

## Revisiting the Reign of Political Violence and the Demand for Autonomy in Garo Hills

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### ABSTRACT

The violent militancy in Garo Hills for now has been successfully quelled by the Indian State. The beauty of the state as the name suggests 'abode of clouds' was once in a terrifying and devastating condition for a long span of time. Even in ones wildest dreams the end of militancy seemed impossible, due to the uncountable and hazardous events that took place over the past years. The amount of violence the militants have caused, the time and efforts spend during the planning and plotting against the Indian State, if only it was utilized appropriately and in the right direction today Meghalaya could have been in a much better position. If only the tussle was focused towards the achievement of some positive outcome and not just an additional way to make effortless riches. The mushrooming of militancy in Meghalaya has been a nonstop event ever since the first group was created. This short sighted group of people could not understand that tormenting its own people or fighting against the state for a false cause would only bring an end to their existence. Several state actors and non state actors fought for the same cause, but they chose to fight it legally unlike the militants. The Central and the State Authorities should have taken them seriously from the very start and not neglected their barbaric conducts. Why could they not be tamed when there was time, who funds the terror? The questions still remain unanswerable. But their existent for over two decades shows how the government has been negligent. Even though it took time but at the end it was able to suppress the movement and now Meghalaya is free from such evils but in order to stop them from regaining back to power the Indian State has to take several measures.

**Key Words :** Ethnic dispute, State autonomy, State resources, Inter-Tribe violence, Political marginalisation

### INTRODUCTION

#### Emergence of Militancy:

In the late 1980s insurgency had taken the shape of the first tribal group in Meghalaya known as the HALC (Hynniewtrep Achik Liberation Council) due to the inter-tribal competition and the common conflict, which was not in favour of the outsiders and thus this insurgent group took place and this group represented all the tribal's, but the unity did not last and it split into two different groups namely the HNLC which represented the Khasi and Syntheng and the ANVC (Achik National Volunteer Council) established as the first Garo dominated insurgent outfit. Haokip (2013) on how fast there is a shift in the relation between the outfits like from brotherhood to being

bitter enemies. The non-tribal issues was calmer and it shifted to a further more complicated subject like the indigenous tribal tension between the Khasi on one side and the Garo's on the other. ANVC was confirmed as an illegal organization on 16th November, 2000 under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, 1967 but it signed a 'tripartite suspension of operation' with the central and the state government following the splinter group from ANVC and also the ANVC-B signed the peace tripartite agreement with the government and dismissed its actions. The termination ceremony of the two outfits namely the ANVC and the ANVC-B, was held at the 'Dikki-Bandi' stadium in the presence of the chief minister Dr. Mukul Sangma, at dakopgre Tura (Sharma, 2016).

Where the chairpersons of both the outfits gave up

their arms and signed the statement of dismissal and with the realisation that for the past two decades there has been a huge loss of life and property and how they have destroyed the charm of Garo Hills. Meghalaya and most of the other parts of North East have suffered much, due to the insurgency groups and they have cited 'underdevelopment and inequality' for them to take up arms while they had major support from the indigenous tribes, and how the central and the state government have been patient towards them with their immature demands keeping the innocent lives as the ransom (Lim, 2018). The insurgent groups have mainly been supported by ULFA, NDFB, NSCN (IM) hence the insurgent activities such as extortion, killing, gun running, bomb explosions, etc. have been taking place mostly around the Garo Hills areas since the past two decades, and this insurgent groups have been using Garo Hills as a corridor for sneaking in and out of Bangladesh and taking advantage because of the vast geographical factor and remoteness of the area (Cause of insurgency and its impact on the security environment of northeast, n.d.).

But over the years due to the tough counter-insurgency and deterioration the outfits got weaker and since July 2004, The ANVC has linked up with the NSCN-IM for financing by targeting the coal belt areas of the West Khasi Hills and the East Garo Hills. While the leaders of the HNLC operating from Bangladesh has denied negotiating with peace treaties many of it cadres have surrendered, but sooner or later this outfit had to end and on 2007 the chairman along with four members surrendered themselves to the authorities in Shillong.

Ever since the chairman Julius Dorphang surrendered the outfit got weak and eventually joined hands with the NLFT (National Liberation Front of Tripura) and continued its extortion activity in the West Khasi Hills. Since the peace agreement signed between the ANVC and the government of India there has been peace prevalent in the Garo Hills but not for long since there are small outfits which come and go but in 2006 a new outfit came into being the LAEF (Liberation Achik Elite Force) formed by a former police commando, Peter Marak. It had its linkage with the NSCN-K (National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Khaplang) and the ULFA (The United Liberation Front of Assam) which created havoc in Garo Hills for a short period of time because the police operation was successful in arresting the chairman of LAEF along with his two collaborators.

LAEF has seen a major rough phase with its

commander-in-chief being shot in an encounter and nine of its senior cadres being arrested on 2008 and by the between the period of 1992 to 2009 there has been 383 insurgency related victims which was recorded in Meghalaya. But this has been showing a decline trend since 2003. The chief minister of Meghalaya, Dr. Mukul Sangma has strictly requested the apex court to put an urgent ban on the Bangladesh border, because it's the border which is the main reason the militants get to escape in and out of the country, taking advantage of the dense geographical area and the backwardness of the Garo Hills area. She further argued, bringing AFSPA to tackle the problems of insurgent groups will further worsen the situation without underestimating the threat this Special Forces bring to the women and common civilians, and hence the Meghalaya high court should further keep a track of the abuses by the Special Forces, in the state where they are active (Mukhim, 2015).

The GNLA (Garo National Liberation Army) was formed by the former DSP Meghalaya, Pakchara R. Sangma also popularly known as Champion R. Sangma and the chief commander to lead this group was Sohan D. Shira and he is the former region commander for the East Garo Hills. This outfit built in 2009 is involved in many activities such as murder, extortion from the coal belts and even the local businessmen, gun running and so on and these activities are being carried mainly in the three districts of Garo Hills. Sohan D. Shira the area commander of ANVC who was supposed to surrender himself in 2007. According to the sources, there was a twist in the surrender of Sohan Shira in 2007 as he was planning to join another outfit the LAEF but just after three days before they were planning on to meet in Guwahati the commander in chief Peter Marak was shot at Samanda (Sharma, 2016).

The police established that after separation from the ANVC camp Sohan exchanged three pistols and other weapons with the LAEF for money and they even confirmed that Sohan had joined the outfit LAEF, but the government had no accurate information on this and hence the family members of Sohan Shira were put under pressure in order for him to surrender. He then on 2010 along with his fellow companion formed the GNLA and since then it has been crucial for both the state and the central to have a talk with them on the peace matters regarding their activities in Garo Hills. However, Sohan was arrested in 2012 and he did not appoint anyone as the new chairman, under his guidance it has been difficult

to reduce the effect the outfit (The Shillong Times, 2015).

Outfits such as the khasi-jaintia based group, NDFB in Bodoland and other such groups have mostly surrendered and negotiated with the central government, but GNLA has not shown any interest in negotiating nor in surrendering. The government has not been able to tame them. The main goal of their fight is for a “Sovereign Garo Land” in the western areas of Meghalaya (SATP, 2001). The Indian government acknowledged GNLA as a group of criminals on 2010, since its formation it has been involved in numerous insurgent activities such as killing, abduction, attacks on the security forces, bomb blast, gun supply to other insurgent outfits etc. The former superintendent of police Meghalaya, Pakchara R. Sangma also known as Champion Sangma who deserted his post in order to form GNLA along with Sohan D. Shira, who was the former area commander for the East Garo Hills district, has now been appointed as the commander-in-chief for the outfit. Since, then the group has not rested, it has been quite a headache for the government (The Shillong Times, 2015).

#### **People’s Perception towards Militancy:**

The most disturbed outfit with the most unique ways of torturing the civilians. The story of ‘Demand Note’ from being served to just the businessmen, coal belt areas to it being served to the God serving people. The demand note served by GNLA to ‘St. Claret Mission’ Ampati was plainly denied by the father mission organization in Tura stating that no ransom money would be paid to ‘anti-social’ outfits working for the interest of them in the name of Garoland. According to the sources, the demand was mainly due to the fact that the insurgent group noticed that some of the missionaries were using the Garo Hills resources for their own benefit, which was later confirmed by the missionaries that it was a false claim by them. The missionaries filed a complaint against the ransom and also submitted the report to the deputy commissioner under the south west Garo Hills district (The Shillong Times, 2013).

Such incidents took place with the cordial help of the mischievous man himself Mr. Champion Sangma who was the founder of the militant outfit GNLA. But was soon arrested in the year 2014 from a remote village Umkrem Pyrwdiwah in Khasi Hills (Meghalaya). This man has been the mastermind for many anti-social activities such as extortion, killing and such and with his arrest the people of Garo Hills are hoping for bright and

fruitful changes in the future (Frontiertvindia, 2012). Regarding the situations Mr. Lyngdoh in 2014 stated that the conditions of Meghalaya went from being “bad to worst” because the state government neglected the growth of small outfit in its starting phase but now they are facing the consequences of their negligence because this small outfit has turned into a short sighted group which now plays the part of Lucifer on destroying the peace of the people.

After being captured Pakchara Sangma (champion) allegedly tried to defame then chief minister Dr Mukul Sangma. Claiming to support him during elections along with his other members and to fund terror on the orders of the chief minister. Later the allegations were turned down by Dr. Sangma himself (Lim, 2018). In spite of all these allegations Dr Mukul Sangma the chief minister of Meghalaya has still decided to give a chance to the militants as one-time peace settlement because we are all very much aware of how the situations have gotten worst due to their insurgent activities, which somehow has to stop in order to maintain peace, expansion and development in the state. Therefore, to carry out the peace talk with the insurgents the state government has shortlisted some interlocutors to have conversations with the GNLA. But having this peace offering means that they cannot engage in any insurgency activities after the negotiations (Firstpost, 2014).

#### **Problems in Peace Building Process and Counter Insurgency :**

From the past events and experience that in most of the backward region a spark is all they need to start of a chain full of reactions of events in the tribal minefield to commence fights, killings, abductions, and paralyze the particular region or the state (The Hoot, 2015). The state of Meghalaya as compared to the other neighbouring states is less volatile but it is still not free from militancy, which shows that even though the destruction is lesser than any other state there may be high possibility of the situation getting worse at any point of time. There is nothing called calmer or better because here the question is things getting better or worse? Are we going on the right direction or wrong? These questions may seem very easy to ask but on the other hand it’s very difficult to reply and who is to blame, the nasty situations which turn a simple sober man to a criminal headed leader of insurgent group, or the so called politicians heading the topmost seats of the governmental institutions.

By the time someone is actually answerable for the ongoing crisis that the particular region is facing, it will be too late. For one small fire at a time may cause to burn a hundreds and thousands of houses, if the fire is fuelled and not stopped at the right time. In the similar way if a situation or crisis is not solved instantly or within a particular span of time it will lead to a major obstacle which will only bring destruction to the region leading to mass sufferings (Rothman, 2018). The problems of militancy, fight amongst the brotherly tribes caused the demand of the bifurcation of the state. Meghalaya serves as a home for not only the khasi and garo but also to several other tribal and non-tribal populations. But the problem lies mostly in the Garo Hills region. The spectre of unemployed youths of Garo Hills are much more than compared to the khasi hills and who is to blame for such a huge difference. The situation here is when a majority is in power the other groups who are by little outnumbered feel insecure and hence starts revolting against the larger group due to several reasons. This can be on the bases of availability or scarcity of resources or any other social and economic situations because they are not happy with the division and hence the outcome is revolution.

Bifurcation of state mostly takes place due to many reasons but according to researches two main reasons can be highlighted, these are the lingo-cultural identity crisis and underdevelopment. If we look at the reasons of insurgency in most of the north eastern states its mostly due to this two reasons that even today people are losing their lives demanding for either cultural identity or underdevelopment. When we talk about identity crisis we mean politics of identity which is basically a phenomenon which leads to a movement of protest against injustice done to the various communities and the reason can be many such as racial, gender, ethnic identity etc. (Brass, 1999). From the basic observation, survey or even understanding has come forward with two main reasons for the bifurcation of the state that is first being the implementation of the reservation bill of 1971 and the following reason being the shift and reorganization of the Meghalaya Board of School Education (MBOSE) at first with its head quarter being Tura and being shifted to Shillong in 2005 with the special demand of the Khasi Student Union (KSU). It was indeed a dooms day for the Garo people as they wept for losing the status of having one important centre of administration in the Hills. Ever since the outlook of the people changed as now they wanted some sort of compensation to be made for

the lost pride and the demand of the separate statehood even grew stronger (Nayak and Singha, 2013). Just three organizations in a very little span of time it grew to 22 new outfits. The rebellious outfits grew more and even stronger with the passage of time and the state trying to quell them seemed even more complex (Thyriniang, 2014).

In one of the articles with the title 'Garo Hills sinks into lawlessness' wrote that the chief ministers have come mostly from this particular region of Garo Hills, that is out of 11 chief ministers, state has ever have or had 4 of them are from this region and that it has ruled the state for 11 times out of 25 times and further writes on how the CM's from Garo Hills have governed the state of Meghalaya for roughly 24 years out of the 44 years. With the strong points she puts forward the idea on how not just the CM's but the public representatives in the form of MP's and MLA's have neglected the development in the region and have only personally benefited on the expenses of the constituency they correspond to. It is not the external factors to be blamed but the internal for the lack of development in the region, unemployed youths, backwardness and all other factors leading to the demand of a separate statehood (Mukhim, 2014). The struggle of the common man seemed not much of a trouble to the elite position holders of the state. GlobalSecurity (n.d.) gives us information on how this organization which is the most dreadful insurgency group so far, which has caused a mess in the society, created a sense of terror amongst the civilians and has compelled some of them to leave the region due to the numerous live threats they have received.

Nonetheless, the Indian state took some major initiative in solving the crisis of militancy in the state by counter insurgency operations in the state not just this to keep a check on the violence and insurgency groups. 79 coys of central armed police force (CAPF's) and 6 terms of COBRA have been supplemented to the state government and also gave the information on GNLA's commander in chief's willingness to come forward for a talk with the condition of release of Champion Sangma. But however got disappointed with the delay of response from the government on the demand of peace talk and announced that they were ready to take up arms again. This series of events has been continuing until 2016 (Northeastnews, 2014).

The militant outfit (GNLA) led by champion Sangma decided to negotiate and showed the willingness to come

forward and talk in the month of February 2016 and with some recovery of 66 IED's planted by the outfit in the East Garo Hills in the same month of negotiation raised several questions on the GNLA wanting to have a peace talk with the State Government. By now the Indian State has left with two options either negotiation or to quit the outfit for the sake of bringing back the region to a calmer state (Sharma, 2016). Militants causing destruction in the state can be understood it can be out of many reasons but causing terror for the demand of a separate statehood could have seen a positive demand only if it did not include arms. Based on ethnicity, linguistic grounds and preservation of identity the three major tribes of the present day Meghalaya, put forward the demand for a separate statehood and which was carved out of Assam on the 21st January 1972, and was made into a fully fledged state. This beautiful state as stated by (Nongkynrih, 2013) shares its border with Assam on the north and Bangladesh on the south.

The demand for a separate autonomy that is 'Garo Land' can be seen as a requirement of not just one or two groups but the claim of several socio-political organizations on behalf of those local people of Garo Hills, who have felt much neglected in the state out of many stated and non stated reasons, cries out for a new Garo Land to be carved out of Meghalaya itself. This fight was not just the solo fight of the militant outfits as they carried their personal vendetta behind it. One such regional party which dedicated its political existence was the Garo National Council, founded by Clifford Marak. The demand the fight of this regional party was different from that of the guerrilla outfits ("Garo National Council," n.d.)

In the name of separate land extortion, murdering, kidnapping, onset attacks etc were just few of the namely activities which was constantly taking place in the Garo Hills region of Meghalaya. Karmakar (2015) wrote an article on the 'art of extortion' an ongoing process in the state of Meghalaya. Extortion is of two types (Lindgren, n.d.) the first type of extortion is the use of threat or fear and the second one is in the form of a person acting as if he or she is an employee of a government unit, but an unauthorised one. Coercive extortion is often referred to as 'blackmail' and also where there is the flow of hush money. Continuing to the extortion in Meghalaya according to the Meghalaya police record, in between the period of June 2013 to June 2014, 175 people were abducted which means an abduction in every two days

which is pretty intense. Extortion is an art, word weary militants in Meghalaya seems to convey. First the attack on the Christian missionary and now the letter was served to the Ramakrishna Mission School and orphanage located in Kuralbanga, West Garo Hills District. Whatever may be the reason for this militancy to come forward, it yet failed to keep up with its goal, a false dream of achieving greater heights of a separate land for the people of Garo Hills. But one such person who solely fought the same battle started by our great statesman Sonaram Sangma and Clifford Marak who till their last breath was constant with their battle, a dream which was shown by him but now followed by others.

Clearly we can see that with the passage of time the situation of Garo Hills is getting worst, it was not long ago when the centre have declared the situation of Meghalaya to be unstable and in the most awful position. It has also mentioned about its inability to tackle the militant outfit which is a shame to the state administration that is solely responsible for all the miss happenings in the state. According to the "Union Ministry of Home Affairs" (Lyngdoh, 2014).

The state actors, non state actors are both responsible for the mishappenings going on in the region, and the mass which is seem to go crazy and feel nothing but helpless is because no one is ready to take the initiative to stop the mushrooming of the ongoing militancy (Mavelil, 2014). The MLA Ms Deborah Marak on being accused and had a charge sheet filed against her for the reason behind the secretive support and having connection with the leader of GNLA for taking their help during the previous Assembly election. Even though the administration had evidence against her and the outfit, it still would not do anything. Now the question arises had it been a normal citizen done this, he or she would have been behind the bars. But since she is the representative and hold power no one could do anything to her. It's sad to see how the representatives we elect turn out to play such demonic roles in the society, this was a true example of "Politician- Militancy Nexus" at the end money and power is all that mattered (Mukhim, 2014).

There are politicians so corrupt and resort to gain the help and support of the guerrilla outfit to win elections or to create a sense of terror in the hearts of the citizens and to make their rivals life tougher, and at the same time there are politicians who are humble enough to not just think of their people but also for the whole of North East region. The Former MP of Tura constituency and

also the Former Lok Sabha Speaker, Purno Sangma stated his clear intention on having smaller states. Not just this but Mr Sangma also had plans for the entire NE region, to have a Great Federation of the NE tribes with each tribe's representatives as being proposed in the sixth schedule of the constitution. According to him the only way to give recognition to all the tribes of north east was to the creation of North East Commission similar that of the European commission on the line of European parliament. This is how a small step would add up to a bigger goal (PTI, 2014).

The elite group of people always have a say even if it's for their own benefit. Dr Mukul Sangma and the Meghalaya assembly however were against and showed his utter disagreement regarding the spilt of a separate land. With a clear message of no such entertainment (The Sangai Express, 2014).

With the denial of the proposal came protest and never ending problems. (SP News Agency, 2017) there was a rally which was held at the Chandmary playground situated in Tura, the district head quarter of West Garo Hills Meghalaya. This rally was organised by the Garo Hills State Movement Committee (GHSMC) and the sole motive was the demand of a separate Garo land. The rally was a success as it was not only participated by group of men and women but also by the old aged people. The demand was clear and as before the rally had met, the GHSMC had met many union ministers and also submitted the memorandum to the Prime Minister of India Mr. Narendra Modi with a humble request of seeing through the demand of the people of Garo Hills. With the success of one step taken forward towards achieving a bigger dream has also brought very surprising news, which must have taken everyone in the state with a storm.

They had the time and a way out of this mess they did not considered any of the options the only thing they wanted to do was resort to violence. The state as well as the central government gave them a chance to come up and negotiate, but all they wanted to do was create more problems. They say with great powers comes greater responsibilities, in the case of GNLA it was the opposite, they had destroyed enough, took the lives of the innocent, extorted money for the betterment of the garo land but ended up using it for their own personal interest and finally one day it had to end somewhere. Garo Hills trying hard to turn itself somewhat to Manipur, due to the multiplying of militant groups which instead of decreasing kept on increasing as the months passed, the situation of Garo

Hills is seemed to be turning soon to a civil war zone like situation with the police armed forces taking on oath to gun down half a dozen of militants and with Christmas around the corner, how can one celebrate such a peaceful festival with so much of hatred in the atmosphere. There is no easy solution to any problem but if we try may be its possible we can find one, it's not easy to end militancy until and unless we do not find its roots from where it started and why it's started for one to celebrate any festival be it Christmas or dussehra, there has to be positivity and with so much of negativity around one cannot meaningfully celebrate it (Thyriniang, 2013).

### **Conclusion:**

The series of the birth of insurgency in the state of Meghalaya has seen to be taken from the less volatile state, to the most dreadful form. Insurgency could not have gotten worst with the declaration of GNLA as a terrorist outfit by the central government; it was a huge pressure on both the state administration and the Meghalaya police department to find ways to tackle the growing crisis. Meghalaya Government launched an "operation hill storm" on 2014, finally in 2017 after three months of hard work and dedication they were successful enough in dismantling the four camps of the GNLA and also the hideouts of the ULFA too. Trying hard to restore back the lost peace in the region and also to disrupt the so called comfortable zone of the outfits to a discomfort one. Amongst the four camps, one of them was the camp of chief commander of GNLA Sohan Shira, which was also the main camps, which were used for training purpose of the newly joined cadres and all (Meghalaya Times, 2017).

Apart from the operation being held, many arrests also took place and 25 militants were arrested belonging to three different outfits, few weapons and 220 ammunitions, an approx of five rocket launcher shells were also discovered from the place of arrest. It was easy for some of the main leaders to flee because of their familiarities of the Durama jungles in the West Garo Hills region. They have been fleeing but how far will they go sooner or later either they will be caught and killed or they may just surrender. In the past years this has been the routine, they do not want to negotiate and live in harmony, all they want to do is create a sense of permanent fear in the minds of people, but little did they know violence will only bring destruction. In the name of achieving a bigger collective dream, they have destroyed

the charm of Garo Hills.

The surrender of the members of the GNLA outfit seems to bring peace in the hearts and minds of the people of Meghalaya, as well as contented news of militancy coming to an end with this last outfit which was considered to be one of the most notorious outfits Meghalaya has seen since its formation (Meghalaya News, 2018). It is the end of GNLA, with its former region commander Sohan Shira dead the outfit lost all hope. His end brought about the news of peace which everyone has been eagerly waiting for years. Nothing could have been better; it's like the old jackfruit tree that has started bearing fruits again. Along with his dead came the surrender of eight other cadres and this decision of surrender to shun violence was welcomed by Mukul Sangma and the troubled youths were handed over to the church and respective police department (The Shillong Times, 2018).

Karma gets you back no matter what, and this is what has happened to the commander in chief of the GNLA. The most wanted declared terrorist was finally found, but he was not spared. The gun shot took away his life during the operation, and along came the victory. His dead brought the news of peace, positivity and happiness to the whole of Meghalaya. May be now Garo Hills can try to build itself without the help of cowards who took away the lives of innocent people, who only destroyed the charm of the beautiful region. The untameable once were now tamed for life, the state administration has put affords to destroy the outfit and in the end all their efforts showed positive results. The GNLA with a history of carrying forward violent activities, murders, extortion was put to an end. Now with the founder in jail and their leader dead, how will the cadres work? Sooner or later they will have to give up (Uriah, 2018).

Without their leader to give them shelter, the cadres were lost and finally the remaining eight cadres surrendered near Williamnagar in the East Garo Hills region. With the following statement of the newly inducted Home Minister James Sangma, beginning of the end of militancy, the torture faced by all is it the state or the people were seen to be becoming invisible now. What a joyous and a proud day for Meghalaya, the sufferings at the end seem worth it. With a new beginning of the end of militancy, it is not far that all the regions would again become a cheerful region without interference in the economy or the development process (Scrolls, 2018). His dead brought the beginning of the end of militancy. The

struggle was finally seemed to be progressing; now the people could have lived their life normally without having to live in the state of fear, due to the insurgents which prevailed in the state for a long time. Insurgency may seem to be vanishing from the state, but the demand for the separate statehood still exists in the hearts and minds of the people. The demand for a smaller statehood is still going strong but with the help and support of the elders of the society and also the movement is being supported by most of the MP's and MLA's of the region, this fight is now a communal fight. The only difference is that the fight carries dignity and no criminal activity. With a hope in our hearts, of getting declared as a separate statehood, on the basis of our indigenous identity and being accepted in a larger scale the fight continuous for a better cause and also for the brighter future of all the people of Garo Hills. May be one fine day we will wake up to see a separate Garo Land.

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