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Identity politics in northeast India

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Abstract---India's Northeast has long been risen by protracted armed conflicts for secession and movements for other forms of autonomy. India's Northeast, the confederation of eight states (i.e, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura) is home to around 200 indigenous communities. All these communities struggle for recognition by the Indian government and have their own respective struggle for identity. This paper examines how various brands of identity politics since the colonial days have served to create the basis of exclusion of groups, resulting in various forms of rifts, often envisaged in binary terms, majority-minority, sons of the soil-immigrant, local outsiders, tribal-non-tribal, hills, plains, inter tribal and intra-tribal.

Keywords---identity, politics, social exclusions, recognition, ethnicity, culture.

Introduction

India's North-eastern region consists of eight states and is a 'mixed bag' of several ethnic groups geographically, the region covers an area of approximately 263,000 sq.kms. (8 percent of the country), and its population is about 4.56 crores (3.77 percent of the country as per 2011 population census. Around three-fourths of the region's geographical area are covered by hilly terrain, and majority of the population (around 85 percent) lives in villages, rural areas in poverty, in the midst of abundant resources, the region is mired by a series of intractable conflicts. In the recent past, it has slowly shifted towards inter-ethnic feuds and rendered more viciously by the ongoing amoebic multiplication of ethnicities in an already prodigiously heterogeneous region. The overall socioeconomic structure of Northeast India is also characterised by inadequate transport and communication facilities, limited industrial activities, high unemployment, limited educational facilities and low per capita income. Strident ethno-nationalistic assertions over the land and resources and articulation of grievances in terms of the 'others' have given rise to contestations over the same space shared by multiple ethnic groups. Tacit assertions and explicit demands for hybrid identity based exclusive homelands are accentuating the latent sociological fissures into apparent fault

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lines and often lead to ethnic cleansing and extermination of the smaller groups or politically weaker section of the society. The Northeast India region has in this way become an epicentre of ethnic conflict, identity conflict, armed conflict and violence in the country.

Colonial Impact and Genesis of Early Ethnic Consciousness

The British Colonisation process of Assam started in 1826 and ended in 1898. The colonial regime, at the beginning, resorted to the policy of non-intervention in most of them larger Assam. Two administrators, J.H Hutton and N.E. Parry advocated for separation of hill areas from general administration scheme. In 1873 was introduced "The Inner Line" in hill areas beyond which no person could pass without a license. Local tribes-people resisted colonial interference in the midst, and thus they often attacked the British. Their resistances were depicted as 'raids' and 'uprisings'. There is a long chronology of such resistance. The Lushai-Kuki, Manipuri and many plains Assam tribes raided British posts in 1860-90, 1891 and 1892-1894 respectively. There are records of Aka/Khamti resistances – 1835-1839, Naga resistances – 1835-1852 and even an agrarian movement in 1893-94. The Sonaram (1902), Kuki (1917) and Jadonang-Gaidiliu movements symbolised early ethnic struggles. By allowing missionary activities, association with the Christian missionaries and gradual spread of education among the tribes and other communities infused a sense of self esteem. This factor is crucial to understand the birth of ethno nationalism eventually among the Nagas, Mizos, Bodo Kachari, Miri and Deuri were the first to demand "Ethnic representation". In the long history of this region the feelings of in group-out group perceived marginalisation, and "minority consciousness" have variously surfaced as key factors causing ethnic unset.

Ethnic Edentity and Conflict

A conflict is ethnic if the contender's identity themselves using ethnic terms, and there is evidence to suggest that the "control of the state is a central ethnic conflict objective". First, the instrumentalists view ethnic conflict being driven by either the relationship between economic wants – greed and grievance or the active manipulation of ethnic identities by political leaders for their political gain. Second, the constructionists attributes it as a product of historical processes over time the results in divergent ethnic identities and hostility between them. Thirdly, the primordia list theory stems from ancient hatreds between ethnic groups and that frustration comes with differences in natural ties that derive from religions, racial or regional connections.

On the eve of Independence of India, several ethnic groups had variously made effective use of the factors of ethnicity and regionalism as basis of ethnic rage, and democratic struggle for self rule, greater autonomy and militant actions. The more assertive tribes who consistently rebelled against their incorporation within the new Indian nation-state such as the Nagas and Mizos ultimately succeeded in attaining status of 'state load' and greater economy. Outside the hills, the Ahom's (who formed the Ahom league) in the wake of 1935 Act) and the Bodos (by forming PTCA) had consistently Raised the questions of 'tribes self rule' right from colonial era. The All-Assam Ahom Association (formed originally in 1893) was

perhaps the earliest ethnic association of its kind. From the 1980's onwards, virtually the entire Northeast was plagued by various ethnic movements. Most of the movements were non-violent in earlier stages, but gradually assumed severe militant nature. In the seven states of the Northeast India, reportedly, more than 30 insurgent groups operated, carrying on protracted armed struggle. Among them, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM, NSCN-K) and the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) remained prominent ones. Their demands ranged from autonomy to outright secession. In recent years, the Indian state has had considerable success in achieving stability in the region, using tactics from negotiations to military operations to root out militants. They even joined hands as early as 1989 forming the Indo Burmese Revolutionary Front (IBRF), which consisted of NSCN, ULFA, KNF (from India) and Chin National Front (Myanmar). In the Manipur Hills, the most power defiant groups besides the NSCN are UNLF-(Meghen), PLA, KNO, KNF, KNA, KDF and KFC. The Kuki-Naga conflict rocked the state on Manipur in the early 90's.

The Tripura National Volunteers' anti Bengali Violence, the Reang minorities struggle for Autonomous Council etc. All rocked Northeast India since the early 1990s. In Assam, there is a long history of incursion of outsiders, emigration and resettlement in Assam. It is said, fear within the native Assamese community of being overwhelmed by the unabated influx of illegal Bangladesh migrants from across the porous border triggered off the long-drawn "Anti Foreigner mass uprising 1979-1985". Spearheaded by the All-Assam Students' Union (AASU). It ended by arriving at an agreement, Assam Accord-15th August 1985. The Accord fixed 25th March 1971 as the cut off date for detection and expulsion of the illegal foreign migrants.

Cease Fire and Peace Accords

Note worthy peace initiatives were undertaken during the 1960s and 1970s involving several militant outfits of the region. However, it was during 1994 that several underground organisations came 'over-ground' and surrendered before the government authorities' particularly in Assam, Meghalaya and Mizoram. The signing of peace accord usually implies an acceptance of both parties to terminate armed conflict. Hence, Peace Accord is the formal agreement between warring parties, which addresses the disputed incompatibility, either by setting all or part of it, or by clearly outlining a process for how they plan to regulate the incompatibility.

- 16-Point Agreement with the Nagas-1960.

In June 1947, an agreement, known as the 9-Point Agreement, was concluded between the Naga National Council (NNC) and the then Governor of Assam to install an in term administrative arrangement for the Naga Hills District. Ironically, it did not materialise as the term of the agreement were thereafter contested by both sides. Initially, the central Government was willing to grant limited political and economic autonomy under the sixth schedule of the constitution of India. The offer was not only rejected, but also led to the commencement of the first armed rebellion against India. In the meantime, a group of intellectuals of the Naga community who wanted a negotiated settlement with India within the country's constitutional

framework formed the Naga Peoples convention (NPC). Initially, it insisted for the constitution of a single administrative unit comprising Naga Hills district of Assam and Tuensang Frontier Division of Northeast Frontier Agency and accordingly, unit of Naga Hills – Tuensang Area was constituted in 1957 comprising Kohima, Mokokchung and Tuensang districts. Consequently, the NPC put forward an additional demand to elevate Naga Hills Tuensang Areas into a state. Once again, the demand was accepted by the government which came to be known as the state of Nagaland came into being.

- Shillong Accord with The Nagas, 1975:
In 1975, six Naga Leaders calling themselves the 'Representations of Underground Organisation' signed an agreement with the Governor of Nagaland, at Shillong popularly called the Shillong Accord. They acted at the behest of a faction of the NNC. Accordingly, they agreed to abide by the constitution of India and surrendered arms. It was also agreed to that they should get reasonable time to formulate other contentions issues for discussion for final settlement. As expected, it was rejected by another fraction of the NNC for what they call 'selling the Naga Nation'. They said that no members of theirs were involved in signing this Accord.
- Mizo Accord 1986:
The two-decade old armed conflict in Mizo (Lushai) hills district of Assam came to an end in 1987. When the demand for the reorganisation of states on linguistic basis gained momentum in the 1950s, in different parts of the country, the Mizo union demanded a separate state comprising Mizo-inhabited areas of Mizo hills district. The States Reorganisation Commission turned down their demand. The Mizos protested when the Assam Government declared Assamese as the official language for official communication in the state in 1960s. Around this time, a severe famine, known as 'Mantam' occurred in the Mizo Hills due to the exponential increase in rat population during bamboo flowering season. This damaged crops on a large scale. Relief works carried out by the government agencies was inadequate causing widespread discontent among the Mizo people. Several voluntary organisations came forward to help the famine affected people. Among them, the Mizo National Famine Front did exceptionally well in providing food to the affected people. Consequently, it dropped the word 'Famine' and became a political party in 1961, seeking an independent homeland for the Mizos. They later transformed into armed group, the Mizo National Front (MNF). Subsequently, the group declared independence from India on 1st March 1966. This district was eventually declared 'disturbed area' and led to the imposition of the Armed Force (Special Powers) Act of 1958. Consequently, as a measure to contain conflict, the government initiated negotiation with the MNF. Around this time, the Mizo District Council, an elected legislative body of the district, remind the demand for a separate state, which the central government partially accepted their demand by elevating the district into a Union Territory of Mizoram in 1972 and also promised to upgrade Mizoram into a state. After signing of the peace accord between the MNF and the Central Government in June 1986, Mizoram became a state in 1987.
- Bodo Accord, 1993 and 2003:

In the 1960s, the Bodo, one of the largest ethnic groups in Assam, began the agitation for inclusion of Bodo language as a medium of instruction, followed by the demand for the introduction of Bodo script in education in the 1970s. Their persistent movement compelled the Assam Government to grant Bodo language the status of an associate official language from 1984, which geared a movement for separate state spearheaded by the All Bodo Students' Union. The movement came to an end after signing a peace accord in 1993 popularly known as First Bodo Accord between the government (Central and Assam Government) and leaders of the movement to constitute an autonomous region within Assam to grant extensive home rule powers through a 40 members Bodoland Autonomous Council. An interim executive council was constituted in May 1993 which led to several Bodo Volunteer Force militants to lay down arms. The leader of the movement floated the Bodoland People's Party. Unfortunately, failure to demarcate the exact boundary of the autonomous region coupled with an intense infighting among the leaders derailed all the efforts and hence led to the revival of another phase of the movement once again. The resumption of the statehood movement was also resurrected armed conflict led by the Bodo Liberation Tigers, constituted by former Bodo Volunteer Force militants in 1996. It denounced the first accord and demanded a separate state. Thus, another peace accord known as the second Bodo Accord was signed in 2003 with limited autonomy within Assam under the Sixth Schedule of the constitution. The region is now technically known as the Bodoland Territorial Areas District (BTAD) comprising for contiguous district of Kokrajhar, Baksa, Udalguri and Chirang.

Conclusion

Cultural differences and incongruity sharpened the ethnic boundaries and generated cleavages along ethnic conceit, leading to inter ethnic discord. Ethnic unrest in Northeast India is as old as the country's independence. Diversified culture, ethnicity, religion etc. All paved the way to the race of identity and recognition through violent paths by forming insurgency groups, ethnic clashes or through constitutional ways. Influx of refugees in the region, suspected fear of linguistic – cultural subjugation, economic negligence, social exclusion, and minority syndrome, all paved the way for political unrest in the region. Poor government have also been a major problem. Monitoring of the implementation of peace accords also requires special attention. The people's concern for various perceived threats to their anxiety for preservation of culture and language and their demand of autonomy cannot be seen as dysfunctional for a Healthy Civil Society. Therefore, problems of struggle for identity in Northeast India should be fixed by the government.

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