

## Personal reflection on a leadership challenge in reconciliation and peace-building

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Peace is easier said than done. Peace is mundane; violence is riveting. How can peace have a chance against the fascination and glamour of war and violence? Unlike war, which stuns to submission through ferocity and spectacle, peace is a choice reinforced by the far less spectacular, consistent delivery of hope and opportunities to survive. Gandhi said that it is more difficult to inspire non-violence and sacrifice than to instigate violence and inflict pain on others. The story that follows is that of a consistent effort for a delivery of hope and opportunity for building peace in a region that has for several years been rocked by violence and pain.

### **The story**

In January 1994 the Indian Army was inducted into Manipur as large tracts of the state were taken over by an insurgent group, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN). The holding Army Division in the North East as well as several paramilitary units were moved out in haste to reinforce the deployment in Kashmir where the situation was deteriorating. The Army had to carry out fighting breakthroughs in Manipur to re-establish its control and the states writ. In the process there were major encounters and several casualties. As a young platoon commander I was tasked to search, locate and capture hardcore insurgents who were planning to blow up a vital bridge and communication tower to hamper the movement of security forces in Manipur. After 4 days of relentless search in the jungles we tracked down the militant hideout and had a three hour long fire-fight with the insurgents. At end of the bloody encounter a few militants had been killed and two were apprehended. I was myself shot with two bursts of AK-47 – a bullet in my chest, three on my forearm, a grenade blast over my foot and fracture on my spine with a rifle butt hit. I was grievously injured in the encounter and a few moments away from death due to excessive blood loss. When I was lying there waiting for the cas-evac helicopter, I noticed two young children – a boy and a girl – from the village who had been wounded in the crossfire.



*The bridge that was to be blown up*



*One of the wounded children*



*Waiting for the return of the helicopter*

I had to make a choice in those few moments – between taking responsibility for my own life and that of the lives of the people we were meant and sent to protect. I felt that if anyone deserved to live in that moment, it was those children in whose courtyard we fought – the children did not know what the fight was all about, nor why they had got shot. I made sure that they were airlifted to safety and medical help, before me and extracted a promise from my men that they would not seek revenge on the village for what had happened to me. I fell unconscious soon after but I heard wails of gratitude as the headman and a few women from the village fell at my feet thanking me for what I had done. I was conferred the nation's highest gallantry award, the Shaurya Chakra, in 1995.

## The Reunion

Though the incident was long over, the entire episode was etched in my memory just as the battle wounds were on my skin and flesh. In March 2010 a friend who was commanding a Brigade in the area sent a patrol to the village, still remote and isolated, to enquire about the whereabouts of the survivors, the children who had been shot. That is how the villagers learnt that I was also alive. They sought a reunion with me, saying that I saved a village from calamity and invited me to visit the village. I returned to meet familiar faces from two decades back in time. The girl who had been shot in the abdomen, and whose life was saved by timely airlift, was now married, with children of her own. The boy had become a strapping young man. One of the militants who had surrendered after that long ago firefight, and had given up militancy, also came to meet me. These people, residents of a land ravaged by violence and once branded anti-national, seemed to be reaching out.

In the time since that incident in Tamenglong and the reunion, I had moved from active military postings in the field to work at Army Headquarters, in the Ministry of Defence and then finally to the National Security Council Secretariat in the Prime Minister's Office.



*The reunion with those who were wounded and saved and former militants who shot me became national news.- News video of NDTV is at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LuFnIDx6OjQ> and a news report about meeting the man who shot me is at <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/16-years-later-army-officer-meets-man-who-shot-at-him/594741/>*

### Actions following the reunion

I had never expected to see or visit that village in Tamenglong again. But when I returned there in March 2010, I realized nothing had changed in these two decades. It had become an unforgiving environment – a tangle of tribes, insurgents, army, government, mischievous neighbours and errant geopolitical strategy. Added to that were the tensions between tribes which made entire communities the victims of extended economic blockades enforced by mutually belligerent ethnic groups. Even today, after nearly half-century lost to violence, there seems no end to this story. Amidst this were those people whose lives have been caught in various cross fires – bullets and conflicting loyalties. What they haven't been able to do is find enough peace to live the life that we are lucky to live in other parts of our country. Be that as it may, real seeds of peace, I feel, were sowed with that reunion. This incident triggered a chain of events that holds a lot of promise for building on the goodwill and peace. Using the good offices of well-meaning dignitaries whom I could attract to the cause, we manage to do a lot of work in Tamenglong some of which I list below:-

**Connecting the remote village by road:** Using the influence of the Minister of State for Defence, we laid the foundation stone for a 23 km black top road to the village (Longdipabram) where the encounter took place to the district headquarters ( Tamenglong). It is being constructed by the Defence Ministry and the road is called "For Peace and Friendship"



Foundation stone laid and the rough road cut. More at <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/finally-manipur-village-may-get-road-link/751031>

**A cooperative model livelihood programme for employment in a cash strapped region:** The region is well known for its bamboo. With the help of the Mission Director of the National Mission for Bamboo Applications (NMBA) who travelled to Tamenglong with me we started training the villagers in making finished bamboo products to be marketed by the NMBA. NMBA also extends a line of credit to the cooperative society started by the village to play the role of micro financier – payments are made to the village cooperative society, which is responsible for lending money to the villagers. This approach is unique because the villagers as a whole have no lending or borrowing capacity. This works as a micro finance initiative – to help the villagers get liquid cash – the onus is on the society to recover the loaned amount either by way of money or the finished mats or bamboo sticks. *The Indian Express* (Kolkata) reported the story here: <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/18-yrs-after-he-survived-encounter-army-officer-returns-to-help-village/937541/>



Training of persons in bamboo product making, and the finished products ( incense sticks and mats)

**Realising the agricultural potential:** The region is known for its citrus fruits and its bamboo and the potential of these crops has not been realised due to the insurgency. The produce is grown organically and was wasted as there was no means to transport the products where they could be marketed. There was also no cold-storage chain to store the yields. With help of the Mission Director, National Horticulture Mission, we initiated the process on developing the citrus farming and bamboo products potential of the region. The villagers have created an orange farmers agency, and later this year during the Orange Festival, the product will be purchased by a juice and marmalade manufacturing agency based in Guwahati in the neighbouring state of Assam, at a rate favourable to the farmers. If accomplished, this will be the first time the entire produce is purchased by an external agency.



The oranges of Tamenglong are organically grown and have great potential. Talking to villagers at the Orange Festival 2011 (<http://kanqlaonline.com/2011/12/state-will-sanction-rs-6-lakhs-for-orange-cultivators-from-next-year-phungzathang/>)

**A truck for transportation of produce:** A meeting was organised between the village headman and then Union Home Secretary Mr G.K. Pillai. Mr Pillai is well known for his interest in, and concern for, the North East region and he gifted a truck to the villagers so that they could transport their horticultural produce.



Meeting with Union Home Secretary which resulted in a truck gifting ceremony . <http://e-pao.net/GP.asp?src=26..290411.apr11>

**A waiting shed for stores :** The village got a waiting shed from the Army civic action programme.



**Repair of church for Christmas:** We repaired the village church, which is an important unifying symbol. Also, the region will celebrate 90 years of Christianity in 2016. Efforts are on to carry out major repairs and renovation of the church in the village with help of voluntary contributions from



**Sewing machines for the women and girls**

Since the local women possess extraordinary talent in sewing and weaving it was decided to encourage the setting up of a sewing mission in the village with the help of a good samaritan, Dr. Sajan George, who gifted 10 fully automatic sewing machines to the village. Another good

samaritan, Mr. Rajesh Gupta, gifted cotton yarn. His daughter, a graduate of the National Institute of Design, made designs for sewing.



**Water scheme:** This is one of the first schemes we started with a proposal to supply drinking water to every household. We were able to provide water tanks to all houses in the village. It was meant to be a full-fledged water supply scheme with water tanks and a pipeline. However due to a lack of supervision the money was not spent in the manner it was intended.



### **Vocational Training:**

The levels of literacy are quite high in the region given the presence of many missionary schools . The students speak English well and often migrate to bigger cities like Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore and do well in the service industry . With help of Dr. Alexander Thomas, the CEO of Bangalore Baptist Hospital, we embarked on a mission to train students from the district in Nursing and other hospital services such as radio technicians and medical transcription, among others.

### **Outcome**

In the state and circumstances that the state of Manipur is in, the act of calling an Army officer for a reconciliation and to honour him as one of their own required immense courage and nerve on the part of the villagers, given the bitterness and ill will towards the armed forces as a whole. It is in a sense a declaration of a freedom from fear, a spirit of liberation from the control of the militant movements who seek to control the tribes through their writ and might.

I found that years of unrest have exhausted everyone. Lives and opportunities continue to be wasted. With the Indian economy taking off in other parts of the country, there is an urge to survive and envision a future beyond conflict. I felt that if the people participate whole heartedly in the schemes begun there – and so far they have shown every indication of doing so – they could have a chance at leading conflict-free, prosperous lives. For the first time now, I felt that there is a chance to birth peace organically, inside-out.

Initially when I interacted through the village alone, I came up against the distrust, and often hostility, of other villages and tribes. Therefore the onus was placed on the villagers (Longdipabram village) who had invited me to visit. The headman was asked to create a development society that

covered the entire region so that these benefits went beyond Longdipabram village to cover the whole district. The requirement was that development should transcend traditional tribal divides and that everyone should have a stake in it.

### **Reconciliation in Insurgency**

While these developments are significant, I believe what happens next, how we take it forward, and how we scale it up is critical to ensure peace in the region. Restoring lasting peace will require that the state achieve some sort of reconciliation with its disgruntled citizens and successfully integrate them into society. Reintegration should be the principal goal of the strategy of reconciliation. A strategy of reintegration does not seek to influence the irreconcilable leadership that stands to lose its importance. Efforts should be directed towards weaning away the rank and file of the insurgency.

An insurgency is primarily a political struggle, so an effective plan incorporates the means for citizens to address their social or economic grievances by working within the political system rather than against it. If citizens are willing and able to achieve their aims via the political process, they have little cause to take up arms against the state. The robustness of democratic systems like India lies in the fact that they offer their citizens a means to achieve political change in a non-violent manner. Force cannot quell a grievance and grant legitimacy to a government. Efforts must focus on compromise and reconciliation. Any government eventually should want to see the rebellious peoples reconciled to the state rather than defeated by it. It should therefore view the insurgents as misguided elements or misled citizens rather than enemies of the state. It encourages working within the existing system and not against the political systems.

What are the stumbling blocks?

- Difficulties in convincing villages, tribes to work together in a highly charged environment. Therefore the main player has to have some legitimacy. It helped that I was work in the National Security Council Secretariat in the Prime Minister's Office.
- Difficulties in convincing government – at all levels- municipal, state and federal levels – to adopt a 'development' approach in place of a counter-insurgency approach. The hard factors of security still weigh heavily on the minds of decision makers as a solution instead of the more effective yet time and resource consuming development and inclusive approach.
- Difficulties in cutting through the bureaucratic maze – the lethargy and corruption that characterize the local government machinery, as well as the lack of trust, and therefore lack of proper coordination, between federal and local levels of government.
- Difficulties in countering the hostility of armed opposition groups, which are also characterized by extortion, corruption, and are also prone to settling issues through peremptory diktat and violence, both deliberate and random. Most such groups would see any well-meaning attempts at development as a threat to their own authority and writ in those areas.
- All factions must be included in any peace building initiative and process. It is difficult to bring about peace in a fractured environment with multiple tribes, religions and other divisive factors.
- There are difficulties in sustainability and in monitoring projects located far away.
- There is a tendency to focus on individual constituencies by whoever is delegated or in charge of a project.

The take away from my experience is that there are no quick fixes or a one size fits all solution. Any further actions I might seek to undertake, therefore, would depend on how well I am able to resolve these issues.

**Tamenglong as a Case Study in Human Security:**

Tamenglong/Manipur is an excellent case study in Human Security. The gaps in development drive and give impetus to conflict, which in the long-run have an impact on “state security”. In fact, most insurgencies are born primarily due to the skewed development framework applied to these areas, poor/corrupt governance and administration. Even when it becomes clear that the insurgent forces

The idea around all the development activities is to give ownership of all activities and success to the villagers; the State must only facilitate. The militants and other clear beneficiaries from the maintenance of status quo and protracted conflict cannot then question these significant achievements at the local level.

**Lessons learnt :**

The following issues should be considered before the armed forces are deployed in an internal conflict situation. In any case the deployment of armed forces should not be unending as has been the case in the north-east. The lessons learnt are:

- (1) Consider all non-military options before inducting the armed forces.
- (2) Human security should be the centre of all military activity. It is not just winning hearts and minds and civic action programmes, but integrating the principles at the operational level. It must be realized that a soldier is trained to kill and be killed, but this liability cannot be transferred to civilian and non-combatants in a disturbed area.
- (3) Talk with the affected population, those who do not have a political stake, but whose lives are actually affected.
- (4) All interventions must have an end state – in the form of sunset clauses in security laws and/or regular reviews.
- (5) Military interventions must also allow space for peace building efforts.
- (6) The deployment of the Army should be seen as legitimate and, if possible, must be carried out in consultation with village elders and local council. They must be informed of the need for deployment before the actual operation and activities begin.
- (7) The training and equipment used by the armed forces should be of high quality as counterinsurgency (CI) and war fighting are different. Weapons that can be used in war cannot be used in CI operations.

### **Some news coverage on the work done:-**

#### **The Indian Express -**

- Story on the road for the village - 17 February 2011:  
<http://www.indianexpress.com/news/finally-manipur-village-may-get-road-link/751031>
- Story on meeting the man who shot me - 24 March 2010:  
<http://www.indianexpress.com/news/16-years-later-army-officer-meets-man-who-shot-at-him/594741>
- Story on the development work done in Manipur - 18 years after he survived encounter Army officer returns - 17 April 2012: <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/18-yrs-after-he-survived-encounter-army-officer-returns-to-help-village/937541>

#### **Times of India**

- Manipur Awaits Savior Soldier – 25 June 2012: [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-06-25/guwahati/32408463\\_1\\_village-army-officer-tamenglong-district](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-06-25/guwahati/32408463_1_village-army-officer-tamenglong-district)

#### **Hindustan Times :**

- Man in uniform whom Manipur loves – 14 May 2012: <http://www.hindustantimes.com/India-news/Manipur/Man-in-uniform-whom-Manipur-loves/Article1-855789.aspx>

#### **News Videos**

##### **CNN\_IBN**

- India Positive Awards – <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWSk69nFqK8>
- Shows the progress made since my journey - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-FUH2uyT1iE>

##### **NDTV-**

- A soldier's emotional journey - meeting the children whose lives were saved and the men who shot me - 10 March 2010 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LuFnIDx6OjQ>

A soldier who has touched lives in a Manipur village

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u\\_GZin0FBM8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u_GZin0FBM8)