

Understanding Extremism and Extremists in North East India

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Abstract

There appears to be a clear danger both in terms of our understanding and conceptually when one comes across the fact that extremism is often used pejoratively. This gives rise to a lot of goals. This paper goes on to conceptualize the terms for utter clarity to enable proper understanding of misconceptions about the ideology, actions that extremists often espouse in pursuit of their ideology, actions and their pursuits besides the groups which are active in the region.

Key Words: Extremism, Extremist groups, Ideology, Politics, Political realism

Introduction

An ideological extremist is usually referred to as right wing or left wing, on the basis of his political leaning that he professes or practices. The left wing extremists are as commonly found as that of right wing extremists. While the left wing extremists aspire for state control and inclusiveness, the right wing extremists aspire for freedom and responsibility with a few strict rules.

Extremism is a term used to describe the actions or ideologies of individuals or groups outside the perceived political centre of a society; or otherwise claimed to violate common moral standards. The term is invariably used in a pejorative sense. Extremism is usually seen as a contrast with moderation and the extremists with the moderates. The terms

extremism or extremist are almost always exonymic i.e. people apply the term to a group rather than any group labelling itself as such. Rather than the groups labelling themselves extremist, those labelled as such often describe themselves as militants for believing in militant action. There is no political party as such that calls itself right-wing extremist or left-wing extremist and there is also no sect of any religion that calls itself extremist or which calls its doctrine as extremism.

The term extremist is then used to describe groups and individuals who have become radicalized, in some way or other because of the prevailing conditions in the society even though the term radical is originally understood to go to the root of a social problem. The term “extremist” is often used with reference to those who use

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or advocate violence against the will of society at large. It has also been used by others to describe those who advocate or use violence to enforce the will of the social body, such as a government or majority constituency.

Extremist Groups

These groups when described as extremist however in general do not accept nor admit that what they practice or advocate constitutes violence and instead describe their acts in terms of acts of resistance or militant action or the use of force. The word violence is not value-neutral as ideology and methodology often become inextricably linked with each other when we use the word extremism. The notion that is being advocated by some that there is a philosophy which can be described as extremism is not acceptable in the mainstream political discourse. Within sociological discipline several academics who are critical of extreme right-wing groups have strongly protested against the use of the term extremist, which was popularized by centrist sociologists in the 1960s and 1970s. Jerome Himmelstein wrote: “At best this characterization tells us nothing substantive about the people it labels; at worst it paints a false-picture.”¹

This act of labelling a person, group or action as extremist is sometimes claimed to be a technique or an instrument to further a political goal — especially by governments seeking to defend the status quo, or political centrists. Hence by any

means the term extremist like the word violence is also not value-neutral. On the other hand, George and Wilcox claimed that the extremist label has been historically applied in case of both the extreme right and extreme left.²

However, some academics on the left have sought to change the frame of reference so as to mean, that only the far right, but not the far left can be outside the pale of societal acceptability.

To quote Robert F. Kennedy: “What is objectionable, what is dangerous about extremists is not that they are extreme, but that they are intolerant. The evil is not what they say about their cause, but what they say about their opponents.”³ Laird Wilcox, the American researcher who has studied various political fringe movements has identified twenty-one alleged traits of a political extremist: A tendency to assassination, name calling and labelling, the making of irresponsible, sweeping generalizations, the failure to give adequate proof of assertions made, advocacy of standards, a tendency to view opponents and critics as essentially evil, a Manichean (bipolar) world view, advocating some degree of censorship and/or repression of their opponents and critics, identifying themselves by reference to who their enemies are, a tendency to substitute intimidation for argument, widely use slogans, buzzwords and “thought-terminating clichés, claim some kind of moral or other superiority over others, doomsday thinking, a tendency to believe that it is justified to

do bad things in the service of a supposedly “good” cause, an emphasis on emotional response, as opposed to reasoning and logical analysis, hypersensitivity and “vigilance, claims of some kind of supernatural, mystical or divinely-inspired rationale for their beliefs and actions, an inability to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty, groupthink, the personalization of hostility, a tendency to assume that the system is defective if one is defeated .⁴

Political Extremism and Extremist Movements

During the middle of 20th century, two other political writers viz., Eric Hoffer and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. have written about political extremism in some of their noted publications. Hoffer wrote books such as in *The True Believer* and *The Passionate State of Mind* wherein he analyzed the psychology and sociology of those who join fanatical mass movements.⁵ Arthur Schlesinger in his book, *The Vital Centre*, has identified as to what needs to be the supposed centre of politics within which mainstream political discourse takes place in any extreme situation and has acknowledged the power of societies to draw definite lines regarding what actions would fall outside of this acceptable limits.⁶ Following these assumptions, both Communism and Fascism have been categorized in established western democracies in the post war period as extremist movements, as the fascist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. This

term has also often been used to describe the groups which held views outside of the mainstream but which did not necessarily advocate the use of physical force to achieve their objectives. Examples of such groups are Nation of Islam, and the movement for nuclear disarmament etc.

When we examine the European context more critically we see that the extremist politics is understood as, the new rise of the extreme political right in Europe. This concept of extreme political right, in brief, is comprised of the actions of right-wing extremist parties and the counter-strategies as to how to curb their influence in Europe. In this instant context, it is questioned by some concerned social scientists, if there exists some sort of relationship between neo-liberalism and Right-wing extremism. Extremist politics is the politics of despair.⁷

When we look into our history, the movement of political extremism can be consisted of three different kinds of meshed conditions: conditions of ideology, conditions of history, and conditions of popular attitude. Such extremist movements anywhere owe their origins to causes of disaffection present in the societies. Hence historically extremist movements have always been movements of disaffection. These movements begin when certain groups of people feel that they are about to be deprived of something important or groups whose rising aspirations lead them

to feel that they have always been deprived of something important which they have always had or owned in their society. In majority of cases such deprivation has often been accompanied by a process of political dislocation.

Further, their feelings of alienation is complicated when they assume that the traditional political party structure with which these groups have been associated no longer seems to be serving their needs. It is also seen that extremist movements are not primarily the product of extremists. The critical mass in extremist movements are not necessarily composed of evil-minded types called “extremists,” but rather of ordinary people who have been caught in certain selective kinds of stressful and rather disturbing situations.

The North East Scenario

North East scenario is singularly different. In order to understand analytically as to why extremism or as many call it terrorism is prevalent in this region one has but to take into account the changes that may have occurred in the form of Population Displacement, Political Disorganization, Population Dynamics, Status Preservatism, Low Democratic Restraint and Cultural Baggage etc.

The basic ideology of extremism as can be seen here is encapsulated in a so called model of monism. Hence the extremist actions as manifested in our neighbourhood involves the violation of others’ constitutional rights as a citizen,

through sustained acts of violence aimed at innocent people and advocacy, for the destruction of the very political process, which allows them to co-exist.

We all know that the democratic political process refers primarily to democratic political pluralism: an “open democratic place” for coexistence of ideas, speech, and consonant political action. This kind of monism followed by various extremist groups has become tantamount to the closing down of the democratic space, whether by a massive majority brought under submission through the power of the gun or by a pre-emptive minority composed of their own extremists.

Within a short span of time after independence this region has been a witness to a succession of social changes affecting or threatening displacement. There has been the shift of power from community to elites. There have also been massive waves of immigration. There has been large-scale migration within the country. There has been the many-staged shift from slow development to fast paced developments. The predominant positions of various regional, religious, economic, ethnic, and racial groups have continually been shaken and sharply diminished. Such extremist groups have successfully picked up on social problem situations and crisis processes and have exploited them to the utmost and promised future oriented solutions – which of course have not come true as yet. They have been able to strengthen themselves as well knit groups

through the processes of renewal, the changes in social acceptance, the crystallization of specific social and cultural environments, the changes in the forms, methods and argumentation lines of their self-presentation, their political beliefs according to their respective ethnic communities. In quite a number of cases even after utter failure to live up to their expectation and aspirations to bring about the intended changes in the society, these extremist groups have managed to survive through a process of regrouping and of differentiation. Their relevance has been proved by their capability to participate in anti government operations such as fighting the paramilitary forces or by influencing government formation in the vicinity.

The existence of various right-wing extremist groups can be understood as the result of their programmatic and organizational renewal processes and in their innovative ways of adapting themselves to newly formed specific social environments upon which they can rely and then carry on their acts. They have cleverly positioned themselves within existing society and its political camps as the society is grappling with the phenomena of paradigmatic change from economic and social state to the competitive state.

The proliferation of the locational nationalism (Christopher Butterwege) and the economization of all areas of life have also provided for a social climate to which these right-wing extremist

groups hook on very well. They claim that the only way to solve the problems of the society is by way of nationalism as opposed to the demand for a strong state and inclusion. In that endeavour, they address themselves both to those who are intent on asserting themselves in the national competition and to secure their own perquisites that way, as well as to those who are unsettled by unemployment and precarisation of work and daily life. Neither competition nor social and economic profit maximization emerges as the central principles of actions of the extremists nor any benevolent claims which are made by them on their behalf.

It is revealed from a study of data relating to civilian fatalities as a result of social and political violence in the country over the period September 1, 1999 – August 31, 2001, that over 33 per cent were accounted for a range of insurgencies and terrorist movements in India's Northeast – and these were overwhelmingly concentrated in a small number of districts in four of the seven States in this region.⁸

It is well known that separatism constitutes a primary demand of many of the groups that are active in India's Northeast. However, many Northeast groups have not clearly defined their separatist goals so far. There has also been a major proliferation of militant groups over the years, with 108 groups active in the region, though some appear to be either insignificant gangs and some now

dormant. Amongst all the groups, the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) which pleads for the secession of Assam and the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah) [NSCN-IM] leader of the longest insurgency in the region, seeking Naga independence, stand out prominently. Their influence in the region is still overwhelming despite a decline in the number of violent acts. They are known to be carrying out widespread networks of extortion and smuggling besides other criminal activities and also being in control over substantial ground business operations. While the NSCN-IM is now continuously engaged in peace negotiations with the Union Government

under a cease-fire agreement that has been effective since August 1997, the ULFA has consistently rejected possibilities of a negotiated settlement. It is reported widely in the media that ULFA and the NSCN-IM have also continued to extend their spheres of influence in the region through intermittent low-grade violence and by training and arming a large number of other terrorist and proxy groups at the behest of ISI. The activities of such groups in the region goes beyond the term normally understood as extremism since the actions have proved to be disruptive, secessionist and for self motivated personal gains rather than the social gains they claim to be at their back of mind.

Notes

- ¹ Himmelstein, Jerome L. *All But Sleeping with the Enemy: Studying the Radical Right Up Close*. ASA, San Francisco: 1988.
- ² George, John and Laird Wilcox. *Nazis, Communists, Klansmen, and Others on the Fringe: Political Extremism in America*. Prometheus Books, 1992.
- ³ Extremism, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Extremism>, accessed on 23rd March 2008.
- ⁴ Wilcox, Laird. "What Is Political Extremism", retrieved from The Voluntaryist newsletter #27, 1987.
- ⁵ Hoffer, Eric. *The True Believer : Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements*. Various editions first published 1951.
- ⁶ Schlesinger, Arthur. *The Vital Centre: The Politics of Freedom*. Various editions first published 1949.
- ⁷ Seymour Martin Lipset. *The Politics of Unreason: Right Wing Extremism in America*. 1790-1970, Earl Raab; Harper & Row, 1970. 554 pages.
- ⁸ Gill K.P.S. *Islamist Extremists and Terrorism in South Asia*. Institute For Conflict Management, New Delhi 2004