

A Study on the Emergence of Garo Extremism in Garo Hills of Meghalaya

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Northeast India as a region is infested with different extremist groups. Almost all the states in Northeast India are suffering from the maladies of extremist groups formed by many autochthonous tribes who lived in isolation from the pan-Indian influence. The problems of Northeast India are complex – insurgency, extremism, terrorism, kidnapping, extortion, killings, demographic aggression, ethnic heterogeneity, student politics, border disputes with neighbouring states, flood, poverty, unemployment and underdevelopment have mired the region in an imbroglio. Meghalaya, especially the Garo Hills also suffers from such issues. One of the important problems in Garo Hills is extremism. This paper attempts to study and analyse the different factors for the emergence of Garo extremist groups in Garo Hills. It also examines some of the important responses by the State and the Central Governments.

Keywords: Extremism, Garo Hills, Meghalaya.

Introduction

Extremism has generated a lot of debate in the contemporary political discourse in India in general and North-east India in particular. In fact, the North Eastern Region has witnessed serious ethnic movements, which at times have taken recourse to armed struggle and violence to achieve their goals.¹ While some of these movements focus on regional autonomy and separate states, others express secessionist character. Although different in their goals and objectives, they follow extreme ideologies thereby challenging the Indian federal structure. However, there is no acceptable term to describe this incident. Indeed, different terms and labels such as “extremism”, “militancy,” “terrorism”, “separatism,” “secessionism” and “insurgency” are used to describe these movements.² Further, these terms and labels have not only been used interchangeably but have also been defined and used in a number of ways by different writers, government and the media. In part, the confusion springs from the bewildering complexity and uncertainty of the situation and diversity of communities with contesting aspirations. Interestingly, terms like ‘national workers’, ‘freedom fighter’, ‘nationalists’, etc are commonly used by various armed groups and their supporters.³ Therefore, it is necessary to look at how these terms should be defined, and how they might be used properly in the context of northeast India.

In North-East, India it is quite possible for some ethnic groups to be extremists in their goals without necessarily being located on the extreme scale.⁴ Therefore, extremist groups in the context of North-East India are those who felt that they are being marginalized, alienated, dispossessed by socio-economic change and as a result they use violence even when there are legal and constitutional laws available for pursuing these goals, in order to get entry to and influence within an established political system.⁵ In other words, extremism means the use of violence for achieving a specific set of objectives or goals and producing fear in order to impose

¹ Bimal J. Deb, *Ethnic Issues, Secularism, and Conflict Resolution in North East Asia*, New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 2006, p.87.

² Max Abrahms and Philip B.K. Potter, Explaining Terrorism: Leadership Deficits and Militant Group Tactics. *International Organization*, Volume 69, Issue 2, 2015, pp.311-319.

³ Albert Breton, Gianluigi Galeotti, Pierre Salmon and Ronald Wintrobe, (ed.), *Political Extremism and Rationality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp.7-10.

⁴ Lt Col Vivek Chada, *Low Intensity Conflicts in India: An Analysis*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005, pp. 26-28.

⁵ V. Bijukumar, “Social Exclusion and Ethnicity in Northeast India”, *The NEHU Journal*, Volume XI, No. 2, July, 2013, pp. 22-24.

its control over the civilians and to draw the attention of the governments.⁶ The two important dimensions of extremism in northeast India are the readiness of the political actor to resort to the use of violence to achieve their proclaimed objectives and complete rejection of other ethnic groups. They feel that they are ethnically different, geographically isolated and politically left out of socio-economic development.⁷ The extremism in Meghalaya is no exception.

Objective

1. To examine the various factors responsible for the emergence of Garo extremism in Meghalaya
2. To study the responses of the State Government and the Centre Government.

Methodology

The study included both the primary and the secondary sources. The primary data include the Constitution and other publications of the ANVC and GNLA, Government reports and other relevant documents. The Secondary sources of the study included books, articles in newspapers, magazines and journals. The study made a qualitative analysis of the data collected from both Primary and Secondary sources for an understanding of the study of extremism in Meghalaya.

Debate and Discussion

The Garo Hills consists of districts mainly of hills which form the western extremity of the range separating the valleys of the Brahmaputra and the Surma. Majority of the population of the district are the Garos. Other indigenous inhabitants are the Hajongs, Rabhas, Koches, Rajbonsis, Meches, Kacharis and the Dalus. Other non-tribal communities living in the area are the Bengalis, Muslims, Marwaries, and the Nepalis.⁸

Linguistically and ethnologically, the Garos belongs to the Bodo family, who once occupied a large part of the Brahmaputra valley and was probably pushed from the plains into the hills by the outside invaders. The Garos have a strong tradition that they have come from Tibet and settled in Koch-Bihar for about 400 years. Next place they made mention was Rangamati, in the present day Bangladesh.⁹

⁶ B.C. Bhuyan. (ed.), *Political Development of the North-East*, Volume- II, New Delhi: Omsons Publications, 1992, pp. 40-45.

⁷ B. G. Verghese, *India's North-East Resurgent: Ethnicity, Insurgency, Governance, Development*, New Delhi: Konark Publishers, 1996, pp. 57-61.

⁸ L.S. Gassah (ed.), *Garo Hills Land and the People*, Gauhati : Omsons Publications, 1984, p.122.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.123.

The violence against the non-tribal in Meghalaya can be witnessed since the 1980s. The Sharma Commission (1995) observed that the primary cause of ethnic conflict in Meghalaya is the economic and growing menace of unemployment.¹⁰ In fact, the most important factor responsible for the formation of Hynniewtrep A·chik Liberation Council (HALC) in 1992 was mainly on the issue of outsiders. However, shortly after the formation of HALC, the inter-tribal rivalry and differences between the Khasis and Garos on issues of reservation policy and demand for Greater Garoland had emerged.¹¹ Therefore, the HALC was split leading to the formation of A·chik Liberation Matgrik Army (ALMA), which was subsequently rechristened as A·chik National Volunteers Council (ANVC) in December 1995. Whereas, the Garo National Liberation Army (GNLA) was formed in 2009, to demand for a separate state. Both the ANVC and GNLA aimed at creating a separate Garo state. Of late, they have become infamous for regular extortion and have also caused much bloodshed among the very people they claim to support and represent. The proposed research work therefore attempts to study the demands, strategies, support base of ANVC and GNLA in comparative perspective. It also attempts to study the responses of the public, NGOs, Centre and state Governments to the demands and issues raised by ANVC and GNLA.

It is alleged that the opposition of the tribal's comprising of Khasis, Garos, and Jaintias against the non-tribal's, economic, growing menace of unemployment and aspirations of a separate state are the main factors responsible for the emergence of extremism in Meghalaya as a whole and Garo Hills specifically. Indeed, the fear of the tribal populations regarding the demographic change and steady rise of non-tribal settlers through external and internal movements made the local people think that they were going to be dominated sooner or later in the spheres of culture and economic progress. Further, it is also alleged that the step-motherly treatment by the State government, under-development and lack of good educational institutions in Garo Hills are the other factors for the emergence of extremism. The HALC which was formed by the Garos, Khasis and Jaintias against the non-tribal's witnessed a split on tribal lines leading to the formation of the first extremist Garo outfit ALMA. The issues of reservation policy, under-development in Garo Hills and the demand for Greater Garoland seem to have led

¹⁰ South Asian Terrorism Portal, (SATP), "Meghalaya Backgrounder" retrieved from <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/meghalaya/backgrounder/index.html> accessed on 13th August, 2015.

¹¹ Lazar Jeyaseelan, (ed.), *Conflict Mapping and Peace Processes in North East India*, Guwahati, Publisher, North Eastern Social Research Centre 2008, p.257.

to inter-tribal jealousy and differences between the Khasis and Garos. Interestingly, intra-tribal rivalry and differences within the Garos also began to surface with the formation of different Garo extremist groups with different demands and strategies. The ANVC's proposed Garoland comprises the predominant areas of Meghalaya and Assam. But, the proposed Garoland by the GNLA comprises only the existing districts of Garo Hills. Further, the demands of ANVC seem to have changed from Garoland to strengthening of GHADC, although the GNLA is still demanding for a separate Garo state.¹²

ANVC appears to have achieved no substantial political concession for the Garos even after signing the peace pact. Why and how the Centre and State governments have different approaches to the demands of ANVC and GNLA and its implications on peace process in the region needs further investigations.

The ANVC and GNLA, which seemed to get popular support and sympathy initially, seem to have lost their support base as they have been involved in killings, abduction, extortion, bomb blasts, and factional clashes resulting in killing of innocent civilians. It is claimed that any monetary demand from ANVC and GNLA had to be fulfilled and no law enforcer or constitutional authority could protect those who did not pay up and in most cases, the defaulters were eliminated.¹³ Thus, they seem to have deviated from their main objective of creating a separate state and another major concern is the manner in which innocent civilians are being picked up and tortured by the police for investigation on mere suspicion of having links with the extremist groups.¹⁴ Similarly the killings and kidnapping of innocent people by the extremists on mere suspicion of being a police informer is another issue of great concern. Further, the democratic freedoms of the general public seem to have been strictly restricted by the extremists. Extremism has also disturbed peace and development in the region. The responses of All India Garo Union (AIGU), Garo Students Union (GSU), Garo Baptist Convention (GBC), and United Christian Peace Forum (UCPF) and the general public on these issues seem to be limited to shouting of slogans, rallies and condemnation.¹⁵

¹² South Asian Terrorism Portal, (SATP), "*Garó National Liberation Army (GNLA)*", retrieved from http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/Meghalaya/terrorist_outfits/GNLA.htm accessed on 20th May, 2015.

¹³ For a focused and well-documented analysis on extortion in Meghalaya, See, Sashinungla, "Meghalaya: Extortion Dynamics", *South Asia Intelligence Review*, Vol.2 (40), 19th, April, 2004.

¹⁴ Albert Thyriang, "Garo Hills Bleeds", *The Shillong Times*, 4th June, 2014.

¹⁵ "Peace in the Garo Hills" *The Hindu*, 5th August, 2015.

Responses of the State and Central Governments:

The government responses to the extremist groups in the Garo Hills can be categorized into four parameters, namely; structural changes in administration, development activities, dialogue and negotiations and use of force. In view of the ANVC and GNLA's involvement in many killing of civilians, kidnapping, extortion, killing Security Personnel etc. both the Union and State Government have taken steps to neutralize the ANVC and GNLA. However, the demand for Greater Garoland was ruled out and the government refused to negotiate with such pre-conditions. The Union Government had signed the Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) with the ANVC and ANVC-B in 2014 but the GNLA came out with the demand for Garoland and was did not take part in the peace pact.

It can be noted that the GHADC has no power on Home and Finance subjects. Therefore, the GHADC was not a signatory of the peace pact and there is no response to the demands put forward by the ANVC and GNLA. The GHADC did not play the role of a facilitator as it did not take any initiatives to negotiate a settlement among the Union, State Government and the ANVC and GNLA.

The Union Government and the State Government of Meghalaya responded to the demands of the ANVC and GNLA in two different ways. On the one hand, the government tried to prevent violence by counter-insurgency operations and on the other it invited both the outfits to join the peace process. On 23rd, January, 2003 for the first time the Union Ministry of Home Affairs imposed ban on the ANVC under provisions of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967. Again, on 12th, January, 2012, the GNLA was declared a terrorist outfit and was banned by the Union Ministry of Home Affairs under the provisions of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967.¹⁶

Table 1. Chronology of ban on the ANVC

Date/Month/Year	Authority	Provisions	Duration
23 rd January 2003	Union Government	Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967	1 year 6 months

¹⁶Raju Das, "GNLA declared terror outfit", *The Assam Tribune*, 2nd, February, 2012.

23 rd July 2004	Union Government	Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967	5 months
22 nd December 2004	Union Government	Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967	1 year 10 months
9 th November 2006	Union Government	Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967	6 months
23 rd May 2007	Union Government	Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967	1 year 11 months
15 th May 2009	Union Government	Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967	1 year
6 th June 2010	Union Government	Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967	Indefinite Period

Source: Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India¹⁷

In the year 2001 for the very first time in order to counter the violence spread by the ANVC, the BSF, CRPF and State police held joint operations together in Garo Hills to tackle the situation of law and order. On 16th, December, 2008, Union Home Minister, P. Chidambaram had advised Bangladesh not to allow any extremist outfits from India to carry out any anti-India attacks from its country.¹⁸ Again on 11th, March, 2010, the Border Security Force (BSF) stated that Bangladesh had promised action against the insurgent groups operating from its territory against India

Conclusion

¹⁷ Annual Report of the Ministry of Home Affairs 2004-2005.

¹⁸ "Government to lay pressure on Bangladesh", *The Tribune*, 21st, December, 2008.

The extremist leadership was initially clamouring for a separate state of Garoland and after that the demand was for an autonomous council for the Garos with more autonomy. But, both the demands got a negative response from the Indian state. The Agreements which was signed in the year 2014 with the ANVC were desperate attempts to solve the issues of the Garo extremist groups but still it failed to fulfill the aspirations of the Garos as many of the youths believed that the strengthening of GHADC will not grant any benefits and still the goal for self-determination remains an issue which might be reflected in the days to come.

It can be argued that in order to reduce the demand of extremist politics resorted by the organizations like the ANVC and GNLA, the Union Government needs to appreciate nationality ambitions based on mutual understanding and trust and respect for the rights and interests of other smaller communities who inhabit the supposed homeland. It can be noticed that the Union Government did not recognize the legitimate aspirations for autonomy voiced by different smaller communities and that it showed that that Garo extremist groups have become dissatisfied with the existing arrangements and are seeking different ways to achieve their demands.

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