

Issues and Challenges of Ethnic Identity Politics in Northeast India

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Abstract

The politics of ethnic identity in northeast India assumed greater political importance. The region has become very sensitive and conflict affected areas due to the growing consciousness and assertion of separate ethno political identity of peoples. It is found that the process of identity formation becomes very active in Northeast region where multi-ethnic groups exist in a political boundary. Northeast India is culminating point of numerous ethnic tribes living in the plains as well as in the hills. Each ethnic tribe has its own culture, history, and identity. The identity assertion of various groups has been articulated through language, culture, politics and it has been marked that there are variation in the degree of assertion among them. In this context this paper is an attempt to understand the issues and challenges of ethnic identity and people's politics in the history of northeast India.

Keywords: Ethnic Mobilization, Identity, Northeast, Politics

Introduction:

The history of the northeast is viewed by different scholars from different perspectives. The ethnic communities are very complex in nature because of their unexplored ethnic identities and diverse social formations. Some scholars argue that there are conflicting situations in the northeast because these ethnic groups are trying to explore and construct their own history, culture and identity that they termed as 'nation from below' or 'ethnic nationalism' or 'ethnic identity politics'. However, the history, culture, identity and politics of the ethnic communities of northeast are debatable in the academic discourse.

Conceptualizing 'Northeast India':

The term, 'northeast India' refers to the eight states- Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Tripura and Meghalaya situated in the Northeastern part of India. The very use of the term 'Northeast India' incites resentment from the intellectuals and the people of the area alike (Bhanwari Sharma, 2012). It is contested on the ground that it is a colonial legacy. Udayan Misra (2000) calls the term, 'northeast' an 'illusive construct'. Sanjib Baruah (1999) argues that such generic location place names have been purposely used as a tool of political engineering because they induce no historical memory or collective consciousness. However, recent article of Thongkhohal Haokip (2011) argues that there is a tendency by scholars and policymakers to club

the whole northeastern states together as 'northeast' and use the term as an analytical category for the whole region. However, the practical relevance of clubbing all the eight states together and calling it the 'northeast' is always contested. In fact, northeast India as a single region has the largest number of the ethnic population in the country. Almost all the regions of northeast have witnessed one or the other forms of ethnic or sub nationalist movements.

It is important to argue that ethnic issues of northeast are related to the geopolitics of the region. Though there are differences among different communities in terms of their cultural experiences, they share common experience of marginalization. A large amount of literature exists on the northeast which seeks to explain the ethnic problems of the region. But there are wide differences in the discourse on explaining the ethnic issues of the region. And the divide in the discourse also gets reflected on the basis of the formation of ethnic identities and the movements in the regions.

Nature of Ethnic Mobilization:

Indeed mobilization of the people of the northeast India on the basis of markers, real or imagined, which they share-language, religion, culture, customs, race, etc. into collective is called ethnic mobilization. Ethnic communities in such situation relate and compare themselves to other ethnic communities and have grievances which they want to get resolved. Ethnic mobilization finds expression in the form of self-determination movements, autonomy movements, insurgency or ethnic conflicts. The tribal of India have been involved in ethnic mobilization for different purposes both before and after independence. They have taken recourse to both the violent and non-violent means. Success or failure of ethnic movements depends on political factors. Once one set of demands in ethnic mobilization is accepted, in due course time on other demands the ethnic movements start. Thus, ethnic mobilization is a continuous political process.

It can be argued that ethnic identity has become one of the pertinent issues in the political discourse of northeast India. Identity formation is a complex process among the various ethnic communities in northeast India. They are struggling for constructing their own identity through the politics of identity. The politics of Identity can be defined as a phenomenon that arises out of shared experiences of injustice and marginalization of certain sections of the society. It occurs when some ethnic groups find themselves as oppressed, marginalized and feel that their uniqueness and distinctiveness are under threat from the majority group. In such situation, there is collective mobilization within the group with a view to secure their distinct identity. Identity politics tends to portray differences and grievances rather than similarities and bonds among groups and individuals. It refers to a process of self construction and self presentation of group traits like race, culture, religion and ethnicity with a view to secure political recognition. Rosalind Brunt (1989) identified it as the politics of 'recognition' and Iris Young Marion (1990) used the term the politics of 'differences'. These two conceptual ideas can be used in understanding nature of the ethnic identity formation among the various communities in northeast India.

The ethnic communities in northeast are always subject to the dominance of the 'other', even when they rebel and rise up. According to them, their politics has always been dominated by 'others'. In this context, Stuart Hall (1996) argues that "Far from the still small point of truth inside us, identities actually come from outside, they are the way in which we are recognised and

then come to step into the place of the recognitions which others give us. Without the others there is no 'self'. There is no self-recognition". In other words, identities take shape over a period of time for varied ends and through varied means. They are historically arrived at, sociologically presented and discursively constituted. This necessitates a reading of the contexts located across cultural, social, political and economic spaces to comprehend what identities are and how they are constituted. However, what is fundamental to all identities is, as Ernesto Laclau and Mouffe (2001) argue, "a process of struggle for recognition from the other. The 'other' could be other individuals, contesting communities and social groups or the State. Politics of recognition bring together identities into a process of mutual reciprocity. In India, identities have been constituted around caste (dalits/Brahmins), gender (men/women); ethnicity or nationality (Assamese/Bodos), language (Hindi/Non-Hindi speaking peoples), class and sexuality (Heterosexuals/Homosexuals and Lesbians)".

In this context recent article of Bhanwari Sharma (2012) explicates the unique nature of the identity formation and complexity among the smaller ethnic communities in northeast India. He argues that smaller tribes have identified with a larger tribal identity for self protection during combats amongst hostile identities. In Manipur, Annals have identified with the larger Naga identity; over arching *upajati* identity was contrived by some tribes of Tripura to fortify them against Bengali domination. The reverse process has happened as well. The Lais and Maras started asserting their identity distinct from Mizo to avoid Lushai domination. Paites are projecting themselves as Zomis and have even supported the Nagas against the Kukis (of which Zomis were a part). Matak, Rabha and Lalung which were quite content with them being a part of the Assamese identity are now striving to establish a distinct identity. The Koch- Rajbongshis of northern Bengal, the Ahom, Karbis of Assam are similarly poised. Social endeavors are either channelized directly into political behavior and if that is not feasible, political ramifications are attributed to such endeavors. Most of the tribes in Northeast India are involved in consolidating their numbers and in strengthening their political followers both from within their respective groups and outside, from smaller groups who by themselves cannot launch such a process. Ethnic identities have been articulated through socio- cultural as well as political movements. The socio-cultural movements harp on the issues of religion, language and script, customs and culture, revivalism and reformation. All Assam Ahom Association, Assam Sahitya Sabha, Naga Club, etc. have all delved on the socio-cultural aspects of ethnicity. However, accompanying the socio-cultural concerns is the political overtone of every movement. Almost all tribes have associations which voice the need for territorial reorganization and political control. Almost all of them aim at the ultimate – ethnic homelands - such is the propensity of this lure, that if not all, most of the tribal groups have militias to back this homeland demand. Indeed, the names of the militias proclaim the names of the ethnic groups they profess to defend, e.g. National Socialist Council of Nagalim, Kamtapur Liberation Army, People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak, Tiwa National Revolutionary Force, Kuki National Front, Zomi Revolutionary Volunteers etc. The state response to these insurgent ethnic movements revolves around counter- insurgency operations, negotiations and peace talks, economic packages and concessions of homelands through territorial reorganization. But the modern state failed to address the issue of ethnic politics rather created ethnic turmoil among the smaller communities in northeast India.

K.S Singh (1982) also explained the nature of identity formation in northeast India. He stated that the political processes in the northeastern hills picked up on the eve of transfer of

power and gathered strength later as the secular and democratic system was consolidated. Old tribes assumed new names, small tribes merged with larger tribes, tribes combined to form new ethnic-cum-territorial identity. Beyond the territorial identity states were created to accommodate tribal aspiration for autonomy. Bhagat Oinam (2008) has identified the three types of identity formation in the northeast. Assertion of nationalism can be witnessed starting from larger communities like the Asomiya and the Bengali to the smaller communities like the Bodos, Kukis, Mizos, Nagas, and Chakmas. He also identified another identity formation among the Muslim communities. But the emergence of Muslim insurgency has been on safeguarding religious identity and interest rather than on ethnicity. Inception of PULF in Manipur, Muslim United Liberation Tigers of Assam (MULTA), The Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, the Muslim United Liberation Front of Assam (MULFA) etc, are clearly based on safeguarding, and asserting Islamic identity. Sanjay K. Roy (2005) has explained the nature of identity formation from the nation from below perspective. He stated that “Nations from below’ in the Northeast are formed on ethnic lines (mostly a tribe in a geographical area, with one name, common heritage, common language, common culture and therefore one identity); an identity formed in countering other identities and expressed in democratic movements, in anti-state armed struggle, in ethnic cleansing and similar actions. The expression that a nation from below does not make a claim for state hood cannot be substantiated by the nature of ethnic movements in the northeast, since the central demand of most of the movements is either to acquire constitutional power over a territory or to create a sovereign state outside India”. But in the case of Nagaland it is different. They demanded Greater Nagaland on the lines of ethnic territory.

Recently many scholars argue that colonial cartography introduced the physical boundary with the interest of colonizing the northeast India. Sanjib Baruah (1999) argues that how colonial political geography reflected the ethnic politics of Assam in the post-independence period (Udayon Misra, 2000). After the British take-over, the boundaries of the Assam of the Ahom age were continuously changed to meet British administrative convenience and, as the experimentation went on; new areas were either added or deleted from the map of Assam. Baruah points out two major effects of this colonial geography and refers to the segregation of the hills from Assam and the colonial assumption that Assam was in actuality an extension of Bengal. Questions of historical or cultural continuity were never considered when the British restructured the boundaries of Assam, and one of the major casualties of this was the Naga raids in pre colonial period on Ahom. Assam had interaction with the British East India Company as early as 1792. The persisting internal conflict led the Burmese to occupy the plains of Assam from 1817 to 1826 and Manipur from 1819 to 1826. At the request of the king of Assam the British defeated the Burmese who were forced to surrender their suzerainty over Assam and Manipur by the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826. Eventually the British rulers annexed the whole region in the subsequent years, the Cachar plains in 1830, Khasi Hills (1833), Jaintia Hills (1835), Karbi Anglong or Mikir Hills (1838), North Cachar Hills (1854), Naga Hills (1866-1904), Garo Hills (1872-73) and Mizo Hills (1890). Thongkholal Haokip (2011) argues that these annexations brought about drastic changes in the polity as well as in the economy of the region, with the gradual decay of feudal institutions and the rise of capitalist economic entities.

Consequently, the historical past throw significant light on the overall discontent and grievances of the people towards the Indian state in the post independent period. The most urgent task for the Indian government after independence was the consolidation of a new nation state.

As national integration was the most pressing of the issues confronting the new sovereign state, any movement that might disrupt the process of integration had to be dealt with stringently, and in some cases oppressively. Moreover, after the India-China border conflicts in 1962, the northeast became a strategic region as regards the national security of India. Any indigenous ethnic movement was considered as “anti-national” and became a “security trouble”. As such, it had to be suppressed. Suppression invited resistance and resistance was countered with more oppressive measures from the state, creating an antipathy among the people, and providing the groundwork for armed confrontation and, furthermore, a growing aspiration for an independent homeland (Kyoko Inoue, 2005). In tracing the causes, it is important to keep in mind how closely the past and present are interwoven and linked together. The deep seated grievances and dissatisfaction of the people over the years, coupled with other factors of localized importance has given rise to the innumerable problems today.

A Discourse on Ethnic Identity Formation:

The population of the northeast consists of the original and indigenous inhabitants together with various ethnic groups. Although there are migrants of long standing that have got integrated into the local population in the historical past. Fascinatingly, each ethnic community of the region not only claims to be unique but also asserts having a long historical past of its ethnicity. However, a closer look reveals that most of the communities as they assert themselves with strong exclusive claims are much more recent than, as early as the British colonial rule in the region. Bhagat Oinam (2008) has briefed the nature of identity formation in northeast. He argues that that “colonial rule has brought major shifts in the sites of political power and emergence of new structures of identities based on these shifts. The import of modernism is one of the packages that came with the colonial power. This has led to a shift in the identity structures in the region. With the bifurcation of the proposed crown colony (India’s northeast as one half and the other half into then Burma) by the colonial powers, and in the subsequent history of dissent, new identities have been formed with new areas as one territory and many different communities as one people. Interestingly, this amorphous also had old identities and territories (in the form of kingdoms) weakened, broken down or reintegrated with the shift in power (such as the Ahoms, Tripuris and Manipuris), and new identities have emerged with claims of politico-administrative legacies (Nagas, Mizos, Kukis etc.)” He also stated very interesting argument by analyzing political formation in the history of the Assam. “Assam has been both the beneficiary as well as victim of these shifts in power. Ahom kingdom got consolidated during the process of ‘Arynaisation’ and its encounters with the Mughals and later with the British. The word, ‘Aryanisation’ suggests that the Aryan people in the course of their peaceful colonization of practically the whole of India met with and overcame opposition from pre- Aryan cultural groups and that the cultural identity of the latter was nearly destroyed and at least a thick surface layer of Aryanism in all its aspects came to prevail. Assam as a modern political entity emerged and consolidated during the British rule in the region. But the state also lost several of its territories in the post independent India. The creation of Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram, carving out of corresponding territories for each of these new political entities (states) out of Assam, led to shrinking, of the state’s boundary. Manipur, too, experienced the same. Manipur not only lost many parts of its territory under the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, but also gained several parts in and around the present Tamenglong district. During the span of a century, the territory of Manipur fluctuated to a considerable degree”. He also stated that: “Naga and Mizo political identities have been nurtured and promoted by the colonial powers leading towards conception of Naga, Mizo, Kuki national identities. The

trend has led to several corresponding claims to establishing a national character of people a land, a territory, a political site of power (state), a world view, and a collective memory through respective histories”. In the contemporary days this trend is not only confined to the Nagas, Mizos and Kukis, but all of them recast their identities with their respective nationhood and corresponding character of a national life”. It is argued that even small identities are searching for their original nationhood in the name of self determined movements in the contemporary days. Thus the nature of identity formation in northeast is always intricate which shapes the cultural behavior of the people.

In the context of colonialism and its administrative impact Kyoko Inoue (2005) stated that during the colonial period and even after independence, the Northeast, adjoining China, has been a difficult frontier region. Throughout the period of colonialism, the northeast India was treated separately and differently from other regions of British India. In the early colonial period, the region formed part of Bengal Province and it was governed as though it were an adjacent subordinate area of Bengal Province even after it became the separate province of Assam in 1874. The colonialism passed the regulation called the Chin Hill Regulation in 1896 for the Lushai Hills which authorized the Superintendent or Deputy Commissioner to order an undesirable outsider to leave the area and to tax the residents, permanent or temporary, clans and villages. The Inner Line Policy was introduced in the year 1873 to certain areas of northeast, especially in the hill areas. In 1928 the Simon Commission came to northeast and under its advice, the categories of excluded areas and partially excluded areas were created. This was enacted in Government of India Act, 1935. Subsequently, the separation and isolation policy of the colonial period created a problem for the national integration of India. As a result a sense of incongruity grew into one of resentment against being made a part of India, and an anti India sentiment emerged among the ethnic groups of the northeast. However, after independence the issues of sub nationalist insurgency and self autonomy movements have been debated by various scholars by highlighting the impact of colonialism. The debatable issues of northeast can be studied less than two major view points: The first viewpoint is ‘Nation-State Building and second ‘Federation Building’. The main advocates of this perspective are S.K Chaube (1969), B P Singh (1997), B G Verghese (1996) and Myron Wienor (1978). Most of these writers do not hail from the region. The first view point argued that the problems of the northeast are related to the issues of “nation state building”; conflict between the new middle classes, especially among the tribal of the region, which has emerged as a result of modernization/development/transition Democratization) with the traditional leadership; inability of the system to meet the rising aspiration of this group. The second perspective is actually the critique of the first one and is available in the writings of the scholars who hail from the region. The principal adherents of this perspective are Sanjib Baruah (1999, 2004, 2005), Udyan Misra (1981, 1988, 2000, 2002), Sanjay Hazarika (1994) etc. They argue that problems of the northeast India arose because the national leadership overlooked the perspective of the people of the region in their quest for ‘nation-building’. In order to build ‘nation-state’ the central government adopted “step motherly” treatment towards the Northeast; ignored the “periphery” and the smaller nationalities; shown arrogant attitude towards them; have been indifferent to the human rights violation in the region. They argue for a “Federation-Building” perspective in place on the ‘nation-state’ building perspective (Jagpal Singh, 2005). The need for a “Federation-building” perspective has been most prominently emphasize by Sanjib Baruah (1999, 2005).

After independence the central government decided to form the new states such as Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura according to the State Reorganization Act, 1971. But the formation of state does not solve the problem of ethnic nationalism. Demands for autonomy still continued in the North Cachar Hills, Karbi Anglong and Bodoland Territorial Autonomous District of Assam, because the expectations of the people were not fulfilled. J. K. Sarmah (year not mentioned) argues that “Reorganization was done as a hurried attempt to curb the trouble situations before it was in full bloom. Granting of state to one community lead to the demand by others and this become a never ending situation. Their demands for autonomy intensified in course of time”. The Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) serve only as a temporary solution for solving the problems of the Northeast region. An autonomy movement for separate states still continues. Thus ADCs of Sixth Schedule are acting as an agency of the Indian state for pacifying the sub nationalist political aspirations and also failed to uplift the ethnic communities as well.

The Assam Movement or Assamese Nationalism played an important role during 1979-1985 in Assam. According to them it was a movement primarily for the deportation of the illegal Bangladeshi migrants from Assam. Though the various ethnic community leaders of Assam participated in the movement and sacrificed their lives for the cause of the purging of outsiders. The question of outsider is a debatable issue in northeast in the context of identity formation. But this movement has created the feeling of hatred among the ethnic groups against the Muslim communities. Many scholars argue that this movement could be branded as ‘bigoted nationalism of the Assamese dominant communities’. Various ethnic communities were used for the interest of the dominant Assamese communities. During this period the tribal and non tribal also raised their voice against the language policy of the Assamese government. They resisted against the Assamese language which sought to make the Assamese as a medium of instruction in schools and also an official language. This was seen as an imposition of the Assamese on the non-Assamese including the tribal and the non-tribes. For instance Bengalis discontent against imposition of Assamese language in Bark Valley and Bodo’s agitation in the present Bodo land. Thus several ethnic communities felt deceived during the Assam movement and resented language policy of the Assam government. As a result the ethnic communities reacted against the hegemonic attitude of the Assamese nationalists. Subsequently, the Autonomous State movements were started in order to demand the separate statehood. These movements could be studied under the banner of sub-nationalist movement against domination of Assam state.

It is very important to discuss the issue of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act because it has been playing a key role in order to suppress the voice of ethnic communities and acting as a hegemonic institution of the state. The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act was enacted in 1958 in order to control the so-called ‘disturbed areas’ the state usually use the term, ‘disturbed areas’. Governor of the State and Central Government are empowered to declare any part or full of any state as ‘disturbed area’ if it is in their opinion that it is necessary to prevent terrorist activity or any such activity that might disrupt the sovereignty of India or cause insult to the national flag, anthem or India’s Constitution. The act has been justified by the security forces by citing the need for armed forces to have extraordinary powers to deal with militancy. However it has been a subject of intense criticism by the civil society, intellectuals and human rights organizations. The government (either the state or centre) considers those areas to be ‘disturbed’ “by reason of differences or disputes between members of different religious, racial,

language or regional groups or castes or communities” (M. Ramakrishnan, 2015). However it has chaos in order to denote northeast. But the term ‘disturbed’ is contested by the people of the region. The state always justified their position by portraying some regions, communities and cultures as disturbed or problematic etc. in order to justify their position in northeast as colonialism did in India. James C. Scott (2011) argues in the context of primitiveness among the ethnic communities or tribal that the ‘hill Peoples’ backwardness is a political choice. Conventional narratives treat these people as backward, barbarous, primitive vestiges of a pre-civilized era. Scott argues this narrative is wrong and instead insists that “hill peoples” are, and have always been ‘barbarians’ by design. Hill peoples sought to position themselves outside the scope of state power. To avoid the state ‘hill peoples’ practice both state evasion and state prevention, which involve the adoption of a distinct set of economic, political, social and cultural practices. State evading characteristics are traits ‘that make it difficult for a state to capture or incorporate a group or appropriate its material production’. State preventing traits are ‘those that make it unlikely that a group will develop internally durable, hierarchical, state-like structures’. Ranajit Guha’s work (1983), *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* also contested the elitist writings that did not see the differences between ‘Crime’ and ‘Insurgency’. He argues that the main objective of elitist agenda/ state is to demoralize the politics of the subalterns by using such derogative language. To Guha, crime tends to be an individualistic or small group-oriented, but secretive or conspiratorial, action. In contrast, insurgency has a mass character which manifests publicly. The two acts derive from two different codes of violence, but since in the overt form the acted violence may be similar, there is an ambiguity in violence as an internal or integral part of insurgency. In the same way the Indian state has been perusing the northeast issues from the perspective of crime and failed to look into the ideological consciousness of the people who are struggling for construction of their identity. They also failed to address the issues while considering the historicity of the region. Thus, the region is always subject to the dominance of the other, even when they rebel and rise up for the reclaiming of their land.

Conclusion:

This paper can be concluded that identity formation among the ethnic communities in northeast locates in the form of self-determination movements and autonomy movements. The people of this region have been involved in ethnic mobilization for the politics of recognition. This is the slogan of the identity politics after 1980s in India in general and northeast India in particular. That is why ethnic identity construction has become a debatable issue in the political discourse of northeast. The issue of ethnic identity is a very complex process. It is argued that the sharing of a common culture on the one hand, and harps on separateness from others, on the other. As a result, the assertion of ethnic identity led to emergence of ethnic nationalism in contemporary days. But it also created a rift not only between the different ethnic groups but also between ethnic groups themselves causing uncertainty and tension in northeast.

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