

**MAKING MOUNTAINS OUT OF MOLEHILLS**  
**BY**  
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Army Chief General Bipin Rawat has drawn a fair amount of flak for his concluding address given at the recent Centre for Joint Warfare Studies (CENJOWS) and the HQ Integrated Defence Staff Net Assessment organised seminar on “NE Region of India: Bridging Gaps and Securing Borders.” This seminar addressed two issues of great strategic importance, that of border management with Myanmar and Bangladesh and the security of the Siliguri Corridor.

Given the post Doklam scenario, China’s ill-founded but increasingly vociferous claims to Arunachal Pradesh and the growing momentum of the government’s Act East policy, it was creditable, and indeed necessary, for the Armed Forces to focus on such a contemporary topic. It is no secret that over the past seven decades we have been faced with an extremely tenuous internal security situation in the region. A host of ongoing insurgencies and secessionist movements, with issues pertaining to identity, religion and demographic changes as points of contention, has adversely impacted socio-economic development in the region. It goes without saying that however uncomfortable these issues may be, no real movement forward is possible without first identifying the problems and initiating the necessary political steps that can help in their resolution.

It is in this context that General Rawat gave an excellent and very measured address. In his seven-and-a-half-minute speech, the General pointed to the necessity for amalgamating the people from that region into a national identity, despite the cultural, ethnic and religious differences that may exist. He also touched on the fact that Muslims had first settled in the Assam plains in the 13th century, at the same time as the Ahoms. However, the continuing illegal migration from Bangladesh, partially due to pressure on land and partially planned and orchestrated by Pakistan with China’s support is resulting in a

population inversion that will have serious repercussions on the security of the region. There is a possibility that he may have inferred to this trend while comparing the rapid growth of the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), which has support mainly of the Muslim community, with the BJP. Though, to be fair to him, he never made mention of this in these specific terms. The reader would do well to listen to this speech on You Tube (<https://youtu.be/fvMwiSXZ5wQ>) and then draw his own conclusions.

Most analysts who have been critical of the Army Chief's speech have not taken issue with his reference to illegal immigration, though some have expressed skepticism of such a migration being planned. Their primary objection has been at the comparison of the two parties and the unspoken inference that this growth in electoral clout of AIUDF, is in all likelihood, connected to the growing demographic changes being wrought by the illegal immigration into Assam, an inference that may or may not be borne out by facts on the ground. They have further suggested that by commenting on the subject of political parties, he has attempted to steer the military away from its long held ethos of being apolitical and secular.

Thus, it appears to have been suggested that being apolitical, which clearly implies that the military's actions have no political bias, must also perforce require them to be politically unaware? Nothing can be more further from the truth. It is in fact a well-accepted dictum of counter insurgency warfare that if insurgencies are to be resolved, this can only be done through a mutually acceptable political solution, because, to begin with, all insurgencies have a clearly defined political aim. Thus to suggest that the military must only follow orders and do what it is told, aka the "Charge of the Light Brigade", is a skewed and anachronistic concept that has no validity in this day and age. As a matter of fact, it is incumbent on the military to be politically aware of the situation in its area of operations, if it is to operate sensitively and successfully.

It is these outmoded concepts of what the service chiefs may or may not express publicly that has kept them out of our security planning infrastructure for so long. Obviously, the need for the rank and file to be abreast of political matters is directly proportional to the responsibilities they hold. But it is the duty of the serving chiefs to express themselves boldly and candidly on all aspects that impact the success or otherwise of any task that their forces may be required to discharge. More importantly, it is our democratic right as citizens to hear the frank and forthright views of those given the responsibility of protecting our sovereignty and way of life. It is not just for our political leadership to speak on such matters. They can longer be expected to behave as “GoongiGuriyas” of yore. We would then not have lost Haji Pir or let go of 93,000 Pakistani POWs without getting something worthwhile in return on the whims of the political class.

**Disclaimer:** Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS.