

Tribal unrest rends India's northeast

by Ramtanu Maitra

In a few weeks, three of India's seven northeastern states will hold elections for state legislative assembly, amidst a rise of insurgency in the region and the steady loss of credibility of the ruling Congress Party in New Delhi.

The three northeastern states—Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Tripura—going to the polls are deeply divided within, because of tribal insurgencies. In Tripura and Meghalaya the tribals have been confined to anti-non-tribal movements trying to remove non-tribal settlers from their lands; however, the movements in Nagaland are secessionist. The various Naga tribes, most of whom are Christian, had fought the British independently and had resisted accepting Delhi's authority for decades.

Although the Shillong Agreement in 1975 officially put an end to the Naga insurgency, the Nagas never really put down their guns. Delhi's priority was to implant a Congress Party, controlled from north India, which has created a few Delhi loyalists in Nagaland; but this had little effect.

Drugs and guns

Chinese-backed drug-and-gun mafias have rushed in to fill the vacuum. The growth of the heroin trade in Burma (Myanmar) and that country's takeover by a hostile pro-China junta have provided the insurgents in India's northeast with a ready source of cash and guns, in addition to a shelter during difficult times. The heroin trade got a boost when China, whose southern province of Yunnan grows plenty of poppy, began to push heroin in the world market beginning in the 1970s.

The situation worsened with the political developments in Burma. The collapse of the democracy movement after elections in which they had won, sent a stream of pro-democracy activists seeking refuge in India. In retaliation, Burmese authorities have been encouraging the tribal insurgents from Nagaland and Manipur.

The settler issue

The insurgents have also cashed in on the instability prevailing in Bangladesh. Although some terrorists had set up camps within Bangladesh territory, the outflow of poverty-stricken Bangladeshis to India has given an impetus to the tribals' anti-settler movement. The Bangladeshi settlements have taken place all over India; but the issue of Bangladeshi settling by the thousands in northeastern India—in Assam,

Meghalaya, and West Bengal—has prompted many tribes to band together to form a common front. The tribals believe that Delhi does not care about the issue because the migrants are settling in tribals' lands.

The settler issue has kept the political pot boiling in Assam for years. The Nellie massacre in 1983 saw thousands of innocent Bangladeshis slaughtered by militant Assamese. The Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), a political party of minority Assamese origin, came to power in Assam with the promise of removing the illegal migrants. But failure to deal with this contentious issue caused the political death of the AGP, despite the late Rajiv Gandhi's belated efforts through the Assam Accord of 1988. The failure gave birth to a more violent militant movement, led by the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), which promotes terrorism and secession. The ULFA's rise is as much targeted against the non-tribal settlers as it is against Delhi. The ULFA leadership consists of all those who were earlier identified as the radicals in the AGP.

In northern Assam, north of the Brahmaputra River, another terrorist movement has begun with the goal of carving out a separate state, Bodoland, for the Bodo tribe. The movement has spread throughout northern Assam and is now reportedly spilling into southern Bhutan.

The tribal movements are slowly dragging Bhutan and Nepal, two independent kingdoms, into the fray. All along the foothills of the Himalayas, Nepalis have settled for years, carrying out commercial and service-sector activities. The growth of militant tribals has made these Nepalis a common target, like the migrant Bangladeshis. Since the Indo-Nepal borders remain open for all practical purposes, the movement of people between both countries has remained unhindered.

The Nepalis have also settled in southern Bhutan over the years. In the mid-1980s, however, trouble began to brew in this tiny Himalayan kingdom. Nepalis there claim that Bhutanese culture was being forcibly imposed upon them. During the last two years, the Nepali movement has taken a violent turn, and thousands of Nepalis have left Bhutan, claiming repression by the monarch, who is staunchly pro-India. These Nepalis, who are now operating from Nepal adjacent to Bhutan's borders, have started a concerted campaign pointing out human rights violations by the Bhutanese authorities, and demanding domestic reforms—all with the support of the World Council of Churches and other international organizations.

Meanwhile, the growth of "Hindu awareness" in the plains of India, and subsequent demands by the Hindu revivalists that Hindu culture must prevail in India, make tribals such as the Nagas, Gorkhas, Khasis, Garos, and others very uneasy. Delhi's inability to deal with these political developments, and its overdependence on the military to resolve the problems of the northeast, have begun to create a backlash. It is also evident that Delhi's age-old policy of propping up one tribe against another has come to its logical end.