

Revisiting our approach, lest we lose the advantage!

Conflicts in the Northeast region have a history of complex characteristics ranging from secession to autonomy, from ethnic clashes to sponsored terrorism, and from illegal migration to a deep-seated sense of deprivation amidst sub-regional stratifications.

Given the region's historical legacies, there have been a series of border disputes emerging from people's ethnic, cultural and tribal identities. There have also been multiple intrusions in varying modes from across the border, given the existent geopolitical situations.

Yet, over a period of time, all possible efforts have been made to bring in peace and successfully integrate these areas into the national mainstream. These include political efforts, diplomatic strokes, armed interventions by security forces, and administrative initiatives for overall development through participative and collaborative efforts.

This journey has witnessed several upheavals and catastrophic setbacks in terms of violence and fracturing of the human terrain on one side and exploitative and corruption-ridden parallel regimes on the other. This has also paved the way for trafficking of drugs, arms, and human beings.

Several task forces and active groups have been formed over the years to usher in a higher level of confluence. There have been efforts to neutralise extremists and enter into ceasefire agreements, and simultaneously work on the developmental aspects of the area through special schemes. Mobility and communication issues have been addressed to improve ease of living.

However, we have still not reached the stage of an optimal solution. Security personnel and civilians have had to sacrifice lives in considerable numbers in these low intensity conflict zones due to hostile undercurrents.

Not going deeper into the intricacies of the transitional facets, it will suffice to say that the states like Assam, Manipur and Nagaland have come a long way from the security angle despite having witnessed much violence, torture and torment in the past. The credit for this goes to security forces, developmental agencies, the people and their representatives.

The list of areas declared as disturbed area and where the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) was enforced has narrowed down over time.

However, the recent incident in Mon district of Nagaland on December 4 where 14 civilians were reportedly killed in two separate incidents has thrown open several worrisome questions before us.

From the security perspective and as conscientious citizens, we need to honestly deliberate on the dynamics of the operational environment, necessary capacity building of the forces, applicability of various tools in our kit, and core responses of various agencies.

Operational intricacies may demand special powers to be given to security forces but that needs to be used within the framework of law, i.e., minimum essential use, and least fatal methodologies, that too only to the extent required at a given point of time.

Forces that have been so empowered need to show deliberated wisdom, keeping in view the possibilities of collateral damage, mistaken identity and so on, amidst extreme options that are irreversible.

Each such case calls for a careful audit since nothing can remain mute in a civilised society even during abnormal situations. Accountability and transparency are essential. There is no scope for error in the name of impunity.

Whereas a professional force should conduct internal enquiry to ensure its own fitness, an independent agency should be tasked to bring out the facts in the most unbiased manner. This is an intrinsic feature of a cultured setup.

Law provides for all types of options in self-defence, given the level of conflicts and the bona fide responses expected within the framework of democratic values or rule of law. Operational situations too need to be differentiated from law and order situations where a process of mediation can prove to be more effective.

In the present times of advancing technologies, with better data analysis and intelligence tools, we need to shift from the traditional chemo-approach to a well-calibrated cleansing. We must make suo motto disclosures lest we lose our credibility and generate a negative influence in the minds of people, which will result in a greater loss to the nation as a whole.

Leadership issues at each level are, therefore, significant. We must not forget that the right of immunity comes with a huge responsibility, else the line of difference between the terror sponsored by private

players and the security response evolved by a responsible state shall dissipate and dissolve for the worse. A state cannot use the right to be silent in a democratic setup that we are committed to nurture and safeguard.

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