceived victory of the agitation, with the agitation leadership controlling government, was that everybody should return to their normal lives. APLA vanished with the majority of its member returning home and a few obstinate ones joining the ULFA, which had declared that the Accord and the AGP government were of no consequence to their goal of a separate and sovereign Assamese state. The ULFA leadership painstakingly mobilised recruits from different parts of Assam and kept sending fresh batch of trainees to the NSCN camp. Before the completion of two years of the AGP regime, considerable disillusionment had set in among the Assamese, with the inevitable unfulfillment of the unrealistically high hopes reposed on the agitation leaders turned politicians of the ruling AGP.

With rising disenchantment against the AGP regime, ULFA was able to regain some amount of public support and sympathy for their 'cause'. The year 1988 saw a spectacular rise in the popularity and influence of the ULFA amongst the Assamese. There was competition – at times bitter – between district and local committees to send more recruits for training. In the spring of 1987, the first batch of 80 selected ULFA cadres went to the Kachin State of Burma for advanced training under the Kachin Independent Army (KIA). KIA was a battle-hardened fighting force, engaged in a secessionist war with the Burmese government, and was experienced in the art of guerrilla fighting since the Second World War. The Kachin connection helped ULFA create a cadre of well-

trained guerrilla fighters. The State police and the para-military forces could not match the zeal of these trained young men. The AGP government, failing on all fronts, sought to reach a tacit understanding with the rebels, so that their own interests would not be harmed by the ULFA. The ill-concealed understanding between their political masters and the insurgents led to the further evaporation of the already depleted morale of the police. With the government firmly keeping its eyes shut, the ULFA commenced 'implementing social reforms', such as the ban on consumption of alcohol, which made them popular amongst women. It is often said that, in the late nineteen eighties, the ULFA ran a parallel government in Assam. It would, however, be more appropriate to say that ULFA *was* the government in those days.

The state of affairs, however, abruptly changed after the Union government dismissed the AGP government in the State, imposed President's Rule and commenced counter-insurgency operations by the Army in the last days of the year 1990. Though elections to the State Legislative Assembly were held within six months, and a Congress government was installed, the Army stayed on. To cut a long story short, by 1992, the ULFA was on the run, with many cadres, including scores of district level leaders and a few central committee members surrendering before the government. In the immediate aftermath of the 1992 surrenders, ULFA appeared to be a spent force.

It regained strength, however, to become a force to reckon with after a downswing that lasted no more than a couple of years. It has been forced to abandon its previous high-profile 'social-reform' activities, but has continuously engaged the security forces, primarily through hit and run tactics. The Assamese, who have had to face the brunt of unabated counter-insurgency operations through over a decade, now increasingly wish to see a negotiated settlement between ULFA and the GOI. The romantic fascination for secessionist insurgency has all but evaporated. The quelling of the secessionist tendency by security forces, at times with brute force, has resulted in a sullen silence. Gradually, the initial attraction of the armed 'boys' was replaced by consternation at their obstinacy regarding a negotiated settlement. Furthermore, terrorist actions by ULFA have led to a further erosion of its already emaciated support base. The discernible turning point was the ULFA leadership's posture during the Kargil war in 1999. ULFA declared the Pakistani intruders in Kargil to be Kashmiri 'freedom fighters' and issued a call to Assamese men serving in the Indian Army to desist from fighting against them. The timing could not have been more inauspicious for ULFA. While its leaders were siding with the Pakistanis, the dead body of Captain Jintu Gogoi, an Indian Army officer, killed during action in Kargil, was brought to Assam. Huge crowds of people gathered to pay their last respect to the brave soldier, and ULFA was publicly denounced for advocating support for the Pakistanis.

Current Situation

The last State government, led by Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, started off by being

openly soft towards the ULFA. Quite a few top-ranking ULFA cadres, who had been captured earlier and incarcerated, were released. The honeymoon, however, did not last long, and towards mid-1998, the State government was waging a vicious counter-insurgency (CI) campaign against the ULFA with the help of Army and surrendered ULFA militants (SULFA). Till the change in the State government in spring 2001, three years of lethal CI operations had made a mess of ULFA's organisational structure and confidence. The multiple terrorist attacks on targets in the US on September 11, 2001, and their aftermath have further aggravated its woes, since no regime in the world is now willing to be seen as being soft towards armed non-state actors in the current scenario. The ULFA has been maintaining an unprecedented and uncharacteristically low profile for some time now. From the outward appearances of the present situation, it may be construed that a GOI initiative to negotiate a solution with the ULFA could well prove fruitful.

Unfortunately, appearances are often deceptive. Like most other rebel entities, ULFA too has the phoenix-like habit of rising anew from its ashes. According to reports, fresh recruitment by the ULFA is going on unabated. All its important leaders, barring Anup Chetia, the General Secretary, who is under-going a jail sentence in Bangladesh, are active. It is quite probable, moreover, that Chetia might be allowed to walk away and 'disappear' after completing his sentence, which is nearing its end.

Although the Assamese do not support or empathise with ULFA at present, tacit sympathy for the local 'boys' has not vanished completely. Though very few support the use of terror tactics by ULFA, there is a general feeling that ULFA's demand for sovereignty is understandable, given the unacceptable attitude of the Union government towards Assam. And if the ULFA has lost popularity amongst the Assamese, this does not mean that the GOI has won wide acceptability either. The CI operations of the last three years, while succeeding in debilitating the ULFA, have also, unfortunately but inevitably, sharpened the feeling of alienation amongst the common people through the use of counter-terror through 'secret killings', a term used in Assam to describe 'mysterious' lethal attacks on supporters and relatives of ULFA leaders and members. Nearly 200 young men have 'disappeared' after being picked up by unrecognised persons, reportedly security forces concealing their identity, aided by the SULFA. The total difference in approach of the GOI towards Naga insurgents and the secessionist agenda in Assam, too, have not gone unnoticed. Though the scale is currently tilted in favour of the GOI, there is no guarantee that the *status quo* will be permanent.

The most worrying probability is that of the transformation of ULFA into a purely terrorist outfit. At first glance, it might seem that the detachment of ULFA from the public is good for peace, but the experience in many parts of the world is that a purely terrorist outfit is a more sinister problem than an ethnic insurgency. The difference between a dictator and a democratically elected leader answerable to the public is quite similar to the difference between a terrorist and an insurgent guerrilla. Whereas an insurgency cannot survive

without popular support, a terrorist outfit does not depend on such support. A handful of terrorists are enough to create chaos. Terrorism undermines democratic processes and vitiates the political atmosphere, bringing society to a virtual standstill. The resultant stagnation leads to disruption of economic activity leading to a chronic lack of development. With foreign bases and foreign friends, ULFA is in a position to carry out terrorist activities against the Indian state for an indefinite period. If MHA entertains the fond belief that the ULFA leadership may lose steam with the aging of the top leadership,³⁶ it should also keep in mind that, with continuous recruitment to the ULFA cadre, fresh and young insurgents are coming up, who would be only too willing to step into the positions of an ageing leadership. Though the actors would change, the morbid saga would continue.

A Critique of the Official Approach towards Conflict Resolution

The present approach of the GOI towards a negotiated settlement with the ULFA does not give much scope to commend it. The word 'talks' in MHA lexicon means withdrawal, undeclared if necessary, of the demand for secession. As with the GOI-NSCN-IM talks, the priority seems to be that ULFA should renounce its secessionist demand, not its armed activities. This is evident in the case of the peace-process with the NSCN-IM, which has merrily continued using the threat of weapons against the common public while maintaining a temporary silence on the aim of secession. While officials may construe the apparent 'neutralising' of secessionist forces as a success, the civil society continues to suffer from the continuance of armed activity by insurgents, who become more of a menace after cessation of CI operations against them following a cease-fire with the GOI. To reach a permanent solution, the Indian state shall have to change its mindset. The common people, who are in overwhelming majority against armed insurgency, will have to be taken into confidence. The need of the hour is mutual trust and confidence between the people of the region and the Indian state. The Northeast has long suffered due to the imposition of certain special Acts, like the Disturbed Areas Act, 1955, and the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958, admittedly necessitated by abnormal situations. Suspicion amongst the Assamese about the Centre's antipathy towards the State precedes the appearance of the ULFA's secessionist insurgency. The ULFA has only been cashing in on the general discontentment prevalent in society against perceived injustices. The vitiated democratic environment, inevitable after arming the State police and other security forces, including the Army, with quasi-judicial powers, has been a fertile ground for the growth of secessionism amongst the Assamese in general and armed secessionism amongst the Assamese youth in particular. The common people, though coerced into silence by extra-constitutional exercise of state power, develop sympathy for the armed insurgents as a reaction to this arm-twisting by the state. The insurgents have been extracting full advantage of this harmful situation and the irresponsible utterances by certain MHA officials exhibiting disdain for Assamese sentiments have not been particularly helpful.

While it is correct that underdevelopment preceded insurgency in Assam, it is equally true that the continuance of insurgent violence has led to an outflow of scarce capital from the State. The resultant stagnation in economic development has, in turn, created a vast horde of unemployed youth, which is a potential source of fresh recruits into the insurgent ranks. Thus, Assam has entered a full circle of underdevelopment leading to insurgency, which in turn leads to more underdevelopment. This vicious cycle has to be broken to liquidate insurgency from the State. It is obvious that if the ready cause of the perceived 'exploitation and neglect by Delhi' had not been easily available, the ever-increasing pool of frustrated youth-power in Assam would have discovered other 'causes' to serve as an excuse for embarking on a career in illegal armed activities. Without going into statistical details, one can say, on the basis of first hand knowledge and experience, that more than 90 per cent of the present ULFA cadre consists of educational drop-outs hailing from a rural poor background. Gone are the days when well-educated boys and girls of all economic segments of the Assamese society were attracted to the romantic notion of becoming a 'rebel with a cause'. The real threat to life has undone the earlier romantic appeal of being an ULFA cadre, and only the really desperate among these join the ULFA now. Unfortunately, with a stagnating economy and no scope for earning a livelihood, there is no dearth of desperate youngsters opting for an alternative career. It would not be off the mark to say that ULFA, and for that matter, the various ethnic insurgent outfits cropping up in Assam and in the entire Northeast region actually serve as an arena for alternative employment. Those who could have earned a decent living without becoming insurgents are a fast disappearing species among the underground cadres now. The dismal economic scene, coupled with popular disenchantment against the state, has created an ideal environment for the growth and sustenance of collective armed activity in the name of secessionist insurgency.

At the same time, consequent to the fading of the initial admiration for 'our boys' amongst the common people, the insurgents have replaced voluntary support with coerced co-operation. In rural areas, where the state is not omnipresent and omnipotent, people have to continue cooperating with the armed ULFA cadres under the threat of the gun, normally discreet or implicit but, if necessary, openly expressed. If they resist the ULFA, when asked for shelter, food and other services, they risk being harmed by the cadres. On the other hand, if they acquiesce to the demands, they are punished by the security forces for 'supporting' ULFA. Though this situation has alienated the people from the ULFA, insofar as genuine support and sympathy is concerned, it has also not endeared the state and its agencies to the common people, who perceive the latter as a malevolent punitive authority, rather than a benevolent benefactor.

The urban segment of the society has its own problems. The insurgent gun, unchecked by legal or constitutional constraints, is feared and the rebel *diktat* is surreptitiously obeyed, though, vocally, loyalty is proclaimed to the state. A section of the intelligentsia, however, uses the insurgent influence as a shortcut to secure personal objectives and fame. It is not a rare exception in

Assam to find a respected intellectual advocating the insurgent cause, of course from a safe distance and carefully balancing constitutional restrictions and revolutionary babble. Many among the more sober intellectuals in Assam prefer to maintain a deliberate silence on the issue. The most harmful effect comes from the general criticism of the Union government, which is a common refrain amongst the Assamese intelligentsia.³⁹ The insurgents and their supporters amongst the intelligentsia have to merely increase the tone of this general criticism by a few notches to convert it into rebel propaganda. Many Assamese intellectuals thus unconsciously provide propaganda material to the insurgents by openly condemning the Union government for its perceived negative attitude towards the State. From personal experience gathered while interacting with the MHA, this author, however, holds the opinion that the lack of a proper attitude amongst some officers of the Union government has more to do with an individual lack of sensitivity and administrative efficiency, rather than a deliberate government policy. The prevailing mistrust between the GOI and the Assamese, which has been stirred up over a period of time, leads to a negative interpretation of most of GOI's activity *vis-à-vis* Assam. This brings us back to the earlier refrain that 'justice should also appear to be done.'

Conclusion

It is hoped that the preceding discussion has been able to specifically characterise the problem arising out of ULFA's secessionist-insurgency in Assam. Within the context of this analysis, it is felt that an unbiased approach to 'secessionist insurgency' – a political problem – and 'terrorism' – a heinous method of registering protest and conducting insurgency – is needed to tackle the problem of violence in the forms currently prevailing in Assam. Romantic and idealistic youth with a rebellious inclination and lumpen elements with criminal and terrorist tendencies co-habit the insurgent camp. It is certain that the insurgent, whose priority lies in the ends rather than the means, would accept a peaceful and easier method of propagating secessionism. The terrorists, for whom the goal of secession is just an excuse to indulge in inhuman violence, would be effectively isolated and denied any popular sympathy. Though secessionism itself is harmful to the concept of a united India or India as a nation, the pan-Indian nationalism preferred and propagated by the Indian state is more a matter of winning hearts than imposing constitutional restrictions on freedom of speech. It should be remembered that though freedom of speech may be partially suppressed by statutory restrictions, no power on earth can suppress freedom of thought, unexpressed though it might be. Whispers and murmurs carry ideas as effectively as open discussions.

The continued existence of democracy and a democratic state ultimately depend on the freedom of speech and expression, in practice as well as in theory. The restrictive clauses applied to the freedom of speech and expression as enshrined in the Indian Constitution have provided a valid excuse for all secessionists to practice armed rebellions which have, more often than not, degenerated into terrorism. While the practice of terrorism has effectively

unmasked the secessionist-insurgent organisations as unworthy leaders, the people of the affected areas have not been provided with an unambiguous method of expressing a convincing verdict on the worthiness of the goal itself. This has led to the revival of the insurgent movements like the mythical phoenix, and has in turn led to certain areas of the country being permanently labelled as unsafe places for investment.

Tottering along second-generation economic reforms, India can ill-afford a disgruntled populace. Rebellions start in the weakest moments of the state. And a succession of such weak moments is a strong possibility before India can successfully complete the process of its economic reforms.

It is sensible to remove disgruntlement among the people to the extent that this is practicable, rather than to expend the nation's resources in quelling rebellions after they occur. Very few areas of India actually have a population that desires secession. It is the lack of a convincing democratic apparatus to gauge public sentiments that has deprived the Indian state of the means to effectively project the microscopic support actually enjoyed by the separatists in most cases of secessionist-insurgencies.

Unadulterated freedom of speech, including the right to peaceful and democratic propagation of secession, would effectively liquidate the excuse to take up arms for secessionism. While, in all probability, this might boost the morale of the Kashmiri separatists in the Kashmir Valley, it can be confidently assumed that, it would only be an exception to the general rule of rejection of secessionism by the majority in States like Assam and Punjab.

The process of bringing in a proposed change in the constitutional law of India could begin by repealing the sixteenth amendment to the Constitution of India,⁴⁰ which brought in the so-called 'reasonable restrictions' to the freedom of speech and expression, as also to the freedom of association laid out in Article 19, clause 1, sub clause 'a' through 'c'. Such a repeal cannot be deemed a radical change, as it only restores the Constitution to its original form as envisaged by its founders in the Constituent Assembly. In plain language, the law of the state should be suitably rectified to make peaceful and democratic propagation of political ideas, including secession, a legal exercise, without the provision of any punitive reaction by the state. The recalcitrant rebels who cling to their guns and lumps of RDX after the availability of democratic and peaceful means of propagating their professed cause, would lose the last remnants of any goodwill or sympathy they may have among their own people. There is, of course, the theoretical possibility of the populace of a particular area expressing its desire to secede through the means newly made available to them, but this cannot be something that the Indian state should be intimidated by.

This proposal, most probably, would have to run the gauntlet of hostility from many quarters. But the exploration of every probable avenue of conflict resolution is an unavoidable necessity to arrive at a suitable solution. Holding man-made concepts and laws as sacrosanct has the same affect as that of

putting pre-conditions before negotiations. Every concept should be clinically analysed before retaining or discarding it. In fact, a logically explained repudiation of the proposal proffered here would itself contribute in strengthening Indian democracy. The plurality of India necessitates an open mind on the part of its intelligentsia. Loyalty extracted from convinced minds is always a better option than coerced allegiance. It would be immensely beneficial if this debate could be taken further.

Compiled by
Dijamani Saramh
Assistant Professor
Department of Political Science
Rabindranath Tagore University