

Intriguing tie-ups of Manipur rebels

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An analysis of reports coming in from Manipur over the last few days makes quite a jig-saw of intriguing tie-ups between the various insurgent groups in the North-East. On the face of it, it would seem there is something brewing between the Naga, Manipuri and Assamese extremists. And it would also seem that the PLA is having serious infighting, but observers would wait for more concrete evidence before saying anything conclusive.

Coupled with an increase in the Manipuri insurgent activity and the sudden emergence of the guerrillas of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Muvah-Isak group) in the north district of Manipur along the Impal-Kohima road, two incidents have specifically got the security men intrigued.

The latest, and the most significant incident has been the murder of Chongtham Bedamani Singh, a third year drop-out from IIT, Powai. He is reported to have been the brain behind the highly ingenious booby-trapped explosive devices the PLA had been planting all over the Imphal town in the shape of PLA flags and red stars. He is also reported to have been a contender for the leadership of the organisation which has been under their provisional operation control of Lhasa-trained Kunj Behari Singh since the capture of its founder N. Bisheshwar Singh. But while his assassination at Imphal's Naoremthong Bamon Yama Leirak locality can be ascribed to factional rivalry within the organisation, the most intriguing aspect of the whole story is the identity of the other young man, murdered along with him. The Manipur police insist that he is an Assamese Extremist called Bimal Das.

Implications of this claim are sensational in that it would mean a working relationship between the still incipient Assamese Extremist groups and the better organised Manipuris. But till now there is no substantiation at all of the Manipur police belief.

The so-called Assamese youth died in Thed hospital quite some time after he was rushed there from the assassination spot. But apparently he could no more than mumble a few words to the police and doctors. How, then have the police thought of him as being an Assamese Extremist is not yet clear. Pictures of his body have been rushed to special branch of police in Assam and other adjoining states. But they reportedly do not match the description of any known Assamese Extremist.

Sources say, while the special branches need not necessarily have the descriptions or photographs of every extremist in Assam, they have a good bit of information on the more important operatives. If an Assamese Extremist was indeed going around with a top-level functionary of the PLA, he would have

had to be an important one among the Extremist ranks. This is the question to which the army and the security agencies would also be seeking an answer.

Just as intriguing, and only a little less significant was the arrest at Imphal, a couple of days earlier, of Rochu Ro, chairman of the Regional Council of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland, along with a known Manipuri insurgent.

This completes the confusion. About six months back, that is, a little prior to the arrest of Bisheshwar Singh, the security agencies were sure of establishment of at least a quite pro quo relationship between the PLA and Naga rebels of the Muvah-Isak group, both of which profess a distinctly left-of-centre ideology. It was known that Angelus, a "foreign secretary" of the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland had been frequenting the PLA hideouts in Imphal. But information made available after interrogation of Bisheshwar clearly suggested that the tie-up had not gone beyond a very elementary level and Bisheshwar had a distaste for Muvah and his methods, like killing own tribesmen frequently for retribution and admitting young women in his ranks.

And now the securitymen have a clear-cut evidence of top-level Naga rebels moving around with Manipuri Extremists. Sources wonder whether it is a case of PLA softening its attitude towards the Nagas after Bisheshwar's death or whether Bisheshwar took everyone for a merry ride during his interrogation.

Another suggestion put forward in some circles is that the Manipuri arrested along with Rochu Ro is not a PLA-man, but a remnant of the Peoples Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK), which is now operationally defunct. This sounds unlikely. Sources say a Naga rebel, valued by the securitymen, would not risk moving around Imphal with a non-entity, particularly when the city is teeming with security-men, plainclothed and uniformed.

Meanwhile, as brains in the intelligence organisations are desperately trying to read the real meaning in the incidents, the security organisations in Manipur have launched renewed offensive against the rebels. This was expected, with Zail Singh expected to visit Imphal shortly. But the successes so far have been limited to the capture of old PREPAK men, now reduced to petty hit-men and hoodlums.

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