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Interrogating peace in Meghalaya

The policy brief examines claims regarding the peacefulness of India's north eastern state of Meghalaya. It highlights the triggers and dynamics of the state's ongoing conflict, which continues to smoulder beneath the veneer of so-called peace. The brief critically evaluates governmental and nongovernmental initiatives for defusing and resolving the ongoing conflicts, and puts forward some recommendations for how to engender sustainable peace in the region.

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Introduction

Meghalaya is generally construed as a relatively peaceful place, amid the otherwise conflict-ridden region of India's northeast. This pacific image was largely created by the peaceful nature of the process through which Meghalaya acquired its independent statehood. The absence of any large-scale violence in recent times has also enhanced the state's peace credentials. It was the uniqueness of Meghalaya's claim to peacefulness that intrigued us to interrogate how the so-called peace was validated, and to explore the pros and cons of peace in Meghalayan society. Our fieldwork explorations unravelled many interesting facts that call into question the nature of Meghalaya's peace. Contrary to the prevalent hypothesis, in Khasi and Garo Hills we noticed marked disaffections that were structured mostly along ethnic lines, and seemed likely to usher in fresh conflict situations if not attended to in time. This policy brief intends to offer an analysis of the root causes of the simmering socio-political estrangements in Meghalaya and makes a few policy suggestions for how to deal with the conflicts.

Anatomy of conflicts

Meghalaya peacefully attained statehood on 21 January 1972, following concerted efforts by the combined tribal leadership of the Khasis, the Garos and the Jaintias under the flagship of the APHLC party. However, the reclamation of tribal identity in the new state amid gnawing scarcities led to a range of conflicts. The rise of ethnocentric politics emerged as the major plank around which much identity-based conflict transpired. Predicated on the cultural superiority of two tribal communities – the Khasis and the Garos – over the non-tribal population, politically motivated ethnocentrism led to the commission of many dreadful acts against members of Meghalaya's non-tribal population. This trend was more conspicuous in the Khasi Hills, where the elevation of the Khasis to a dominant political position in the newly created state led them to challenge the hitherto ascendancy of the non-tribal population, who were often branded as 'Bangladeshis' – nationals of Bangladesh.

The high point of these violent ethnocentric feelings was the targeting of Bengalis, basically individuals from the Indian state of West Bengal, by the Khasi population – which was first clearly seen during the much publicized Durga Puja incident of 1979. This incident in turn stirred many similar acts of violence in other parts of Meghalaya, and led to the political uproar against the Nepalese in 1987.[1] Similarly, members of the Bihari and Marwari communities (the former migrated from the Indian state of Bihar to work as labourers and workers in Meghalaya, while the latter are basically business clans from the Indian state of Rajasthan) were targeted by the Khasis during 1992–93. These acts of violence unleashed a fear psychosis among members of the non-tribal population, which led to several cases of mass exodus followed by the gradual flight of non-tribal people from Meghalaya.[2] The aggressive ethnocentric campaigns thus led to a decline in the numbers of the non-tribal population, which enabled the Khasis to take possession of their houses, shops and establishments. Although no large-scale acts of violence against non-tribal people have made the headlines in recent years, sporadic incidents in which they are targeted, especially in the Khasi Hills, are often reported.

The ethnic disaffection between the Khasis and the Garos is another subdued yet potent conflict issue in Meghalaya. Although it was a joint initiative by the Khasis and the Garos that led to the formation of Meghalaya, the dominance of the Khasis over the other tribal groups has since been a constant source of friction. The main bone of contention between Khasis and Garos was the implementation of the 1971 Reservation Bill that specified quotas of 40% for Khasis and Jaintias, 50% for Garos, and 10% for minorities in government jobs and educational institutions. The reservation policy created an antagonistic environment marked by the Khasis' insistence on increased quotas within government jobs because of their higher educational qualifications, while the Garos felt cheated over promises that had been made to them. The hegemony of the Khasis was felt during 2005 when the Meghalaya Board of School Education, which had its head office in Tura, agreed to reorganize itself along the lines demanded by the Khasi Students Union. The subsequent massive outcry resulted in demands by the Garos for a separate state.[3] Undoubtedly, these episodes shape the embittered situation between the Khasis and the Garos, which may develop into violence.

Insurgent activities often linked to the attempts by ethnic groups to advance their own claims have posed a constant challenge to the peace and security of Meghalaya. The state first witnessed insurgent activities in the early 1980s, and these took on a virulent aspect in the 1990s with the emergence of the Achik Liberation Matgrik Army (ALMA) and the A'chick National Volunteer Council (ANVC) in the Garo Hills, and the Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HLNC) in the Khasi Hills. While the insurgency in the Khasi Hills was mainly targeted against the non-tribal populace, the insurgency in the Garo Hills had its roots in the economic instability of that backward region. And, while the insurgency in the Khasi Hills could be pacified through a combination of forceful means and promises of economic benefits, the insurgents in the Garo Hills remained recalcitrant despite varied efforts, including monetary incentives.[4] The emergence and rise of the Garo Liberation National Army (GLNA) and of ANVC (B), a splinter faction of the ANVC, amply suggests that the insurgency in the Garo Hills is set to be a prolonged affair that will warrant structural reforms and will not be pacified through short-term diversionary tactics.

Of the various causes of conflict in Meghalaya, economic disparity emerges as the most prominent. The state's community-based agrarian economy lost much of its verve as a result of the unchecked privatization of community land, while the decline of agrarian resources made it extremely difficult for members of the tribal population to maintain their livelihoods. Lack of industry and employment opportunities within such an unfavourable economic climate further added to their misery. Against this backdrop, many uneducated and in many ways unemployable young men were tempted to join the insurgent bandwagon in order to make a living.[5]

The spectre of unemployed youth haunts particularly Meghalaya's Garo Hills region – the worst site of underdevelopment and poverty in the state. The situation in this area is all the more disconcerting for its inhabitants when they contrast their conditions to those in the relatively developed region of the Khasi Hills. The Garo Hills' meagre infrastructure and essential services, scanty health and education facilities, and poor connectivity to the rest of Meghalaya accentuate the sense of relative deprivation in the region. Widespread

corruption in the administration and allocation of development funds, bureaucratic inertia, and the insensitive attitude of government officials also tend to escalate the severity of the situation.[6] Unsurprisingly, the Garo Hills has become a fertile ground for insurgents, especially in the coal belt areas, where extortion activities provide a rich incentive to take up arms.

Peace initiatives: Government and civil society

The Indian government and the state government have sought to mitigate conflict by promoting rapid growth and development through heavy doses of public investment.[7] Construing economic deprivation as the root cause of all problems has led the state government of Meghalaya to undertake various initiatives. Such projects – for which a degree of sustainability has been claimed – include the Second Rural Tourism Resort Project at Chandigre, which showcased the lifestyle of the rural Garos within the rural setting to attract tourism while providing a means of generating income. The state government has also promoted the economic empowerment of women through financial assistance provided under the Integrated Basin Development and Livelihood Programme (IBDLP), which also mandates the Enterprise Facilitation Centre (EFC) to increase people's awareness of such schemes.

Community policing is another initiative through which the Meghalaya government hopes to develop better relations with the general public. Here, the innovative idea is to increase the police force's social responsibility by obliging its members to treat citizens with dignity and respect. Such community policing would also work towards providing medical facilities to people in the rural areas and integrating them into the mainstream through various training programmes and workshops. Specifically, the idea of social responsibility is understood as requiring police officers to act as facilitators for people in distress, particularly accident victims who urgently require transport to the nearest health centre. In addition, they are also required to escort health personnel to inaccessible areas, such as those where insurgents are active.

The government has also launched some notable initiatives to mitigate the ethnic disaffection between tribal and non-tribal communities. One such step was the implementation of the 1971 Reservation Bill that granted reservation quotas for the three tribes of Meghalaya – the Khasis, the Garos and the Jaintias. But due to the varied size of the quotas, the bill subsequently stirred up existing animosity between the Khasis and the Garos. However, this initiative subsequently became a bone of contention between Khasis and Garos, who disagreed over the size of their respective quotas. Another prominent governmental initiative was the Land Transfer Act of 1971, which concerned ownership and transfer of land and prohibited the transfer of land to non-tribal entities. This Act undoubtedly helped to safeguard tribal interests against the misuse of land by non-tribals. It was later supported by the Benami Transaction (Protection) Act of 1980, which provided additional security to the tribal population by banning the transfer of land to a non-tribal entity through illegal means – that is, through use of the name of a tribal person as a proxy for the land transfer. The pros and cons of the Inner Line Permit and the Three-Tier System[8] are also being explored in this context.

The government of India and the state government have also undertaken a number of joint efforts to deal with sporadic acts of insurgency in the state. The state government managed to tackle the HLNC-led insurgency in the Khasi Hills on its own, but the situation in the Garo Hills remained intractable for some time. The Indian and state governments collaborated on a carrot-and-stick policy aimed at countering the activities of the ALMA and the ANVC. While this policy succeeded partially in the case of the ALMA, it remained unsuccessful in the case of the ANVC, which still defies attempts to establish a peace settlement. For its part, the GLNA was declared a proscribed organization by the government of India on 1 February 2012.

In addition to government initiatives, civil society – particularly religious organizations – has played a prominent role in ameliorating the conflict scenario. The Garo Baptist Church, for example, was instrumental in bringing the insurgents of both the ALMA and the ANVC to the negotiating table. During 2003, the Garo Baptist Church, along with Mothers Union, another prominent civil society organization, also helped to bring peace to the Garo Hills at a difficult time. Even during the ethnic conflicts, the Church frequently played a crucial role in efforts to maintain peace by providing channels of communication.[9]

The impact

Though partially successful in defusing the conflict situation in Meghalaya, the conflict-mitigation initiatives undertaken by the government do not seem to have a sustainable bearing. Some of the key conflict issues have received little attention, including the much-contended monopoly of the Khasis within the state's administrative system, which has strained the relationship between the Khasis and the Garo.[10] Similarly, the aggravation caused by the influx of Bangladeshi immigrants has not been addressed, seemingly owing to political considerations. The issue has instead become somewhat inflamed, and there is a common tendency to regard all non-tribal people as illegal migrants. This in turn has led to an increasing exodus by members of the non-tribal population.

Efforts to curb insurgent activities in the Garo Hills have largely been unsuccessful owing to the region's grim economic conditions and poor communication infrastructure, as well as the seeming indifference of political leaders towards the people's woes. It is often suggested that while the government employed serious measures to curb the HLNC insurgency in the Khasi Hills, a similar degree of earnestness has been lacking in the case of the Garo Hills. Politicians are often perceived as being hand in glove with the insurgents, sharing the spoils of the latter's illegal activities. The government therefore needs to be stricter in its efforts to curb the menace of insurgency.

Recommendations

- The peacefulness of Meghalaya should not be taken for granted within policy circles. It is still fragile and may not endure in the long run. If generic issues of governance and development – such as providing basic facilities for the day-to-day life of the population – are not addressed in time, the seeming peace may give way to violent upheavals and new conflicts.
- Empowering members of the general public and bringing them into the de-

cision-making loop is an important policy imperative. One way of doing this is to engage people through social policing – an approach that may offer them a chance to be part of the decision-making and solution-seeking process. Some ideas for community policing are already on the policymaking board and merit sincere efforts at implementation. This will in turn require greater synergy between the administration and citizens through government- or civil society-sponsored programmes and interactive sessions.

- Sensitization and awareness-raising are required to enhance the capacity of the people to carry out their responsibilities as citizens, participate in democratic governance and seek practical solutions to the varied issues facing Meghalayan society. Acting in concert with the government, civil society could play a critical role in this context.
- Little has been done to address the contended monopoly of the Khasis within the administrative system, which has strained the relationship between the Khasis and the Garos. Better communication channels need to be built up between Meghalaya's tribal and non-tribal populations, as well as between the Garos and the Khasis. Festive seasons provide good opportunities for improving the day-to-day relationships between the communities. The government should also make efforts to curb antisocial elements that may seek to take advantage of the existing tensions.
- Keeping both demography and development imperatives in mind, serious consideration should be given to new ideas, such as proposals for a Three-Tier System that would encourage outsiders to work in Meghalaya for stipulated short periods of time.
- Meghalaya needs to be better connected to the rest of India, both politically and otherwise, to alleviate its sense of alienation. National media should be more sensitized towards the conflict situation within the state.
- Strategies for appeasement that rely on the provision of monetary benefits should be avoided, as they have only added to the growth of insurgent outfits. Instead, the government should focus on development in the region, increasing job opportunities and improving educational opportunities in more backward areas. Transparency in the allocation of welfare funds should be maintained.
- Social auditing against non-implementation of development projects and corruption is required. This would not only ensure that programmes are implemented, but also guarantee that the benefits of programmes reach those in need.

Efforts to achieve peace through the appeasement of one or another political community or through the provision of economic incentives are unlikely to endure for any length of time. Such efforts cannot cater to the imperatives of rights, justice and democracy for all the communities.■

References

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Notes

[1] Upadhyaya et al. (n.d.).

[2] Since that time, the demographics of the state have changed. The so-called majority non-tribals have now become minorities whose population percentile is declining by 2 every year (interview with Manas Choudhuri, MLA, Mawprem, Shillong, 7 February 2012).

[3] Upadhyaya et al. (n.d.).

[4] Upadhyaya et al. (n.d.).

[5] Upadhyaya et al. (n.d.).

[6] Upadhyaya et al. (n.d.).

[7] Upadhyaya et al. (n.d.).

[8] The Inner Line Permit is an official travel document issued by the government of India that allows inward travel of an Indian citizen into a protected/restricted area for a limited period. NGOs in Meghalaya have been pressuring the state government to implement such an approach to reduce problems related to immigration. In a bid to stop immigration in Meghalaya, the Khasi Students Union has proposed the introduction of a Three-Tier System – involving separate ID cards for permanent residents, for students and professionals, and for tourists and migrant labourers. The state government of Meghalaya is yet to decide on these two influx-control mechanisms.

[9] Upadhyaya et al. (n.d.).

[10] Though there are three main tribes in Meghalaya – Khasis, Garos and Jaintias – the primary focus of our research was centered around the Khasis and the Garos.

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