

BOOK REVIEW

Subir Bhaumik, *Insurgent Crossfire: North-East India*, Lancer Publishers Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, 1996, pp. 360.

Insurgent Crossfire: North-East India is a timely and bold intervention on the part of Subir Bhaumik to unravel the pattern behind the network of cross-border insurgencies in the triangle formed by the north eastern Indian states of Mizoram and Tripura, and the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh in South Asia. The book contends that, insurgency in this region has in each instance been sheltered, aided and nurtured, though not created by a foreign power, hence the epithet 'crossfire'. Relying on his vast and in-depth knowledge of the area, and access to sources available to him as a journalist, the author indeed has narrated in detail each of the cases in this triangle.

Divided into ten chapters the book has an historical as well as a contemporary flair to it. The first chapter dwells on the origins of insurgency, and its use in the Indian tradition as a mode of diplomacy. As to its present prevalence in the region, the author holds the process of decolonization responsible for it, which, according to him, had unleashed violent forces in the subcontinent and resulted in the creation of nation-states whose political boundaries did not match the ethnic boundaries. Consequently both India and Pakistan - the two emerging states - contained dissatisfied population. The dynamics of decolonization created a situation whereby the two post-colonial states found each other as arch rivals; the stage, therefore, was set for crossfire insurgency.

This according to Bhaumik has emerged as the distinct pattern of diplomacy in South Asia.

The second chapter takes up the Kashmir, East Pakistan and Tibet issues as cases of insurgencies that had eventually erupted into 'little wars'. Behind these eruptions, in each instance the author demonstrates the active involvement and interests of the regional powers - India, Pakistan and China - as well as extra-regional power like the USA. It puts into focus the 'power politics' of the states concerned which enables the insurgents to turn the situation to their advantage.

The subsequent two chapters detail the background of revolt. It is evident from chapter three that the 'tribes' inhabiting this region had developed a fairly stable and independent political system of their own which was different from the other parts of India. They had also built an elaborate military edifice which allowed them to retain their independence and distinctiveness in the face of repeated onslaughts by the foreign powers entering the subcontinent. However, after several military expeditions the British were able to subjugate them. But they gave recognition to the distinctiveness of the 'tribes'. The region continued to be ruled by its own chiefs and its administrative system was different from the rest of India. This isolation did not allow the 'tribes' to incorporate themselves with the nationalist fervor engulfing India.

Chapter four accounts for the dynamics and processes of the modern nation-state, policies of nation-building as pursued by the national leaders and their conflict with the 'tribal' interests and identity. This finally led to the alienation of the 'tribes' from the political systems into which they were incorporated. Though each of the tribal groups—the Nagas, Mizos, Tripuras and the Hill people of CHT - had their own dynamics of alienation, yet a common pattern could be discerned. In each instance land alienation through demographic invasion or reservation of forests

for commercial exploitation by the government constituted the major issue of contention between the 'tribals' and the central government.

Chapters five to eight constitute the heart of the book. Each chapter takes up a detailed and fascinating account of the individual cases of insurgency in this triangle. It brings into sharp focus the factors leading to the present state of affairs; the politicization and manipulation of the issues by the local and national leaders, the ideological and political differences and divisions between and within the insurgents; and above all, the level and extent of foreign involvement in each instance. Here indeed one has to give credit to the author for making available information that is otherwise denied to the general public.

In chapter nine Bhaumik quite pointedly sets the inadequacies and shortsightedness of our national leaders into focus. He suggests that the failure of our national leaders to take into cognizance our traditions and history of accommodation and autonomy; and instead the adoption of policies of centralization, has led to the present situation. To make matters worse, instead of making amends these leaders put the blame squarely on foreign powers. The author has rightly argued that a foreign power can only nurture a movement but cannot create it; the blame for it, therefore, lies with our policies of centralization and nation-building.

The Postscript leaves us with the somber note that despite changes in the systemic and subsystemic levels crossfire insurgency may never go away. This somber note on the part of the author raises several questions which the book leaves unanswered, which along with a few other issues constitute the weakness of this study.

One can begin by raising the moral question as to how far, and if at all, the national leaders were justified to adopt the policies

of nation-building in the context of these 'tribes'. Then one can move on to the political question of who or what constituted the 'nation' for the leaders; whose interests did they serve and so on. It is evident from the analyses that the land, not the people inhabiting it, has been consequential for the national leaders; the latter gaining salience only during the time of national elections as vote banks. This is evident by the manipulation of local politics in Mizoram and Tripura by the Congress and the Communist party leaders and their support for the Chakma refugees. This point (to take one instance) was most starkly made by Sheikh Mujib's one and only visit to Rangamati in 1973 on the eve of national elections. This indeed demonstrates the total moral bankruptcy of our political system wherein minorities become mere numbers. This bankruptcy is evident in our inter-state diplomacy as well, the prime characteristics of which the author has aptly described as 'deniability, double-speak and deterrence.'

The author's approach is not a holistic one. One is left to wonder about the social reality of the region as to where do the South Asian people or more specifically the ordinary tribal fits in this entire matrix. What is her/his role, opinion or aspirations in this situation. For instance, in the context of CHT it is too simplistic and flawed to suggest that a new Jumma nationalism emerged in the late 1960s (p. 247). Jumma nationalism, on the contrary, is a construction of the PCJSS that has gained currency only in the 1980s, and serious differences exist among the different ethnic groups in the CHT about the appropriateness of this term. Bhaumik is also silent on the role or opinion of the general Indian population or for that matter, of the Bengalis in Bangladesh. It is important to take into account the latter's views for the allegations of deprivation of the tribals and the consequent benefit of the other group, as asserted by the tribals and portrayed by the author can only make sense if the social reality of the latter too is depicted. In other words Bhaumik has narrated to us a parceled, elitist and political account of the events.

A major flaw of the book indeed is its lack of any central argument as to what gives rise to insurgency. The author seems more interested in events following insurgency rather than the ones leading to it. Insurgency as it is well known today is a major problem. Bhaumik himself has conceded that it will not go away, yet surprisingly enough he has not attempted to dwell on its origins, i.e., what factors lead national leaders to disregard their own historical traditions and adopt policies of centralization; is it the fault of the leader or the system? In other words, there are empirical evidences but no theoretical contention.

The utility of the book is further limited by the fact that it has not attempted to make any recommendations as to what is the way out for South Asia. It is quite easy to suggest that the problem exists and will remain so; the onus of the researcher or academician, however, lies in showing (or at least attempting to show) the people the road beyond.

Amena Mohsin

Department of International Relations
University of Dhaka

P. R. Chari, *Indo-Pak Nuclear Standoff : The Role of the United States*, Manohar Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi, 1995, pp.1-256, Price Rs.395

As the century ends, a nuclear specter haunts South Asia more apparently than the 1970s when both India and Pakistan were caught up in a 'latent' nuclear arms race. Recently with the deconstruction of the Soviet Union, the fear of nuclear proliferation has become far more reality than ever before. A strong wind of overt nuclearisation has been blowing in South