

## Ethnicity and Violence in Northeast India

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**Abstract:** The politics of northeast India has been marked by ethnicity and extremism in the periods after independence. Emergence and growth of ethnic consciousness based on ethnic identity has manifested through ethnic political mobilization and ethnic movements. The assertion of various ethnic identities and the policies of the Indian state in containing ethnic extremism make the region distinct from the rest of the country. The root cause of ethnic assertion in northeast India can be found in the identity crisis of various tribal communities. This paper is an attempt to understand the ethnic issues which have decisively influenced the politics of all the states of northeast India.

**Keywords:** Ethnicity, Extremism, Nation-building, Identity crisis, Northeast India.

**INTRODUCTION**

The northeastern region is the cultural mosaic of India often called 'miniature India' consisting of diverse tribal communities, linguistic, and ethnic identities. With an area of about 2.6 lakh square kilometer, it is a conglomeration of around 475 ethnic groups and subgroups, speaking over 400 languages [1]. The region, connected to the mainland India with a narrow corridor measuring 28 km on its western side, consists of eight states and has international border with neighbouring countries, namely Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal, China, and Bhutan.

It has been one of the very sensitive regions in the entire Indian sub-continent. The region has been seen as the 'problem child' since the very inception of the Indian republic because it has been facing the problems like insurgency and political violence; reorganization of political boundaries; continued migration from neighbouring countries; the issue of language, cultural identity, and intra-tribal relation; inter and intra ethnic conflict and violence and resultant human rights violations; and capitalist legacy of underdevelopment for decades. In the international scene, it is in a strategic geo-political location linked to South and South-East Asia.

The politics of northeast India has been marked by ethnicity and extremism in the periods after independence. Emergence and growth of ethnic consciousness based on ethnic identity has manifested through ethnic political mobilization and ethnic movements. The assertion of various ethnic identities and the policies of the Indian state in containing ethnic extremism make the region distinct from the rest of the country. The root cause of ethnic assertion in northeast India can be found in the identity crisis of various tribal communities. Most of the ethnic assertions are due to ethnic groups' veiled attempts to protect their identity,

culture and language. This paper is an attempt to understand the ethnic issues which have decisively influenced the politics of all the states of northeast India.

**Conceptualizing Ethnicity**

Ethnicity refers to the ideas of primordialism based on descent, race, kinship, territory, language, history, etc. with distinctions from another group of people sharing certain common attributes among themselves. It is also defined as "the sense of collective belonging to a named community of common myths or origin and shared memories, associated with a historic homeland" [2]. Ethnicity is based on some form of group identity related to a group of persons who accept and define themselves by a consciousness of common descent or origin, shared historical memories and connections [3]. In certain cases, ethnic identity is intrinsically connected with language. Ethnicity is often considered as the outward expression of discrimination – discrimination in access to resources and opportunities [4]. Ethnicity can be classified into two groups - instrumental ethnicity which emanates from material deprivation – and symbolic ethnicity based on one's anxiety to preserve one's cultural identity [5].

In fact, ethnicity is a sense of ethnic awareness. Ethnic mobilization is conditioned by the overall political and economic environment. As the state operates under the laws of market economy within the broad politico-economic environment giving birth to uneven economic development, it widens the gaps among ethnic groups. Therefore, ethnicity is the outward reaction of various socio-cultural groups against the existing politico-economic system wherein either inequality or competition acts as catalyst in mobilizing people on the basis of ethnicity [6]. In other words, the basis of ethnic assertion can be seen in two contexts. Firstly, the tribal communities' subjective consciousness of being excluded, oppressed and marginalized. Secondly, the process of development failed to address the legitimate concerns of the people.

Ethnicity is harnessed as an ideology as well as a device to wrest greater share of power and authority. Growing sense of awareness and modernization increases the levels of competition for jobs and other economic resources among the ethnic groups which precipitate ethnic and social movement based on ethnic boundaries. Further, denial of basic human rights, breakdown of political order, discriminatory economic policy, conflicting theory of modernization are also responsible for ethnic assertion and conflict. As a result, at present almost all the regions and sub-regions of the world have experienced some form of ethnic assertion and tension. The ethnic groups are mobilized on the basis of ethnicity for asserting their rights. Even the developed countries of the west like USA, Canada, Great Britain and erstwhile communist countries provide glaring examples of ethnic mobilization.

#### **Indian Nation-Building process and Ethnicity**

After independence, India's constitutional democracy's nation-building process pursued a policy of accommodation and assimilation to protect the interests of tribal communities by adopting special provisions. The Indian Constitution itself incorporated two schedules for administration of the tribal areas - the Fifth Schedule and the Sixth Schedule. The Fifth Schedule provides for formation of tribes advisory councils in all other states of the country. The Sixth Schedule gives special status to the traditional institutions and makes provisions for the creation of autonomous district councils. In spite of all these accommodations, the people of this frontier region still feel that they are neglected, exploited and discriminated and as such it is portrayed as a 'Colonial hinterland' [7]. The tribal communities of the region are also

confronting with multiple kinds of exclusion and discrimination. All these institutional mechanisms proved to be futile as in the process of nation-building some communities were left out either because of their low numerical strength or due to low bargaining power with the power structure. Though the postcolonial states initiated a number of policies to ensure 'inclusiveness' for the discontented communities, the efforts did not yield much result. While the state is engaging in nation-building through the construction of national identity, smaller identities move in the opposite direction, when they feel that they are about to lose their identity. In this context, various ethnic groups are seeking larger space in state and are trying to protect their peculiar identity. The state initiative to integrate all communities and groups proved to be counter-productive.

The Indian nation-building process has been trying to integrate and assimilate ethnic communities towards the mainstream development process by ignoring their cultural and economic specificities. The centralized planning and the capitalist modernization further lead to the exclusion of various tribal communities from mainstream [8]. The indigenous way of development of the ethnic communities was disturbed by the penetration of the capitalist development leading to underdevelopment, displacement of communities from their settlement and livelihood and erosion of community life. The problem of ethnicity and extremism is further aggregated by the regional consciousness aroused by elites, especially the middle class [9-11]. Again the dominant communities allied with state power exclude certain groups from accessing resources, institutions and opportunities, generating a feeling of exclusion of other groups. In spite of the efforts of the Indian state to integrate and assimilate various ethnic communities in the mainstream national identity, the development process generated a feeling of alienation among them. Moreover, development led to the unequal distribution of resources across the communities and regions. Thus, both non-economic (subjective consciousness) and economic (material) factors created a sense of exclusion among some ethnic communities [12]. In such a situation, smaller ethnic communities assert for resources and opportunities. The assertion of marginalized identities and its extremist posture are giving a new direction to state politics in India.

#### **The Case of Ethnicity in Northeast India**

In northeast India, there are more than three hundred culturally distinct ethnic groups of various

sizes and at various stages of development. There are hill tribes such as the Nagas, Mizos, Khasis, Nishis, Jayantias, Karbis, Dimasa Kacharis etc. and plain tribes like Bodos, Rabhas, Sonowals, Lalungs (Tiwas), Misings, Deuris etc. The tribal communities of northeast India remained virtually isolated from social and political development taking place elsewhere in the country. There was little scope, particularly, for the hill tribals for participation in the electoral processes. However, the tribals of the plains like the Bodos, Rabhas, Sonowals, Lalungs (Tiwas), Misings and Deuris were somehow integrated with both pan-Indian and pan-Assamese nationalism. The Ahoms, Chutias, Koches, Morans, Mataks who are of Mongoloid origin virtually integrated with the Assamese nationality. Another important segment of Assamese nationality has been the upper caste minority Hindus – Assamese Brahmins, Kayasthas, Kalitas, Keots and other low caste Assamese and Assamese Muslims. However, two large migrant groups – the tea garden labourers and Muslim peasants who came from the East Bengal were not well integrated with the Assamese nationality in colonial Assam. Nevertheless, during the colonial period and even after, the Assamese have been the most advanced nationality in the northeast and among the Assamese the upper-caste Assamese Hindus are the most articulate and dominant group in an economically backward, multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-lingual society of the northeast [13].

As a reaction against the domination of Assamese caste-Hindus, there emerged western educated articulate tribal elites in the hills. They acted as opinion builder and motivators of socio-political awareness among the hill tribals. At the advent of independence, they even laboured under suspicion that the rule of ‘white people’ in the hitherto “Excluded Areas” would be replaced by their “more advanced neighbours of the plains in free India” (CAD, XI: 711). By and large the hill elite believed that in a free India the plainsmen would be in an advantageous position to exploit them on a more permanent basis. This feeling of the hills was mainly shared by the newly emerged western educated elite and tribal chiefs. As a measure of meeting the aspiration of the hill people, the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution was introduced which created an Autonomous District Council in addition to other measures for protecting their interest. But gradually the hill elite started realizing that the autonomy accorded to them through this statutory provision was not adequate to safeguard their interest under the Assamese elite dominated administration

[14]. In fact, they became concerned with their oppressed status in the Assamese elite dominated undivided Assam. As a matter of fact, there was a compulsion on the part of the hill elite to agitate not primarily because of the threat to their own ethnic identity, language, tradition and culture but because they felt that their individual right in the political sphere was virtually threatened. Indeed, the personal ambition of the hill elite was very much involved in the Hill State movement in the sixties which aroused the tribal sentiment in the hills against the Assamese. Subsequently, the demand for creation of hill states in the northeast had to be conceded. As such in the post-colonial period the hill tribals became increasingly conscious of their distinct identity which they utilized for the purpose of fulfillment of political aspiration.

Again, the Assamese ruling class was not much concerned with the problem faced by the plains tribals in the periods after independence. The plain tribals - the Bodos, Misings, Sonowal-Kacharis, Deuris, Rabhas, Tiwas etc. has been experiencing the problem of land alienation, poverty, indebtedness, unemployment and political oppression. Therefore, in post-colonial Assam some of the groups, particularly the ethnic communities, who considered themselves as a component of the larger Assamese society and had assimilated with the Assamese, has been trying to revive their own identity and demands have been raised for political autonomy because of their oppressed status and hatred against the caste Hindu dominated Assamese ruling class [15]. Although the tea garden labourers and immigrant Muslims have virtually accepted their own oppressed status and the dominant position of the Assamese caste-Hindu elite, the autochthon tribals and other ethnic groups are not prepared to accept the dominance. This feeling manifests in the movements for distinct identity launched by the ethnic groups under the leadership of their respective emerging educated elites. The intolerant attitude of Assamese ruling class and opinion builders of Assam further deteriorates the situation. It refuses to recognize the small communities as nationalities and the assertion of identity by the ethnic groups is viewed as a threat to the Assamese nation-building process [16]. Therefore, since the late sixties of the last century, the plain tribals became more conscious and articulate about their distinct ethnic identity and started utilizing their distinctness as a measure of gaining political power, and removing their socio-economic backwardness. The issues of language and culture and other primordial factors came to be articulated in the wake of emerging conflict between the

elites at various levels. The conflict of interest generated by a sense of deprivation and negligence motivates the elites of the ethnic communities to bring about emotional integration of their respective communities so that they can fight against the dominant community. Thus, the elite tend to generalize their conflicts and build up movements mobilizing their respective communities politically.

## CONCLUSION

In view of this, India's Northeastern region has been experiencing ethnic assertions ever since the independence of the country. The process of proliferation of ethnic movements is so rapid and continuous in this region that it is really difficult to find parallels in human history. These movements are threatening to destabilize the existing social and political arrangements leading to serious inter-ethnic conflicts. Many of these are taking recourse to extra-constitutional methods and in certain cases some section are resorting to violent means. These kinds of inter-ethnic conflicts adversely affect the rights and freedom of the individuals. Contemporary politics of northeast India is replete with such interference. In most cases the organizations representing interests of a particular community are totally intolerant of the efforts of other communities of the area at organizing themselves or expressing their views. In situations of inter-ethnic conflicts communities violate rights not only of the members of other communities but also they trample the individual rights of the members of their communities. Nevertheless, the existing conflict may be removed to some extent by mobilizing the masses of all sections far beyond the interest of dominant elite of the communities as well as to end exploitation of the Indian State.

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