

Quest For Identity and Peace In North-East

Lack of proper appreciation the social, political and demographic peculiarities of the region is, to a large extent, responsible for many of the troubles and turmoil that have been plaguing the region and straining the national fabric. Peace in the region has been under constant threat.

Over the past few decades, the North-Eastern region has been in turmoil as a consequence of certain politico-social developments. To any discerning observer of the North-Eastern scene, a distinct pattern of development or events will be apparent. It is a circle, so to speak, of quest for identity followed by violence and culminating in quest for peace. This has been the dominant feature of the changing political scenario. Even after years of strife and tribulations, Nagaland, Manipur and Assam are still restless. There has been temporary respite, but no permanent cessation of violence. Efforts are on to bring back order and peace. But they have so far proved illusive. Why has the region witnessed so extensive and prolonged violence? Why have the secessionist tendencies, developed? I personally feel that the unrest, violence and separatist ideas that one witnesses in the region are the offshoot of certain grave miscalculations and unrealistic appreciation of historical facts, geo-physical peculiarities, the ethos of the ethnic groups and their political and economic aspirations at the national level. The post-independence resurgence among the people of the North-East, particularly the younger generation, is often wished away. It is not realised that at the roof of such resurgence are accidents of history and neglect for centuries

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Everybody in India longs for durable peace in the sensitive and strategic North-East region. Yet this has not happened even after 50 years of freedom. Why? Mizoram's Chief Minister, Lal Thanhawla, analyses the scenario candidly and states: Durable peace in the North-East can be ensured only if the distinct identities of the various ethnic groups or sub-nationalities, as they are sometimes called, are protected and, at the same time, their economic welfare is promoted. Armed repression alone cannot subdue a people in search of identity. I do not for a moment subscribe to or support these violent and anti-national developments. What I want to emphasise is that without a qualitative change in the attitude towards the region through adequate and sympathetic appreciation of its socio-political and economic compulsions, no lasting solution to the vexed problem of the North-East can be found. The rest of India has taken too long a time to realise that besides the Aryan and the Dravidian strains, the Indian nation has a strong component of Mongoloid people with a distinct identity of their own.



CMs of other North-East States in Aizawl in 1986

The fact that the North-East remained independent till a century after the rest of India was subjugated by the British is also not appreciated by many. Nor is it appreciated that partition had aggravated the age old geo-physical isolation of the region. Then, there is the feeling of economic neglect. Such historical accidents and wounded feelings of neglect led to the post-independence resurgence. It was a mistake to wish it away and not to read the events correctly and initiate measures to assuage the popular feelings. All this is an answer to the basic questions I raised earlier. The important pre-requisite for restoration of peace and normalcy is a policy which takes adequate care of the above mentioned realities

Durable peace in the North-East can be ensured only if the distinct identities of the various ethnic groups or sub-nationalities, as they are sometimes called, are protected and, at the same time, their economic welfare is promoted. Armed repression alone cannot subdue a people in search of identity. We should remember that the people of this region, particularly those in the hills, are still adolescent and relatively immature. Refinement in their mental make-up has to be achieved through dialogue and persuasion. This fact has to be borne in mind while striving for peace.

The path to peace is long and hard. The process is indeed a test of patience and perseverance. Peace demands great sacrifices. And when you see light at the end of the tunnel you realise that "peace hath her victory no less renowned than war." This is the Mizo experience. From February 28, 1966, when violence broke out in the State, till June 30, 1988, when the peace accord was signed, for long twenty years the people of Mizoram went through trying times. The state was in turmoil. The sound of the guitar was silenced by the boom of guns. Security and administrative measures were initiated to calm down the outburst. Conciliation and negotiations continued and for twelve years (1974 to 1986) talk with the insurgents, in some form or the other, went on. An agreement was signed in 1976, which could not be acted on. In July 1980, another agreement was arrived at and the new accord also failed.



Chief Minister Lal Thanhawla at the homecoming ceremony of Hmar militants in 1994

Fresh talks started in October 1984 and culminated in the signing of the Peace Accord on June 30, 1986, which fortunately has stood the test of time. A democratically elected government stepped down voluntarily in the interest of peace. Political history has not possibly recorded another sacrifice at the altar of peace like the one in Mizoram. Today, Mizoram is one of the most peaceful states of the Union. The success of the Mizo accord and the efforts that went to make it so many perhaps show to others the path to peace. The Mizoram peace settlement has some morals. There has to be strong political will, an understanding bureaucracy and a determined people to fight against violence and in favour of peace. In the late seventies, Mizoram had all these. The people, by then, were fed up with disturbances and violence and were anxious to rid the state of this scourge. The Church organisations and the student community played a very positive and crucial role in bringing back peace and order. There was no attempt to create alternative leadership to break the movement. Had that been done, it would have only added fuel to the fire. Dialogue with the old guard alone was continued, which produced results. Basically, a humane attitude and a spirit of accommodation helped win half the battle.

If the way to peace is hard and tough, the task of preserving peace is equally hard. Many of the micro-minority groups within the states of the region have sent out alarm signals. In Mizoram we had to face an agitation by Hmar people, which become violent in a limited way.



Another home coming in 2009

Fortunately, the problem was sorted out through negotiations. Besides, there are certain economic and demographic issues relating to the state in the North-East which may ignite revolt against the system and threaten peace. And there are various elements waiting to fish in the troubled water. It is, therefore, necessary that these problems and issues are handled with understanding and a sense of urgency. As the New Testament states: "Blessed are the peace makers: for they shall be called the children of God" - INFA