The Counterinsurgent's Dilemma: Explaining Variation in Coethnic Recruitment for Counterinsurgency

- The Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP) hosted the 19th edition of its Foreign Policy and Security Tiffin Talk series on **The Counterinsurgent's Dilemma: Explaining Variation in Coethnic Recruitment for Counterinsurgency** with **Dr. Dipin Kaur,** Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Relations, Ashoka University.

- The discussion focused on assessing how states decide the ethnic composition of soldiers and security forces in different types of conflicts. The first half of the discussion focused on how the perceived level of threat that states experience determines their recruiting response in different conflicts. The second half of the discussion assessed different conflicts and insurgencies, such as the U.S invasion of Iraq and the insurgency in Punjab from 1980 to mid-90s, to explore how states adapted their recruitment strategies at various stages of conflicts.

- The discussants at the seminar included **Amb. Shivshankar Menon,** former National Security Advisor of India and Distinguished Fellow, CSEP, and **Mr. Sajid Shapoo,** PhD scholar, School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University.

- The discussion was moderated by **Dr. Constantino Xavier,** Fellow, CSEP. Participants of the discussion included scholars from India's leading think tanks and universities and serving and retired officials from the military.

- The Tiffin Talk series features scholars presenting their recent, evidence-based research to peers and practitioners. This series of closed-door seminars seeks to facilitate dialogue between researchers and policymakers on India's foreign and security affairs.

Coethnics as counterinsurgents

Participants discussed how states balance ethnic considerations while deciding the makeup of their security forces in response to conflicts and insurgencies that are specifically based on ethnic lines. Participants assessed the decision-making process of states when recruiting coethnics, people belonging to the same ethnic groups as the insurgents, as counterinsurgents in some conflicts but ethnic outgroups or a combination of coethnics and outgroups in some other conflicts. For instance, when the US first invaded Iraq in 2003, it disbanded the Sunni-dominated Iraqi Army. However,

as the Al Qaeda strengthened, the US adapted its recruitment strategy to mixed recruiting after realising an outgroup Iraqi Army could not suppress the Al Qaeda insurgency.

Participants also discussed the benefits of recruiting coethnics in conflicts: firstly, coethnics are considered most effective from a military effectiveness perspective as they have improved fighting capability. Secondly, they can also enable more local cooperation; and lastly, coethnics bring informational advantages, from an intelligence perspective, which makes them effective as counterinsurgents. However, participants also

addressed the disadvantages of recruiting coethnics such as political backlash and weakened implementation of counterinsurgency programmes. One participant highlighted the "loyalty-efficacy paradox" which states that even though coethnics are more efficient as counterinsurgents due to their local knowledge, states can never fully trust their loyalty towards the counterinsurgency programme.

Threat perception by the state

Participants highlighted how ethnic recruitment processes are affected by the perceived level of threat that the state is facing from the insurgent group. The strength of a state's coercive capabilities is affected by the level of threat from the insurgent group. Participants assessed different levels of threat: the threat level is low when strong states face fragmented insurgent groups, and the threat level is high when weak states face insurgent groups that are more aligned. Furthermore, the discussion analysed the theory which states that low levels of threat equate to higher levels of coethnic recruitment in security forces and vice versa. For instance, the British officials deployed large numbers of coethnics in colonies such as St. Helena where the level of threat was low and lesser coethnics in colonies such as Malaya which was at a high threat level due to the risk of an anti-colonial movement.

To further support the theory of the relationship between perceived threat levels and coethnic recruitment, the discussion highlighted the Indian Army recruitment during Operation Bluestar (1984) against the insurgency in Punjab. The Army opted for employing mixed ethnic soldiers from the Bihar regiment and Parachute regiments instead of coethnic recruitment from Punjab due to the high threat perception. However, in the 1992 counterinsurgent campaign was largely carried out by the Punjab Police due to the weakened threat perception from the counterinsurgency.

Participants also discussed the recruitment strategies in the case of Kashmir. In the initial stage of the conflict, the state perceived a low threat and therefore recruited coethnics. However, by 1993, due to the growing threat, the state resort to mixed-ethnic recruitment where the number of Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) and Border Security Force (BSF) increased.

More variables to coethnic recruitment

The discussion emphasised that recruitment strategies for religious insurgencies differ from that of conflict between ethnic groups such as the Naxalite-Maoist insurgency. Additionally, one participant highlighted the organisational differences between the different wings of security forces such as the Army, the paramilitary, and the police. Since the training of all these security forces is different from the other, they adapt to insurgencies slowly and differently through various recruitment strategies.

Furthermore, one participant highlighted how threat perceptions of different stakeholders such as decision makers, the Army, and the bureaucracy, can differ. Additionally, India has a federal structure which can lead to differing threat perceptions at the centre and state governments. Therefore, participants highlighted the significance of including more variables in addition to threat levels to develop a more robust methodology towards coethnic recruitment during conflicts. Participants emphasised that in order to apply a more complete theory of coethnic recruitment to the entire spectrum of violence over a long period of time, more variables should be considered. For instance, variables such as credible political processes and improved quality of intelligence can also be used as to explain the different coethnic recruitment strategies in 1984 and 1992. In order to conclude the discussion, participants highlighted how no work has been done on the coethnic recruitment strategy of weak states in response to counterinsurgencies. Therefore, it is crucial to analyse the constraints that weak states face in deploying coethnics as counterinsurgents.