



NIAS Conflict Brief

India's Internal Conflicts: Six Issues

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The internal conflicts in India, in their multiple forms and shades, pose serious threats to the social and political cohesion. Often seen through the prism of a security framework, the internal conflicts have not received the desired attention for effective resolution. This policy document highlights the criticalities involved in six major internal conflicts in India. In this process, set policy recommendations are also offered for effective address of the internal conflicts in India.

Often confused with internal security, India's internal conflicts have been either overlooked or inadequately addressed. The socio-political nature of the internal conflicts poses a serious threat to the social cohesion and secular fabric of the Indian state. However, contrary to the popular understanding, they pose very little threat to the conventional security of the state. The Conflict Resolution and Peace Research (CRPR) program at the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS) in its long engagement with the internal conflicts tries to reflect upon three critical issues in India-tribal and marginalized people's movements for their rights and entitlements, ethnic conflicts in the Northeastern states, and the communal tensions. The immediacy of these conflicts demands attention for effective management and subsequent resolution. Engaging with the following questions offers important insights in resolving these internal conflicts.

How do we identify the issues and the stakeholders involved in each of these conflicts without grappling with distorted sentiments and unrealistic issues? How do we work out a comprehensive strategy involving the stakeholders and the society to resolve these conflicts?

1. The working of Indian Democracy and Successive Governments

Contrary to the popular notion, India's experiment with democracy can be viewed as partially successful. The partial success is mainly in form of routine elections and transfer of power and robust political stability. However, qualified political success has not been able to ensure complete social stability and cohesion. Contrary to Ambedkar's ideas of primacy of social, Indian experience with democracy is often reduced to successful electoral politics. In this process, the internal conflicts are either overlooked, inadequately addressed, or engaged through the security issues. For example, the sustained movements by the tribal demanding their rights and entitlements are often seen through the prism of Maoist conflict; ethnic conflicts in the Northeastern states with militancy; and the communal riots with terrorism and

radicalization. Accordingly, the state response towards these internal conflicts has been in terms of minimizing the threat perceptions to the state security rather than focusing on the real issues to reduce the risk of conflict.

Indifference and inability of the successive governments in identifying the real issues and the stakeholders involved have only consolidated the internal conflicts. These conflicts have substantially contributed to extreme polarization among various communities. Such polarization among various communities can be attributed to growing inequalities (social, political, and economic) induced by the indifference of the government towards the legitimate demands of people, deprivation, and alienation from their resources, and a growing sense of ethnocentrism. Sustenance of the internal conflicts also witnesses episodic violence in multiple forms. These conflicts not only reflect on the poor democracy in India but also highlight the Faultline between the communities and lack of social cohesion.

2. Long standing grievances

The internal conflicts are a result of long-standing indifference towards certain issues and genuine grievances of the various sections of the population. The movements by the tribal and other marginalized groups in different states in Central and East India can be attributed to deprivation of rights over land, forest (products), and water resources, popularly known as the fight for jal, jamin and jungle. The sense of deprivation among the tribal and other marginalized groups has only been escalating as India's pursuit for development (read modernization and economic development) keeps extracting resources from these areas without making them a part of the decision-making process or the beneficiary of fruits of development.

Various people's movements led by these deprived sections of the population, unfortunately, are often seen through the prism of the Maoist conflict. The presence of the Maoists in and around the tribal majority areas in Eastern and Central India has further complicated the lives of the marginalized. The demands of the local people concerning their survival are now conceived as a security threat by successive Governments. On the other hand, the out-lawed Maoists also make all possible attempts to garner the support of the local population to claim their representation and legitimize their movement.

Deprived of their rights and entitlements for long, as the state only provides lip service in implementing constitutional provisions of the Fifth Schedule and Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA), the tribal and other marginalized communities are being further alienated from the state. The Pathalgadi movement in Jharkhand is a good example where the tribal demarcate their respective villages declaring independence and prohibit 'outsiders' (read state machinery). These movements by the tribal reflect upon sustained exploitation, deprivation, and alienation of sections of people from the state.

3. Communal Tensions

While the marginalized communities struggle to get a fair share of resources, the communal tensions in India have been all about intolerance and extreme competitive assertions over resources and belief systems. The centuries-old deep rooted communal divide in India has unfortunately become an integral part of socio-political life. The communal tensions in India are about the action of a religious group followed by the reaction of the other. Often used as a tool to polarize social order for electoral gains, the unfortunate episodes of communal violence have negative implications on the secular ethos and social cohesions in India. In the recent past, the communal tensions are increasingly engaged through a majority versus minority narrative. In this process, a certain section legitimizes its intolerant and violent acts using the victim card while the other keeps citing the atrocities on it in the course of history. Fearmongering on the one hand and assertion of dominance, on the other hand, has become a new trend in communal tensions in India. The legislation of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and protests against it is a good example in this regard. Moreover, dissent to the public policies is also increasingly getting communal colors. The involvement of the fundamentalists belonging to a certain religion during the protest against the newly legislated Farm Bill is a good example. Unfortunately, with society getting increasingly communally divided it is also being patronized by opposing civil society bodies and political parties.

4. Sub-regional Conflicts

Contrary to the communal tensions and dissent by the marginalized communities in terms of getting reported in popular discourse, the ethnic conflicts in the sub-regions hardly find a mention. India's Northeast would fall under this category.

Often, the ethnic conflicts in the Northeastern states are engaged through the prism of militancy. The nature of the ethnic conflicts varies from state to state in the Northeast region. Despite their unique features, the assertion of identity has been a commonality of most ethnic conflicts. In the cases like the Bodoland conflict, it has been around the demand for a separate territorial arrangement for the Bodos outside the perceived dominance of the majority Ahoms in the state of Assam. There are also ethnic conflicts between the ethnic Nagas and the Kukis in the state of Manipur.

Violent clashes between the ethnic communities asserting their dominance have been a defining feature of these longstanding conflicts. Apart from violence against each other, the competing ethnic groups are observed to be suffering majority-minority syndrome where the groups manufacture a narrative of a majority enemy and place themselves as a victim of being a minority. In this process, they keep on demanding a separate territorial arrangement which is a common feature of most ethnic conflicts in Northeastern states. The Hill Autonomous Councils under the Sixth Schedule Provisions of the Indian Constitution have offered few

solutions to these conflicts.

5. Ignoring the Implications of Internal Conflicts

The internal conflicts have serious implications on the socio-political orders of the Indian state. The indifference of the Governments hardly dilutes the threats emanating from these conflicts. A major implication of these conflicts is growing political inequality. The sustained demands for constitutionally guaranteed rights and entitlements by a specific section of the population suggest that they have not been able to influence the policy-making process to their advantage. And this process can be attributed to a lack of participation in the decision-making process. A democracy that ensures equality at the opportunity level results in majoritarianism in the outcome. A second implication is a popular subscription to majoritarian ideas across the communities. A majority-minority narrative is no more working as a framework where the minority rights are protected and concerns are addressed; rather, it has become a syndrome where such narratives are pitched against each other diluting the values of peaceful coexistence. It can be safely argued that there seem to be competitions among the communities to see themselves as a majority while enjoying the entitlements and advantages of a minority. A third implication is about legitimizing violence in the name of religious or ethnic solidarity. Over the years, civil society organizations and political leaderships are seen to be taking sides during a communal or ethnic tension. In this process, they condemn the violence of the opposition and condone the violence by the group they represent. This process dilutes the constitutional ethos of secularism, fraternity, and peaceful coexistence.

6. Inadequate Policy Interventions

The policy interventions in dealing with the internal conflicts in India in terms of effectively addressing the issues have been inadequate. One of the major reasons for the inadequacy of the policy intervention can be attributed to linking the conflicts with state-centric security issues. Accordingly, addressing these issues through the prism of a security perspective reduces the scope for the effective resolution of internal conflicts. An effective strategy towards the resolution of conflicts around the issues of rights and entitlements of the tribal and other marginalized groups, communal tensions, ethnic conflicts in the Northeastern states should address the following:

Ensuring rights and entitlements

The demands for protection of rights and entitlements of the tribal and other marginalized groups have been a longstanding issue. The government(s) of the day should consider this issue on a priority basis. To address these demands the government(s) do not need to put extra effort in any manner. The implementation of the constitutional provisions of the Fifth and Sixth Schedule (depending on the geographical areas) and the PESA will take good care of most of the demands.

Strengthening the Gram Sabha (village councils) in making decisions for the needs of its people holds a key in this regard. The Government institutions at the local level need to be made accountable for addressing the demands of the people. Creating awareness among the local people on their rights and duties should be prioritized. Translating legal and constitutional provisions to the local languages and dialects could be a good initiative in this direction.

Working towards Communal harmony

Contrary to the popular discourse, communal tensions are not merely a law-and-order problem. While the manifestations of the communal tensions in the forms of riots need a law-and-order approach to respond, the social roots of the communal divide need to be addressed. At the heart of the social roots of the division lies divergence and competing for value and belief systems which are often guided by prejudices. While these prejudices are mostly manufactured, they are sustained through processes of polarization. Diversity of identities, beliefs, and values needs celebration through pluralism. The roles of social institutions like families, community organizations, and religious bodies are critical. The state machinery should make use of these social organizations in delegitimizing hatred and violence which would minimize the risk of communal tensions.

Addressing Ethnic Conflicts

For the effective addressing of the ethnic conflicts in the Northeastern states, there should be political will to focus on these issues. The state machinery should understand the specific demands of different communities and engage them with dialogues to come to a solution. Strengthening Autonomous Councils within the provisions of the Sixth Schedule should be encouraged. Through the local civil society organizations, the state machinery should work towards ensuring the cultural, linguistic, and ethnic identities of each community. A sense of security in this regard would minimize the risk of conflict substantially.

Collaboration with Civil Society organisations

The internal conflicts are not merely a political problem. Most of them have critical social components. Accordingly, the role of the well-meaning civil society organizations becomes very crucial in establishing a bridge between the people and the Government. The Government should take the initiative to engage these civil society organizations for meaningful dialogue and communicating with the people with grievances. In this process, both parties should develop certain trust which would not generate any prejudices on each other. Organizations working closely with the people at the local level should ideally be in collaboration with the government(s) in effectively resolving the internal conflicts.

About Conflict Resolution and Peace Research Programme

The Conflict Resolution and Peace Research Programme (CRPR) has two primary pillars of research – conflict resolution, and peace research. As a part of this focused research, the Programme looks towards conceptualizing the idea of conflict and peace, and the role of civil society. Conflict Weekly, is one of the regular publications from the Programme.

On Conflict Resolution, the Programme attempts to pursue evidence-based research on individual conflicts and the also aims at larger conceptualization of conflict. It studies individual conflicts in depth with the twin purpose of identifying elements that can be used to resolve them in achieving peace, as well as to further develop the overall understanding of conflicts and their resolution. The process of engagement with conflicts takes a conceptual route to identify the issues and contenders of the conflict which otherwise remain inadequately addressed in most other platforms.

On Peace Research, the Programme aims at studying “peace” as a political process, with an objective to provide policy inputs to the State and the society. In particular, the Programme would research on “peace processes” across the world – their successes and failures. It tries to find an answer why these processes do not always end up in peace. In particular, it aims to study and find answers to the last mile problem in peace processes.

In terms of regions in studying conflicts and peace, the Programme has a special focus on India’s internal conflicts - Northeast, Left-wing affected areas, and J&K; and also on the immediate neighbourhood - Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

At the global level, the Programme also looks at the following: Global Protest Movements; Gender, Peace and Security; Water Conflicts; Border Conflicts.