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INDIAN STATE AT CROSSROAD: A BRIEF REVIEW OF CASE OF INSURGENCY IN INDIA

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The aim does not sanctify the means. No question is ever settled until it is settled right.

India is the largest democracy characterized with society which is multi-ethnic, multi-lingual.

This success must be qualified by the armed challenges to the Indian state that have regularly erupted from time to time. Insurgencies in India have been motivated by religious, ethno-linguistic, and leftist ideologies, reflecting the heterogeneity of the peoples ruled by the Indian state. Separatist conflicts in Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), Nagaland, Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, and Tripura have turned many of India's border regions into war zones for years and even decades. Maoist insurgents in West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, and Chhattisgarh continue to operate in vast interior areas of the country. It is Insurgency and counterinsurgency has taken an extraordinary cost in human suffering, economic costs, and social dislocation. Internal conflict is an integral, if often understudied, part of India's political experience.



This paper explores the historical roots of major insurgent movements and state responses. It takes into account the federal structure of the Indian state and of those centre-periphery tensions that this framework has been unable to peacefully manage. The major separatist insurgencies find their roots in problems of managing distinct political aspirations within a single political system: centralizing and repressive policies at the centre, intra-ethnic political competition on the periphery, and the availability of external sanctuary and support have created volatile situations on India's north-western and north-eastern frontiers. It then deals with the specific separatist conflicts.

The paper concludes by drawing out some general insights that help us understand the dynamics of violence in India. First, the roots of separatism crucially involve the ways that centre-periphery relations intersect with political and militant competition within peripheral areas. Second, the dynamics of Naxalism reflect the dual problems of insufficient and excessive state strength. Minimal or non-existent service provision, basic law enforcement, and infrastructure create areas that insurgents can mobilize within, while crackdowns by poorly-trained, often brutal security forces can trigger escalation and growing violence. Third, Indian counterinsurgency challenges conventional wisdoms. Some wars have been ended by the ruthless application of coercion and human rights abuses, while others have been resolved or at least stabilized by political bargains, tacit deals, and the creation of ambiguous nexuses of politics and violence.

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Some Exploration about the Causes of Insurgencies

Insurgencies do not emerge in a vacuum. Their underlying root causes are invariably to be found in political, socio-economic or religious domains, their nature and scope depending upon the nature of the grievances, motivations and demands of the people. India has had its share of insurgencies. Here in India, there are some thirty insurgencies which have taken the country into its fold and it symbolises that there are acute sense of grievance and alienation lies with them. Broadly, these can be divided into movements for **political rights** – e.g. Assam, Kashmir and Khalistan (Punjab), movements for **social** and **economic justice** – e.g. Maoist (Naxalite) and north-eastern states, and **religious grounds** – e.g. Kashmir. These causes overlap at times.

Political Causes:

South Asia, as well known fact, has never been a homogenous society. The multiplicity of races, ethnicities, tribes, religions, and languages led to the creation of hundreds of sovereign entities all over the subcontinent ruled by tribal and religious leaders and conquerors of all sorts. Like Europe over the centuries, the map of South Asia also kept changing owing to internecine warfare. India in its entire history, until colonized by the British and united at gun point, was never a single nation, nor a united country. The numerous entities were in many cases territorially and population-wise much larger than several European countries, were independently ruled and qualified for nationhood by any modern standards. During and after the colonial rule, such territorial entities were lumped together to form new administrative and political units - or states, without, in many cases, taking into account the preferences and aspirations of the people. For the people of these territories, this administrative and political amalgam amounted to loss of identity and freedom and being ruled by aliens. The new dispensation – democracy, in many cases brought no political or economic advantage.

To complicate matters, hundreds of religious and ethnic groups, some of which are fiercely sectarian and independent in nature, found themselves passionately defending their religions, ethnicities, languages and cultures, at times clashing fiercely with rival groups, challenging even the writ of the state in the process. As the time passes, it is becoming clear that keeping a conglomerate of nationalities and sub-nationalities together as one nation would be an impossibility, given the absence of a common thread that could weave them together. Thus the artificial nature of the modern state created by the British colonialists and adopted by post-colonial India also triggers violent reactions in different hotspots.

Caste Based Discrimination and Discontent:

India's caste system, which tears apart its social fabric and divides people into potential warring groups, is unique and has no place in the modern world. This sinister game has historically been played by the Brahmans in collaboration with the ruling class to their mutual benefit. The issue assumes more horrific dimensions when those who practice it among the Hindus insist that it is a divinely sanctioned concept and cannot be abrogated by humans. Even the anti-caste activist - Dr. Ambedkar, acknowledges that 'to destroy caste, all the Hindu shastras would have to be done away with'. The system confers on the 'higher' castes the absolute right to plunder the wealth of those belonging to the 'lower' caste or Dalits (or the 'untouchables'). For over four thousand years, the system has been driven by the intense hatred and by the yearning of the 'higher' castes to accept nothing less than abject subservience from the 'lower' castes. Ironically, its defenders have argued that it has kept a sense of order and peace among the people and has prevented society from disintegrating into chaos.

Despite the fact that the Indian Constitution has abolished it, this caste based discrimination continues because it has infiltrated into the Indian polity, serves the vested interests of a powerful minority and gives it a hold over a helpless majority in the name of religion and ancient social customs. It has even been glorified by M.K. Gandhi who is reported to have said that 'caste is an integral part of Hinduism and cannot be eradicated if Hinduism is to be preserved.' The mentality of hate this creates in the lower castes in an age when the concepts of socialism, awareness about human rights and equality

and dignity of man are spreading fast, this 'helpless majority' has begun to resort to violence to overthrow this yoke. The Maoist/ Naxalite uprising in eastern India is just one case in point.

Economic Disparity and Discontent

India is a country of 1200 million population about 800 million - more than 60% - are poor, many living on the margins of life, lacking some or all of the basic necessities. Despite its emergence as Asia's third biggest economy, India has the highest illiteracy rate in the world - 70%, and the people lack adequate shelter, sanitation, clean water, nutrition, health-care and job opportunities. The groups that are mostly left behind are minorities. There is a growing concern that unless this situation is addressed, the country will be torn apart by the despair and rage of the poor sooner or later.

Indian practice of Federalism and Social Diversity

India is a federal state in which there is a division of responsibility between the federal government in New Delhi and state governments. For our purposes, it is important that the central government is responsible for national security and defence while, under most circumstances, state governments are responsible for law and order among other areas. The federal system emerged after independence as a means of managing ethnic and linguistic diversity: demands for autonomy could be more easily accommodated than in a unitary structure like that of Sri Lanka. Indian states vary dramatically in their languages, social structures, economies, and party competition, and the federal system institutionalizes these differences rather than attempting to homogenize them.

The tension also comes from the state level. A great fear of central governments is that state governments will become intimidated by or sympathetic to separatist insurgencies. In some cases, local political actors engage in processes of "outbidding" within their ethnic or religious bloc in the direction of separatist sentiment. Sometimes their goal is simply to create a new state within the Indian Union, but sometimes it is at least formally independence. The basic idea of the federal bargain is that states will retain loyalty to India even while acting with significant autonomy within it. Separatist rhetoric and positions - and connections with armed actors - can trigger centre-state conflict and tension. Local political competition within states thus can be an impetus for the Centre to become more hostile and interventionist. This combination may lead to escalation, violence, and even insurgency.

The federal system demands a careful balance between local autonomy and central authority. This balance is manageable under most circumstances, but it is most clearly threatened when dealing with linguistic and religious groups that have access to external support and that see themselves as distinctive from the Indian heartland. When these relations break down and violence erupts, the Indian state deploys large numbers of Army and Ministry of Home Affairs - especially Border Security Force (BSF) and Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) - forces to target insurgents and political dissidents. In doing so, it often side-lines local police and politicians who are seen as infiltrated or untrustworthy. Variants of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act since 1958, as well as other pieces of legislation, have created immunity for central armed forces in the Northeast and Jammu and Kashmir, contributing to human rights abuses and heavy-handed behaviour. It is possible to reclaim a stable equilibrium (as has happened in Punjab and Mizoram) but this outcome requires time and a careful combination of coercion and political bargaining that is easier suggested than done.

Centre-state Relations and Insurgent Movements

The emergence of insurgency in India is linked to the problems of centre-state relations and of relations within states between political contenders. It is also important to keep in mind India's geopolitical environment to understand insurgency specifically, as opposed simply to contentious politics, protest, or political grandstanding. India's neighbours have historically shown willingness (even eagerness) to provide guns, money, sanctuary, and training to insurgent groups, thus creating a greater opportunity for armed groups to emerge and endure. The regional context makes the periphery particularly primed for violent conflict, as does the existence of distinct social blocs and networks that define themselves in reaction to the massive Indian "mainland."

This section of the paper identifies the origins and evolutions of the major separatist insurgencies in India. Two points deserve particular emphasis. *First*, the origins of separatist conflicts have combined central misperceptions and miscalculations with debilitating local political and military competition that escalated conflict. Military counterinsurgency policies have often been poorly adapted to circumstances, though there are possibilities for learning. *Second*, there has been significant variety in the trajectories and resolution of these wars. Some have ended in formal deals, others in tacit bargains, and others through brute force, while yet other conflicts endure as low-level peripheral wars.

Discontent and Insurgency in Northeast

India's Northeast is a collection of seven states wedged between Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and China. Though the region includes only about 4% of the Indian population, it is strategically important, includes remarkable linguistic and religious diversity, and has become a site of enduring violence and conflict (as well as some changes towards peace and diminishing violence). At independence in 1947, the region consisted of the state of Assam, the princely states of Manipur and Tripura, and the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA). Manipur and Tripura became Union Territories in 1949 and then states in 1972. NEFA was part of Assam until becoming a Union Territory in 1972 and a state in 1987 as Arunachal Pradesh.

These political reorganizations over time reflect the mobilization and tensions within the Northeast, which are often intertwined. Insurgencies have occurred in contemporary Nagaland, Assam, Mizoram, Manipur, and Tripura, involving dozens of armed groups with complicated links to external states, illicit economies, and electoral politics. India's management of its north-eastern frontier has combined violence and bargaining, and has been largely ignored in mainstream politics.

Naga Insurgency:

The original insurgency that emerged in the region in the mid-1950s was by Naga political entrepreneurs who believed that they had been granted autonomy and the option to leave India at the time of partition. The Indian government did not look sympathetically at these claims. Intra- Naga violence led to the introduction of Indian combat forces and the escalation of violence into a full-fledged insurgency in the Naga areas of eastern Assam state. Naga insurgents were able to find sanctuary in neighbouring areas of Burma and, even after the creation of a Nagaland state, received support from China and Pakistan. The state's politics have spilled over into neighbouring states both through the mobilization of Naga populations in these states and through NSCN training of and support for other separatist movements. During the 1970s, negotiations between the government of India and moderate Naga factions led to greater political participation and incorporation.

Mizo Insurgency:

In the mid-1960s under the leadership of Mizo National Front (MNF), insurgency broke out. Following a famine in Mizo areas and the perception that the Assam government neglected the Mizos, the MNF violently mobilized for an independent state. Impressively organized, the MNF rapidly established significant influence and power. The Indian state responded with forced population relocations and influxes of troops. The 1971 India-Pakistan war ended the MNF's sanctuary in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and opened political space for other Mizo political forces to emerge. However, the key turning point was the decision by the MNF to directly cut a deal with Delhi, which finally occurred in 1986 and led to an MNF government taking power in the state of Mizoram. This is a case in which direct negotiation with an insurgent group paid dividends.

Assam Insurgency:

Other insurgencies in the Northeast have been driven by interethnic competition, particularly the perceived threat of massive migration from the outside or by claims on a state by members of another ethnic group. The clearest example is the rise of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) in Assam in the 1980s. Bengali migration into Assam came to be viewed as an existential threat by

Assamese “sons of the soil” (Weiner 1978). Student mobilization and riots against Bengalis migrants in the late 1970s and 1980s accompanied the rise of ULFA as a major insurgent group that became extremely powerful in large swathes of Assam. Eventually Delhi imposed President’s Rule and used the Army and MHA paramilitaries to restore order. Insurgency and counterinsurgency dominated Assam during much of the 1990s. ULFA militancy spurred reactions from minority tribal and linguistic groups within Assam, particularly among the Bodos, that proliferated both armed groups and various autonomous governance structures. The government was able to pull away some ULFA splinters and to suppress the insurgency, which draws sustenance from cross-border sanctuaries and links to other armed groups. At present, ULFA is a contained and apparently divided force, but Assam remains heavily garrisoned and has seen outbreaks of various types of inter-ethnic violence.

Manipur Insurgency:

In Manipur, an extremely complex insurgency arose from the early 1960s led by members of the Meitei ethnic group. This movement then became locked into ethnic conflict with Nagas and Kukis, with NSCN factions operating in Naga areas and Kuki armed groups growing. Communist and Muslim armed groups have also emerged (and in some cases disappeared) in the state, which remains heavily populated by a variety of insurgent organizations. The government response has combined coercion, bargaining, and amnesty offers without much overall success. Manipur remains extremely unstable and characterized by byzantine links between insurgents, politicians, crime, and the state.

Tripura Insurgency:

In Tripura, another complex insurgency emerged in backlash against influxes of migrants in the mid-1960s and then again in the early 1980s. A proliferation of armed groups has developed during the conflict, many with links to other insurgents in the Northeast and sanctuaries in Bangladesh. Rivalries between and within these groups, over politics, money, and personalities, complicate both policy and analysis. Violence in Tripura has diminished dramatically since 2000, though insurgent groups continue to operate.

Northeast reflects the difficulties of managing extraordinary diversity in areas with comparatively weak historical links to contemporary India, an international context that allows and encourages violence, and a lack of sustained political interest from the Centre. The deep political and organizational divisions within linguistic, religious, and tribal groups in the Northeast has allowed the Indian state to play games of divide-and-rule but has undermined lasting political settlements.

Punjab:

The roots of Sikh militancy in the Punjab are tightly intertwined with electoral and coalitional politics both in Punjab and in India more broadly. Sikhs were badly affected by Partition in 1947, being driven in large numbers from the Pakistani Punjab amidst intense violence. Sikhs found themselves a tiny minority in the new India. Ethno-linguistic reorganization led to the split of Haryana from Punjab, which created a Sikh majority in Punjab. The two states shared (and continue to share) Chandigarh as their capital city. Punjab was the home of a major, if often divided, Sikh political party, the Akali Dal, The Akali Dal would become a prominent opponent of Indira Gandhi during and after the Emergency, creating endemic state-centre tensions. The Green Revolution triggered economic growth in Punjab even as political instability grew in the 1970s. The Akalis were part of the coalition that opposed Indira Gandhi and that briefly supplanted her after the Emergency.

The insurgency in Punjab clearly reveals how competition within groups on the periphery intersects with centre-state relations to create unstable and dangerous political dynamics. The existence of Pakistani support, a large and mobilized diaspora, and a Sikh population with a tradition of military service all made the Sikh militancy much more potent than many other possible separatist movements and encouraged violence rather than pure political bargaining. The government response to the insurgency varied over time as both Delhi and Punjabi politicians tried to figure out whether it could be politically managed. The ultimate reliance on significant force proved effective, but came at the

price of human rights abuses. Punjab's politics have returned to normalcy, in stark contrast to most of the other conflicts studied in this chapter, in part because coalition governments at the Centre have been much less aggressive in their centralization than Indira Gandhi.

Jammu and Kashmir:

The problem of Kashmir goes back to the partition of the sub-continent. In 1947, the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), a Hindu king ruling an overwhelmingly Muslim population, took his time to decide on the accession to India or Pakistan. Pakistan taking the advantage of indecision of Maharaja Hari Singh laid its claim on the state on the grounds of its demographic composition and sent in tribal raiders, who almost reached Srinagar. It was then Maharaja hastily decided to accede to India. The Indian army then was then flown in, and it pushed back the invaders. The issue in the meanwhile was taken to the UNO and ceasefire was imposed, leaving a large area under Pakistani occupation. The virtual division of the state between India and Pakistan made Kashmir into a disputed territory and resulted in divided loyalties in the valley. However, it remains in the background till 1988. But in the mid of 1989, the violence in Kashmir came on to the surface. Since then, the strength of the insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir fluctuates. Faced with wrath of many of the Islamist Militants Groups, more than 200,000 Hindus (known as Pundits) have fled the Kashmir valley. Currently, nearly 400,000 thousand Indian Army and Para military troops are deployed in the state. The security forces are battling at least a dozen major insurgent groups of varying size and ideological orientation, as well as dozens more minor operations. The more prominent of the insurgents groups include the nominally secular, pro-independence Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) and the radical Islamic and pro Pakistani groups Hizb-ul-Mujahidin (HUM), Hezbollah, Harkat-ul-Ansar, and Ikhwanul Muslemin. The first among the insurgent groups, formed in mid-1989, calling for the merger of Kashmir with Pakistan on the basis of a common Muslim identity was the Hizbul Mujahiden. At least 15,000 to 20,000 insurgents, police, parliamentary personnel, and civilians have lost their lives since the onset of the insurgency. As of mid-1996, the insurgency appears to have reached a stalemate. Despite substantial Pakistani assistance and the involvement of several thousand Afghan *muzahidin*, the insurgents cannot prevail on the battlefield. Nor have the Indian security forces been able to crush the insurgents militarily. After Kashmir's accession to India, it was given a special status under Article 370 of the Indian Constitution. Over a period of time, New Delhi curtailed the powers and scope of Article 370 which gives J&K substantial autonomy. The present government strategies appear to be three-pronged: to apply substantial military pressure on the insurgents, to sow discord in their ranks with offers of negotiations, and to revive the political process in the state. This strategy has evolved from the government's experience of the defeating insurgents movements in the neighbouring state of Punjab and in India's north-eastern states.

J&K remains a volatile place and an enduring issue between India and Pakistan and between Kashmiris and Delhi, but the era of intense insurgency appears to be over. This outcome reflects India's military successes in containing militancy and its political failure to arrive at an acceptable political arrangement for J&K. Though political competition within J&K has contributed to fragmentation instead of a clear united front, the primary axis of contention has been between the centre and the state. It is here that Delhi has much more work to do before the state is likely to become "normalized." Building a new, stable equilibrium will require further bargaining with Pakistan and truly substantial reforms in how J&K is governed.

Left Wing Insurgency (Maoist Insurgency)

A very different type of insurgency has become a major force in a swath of India stretching from West Bengal to northern Andhra Pradesh. Rather than the separatist militancy described above, India's Maoist Naxalite guerrillas allegedly seek to capture power in India and transform it into a communist state. This movement originated in West Bengal in the late 1960s amid the tumult of leftist mobilization and feuding during that period. After being suppressed, Naxalite organizers took to interior jungles and forests and maintained their war at a much lower level. Since the early 2000s, another surge of Naxalite activity has become hugely important in much of eastern India. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has

called the Naxalites the largest internal security threat to India. The major centre-state issue in this context has been coordination of counterinsurgency efforts across different states, each with its own capabilities and political interests.

The Naxalite movement began in India in the late 1960s as a peasant struggle (in Naxalbari, West Bengal, hence the name Naxalite). It represented the revolutionary stream of Indian Marxism which did not believe that parliamentary democracy would lead to the requisite systemic change and argued for armed struggle instead. While the Indian state managed to crush the movement in the 1970s, causing an already ideologically fractured movement to splinter further (currently 34 parties by official estimates), in 2004 two of the major parties, the Communist Party of India (CPI) (Marxist-Leninist) People's War (formed out of the merger of the People's War Group with Party Unity) and the Maoist Communist Center (MCC) of India, united to form the Communist Party of India (Maoist). The CPI (Maoist) is currently a significant political force across several states, especially in rural areas where state services have been inadequate or absent. Since about 2005-6, the Maoists have become the main target of the Indian state, with thousands of paramilitary forces being poured into the areas where they are strong, and the prime minister repeatedly referring to them as India's biggest security threat. As a consequence, armed conflict is occurring across large parts of central India and is taking several hundred lives on an annual basis. In the state of Chhattisgarh, which is the epicentre of the war, sovereignty is contested over large parts of terrain.

Concluding Observations

Insurgency and counterinsurgency in India have affected the lives of millions of people. Government responses to militancy have ranged from political deal making to sustained repression. Some of these responses challenge an understanding of India as a liberal democracy. Torture, human rights abuses, extrajudicial killings, and forced population displacement have all been used, often with legal impunity. Insurgent violence has also regularly been horrific. Significant swathes of India have been ravaged by brutal warfare since independence.

Yet other responses challenge our assumptions about the state's pursuit of a monopoly of violence. India's government has sometimes simply ignored insurgent mobilization, cut tacit deals with militants, and directly bargained with them outside of the electoral process. This heterogeneity in reaction to insurgency is quite remarkable. It hints at the complexity of insurgency as a political phenomenon: different rebellions threaten different interests and worldviews, and thus attract varying responses. The ultimate success of these policies has been mixed, with success in Punjab and Mizoram, but enduring instability in J&K and other areas of the Northeast.

India's future holds in timely solving internal conflicts with taking care of marginalised people's larger interests. At one hand, the Naxalite challenge poses a serious threat to the state's reach in large areas of the interior. Though, it is clear that this insurgency will not be in the position to seize state power, it will nevertheless be able to disrupt normal economic and political life for thousands of Indian citizens and drain the resources of the state. There is a risk that inept state responses will play into the hands of the Naxalites and contribute to the endurance of the conflict. On the other hand, India's Northeast remains militarily volatile and politically unsettled, particularly Manipur and Nagaland. The Kashmir issue will haunt Indian state until it summons the political will to change how it governs the state. India's dramatic growth and democratic survival are remarkable and worthy of attention, but rebellion and coercion constitute politics in worrisomely large swathes of the country.

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