

# Reviewing Internal Armed Conflict in India: Forging a Joint Civil-Military Approach

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## Introduction

Rostum Nanavatty has been a reluctant scholar and a committed soldier's General with his feet on the ground. Iconised by his juniors, adored by his peers, feared by many of his seniors, and grudgingly respected by the political elites for expressing directly his views on the civil-military relationship, including issues related to good governance. Perhaps, on record, he will be the only Army Commander who, while holding office and operating in the most geo-strategic state of India, could caution the highest political authority in charge of the internal security of the country about the essential need to pay attention to the role of good governance—an observation which made headlines in the international system and drew the attention and respect of the most powerful nation in the world. The political class could not find fault with his observations, the vociferous press could not sensationalise them, and the bureaucracy refrained from attempting the use of their established methods to malign the character and integrity of this public intellectual in the role of a celebrated soldier.

The book *Internal Armed Conflict in India: Forging a Joint Civil-Military Approach* penned by Nanavatty (New Delhi: Pentagon Press,

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2013), is an undiluted output of the experience and judgment of a soldier that has unwittingly entered the realm of policy relevance rather than being policy oriented. Its utility is, thus, universal and future generations of research scholars introspecting across disciplines and organisational behaviour will find it useful to link theory with practices of public policy formulations related to national security and the civil-military relationship. There is another uniqueness that must be recognised in the writing of this book. It represents a generational legacy of two generations of professional experience percolating down from father to son. The late K J Nanavatty, Imperial Police (IP), Inspector General of Police (IGP), Bombay state and later, of the state of Maharashtra after his retirement in 1964, was appointed as the first IGP of the newly formed state of Nagaland by the Government of India. He definitely would have “scripted a different paradigm for State Police Forces in counter-insurgency in India, had greater Army understanding, cooperation and assistance been forthcoming.”<sup>1</sup> Rostum Nanavatty was already a Commissioned Officer in the Indian Army in 1964, and must have been privy to the situation in Nagaland much beyond the experience of young officers. Later, he served as General Officer Commanding 3 Corps responsible for counter-insurgency operations in the states of Nagaland, Manipur and Tripura and in the region of South Assam from 1997-2000.

When the work was in its nascent stage of being formulated as a project, Nanavatty asked for my opinion. Having read the initial proposal, I advised him to introspect on whether he wanted the work to be policy oriented or policy relevant. Thereafter, there was no further input from me or even any comments made by me despite his having given me the draft of the manuscript and reminding me about the same. This was a deliberate attempt on my part to ensure that I did not in any way influence the character of his writing and that I would be in a position to write a review essay on his work in due course of time, which I am doing today with pleasure.

## The Normative Paradigm

The present endeavour is not merely to write a review of the book by summarising the content and context of the book and, thus, help the future readers to make up their minds on whether to read it further. Reviews basically are for opinion formation. However, a review article like the present one, firstly, is a piece of research to record the intellectual paradigm within which the work needs to be assessed so that it contributes to the growth of knowledge—as in this case, the relationship between the causal and prescriptive recommendations to manage Internal Armed Conflict in India (IACI) and further the efforts to forge interdependent civil-military cooperation. Secondly, a review article is an intellectual war-game between the conceptualisation of the author’s intellectual mind fix against the critical overview by the reviewer to place the work in the larger paradigm of conceptual issues articulated to serve as a permanent reference point.

It is essential at this stage to be explicit since the “must read” universe of this book will largely be the officers of the Indian armed forces who are today in a stage of intellectual transformation to understand and internalise the nuances of professional military education as a part of their professional career in the 21<sup>st</sup> century modernised Indian Army operating under a democratic system of polity. The author upholds the Constitution of India and pits all actions, thought processes and operationalisation of doctrine and responsibilities of the states and central governments to “counter internal threats to the security of the state” within the framework of the Constitution and makes an important cautionary observation on the suggestion made by some analysts who have gone ahead to prescribe a “joint responsibility of both the union government and the state” and proposing the need of specific mention to be incorporated in the Concurrent List (List III)<sup>2</sup>.

Chapter III of the book is the most significant contribution. It is an abridgement of all the relevant sections of the Constitution of India citing

the various Articles to put forth the locus of power and legitimise the action needed by the military for forging joint civil-military cooperation. Nanavatty notes, “The Constitution does not distinguish between law and order and public policy. The responsibility for drawing this distinction devolves on the Supreme Court of India.”<sup>3</sup> He, thus, places the role of the bureaucracy to be merely to complement the role of the political executive and the legislators in the Parliament. Chapter III, therefore, is a significant contribution to understand the role of the armed forces while dealing with IACI. The ten-page Chapter III, with its 56 footnotes, leaves nothing missing to understand the Indian Constitution’s various sections related to the use of force to contain IACI. It is recommended that not only the younger generation of the Indian armed forces but the senior formation commanders alike take pains to memorise these ten pages with all the footnotes. This will ensure that the conceptualisation of the role and exercise of power is no longer ambiguous in the minds of those who are asked to act to contain IACI. Nanavatty’s incisive interpretation of the Constitution, leading to the flow of recommendations has been seen in certain quarters as a military bias in his approach, which is uncalled for.

The framework of research is straightforward. A comprehensive survey of the literature written, published or discussed on internal armed conflict leading to insurgency, and the prescriptions for counter-insurgency operations have been quantified as empirical facts corroborated for cross-references and applicability. This rich text of primary, secondary and treasury source material has allowed the author to escape the otherwise methodological rigours required to formulate hypotheses essential for universal generalisation to cull out possible rule formation in the vast, volatile and shifting landscape of the paradigmic conflict analysis model in which internal armed conflict would have become a subset of conflict resolution alone. This is where the inherent innovativeness of the author becomes apparent to side-step the discipline narrowness and operate outside the box in a multi-disciplinary format.

The book, as noted by the author in the very first page of the preface, is “India-centric”. Nanavatty has juxtaposed the empirical evidence culled out of the vast literature that he has surveyed with observations related to an “India case study” as an analysis, enriching it with his own experience in the field, the operating principles and doctrines that he kept in his subconscious mind as a field commander. Thus, creating a total “Indo-centric” and not merely an “India-centric” version of analysis to enable the serious readers understand the causal relationship responsible for the emergence of IACI by those actors and subset of actors whom the political, bureaucratic and social entities in India failed to recognise, and to negotiate a process leading to an integration of the then disruptive forces with the mainstream politics so that they are forced to accept, and operate within, the framework of the Indian federal Constitution. Inherent and implicit in Nanavatty’s deliberation is the indication that while the Indian Constitution is common to all the states of the Indian nation-state—even though Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) was granted a special status under Article 370 at the time of India gaining independence in 1947— all the internal armed conflicts and insurgencies are not similar to each other. There is hardly any commonality in each of their occurrences. Hence, the creative part of finding solutions or leadership strategies to each situation will depend on the exercise of the intellectual understanding of the complex cultural matrix of the state where it is occurring and the flexibility to apply the provisions of the Constitution without compromising on its basic tenets, especially where cross-border terrorism vitiates the atmosphere.

Not being trained in the methodology of theoretical research falling within the vast domain of social science research has been, in Nanavatty’s case, an advantage. He has not been hindered by a strict paradigm approach of any social science discipline which would have forced him to adopt a methodology of a single discipline conceptual lens of history, sociology, anthropology or political philosophy. Therefore, his non-training in pure

theory has permitted him to overlap disciplines, cut across narrow confines and create unmanageable hypotheses required to be proved to arrive at any form of a general theory for application in IACI. Hence, in the strict sense, this “India-centric” book has moved into an “Indo-centric” paradigm in which theory has been inverted on its head to give way to experience and judgment, which is truly trans-disciplinary in nature. The sheer narratives of the ground realities faced, the prescriptive methods recommended and the upholding of the Constitution make it essential for all armchair strategists, policy-makers, political elites and bureaucrats in India to read this book more carefully, to change the mind-fix that they suffer from. It is also essential to indicate that while writing the subaltern history of IACI, the retired armed forces officers must be careful not to indulge in writing or tabulating their views by distorting the rigours of scientific methodology and misusing the freedom of expression.

### **The Conceptual Construct**

In India, ever since independence, the theories related to strategic affairs and national security have rarely been related to the outputs of professional military viewpoints. The role of professional military education has neither been planned, introspected upon nor placed as an essential component of the national education policy. Policies, therefore, of strategic and national security affairs have been the victim of strong opinion rather than being based on a studied approach to safeguard national interests. Nanavatty’s work is based on a conceptual analysis supported by observed facts and a studied approach rather than taking recourse to strong opinion. This labour of research undertaken by the author should become an example, especially for every young officer of the Indian armed forces attempting to undertake scholarly work to operationalise concepts by pounding them on the anvil of theory and making outputs of universal and lasting value. Here, I must caution all researchers that while theory can never replace experience and judgment, it always acts as a catalyst to integrate all three.

In the above context, a variety of opinions has emerged, both orally and in print, from a number of experts having long experience and distinguished track records of service in the various organisations of the central government about the content of the work and the context in which it had been undertaken by Nanavatty. The book, thus, becomes marketable amongst the readers who are also serving in government organisations. But the way it is being marketed today shows that it is far from being disseminated to the academic intellectual community or other stakeholders, including those from the corporate sector who now have a vested interest to understand the complex nuances of internal armed conflicts or national security issues that have plagued the Indian nation-state for decades.

These inane opinions appear to be inadequate, pedestrian and unable to project the true nature of the serious deliberations undertaken in the writing of this book. They project a truncated view, lacking depth and insight of the real utility of the work. It will, hence, fail to raise the inquisitiveness of the non-traditional stakeholders at large or the young researchers studying the role of public policy-making in strategic affairs and those in the corporate sector who are slowly but surely becoming the main stakeholders in the affairs of good governance, strategic policy-making and issues related to national interests and national security. Nanavatty's work deserves at the first take the attention of the finest representatives from amongst academia who have international standing in the disciplines covering social psychology, social anthropology, cultural history and public policy-making, and placing such critical opinions in the market place of the knowledge society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Such opinions would then become a catalyst to promote a knowledge-based debate and reaction as was seen after the Council on Foreign Affairs published Samuel Huntington's seminal work on *Clash of Civilizations*.

Further, the opinions written so far, seen after the release of the book on January 16, 2013, range from displaying certain mindsets—all unable

to go beyond the box to contribute towards the growth of knowledge. Three distinct categories of opinion can be discerned. The first category represents the fixed mindset of seeing through the conceptual lens of prioritising the utility of coercive force in the civil-military relationship to solve the knotty problems related to application of force to sustain stability. The second category displays the mind fix in a fixed mind and, therefore, identifies biases in the writing that inherently do not exist. This obviously has led such opinion-makers to conceptualisation and seeking an operable control mechanism to all solutions on policy-making by adopting the normative method of suggesting that “administering to govern” rather than “governing to administer” is the real way to achieve good governance. The third category of opinion gives the notion that only accredited, authorised persons can practise good governance. Perhaps the opinion on a work of this dimension would have been better served, if, as I have noted above, it had been made through an interdisciplinary approach in a multi-disciplinary format. The phenomenon of war and the various dimensions of internal armed conflicts, plaguing any nation-state even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, comprise a cultural phenomenon having civilisational preconditions. There are no military, bureaucratic or intelligence solutions to cultural problems thriving on inequality, lack of inclusiveness or empowerment. Once these fundamental problematics are understood and the first take opinions are streamlined, the work undertaken by authors like Nanavatty becomes a knowledge enhancer, revealing its inherent worth.

## **The Content**

The book by itself is laid out within a structure of 10 chapters. It is the opinion of the author that IACI will persist, with the military continuing to play a significant role in its management and resolution and that the present work pertains basically to insurgency and counter-insurgency. In the author’s note, “The Terminology Trap”, Nanavatty

observes that there is a propensity on the part of the Indian military to use particularly US military terminology, but the “indiscriminate use of (such) terminologies does little to foster comprehension of a new form of conflict and can actually complicate issues from a legal perspective”<sup>4</sup>. The author makes it clear that IACI is an internal issue of the Indian nation-state, the insurgent is not the ‘enemy’ and counter-insurgency is not war.

Chapter I dealing with “Internal Armed Conflict in General” discusses and also clarifies the definitional aspects related to terrorism, civil disturbances, subversion, insurgency, and civil war. In the 17 pages of exposition with 101 footnotes, the treatment to each term and concept is appropriate with corroborating evidence. It is a reference manual by itself and sets the tonality to place the Indian experience in perspective as contained in Chapters II to VI. A useful pointer is made in differentiating between internal armed conflict and conventional war<sup>5</sup>. There is a table tabulating the Evolution of Fundamental Principles of Counter-Insurgency<sup>6</sup>, followed by a comparison of the fundamental principles of counter-insurgency among the British, US and Indian Armies<sup>7</sup>. The inclusion and deliberations on the fundamental principles will be of immense use to the future military leaders in India to understand the political nature of the conflict, the need to isolate the insurgents, mobilise the people, ensure restraint in the use of coercive force, operate within the ambit of the Constitution and the law of the land, and work towards unity of effort/command augmented by real-time intelligence support. Nanavatty warns the readers that despite the terms “unified command” and joint civil-military responsibility finding mention in the Indian doctrine, the government fights shy of taking steps that will ensure the “unity of effort.”<sup>8</sup>

Chapters II to VI record the Indian experience related to insurgency with a detailed tabulated analysis of current internal armed conflicts taking place in India<sup>9</sup>. A summary of the Indian Constitution highlighting all the relevant Articles, emergency provisions of the

Constitution, empowerment of the government to deploy the “armed forces of the union” is very helpful to understand the role of the Constitution within which the armed forces of the union must function without violation of human rights. It has an interesting observation advocating:

In India, while the severity of the law may well invite criticism, the security forces – state police forces, CRPF and the army – acting in ‘good faith’ and within the parameters of the Constitution and domestic law must be seen as only doing their duty, by their country, in internal armed conflict.<sup>10</sup>

The role of the Army is exhaustively treated, with the clarity that its function and empowerment to contain internal armed conflict have to be achieved within the framework of the Constitution, though it (Army) views this as its “secondary and less important role”<sup>11</sup> as compared to its primary role “to counter external threats and to defend the country against external forces’ aggression and help the civil and state government in time of need”<sup>12</sup>. Nanavatty truthfully records his own difference of opinion with Gen N C Vij, then Chief of the Army Staff, on the erection of the man-made obstacle in the form of the 750-km-long permanent wire-based obstacle system along the Line of Control (LoC) in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) state to contain infiltration, and accepts that “as things turned out, he (Vij) was proved right”.<sup>13</sup> The author is equally frank and candid while placing his views on the state’s response to insurgency. He records the views of KPS Gill that “the Indian state is sluggish in its response to an emerging internal conflict situation.”<sup>14</sup> He further points out that “the absence of joint military doctrine impacts every aspect of the government’s campaign (against insurgency).”<sup>15</sup> He, hence, advises the formulation and articulation of a joint civil-military doctrine for the conduct of counter-insurgency operations.

Chapters VII to X indicate the author's attempt to examine various options and the way forward. True, but Nanavatty goes much beyond that. He brings in the need to understand the cultural aspects to be imbibed in the counter-insurgency doctrine by making it "population-centric and the need to understand the political nature of internal armed conflict"<sup>16</sup>. He has boldly proposed the structure and organisation for management of internal armed conflict at the national<sup>17</sup> as well as state level<sup>18</sup>. Whether the powers that be will be able to incorporate these as part of the doctrine to counter internal armed conflicts in India or the recommendations made in this book to initiate a long-term strategic perspective as well as strategic thinking in this area, only time will tell. Nanavatty is fully aware of the problems related to coalition politics as a factor which retards the precipitation of hard decisions, especially when Centre–state relations can be in very delicate situations.

## **Conclusion**

The book is a fairly definitive work though the author does not consider it to be so. When a book revolves around a single idea representing a single dependent variable, as in this case, it becomes a definitive work. Any reviewer coming from the professional academic field can find shortcomings in any work. However, this review essay is about the spirit and enthusiasm with which an intellectual introspection of the issue of insurgency has been carried out by the author for over five decades of his professional career and the patience to piece back the deliberations over a period of six years. The documentation is exhaustive though it lacks the rigour of the universal documentation method. The choice of primary sources tabulated is a point of issue. Any international publisher would have got the documentation as well as the indexing done as per standard practice by professionals in this field. However, these are small issues as compared to the usefulness of the work contributing to the growth of knowledge. At the end of the review essay, the only recommendation is

that the work should become a part of the reading list of all establishments of the Indian armed forces, across the Services. The think-tanks and institutes of higher education will be well advised to organise seminars and conferences for the next two years on various aspects touched by the author of this book.

## Notes

1. R K Nanavatty, *Internal Armed Conflict In India: Forging A Joint Civil-Military Approach* (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2013). See the Dedication.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
3. *Ibid.* It is further noted that the “Constitution of India is inherently flexible and allows for the exercise of discretion. It is important that the political executive and the legislators in Parliament understand it; exercise proper judgment in its interpretation, and demonstrate the courage to use its provisions without fear or favour, in the best interest of the country.”
4. *Ibid.*, n. 1, p. xvii.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 50-55.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 121-122; see the citation by Nanavatty contained in footnotes 1 to 3. Important is the documentation of the views of Gen S Padmanabhan on the primary and secondary role of the Indian Army, listing the major tasks for them, including in UN peace-keeping Operations and military assistance to friendly countries.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 127, see footnote 49.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 131.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 146.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 155.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 204, see Fig 7.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 212, see Fig 9.