

Conceptualizing Ethnicity in the Context of Northeast India

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Abstract :

Northeast India is a politically vital and strategically vulnerable region of India. Ethnic uprisings, militancy and continuous political mobilizations based on ethnic identity are a characteristic feature of the area. This article analyses the various definitions and approaches of the term 'ethnicity' in the context of Northeast India.

Index Terms - Northeast, Ethnic Identity, Ethnic Mobilization.

I. INTRODUCTION

Ethnic identity is the pivot around which much of the politics of North-East India revolves. Identity aspirations have influenced, inspired and mobilized the communities in pursuit of self-government, autonomy or independence. North-East India provides instances of multiple forms of manifestations of ethnic identity. Hence there is a serious need to comprehend the different aspects and dimensions of ethnic identity.

1.1 Ethnicity Defined

The term ethnicity is derived from the Greek word 'ethnos' which means 'heathen' or 'pagan.' [1]

From mid-fourteenth century to mid-nineteenth century, the term was used in this sense. Aristotle in his 'Politics' used the term to refer to foreign or barbarous nations. [2] Ethnicity today is synonymous with the ideas of primordialism based on descent, race, kinship, territory, language, history, etc. Ethnicity is defined as "the sense of collective belonging to a named community of common myths or origin and shared memories, associated with an historic homeland." [3] For Paul R Brass, 'any group of people dissimilar from other people in terms of objective cultural criteria and containing within its membership, either in principle or in practice, the elements for complete division of labour and of reproduction forms an ethnic category.' [4]

Ethnicity also refers to 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. [5] Ethnicity is a sense of ethnic identity. [6] It creates internal cohesion and differentiates from other groups. [7] 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. [8]

II. ETHNICITY IN THE CONTEXT OF NORTHEAST

Ethnicity may also refer to the sense of people hood or we feeling shared by members of the group. Any group that shares this feeling is an ethnic group. It also involves "the claims and demands for recognition and status as a superior group or as a group at least equal to other groups." [9] The mobilizations of Bodos, Hmars, Kukis, Dimasas, Tea tribes are all demands for such recognition.

Ethnicity can be of two types- homeland societies and diaspora communities. Ethnic groups belonging to homeland societies are the long time occupant of a particular place. They claim for a moral right to rule themselves on the basis of historical and archeological evidences. Diaspora communities, on the other hand, are people who have migrated and settled in a foreign land either after undergoing oppression in their homeland or in search of better livelihood or for any other reason. [10] They do not generally claim for self rule. Instead their demand focuses on an equal status and role in public sphere with an opportunity to preserve their culture. The ethnic demand for homeland created a number of smaller states in the northeast. For instance, the greater Assam was divided into Nagaland (1963), Meghalaya (1972), Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram (1987) to meet the demands of these ethnic groups. However, mere making of territorial boundary did not solve the problem; on the contrary, it further aggravated it. Every ethnic group aspired for such territorial homelands. The demand for greater Nagalim amply illustrates the vexed issue of territorial exclusivity to fulfill the claims of Nagas into areas beyond Nagaland as Naga diaspora exists there.

Ethnicity is often considered as the outward expression of discrimination – discrimination in access to resources and opportunities. Such "discrimination is built into the normal operating procedures of institutions." [11] The Sixth Schedule in the Indian constitution seeking to safeguard the rights of tribal population through the formation of Autonomous District Councils is a case in point. It has become a bone of contention between various ethnic groups vying for autonomy. The creation BTAD (Bodoland Territorial Autonomous District) and ensuing violence and displacements of the Bengali muslims from the area outlines the problems associated with institutional protective discrimination.

T.K. Oommen identifies six reasons for the process of ethnification. First, a nation may continue to be in its ancestral or adopted homeland and yet it may be ethnified by the colonizing or native dominant collectivity. The Bodo mobilization can be seen in this perspective. Second, the denial of full-fledged participation in the economy and polity to an immigrant collectivity

which had adopted a new land as its homeland. The ethnification of Tea Tribes of Assam falls in this category. Thirdly, the tendency on the part of a settler collectivity to identify with its ancestral homeland even after several decades, sometimes even after centuries, of immigration. Fourthly, ethnification also occurs when a state attempts to 'integrate' and homogenize the different nations in its territory into a common people. Fifthly, if those who migrate to alien lands are denied basic human and citizenship rights even when they become eligible for them, they are ethnified in that they are treated as strangers and outsiders. The fear of the Bengalis after the Assam Movement and the IMDT Act of 1983 was palpable. It led to the politicization of their identities. Finally, even when immigrants are accepted as co-nationals by the host society, the former may not want that identity and might wish to return to their homeland. [12]

This phenomenon of ethnicity may be viewed from two broad perspectives- Primordial and Instrumental.[13] From the Primordial point of view, ethnicity is a 'natural' and 'given' phenomenon. Every individual carries with him some attachments derived from his/her place of birth, kinship, religion, language and social practices which are natural to him, spiritual in nature and provide a basis for an easy affinity with other people from the same background.[14] Thus, the core of such attachments are rooted on descent and do not evolve as result of social interactions. As a function of (myths of) 'common blood' shared within each ethnic group, primordialists anticipate hospitality and cooperation among members of the in-group and hostility and conflict against out-groups.[15] Because ethnic differences under primordialism are ancestral, deep, and irreconcilable, ethnic conflicts arise inevitably from 'ancient hatreds' between ethnic groups and 'mutual fear' of domination, expulsion or even extinction. Thus suggesting that conflict between various ethnic groups are inevitable by their very definition.

Instrumentalists, on the other hand, believe ethnic identity as a socially constructed phenomenon. For them, ethnic conflict does not emerge directly from differences in ethnic identity. Rather ethnic conflict arises only when ethnic identities are politicized or manipulated to generate political and socio-economic advantages for an ethnic group at the cost of depriving or neglecting other ethnic groups. [17] It is the "creation of elites who draw upon, distort, and sometimes fabricate materials from the cultures of the groups they wish to represent in order to protect their well being or existence or to gain political and economic advantage for their groups as well as for themselves." [18] According to them, the process of ethnic identity formation always involves competition and conflicts among the elites for political power, economic benefits and social status both within and among different ethnic groups.

Ethnic consciousness, according to Paul R Brass, can occur only when there is some conflict either between indigenous and external elites or between authorities and indigenous elites. He mentioned four types of ethnic conflicts, such as, between local aristocracy attempting to maintain its privileges against an alien conqueror; between competing elites of various religious groups, between religious elites and native aristocracy of different ethnic groups and between native religious elites and an alien aristocracy. [19] Thus, the two approaches emphasize different factors as responsible for the formation and persistence of ethnicity and ethnic identity movement. The primordial approach emphasizes on mobilization of the groups in defense of their established beliefs and faiths based on their customs and traditions, while instrumentalist approach considers ethnicity as the creation of elites to reap and perpetuate their socio-political interests.

III. CONCLUSION

The study of the ethnic movements in Northeast India exhibits both Primordial and Instrumental approaches. The NNC's call for independence in 1946 combines both these elemental approaches. The ethnic identification of various tribes under the umbrella of 'Naga' to thwart the process of assimilation by the Indian mainland manifests the cultural belonging as well as the creation of elites to reap and perpetuate their socio-political interests.

The ethnic movements launched by the Asomiyas, the Bengalis, the Nagas, the Kukis, the Khakis, the Garos, the Mizos, the Bodos, the Karbis, the Kokboros, are now well known. Many smaller groups with somewhat blurred culture markers are also now beginning to assert their identities. Some are even busy in inventing their own identities. For example Matak, Rabha and Lalung of Assam for a long time have been a part of the Asomiyas community that emerged during the six hundred years of Ahom rules in the Brahmaputra valley. But now these communities are busy reviving their traditions in terms of religious practices and languages etc in an effort to establishing their identities distinct from the Asomiyas.

The creation of smaller territorial units acceding to the demands of the dominant ethnic community in a region often threatens the existence and survival of numerically less ethnic communities as the positions and jobs and resources are monopolized by the dominant ethnic group. The Hmar problem in Mizoram and the Garos disadvantageous positions in accessing resources and positions in Meghalaya are such examples forcing them to arouse ethnic feeling and violent mobilization. While the making of territorial boundary satisfied the dominant ethnic community, it created despair for the minority ethnic economic communities.

Most of the conflicts have been waged to assert for a different ethnic identity, culture, political empowerment, optimal utilisation of resources and to ensure protection of ethnic minority rights. The political goals of the armed conflicts have differed, ranging from demands for greater political autonomy, more transparent political rights and institutional structures to outright secession from India..

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