

Chapter-1

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In the new millennium, India is faced with a multiplicity of problems and challenges. The centrifugal forces sapping at the roots of national unity, pose the most formidable challenge before the policy-makers both at the central and the state level. A number of secessionist ethnic movements are operating at present, the most prominent among them being the movement for sovereign Assam spearheaded by the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), the agitation for a separate state of Kamtapur consisting of 6 Districts in North Bengal led by the Kamtapur People's Party (KPP) in collusion with the Kamtapur Liberation Organization (KLO) the militant outfit of the North East and which found its extension in the Greater Coochbehar movement. Other movements of political and strategic importance are those of Bodoland led by the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), Nagaland masterminded by the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) and lately Gorkhaland where the Gorkha Janamukti Morcha has provided leadership. The Maoist movement too has gained considerable momentum in West Bengal. While these movements often differ in terms of their agenda, there happens to be striking similarities between them in terms of their character, operational strategy, methods of cadre mobilization, quality of leadership, etc. Thus, despite their diverse objectives they display tacit sympathy and occasionally direct support for each other and combine together in a common platform. There is thus an integral linkage between secessionist movements which transcends ideological and political differences and cements a bond of unity

among them at a deeper psychological level. In many cases the movements have not remained confined to legitimate channels and peaceful constitutional methods based on non violence. In many cases widespread violence has been manifested in acts of murder, ambush, guerilla warfare, bomb blast, abduction, extortion, intimidation, vandalism, etc. Broadly speaking ethnic politics is based on identity politics which centers on the quest of an ethnic group for an identity distinct from other ethnic groups. Ethnic sub nationalism champions the recognition of the distinctive status of regional language, culture and literature. The demands of ethnic groups range from greater autonomy and political, cultural and economic empowerment to the assertion of the right to self-determination either through the formation of a separate state within the Indian Union or a sovereign homeland separate from India. There is a debate over the logic of characterizing such movements as secessionist particularly with respect to movements which seek to carve out a small state within India without seceding from it. Technically they are not secessionist though their repercussions on national unity and territorial integrity are far reaching. Moreover they assume a militant character and this creates problems of security whose ramifications for the future of the nation are portentous. Another contentious debate is over the question of the feasibility of recognizing the demand for small states within India and on this point there is a clear division of opinion in the contemporary academia. Finally, as regards the issue of policy formulation for countering militancy, there is a serious debate among scholars, researchers and policy makers which focuses on the relative utility of military action, political dialogue and packages for political and economic empowerment as alternative methods to combat militancy.

This research is based on the militant movement in North Bengal and Assam, specifically the movements for the creation of Kamtapur and sovereign Assam. In the present chapter, the objectives of the study are delineated in broad parameters. Its scope and area of coverage are clearly demarcated. The significance and contemporary relevance of the research have been explicated in the light of its implications not only for the regions under consideration but the Indian republic at large. The major research

questions envisaged by the study will be specified. Finally, the methodology adopted for the study is specified.

1. Objectives

The study intends to provide an overview of political movements and militancy in North Bengal and Assam with special reference to the movements for the cause of Kamtapur and Greater Coochbehar in the former and independent Assam in the latter. This research study primarily concentrates on the role of the ULFA and the KLO as catalysts of militancy. It attempts a comparative estimate of the two militant outfits in terms of their agenda, composition, leadership, strategy of mobilization and recruitment, political and ideological awareness level, support base, etc. It further seeks to investigate the factors that motivate people to join militant organizations. A broad spectrum of factors, political, ideological, economic, social, cultural and psychological, are sought to be subjected to in depth analysis with the primary objective of identifying the root causes of militancy. Moreover it intends to explore the linkages of the aforesaid militant organizations with other militant counterparts operating elsewhere thereby unraveling the wide militant network in which diverse militant organizations are entangled. While militancy in India has never been a monolithic phenomenon with different militant groups envisaging different goals, yet at a deeper level they share a sense and spirit of unity and often share a common platform. The present study takes a fresh look at these shared commonalities. Apart from investigating the factors that lead a person to opt for the path of militancy, the study also considers the fact of their desertion of the organizations they joined. It seeks to highlight in this context the inherent drawbacks and contradictions of the militant organizations that lead to large scale desertions. Finally, the research endeavors to provide an appropriate policy blueprint to combat militancy. It envisages a Challenge-Response Paradigm whereby resistance mechanisms can be activated both at the level of government as well as civil society to counter the menace of militancy. However, apart from direct confrontation through military action, the possibilities of engaging the militants in meaningful dialogue need to be explored so that they abandon the

path of violence. The problem also needs to be addressed at the psychological level with the aim of delving deep into the mindset of the militants understanding their grievances underscoring the need to rehabilitate them and restore them to the mainstream making it the focal point for appropriate policy response. The study examines each of these alternative policy responses and their relative feasibility for the task of eliminating militancy. In a nutshell, the study aims to highlight the important causes of militancy in North Bengal and Assam and suggest ways by which this menace can be countered. It intends not only to diagnose the malady but also prescribe appropriate remedies for the same. The study also endeavors to provide a theoretical model which policy makers may find useful in strategy formulation to combat militancy.

2. Significance

The present research is significant because it has portentous implications not only for national unity and territorial integrity but also for India's relations with neighbouring countries. Some important questions have been raised at the academic level which the present study seeks to address. *Firstly*, can all ethnic movements standing for autonomy and identity politics be characterized as secessionist? A related question is that while movements clamoring for a new sovereign state breaking away from the Indian Union may be justifiably branded as secessionist, is it correct to brand as secessionist, movements asking for the creation of separate small states within the territory of India? The academia is clearly divided on this point but from the point of view of intellectual clarity as well as policy perception, this problem needs to be cleared up. *Secondly*, there is a perceptual hiatus between the intellectual world, the administration and the political leadership as regards the causes of militancy. An adequate solution to the problem of militancy requires a rational choice from a wide range of policy alternatives based on a meticulous examination of each particular cause espoused by different people from different angles. The study addresses the seminal question as to whether militancy is explicable in terms of a single causal factor or whether it is the product of a constellation of factors. The research findings

are based on diverse viewpoints extending over a broad canvas without which no comprehensive and dispassionate idea about the problem can be formed and policy responses provided. Thirdly, there is another point of debate as to whether the problem of militancy can be solved once and for all by the application of military force or through a process of dialogue or a combination of both depending on situational exigencies. The study examines the pros and cons of the issue in critical perspective.

The disquisition is of special significance from the point of view of its inter-disciplinary relevance. The problem of militancy is not by itself a political, social, cultural or economic problem. It is also a psychological problem but this dimension has remained largely neglected though international literature on terrorism has treated it with importance. The present study attempts an in depth analysis of the psychological factors that motivate people to join militant organizations. This is an area where Political Science can benefit greatly through the acquisition and assimilation of insights from the allied discipline of Psychology without losing its distinctive status or autonomy. Extending the process of mutual cross fertilization further, the study incorporates within its framework of analysis, insights from the discipline of Psychiatry. Psychiatric intervention for reforming militants is yet to gain a firm foothold in India but it is decidedly capable of equipping policy makers with new and ingenious techniques to combat militancy on a totally different level. The study seeks to impart a new dimension to literature on the subject by emphasizing a hitherto neglected area of both academic and policy research.

From the strategic and geopolitical perspective, both North Bengal and the North East are of special significance. In terms of locational status, North Bengal assumes added significance as it provides a corridor for the flow of trade and commerce from North East India to the rest of India in the form of tea, timber and oil. Therefore unless the spurt in militancy is arrested, the economic repercussions are bound to be destabilizing. Viewed from the security perspective the region is most vulnerable and sensitive. According to an analyst, 'North Bengal is not only proximate to the North East, its physical features, its backwardness, its lack of development and its pre-dominantly low caste and tribal

population make it almost a part of the region. Besides both the North East and North Bengal are plagued by the same types of geo-strategic problems. The entire region has borders with as many as five countries-namely China, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar and people from four of these countries can easily cross over and pour into North Bengal. The countries may not be overtly hostile but they possess a sustained capacity for sub-version, often by sheltering hostile elements for operations within Indian territory. No area in the eastern region is as vulnerable as North Bengal to infiltration by Pakistani Inter-Service Intelligence operatives from their havens in Nepal and Bangladesh. The influx which is increasing adds to the already simmering ethnic and communal tension. Besides, North Bengal provides the only overland connection between the North East and the rest of India and as such its geo-strategic importance cannot be over emphasized.¹ A number of training camps for the militants have been established in Bangladesh and Bhutan. The Bhutan Government, in 2004 launched *Operation Flush Out* to drive out the KLO militants from its soil. No such drive was however launched by the Bangladesh Government and intelligence reports have revealed that many KLO militants have been provided training and asylum there. Reference may also be made to the Maoist movement in Nepal which culminated in the capture of power by the Maoists and the end of monarchy. The Maoist movement which originated in Nepal and gained momentum in India particularly in Bengal and Bihar is only tangentially linked to the present study but it is through the Siliguri corridor that the Maoists have infiltrated into India. Meanwhile the resurgent Gorkhaland movement spearheaded by the Gorkha Janamukti Morcha in Darjeeling has intensified under the leadership of Bimal Gurung. While there is no evidence of the Maoists providing support to the KLO,² but the Maoists have openly come out in support of the Gorkhaland movement.² Since militant organizations have a wide ranging network therefore a future tie up between the Maoists and the KLO cannot be ruled out particularly because the KLO has expressed sympathy for the Gorkhaland movement. Though there is no evidence till date of ULFA support for Gorkhaland, but there is a close linkage between

the ULFA and the KLO. According to intelligence reports, the KLO was propped up by the ULFA in December 1995. In the face of the challenge of repeated army operations, the ULFA was confronted with the uphill task of maintaining its cadre strength and influence. It sought to use the relatively unmanned area of North Bengal which provided it with a transit point to commute from Bhutan to Bangladesh and *vice versa*. Some insurgents crossed over to Nepal through this area. The ULFA has been using it to transship weapons to their camps in Bhutan. The ULFA has promoted the KLO and the latter has constantly sought its help for acquiring sophisticated weapons. This brings us to the important issue of inter-state militancy. Militancy assumes different forms in different places and circumstances and policies to curb it also need to be suitably adjusted to situational exigencies. At the same time militant movements in different states and regions display striking commonalities which cut across regional and state barriers. This explains the extensive linkage network which unites militant organizations. A comparative estimate of militancy in different regions is most important from the policy perspective because different types of militancy require different types of response. Without deviating from the central theme the study seeks to address at a peripheral level, related and relevant issues like the linkage of the ULFA and the KLO with other secessionist movements like Nagaland, Bodoland, etc. Equally important is the attitude of foreign powers towards secessionist movements in India. Expression of tacit or active support for the same might necessitate rethinking in India's foreign policy which would have its own impact on India's relations with the countries concerned. In view of the volatile nature of international relations, particularly India's relations with countries like China and Pakistan, the possibility of the former encouraging separatism in India needs to be considered. The study seeks to address all these issues within a broad framework of analysis.

3. Scope

The study encompasses two Districts of North Bengal namely Coochbehar and Jalpaiguri and seven districts of Assam namely Jorhat, Bongaigaon, Goalpara, Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar