India has been plagued by multiple insurgencies for many decades. Prominent amongst them are the ethnic insurgencies in the northeast of India, the Sikh insurgency in the Punjab, and the Maoist or the left-wing insurgency in states like Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand, Orissa. While it is argued by existing literature (Verghese 1996) that there are several causes for armed insurgencies in India such as a demand for a separate independent state; greater political representation within the Union of India; assertion of cultural identity; and the lack of governance, this chapter isolates four significant factors that have sustained multiple insurgencies in India across time and space. These are: exclusive homeland narratives; political mobilization; the use of violence; and external connections.

Five cases studies of insurgencies will be used to illustrate these ideas: the Dima Halang Daogah (DHD) and the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) in Assam; the National Socialist Council of Nagalim led by Thuingaleng Muivah and Isak Chisi Swu-NMSC (IM) based in Manipur and Nagaland; the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) based in Manipur; the Sikh insurgency in the Punjab in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s and the Maoist insurgency (see Figure 16.1)

A brief overview

With an international border stretching up to 4,500kms, the northeastern region of India has been plagued by multiple insurgencies since India’s independence. The oldest insurgency is the Naga insurgency which can be traced back to 1918 with the formation of the Naga Club. In 1946, the Naga National Council (NNC) was formed and it declared Naga independence on 14 August 1947, a day before India declared its own independence. The Naga movement turned violent in the 1950s and is still active today. Manipur has also been grossly affected by armed violence with the formation of the UNLF on 24 November 1964. Another significant Manipuri separatist armed group known as the Revolutionary People’s Front (RPF) and its armed wing, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) have been engaged in armed struggle since 1976. Other insurgent groups in Manipur include the Peoples’ Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK) established in the 1970s and the Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL) formed in 1994. Neighbouring Assam has also been plagued by insurgent violence since 1979 with the formation of the ULFA. The hill districts of Assam, North Cachar Hills and Karbi Anglong are
dominated by the DHD and the United Peoples’ Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) since the 1990s. Significantly, most of the northeast insurgent groups have thrived primarily due to strong external connections. Countries like China in the 1960s and the 1970s as well as Pakistan and later on Bangladesh have supported many of these armed groups by providing arms, training and, most importantly, base areas for underground camps (Bhaumik 2007: 1–16). Matters rather changed however when Bangladesh closed these camps when Sheikh Hasina came to power in 2008.

The Sikh insurgency had a turbulent beginning as the Indian state oscillated in its response between limited and excessive use of force. Due to the lack of a ‘trust and nurture’ doctrine in Indian counterinsurgency strategy (Goswami 2009: 66–86), Punjabis started fearing that the Panth (greater Sikh community) was in danger within India (Latimer 2004: 14–16). This resulted in a plethora of insurgent groups, namely the Khalistan Liberation Force, the All India Sikh Student’s Federation (AISSF), the Khalistan Commando Force and the Babbar Khalsa (Gill 1997: 48). Insurgent violence peaked during 1983–91 killing nearly 21,000 people.1

A Maoist insurgency started in 1967 in a place called Naxalbari in West Bengal as a peasant uprising against unjust landlords, though some semblance of it had already started taking roots in the state of Hyderabad as early as 1948 (Bajpai 2002: 18–22). While the movement was contained by the Indian state in the 1970s, it re-appeared in the 1980s and started spreading across many states in India. According to the 2010 Government of India statistics, 20 out of 28 states in India were affected in some way or other by Naxalite activities. The reasons for this spread of

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1 Figure 16.1 Insurgencies in India.
the Maoist insurgency lay in the inability of the legitimate political authority in India to provide avenues for structural upliftment of the deprived sections of society in the affected states. The tribal population in these states views the Maoist insurgency as a viable alternative out of desperate social and economic conditions.\(^2\) Violence is also seen as an instrument for political assertion and attention (Coser 1956: 6–10).

**Four significant factors for sustenance of insurgencies in India**

As noted, four significant factors have given rise to multiple insurgencies in India: exclusive homeland narratives; political mobilization; the use of violence; and external connections. These will now be discussed in turn.

*Exclusive homeland narratives:* though the depth of insurgent movements across India varies, there are certain similarities weaving them together. When one probes deeper into the antecedent causes of the conflicts, assertions of minority ethnic identity and aspirations of political empowerment are at the core of the conflicts, be it in Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand or the Punjab. The northeast insurgencies have another added feature: the colonial residue of being treated as ‘excluded or partially excluded’ areas based on the Inner Line Regulation of 1873.\(^3\) Due to the lack of a pre-colonial and colonial integrative policy with the rest of India, the hill tribes resist the post-colonial Indian state’s entry into their territories. Consequently, in order to safeguard their political space, most of the ethnic communities demand a separate ethnic homeland. Interestingly, these factors are evident in the ethnic movements pertaining to the NSCN (IM), UNLF, ULFA and the DHD. For instance, the NSCN (IM) in its negotiations with the Union government, ongoing since 1997, demands an exclusive ethnic homeland for Nagas, Greater Nagalim (Nagaland) comprising of Naga inhabited areas in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Nagaland and across the border in Myanmar. The flip side of this exclusive ethnic homeland demand is that the territories included in the Greater Nagalim map are inhabited by ethnic ‘others’ and as a result the claim is perceived as a serious security threat given the risk of serious inter-communal and inter-ethnic violence.

A case in point is the response of the Meitei community in Manipur. The Meiteis are deeply apprehensive that the current Naga peace process could end up in the balkanization of Manipur. Geographically, the hills which are included in Greater Nagalim constitute 70 per cent of Manipur’s territory and any further slicing of territory would leave Manipur at a disadvantage. Meiteis also claim that their culture is a synthesis of Naga and Meitei cultures and they are embittered by the identity and historical exclusivity discourse of the Nagas. Under pressure from the NSCN (IM), in a joint statement issued on 14 June 2001 in Bangkok, the Indian government extended the Naga ceasefire ‘without territorial limits’ to Manipur.\(^4\) This led to violent protests in Manipur. Many civil society organizations were united in a mass movement against the decision to extend the Naga ceasefire to the Naga-dominated hill districts of Manipur.\(^5\) The end result was the state assembly building being burned down with 13 protesters killed on 18 June 2001.

The ULFA and the DHD in Assam also base their armed movements on the demand for exclusive homelands for the Assamese and the Dimasa ethnic communities, respectively. The ULFA seeks to revert Assam’s status to the Ahom ruled Assam, as conceived of in the 1826 treaty of Yandaboo between the British and the Burmese, which ushered in British rule in Assam (Baruah 1994: 863–97). ULFA’s Vice Chairman, Pradip Gogoi, has stated that his organization’s political objectives are the creation of a ‘sovereign, socialist Assam’ in which ‘All indigenous people must stay, all others must leave’. The stated demand of the DHD is a unified Dimaraji state comprised of Dimasa inhabited areas of N C Hills district, Karbi Anglong district,
Cachar district, parts of Nagaon district in Assam, and Dimapur and Dimasa inhabited areas in Dhansiripar in Nagaland. The UNLF in Manipur draws its credence from the historical argument that Manipur was forcefully inducted into India in 1949. The DHD is based on a leftist ideology vis-à-vis the economic and social alienation of the people of Manipur. The armed group asserts that the backwardness of Meitei society can be better addressed with the establishment of a Meitei state to the exclusion of all ethnic ‘others’ (Goswami 2007: 287–313).

Interestingly, the demands of the NSCN (IM) for a unified Nagalim (Greater Nagaland), the DHD for a Dimasa state, the ULFA for Independent Assam and the UNLF for Independent Manipur consist of overlapping claims to the same territorial space. Indeed, the emergence of multifarious insurgent groups with claims over the same territory has further complicated the situation in these remote areas of India.

The Punjab insurgency was also propelled by deep-seated fears of the Sikh community that a Hindu dominated country like India would have little space for their religion, language and culture (Bajpai 2002: 55–6). As a result, the major political party in Punjab, the Akali Dal, argued that Punjab had to either become sovereign or granted a high degree of political autonomy to safeguard the Sikh community. When the Union government appeared to be lacklustre in meeting these demands, the movement took on an insurgent turn with the political goal of establishing an exclusive Sikh state called Khalistan, based on the Anandpur Sahib resolution of 1973.

Drawing inspiration from the Maoist ideology of heartland ‘revolutionary warfare’, the Maoist insurgency aspired to establish a ‘red corridor’ in India, stretching from the border of Nepal in central India in the north to Karnataka in the south by violent struggle. The Maoists claim that this Maoist state will be anti-imperialist, anti-bourgeois and pro-proletariat. Apparently, the political goal of the Maoist insurgency differs from that of the northeast and the Punjab insurgencies with its focus on regime change in India. However, in reality, the dynamics of allegiance of the Maoist cadres to the armed insurgency is similar to that of the other insurgencies. The most committed cadres of the Maoist insurgency are the tribals of Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Orissa whose support is based on the political goal of establishing an exclusive homeland in which their rights are paramount. Hence, the red corridor that the Maoists want to establish is coterminous with that of the tribal population inhabiting these areas. Significantly, the goal of regime change that the Maoists are fighting for is also similar to that of the other insurgencies in India. The northeast armed groups and the Sikh insurgency also seek regime change with the ultimate political goal of undoing the so-called illiberal and non-representative character of the present local state regimes and replacing them with a democratic ethnic leadership. The only difference is that the Maoist insurgency wants to achieve this at a pan-India level whereas the other insurgencies have been largely limited to a local and regional level.

**Political mobilization:** politics forms the core of insurgent groups’ mobilization strategy (Grey 1999: 283–5). Most insurgent groups garner popular support for their violent activities by citing a political cause, significantly important to the target population. According to Mao Zedong, the promise of mobilizing for revolution will exist in any country where the formal administrative structures fail to meet their basic obligations of providing the minimum standard of life to their citizens (Griffith 1962: 5–6). Political mobilization is the first critical phase in any insurgency to acquire critical mass. Historical evidence also suggests that there is very little hope of destroying an insurgency once it survives the first phase and succeeds in acquiring a level of social support (Griffith 1962: 27–43). It must also be noted that insurgent groups construct a ‘social imaginary’ (Schmidt and Schroder 2001: 4) based on real or perceived political alienation and cultural subjugation by dominant ‘others’ thereby vindicating the need for violent assertion.
of legitimate concerns of the insurgent groups’ social base. Insurgent leaders also behave like socially powerful individuals by openly projecting their armed cadres, weapons and financial prowess. This visible showcasing attracts unemployed youths in areas where the state is unable to provide decent alternative livelihoods.

The NSCN (IM) cites political reasons for the use of force. It argues that its political objective is Naga territorial unification and sovereignty based on the group’s historical narrative of Naga independent status before the British occupied Naga territories in the nineteenth century (Goswami 2007: 134–54). During the 6th Naga Peoples’ Consultative Meeting for Discussion on Extension of Cease-Fire at Camp Hebron on 27 July 2007 and attended by nearly 5,000 people from across the Naga areas, Thuingaleng Muivah, the General Secretary of the NSCN (IM) asserted the importance of the political objectives. He also committed to improve the overall economic and social standing of Nagas knowing full well that such arguments strike an emotional cord amongst Naga society as development in these areas is dismal. The ULFA, the DHD and the UNLF also utilize the perceived sense of social alienation and political neglect cutting across societal spaces in the northeast. Historical narratives are constructed based on a nostalgic interpretation of past events and earlier ethnic communities are projected as leading an idyllic independent political life. It is also argued that if such an ethnic based state is established, all the present ills of under-development and dominance by India’s northern heartland will end. This was also the case with the Punjab. Sikh society was mobilized by insurgent actors who projected the idea of an independent Khalistan which would guarantee the preservation of the Sikh language, religion and politics.

The Maoist insurgency is perhaps the most well organized to carry out political mobilization. The People’s Liberation Guerrilla Army (PLGA) of the Communist Party of India (Maoist) or the CPI (M) is the chief instrument of the insurgency. It is through the PLGA that most of the political mobilization and training has been conducted. Central to the factor of political mobilization are the violent means used for the political objective of regime change. Most crucially, the fact that young recruits are turned into forces capable of unleashing social violence must be kept in focus. The interaction between insurgent groups, the armed forces of the state and civilian population is central to understanding not only political mobilization patterns but also the all important variable of dynamics of allegiance. What is at stake here is the loyalty of the non-combatant population. Civilian support is crucial for the advancement of a conflict. Resources like crucial food supply, manpower and information come from the people. Building support through the correct political mobilization strategy wrapped around core issues linked to the population is therefore critical (Weinstein 2007: 7–22).

Another important political factor for insurgent mobilization is the disproportionate government response to insurgent violence. As mentioned earlier, during the Punjab insurgency, the years 1983–91 witnessed a brutal suppression of the insurgency leading to widespread alienation of the local people. The Akali Dal government under Prakash Singh Badal was dismissed by the Indira Gandhi government on the mere suspicion that it was supporting pro-Khalistan groups and a state of emergency was imposed on Punjab. Military operations were intensified with little regard for human rights (Final Report on Punjab Disappearances, 2003). This strengthened the hands of militants like Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale who, taking advantage of the widespread hardships of the local people, further radicalized them under the pretext that Sikh religion was under threat (Marwah 1996: 59; Joshi 1984: 126–34). The Akali Dal party also joined this militant nexus. Operation Wood Rose, an army operation aimed at wiping out Bhindranwale’s supporters in the aftermath of his death in 1984 ended up further alienating the population due to its use of indiscriminate force and critical lack of knowledge of the terrain and its people. According to K.P.S. Gill, Operations Blue Star and Wood Rose ‘in combination, gave new lease of life to a movement that could have been easily contained in 1984 itself’ (Gill 1997: 95–7).
The Sikh insurgency intensified after Operation Blue Star of June 1984 was seen by local Sikh communities as an assault on their religion. Worse still, it was undertaken on 5 June, the day that marked the death anniversary of the founder of Amritsar’s Golden Temple, Guru Arjan Dev. An estimated 10,000 pilgrims were present in the temple site that day. In a large-scale operation involving six tanks, heavy artillery, four infantry fighting vehicles and three armoured personnel carriers, 4,712 civilians including Bhindhranwale were killed (Latimer 2004: 22). Several old manuscripts of the Sikhs, as well as the temple itself, suffered severe damage. The entire Sikh community was outraged, not so much by Bhindhranwale’s death, but by the attack on their holy site. This discontentment culminated in the assassination of the Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, in October 1984 by her two Sikh bodyguards.

The use of violence: the tactic and strategy of guerrilla warfare is followed by the insurgent actors in India providing them with the genesis of a protracted conflict aimed at wearing down the will of the stronger party. Violence is utilized by insurgent actors for three significant reasons:

1 assertion of power in a given territory;
2 as a bargaining chip; and
3 as a coercive means to get support from the local population.

Most of the insurgent groups in the northeast utilize violence to establish their hold on a given territory. For instance, show of force is essential in the Naga inhabited areas as there are multiple insurgent actors at a given time inhabiting the same territorial space. According to Phunthing Shimrang, self-styled Brigadier in the Naga Army and Chairman, NSCN (IM) Cease-fire Monitoring Cell, the use of violence by the NSCN (IM) is critical to signal to their rival armed faction, the NSCN (K) who is the dominant actor in a given territory. Consequently, the use of violence should be viewed as a consequence of power-battles with factional fights mainly aimed at dominating the authoritative allocation of resources and territory. Given the fact that insurgent groups are heavily dependent on the extortion networks run in common areas, the violence is mostly about who dominates what, where and how. The Sikh and Maoist insurgencies follow a similar pattern. With regard to the latter, it is critical for the Maoist insurgency to dominate states like Jharkhand whose illegal coal mines add the highest percentage of money to Maoist budgets.

Violence is utilized as a bargaining chip to get concessions from the stronger actor (read the Indian state). This also gets insurgent actors visibility, space for dissent and a place at the negotiating table with the Union government, as is the case with northeastern insurgent actors like the NSCN (IM), the DHD and the ULFA. Violence is also utilized as a viable tool to get support from the insurgent groups’ target population through ‘fear and intimidation’. ULFA is known for its terror tactics of killing non-Assamese Hindi-speaking people, especially migrant workers from Bihar. Most societies affected by insurgent violence in India support insurgent actors out of a need to ‘self-preserve’ because if they do otherwise, they fear some kind of physical harm, given that they inhabit remote inaccessible terrain still not penetrated by the state (Goswami 2009: 66–86). Usually, insurgency affected societies suffer from high stress levels and genuinely fear destructive social forces prevalent among them.

External support: insurgencies garner support from external sources especially with regard to the hardware of violence and in updating their strategies. External support is contingent on the geography of the area where the insurgent groups are active. Support from neighbouring countries could be political, moral, military, economic, territorial or cultural based on ethnic ties (Bajpai 2002: 98–104).
The northeastern states share a 4,500 km highly porous border with China in the north, Myanmar in the East, Bangladesh in the southwest and Bhutan in the northwest whereas it precariously clings to the rest of India by a 22 km narrow strip of land known in Bengal as the ‘Chicken’s Neck’. Both the ULFA and the NSCN (IM) have had training camps in Myanmar and Bangladesh. Significantly, the unified National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) was formed in Myanmar on 31 January 1980. In 1986, ULFA established linkages with the unified NSCN. Both insurgent groups had strong connections with the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) of Myanmar (Tucker 2000: 82–5). (See also Chapter 15 by Lawrence E. Cline) Southern Bhutan also offered a safe haven for insurgent bases in the 1980s and 1990s. Things however changed when in December 2003, the Royal Bhutan Army (RBA) and the Royal Body Guards (RBG) comprising 6,000 military personnel forcefully expelled 3,000 insurgent cadres of the ULFA and KIO from Bhutan and destroyed nearly 30 training camps. Many top ULFA functionaries were also arrested. The ULFA then shifted to Myanmar and Bangladesh. The ULFA camps in Bangladesh remained a bone of contention between India and Bangladesh for a long time. Most of the top ULFA leaders, like its chairman, Arabinda Rajkhowa, and commander-in-chief, Paresh Barua, remained in Bangladesh. It is only recently that there has been some gainful cooperation between India and Bangladesh in this regard and top ULFA leaders like Rajkhowa were arrested by Indian security personnel in the Bangladesh-Meghalaya border area in December 2009.

The NSCN (IM) receives the help of the Karen National Union (KNU) fighting the Myanmar junta since 1947. The group has also ventured into the Chinese black market in Yunnan province. Small arms are shipped by the NSCN (IM) through the Chittagong port in Bangladesh. Anthony Shimray is the NSCN (IM)’s procurement officer in Philippines enjoying close connections with the Southeast Asian small arms network (Egreteau 2006: 78).

China also began to support revolutionary movements across the world after the Communist takeover in 1949. Thereafter, it provided strong political, economic and logistical support to various insurgent groups in northeast India in order to counter so-called Western imperialism and Soviet revisionism in Asia. In return, most of these insurgent groups supported the ‘One China policy’ with regard to Taiwan. The Nagas were greatly inspired by the Chinese ideas of ‘People’s War’ and ‘protracted struggle’. In 1966, Muivah, then member of the NNC, led a 130-strong Naga guerrilla force in a three-month trek to Yunnan province in China mostly helped by the Kachins. He later moved to Beijing to get political training, followed by Isak Chisi Swu and Moure Angami in 1968. China’s help to the Mizos is also well documented, subsequently followed by support to the UNLF. However, Deng Xiaoping’s ‘good neighbour policy’ stopped Chinese aid to these insurgent groups except for the flow of illegal Chinese arms through the black market in Yunnan.

The Sikh insurgency was backed by Pakistan with regard to supply of arms, money and training. Without this external help, the insurgency would have most likely failed to sustain itself for nearly three decades in the face of India’s counterinsurgency operations (Wallace 2007: 425–79). The Maoist insurgency depends on internal sources within India like illegal small arms factories in Bihar and looting for the hardware of violence. However, there have been growing linkages regarding strategy and ideology following the formation of the Coordination Committee of the Maoist Parties and Organizations in South Asia (CCOMPOSA) in 2001. This body includes ten Maoist groups from Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka. In a joint statement issued on 1 July 2001, subsequently followed by a declaration in August 2002, the CCOMPOSA identifies resistance to US imperialism, globalization, the ‘centralized’ Indian state and its internal repression of minority people through the Naxalite People’s War, and India’s expansionist designs backed by US imperialism in South Asia as its goals.
Conclusion

This chapter has outlined a framework for further research to analyse insurgencies in India. It is equally important to do substantive work on conflict resolution mechanisms. Conflict resolution by definition indicates a comprehensive framework, going much beyond conflict management, which addresses the deep sources and root causes of any particular conflict. The Mizo peace process (1968–86) in India indicates that the conflict was transformed from violent assertion to peaceful resolution as the root causes of the conflict were addressed; attitudes of the conflicting actors changed over time; and issues became reframed. Another critical issue in a democracy like India is popular support for insurgencies. Consequently, while ‘use of force’ is a necessary counterinsurgency response, it must be proportionate and should not end up further alienating the insurgency affected population by doing more harm than was intended. Use of force in a democracy must visibly demonstrate accountability and restraint by a responsive state. Consequently, security forces must realize that counterinsurgency in a democracy is not merely a military operation; it is a political act as well. Further research should particularly be undertaken on important concepts like ‘non-combatant immunity’ and ‘proportionality’ and their relationship to insurgencies and counterinsurgencies.

Notes


3 The Inner Line Regulation of 1873 prohibited any British Indian subjects from entering Naga inhabited areas without having prior permission. The policy continues to be upheld after India became independent in 1947 and is still in force today.

4 For full text of the agreement see South Asia Terrorism Portal, ‘Countries; India; States; Nagaland; Papers; Extension of the cease-fire with the NSCN-IM’, www.satp.org (accessed 21 June 2006).

5 The ULFA has said that the NSCN (IM)’s claim of eight Assam districts as part of Nagalim has ‘neither credibility nor any historical basis’. Arabinda Rajkhowa, the ULFA chairman, has called upon the NSCN (IM) to remove the eight Assam districts from its Nagalim map. See Ajai Sahni ‘Survey of Conflicts and Resolution in India’s Northeast’, at www.satp.org/satporgtp/publication/faultlines/volume12/article3.htm (accessed 10 August 2006).

6 Field interviews conducted by author in Orissa with the tribal community in Kandamal, Nayagarh and Malkangiri, October 2008.

7 The 6th Naga Peoples’ Consultative Meeting was held on 27 July 2007 at Camp Hebron near Dimapur, Nagaland, which I attended as an observer. The meeting comprised nearly 5,000 Naga peoples’ representatives from Naga areas in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur and Nagaland. Civil society organizations like the Naga Hoho (Apex Council) representatives, Presidents of Tribal Hohos, Naga Mothers’ Association, Naga Students’ Federation, Human Rights Organizations, Village Headmen Association, Senior Citizens’ Forums, members of the intelligentsia and media were also in attendance.


9 Ibid. Also see ‘CPI (ML) People’s War: Functioning of Military Commissions and Commands Coordination of Main, Secondary and Base Forces’, at http://satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/maoist/documents/papers/Functioning.htm (accessed on 1 March 2008).


Recommended readings


References

Insurgencies in India