



## Ethnicity in north-east India: A challenge to identity

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### Abstract

North -East India has been occupying a unique position in Indian politics. This multi ethnic society comprises the states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and the Himalayan State of Sikkim. North East India, the entire region is an area which is a house of many internal strife and conflicts. Pending border disputes, insurgencies and terrorist problems, resources sharing disputes are some common problems which have made this region quite turbulent. North East India is home to large number of ethnic groups who came from different directions at different historical times. These groups belong to different racial stocks, speak different languages and have varied socio-cultural traditions. However the alienation of ethnic people in different socio-economic and political sphere led to the emergence of ethnic assertion and ethnic conflict in northeastern region. An ethnic group is a group, whose members identify with each other, through a common heritage, often consisting of common language, common culture, common religion and an ideology that stresses common heritage or endogamy. Ethnic group within a diverse society may vary from one another in terms of numerical strengths, political inclination, socio economic connections, impact of national affairs and communal cohesion. This relationship face setback when there is the essence of distrust, disagreement, contest and inharmoniousness. The tension of ethnic conflict emerged through the feeling of deprivations and unreturned expectations towards communities concerned. This insight is normally associated with the feelings of political, social, economical and cultural insecurities and apathy. The **methodology** of this paper is based on secondary sources such as Published book, journals, reports, articles, newspapers and online sources. In this paper descriptive and analytical method has been employed.

**Keywords:** ethnicity, identity, ethnic conflict, politics, language

### Introduction

Ethnic conflict in its outmost form is looked as large scale violence, sweeping insurgency and ultimate civil war resulting in massive death, devastation, agony and affliction. Such type of perpetuated condition may intensely undermine and derange the social order leading to political-economic break down<sup>[1]</sup>. The concern of ethnic conflict in Indian society has touched different parts of India. The usage of the term “us versus them” connoting one community against another or community against state<sup>[2]</sup> has accelerated the concern of ethnic violence. This ethnic conflicts and insurgency is however said to be motivated by politically constructed antagonism in India especially Assam. North East India is home to large number of ethnic groups who came from different directions at different historical times<sup>[3]</sup>. These groups belong to different racial stocks, speak different languages and have varied socio-cultural traditions. However the alienation of ethnic people in different socio-economic and political sphere led to the emergence of ethnic assertion and ethnic conflict in northeastern region. In Northeast India various ethnic groups are now posing serious threat to the political stability and national integrity of India for the sake of preservation of their own distinct identity. Moreover ethnicity is highly politicized and it has become an instrument of politics. In politics, organization or mobilization of people is very important. Unless people are not organized they will not be able to share the fruits of politics and hence they will

remain economically underdeveloped. On the other hand organization or mobilizations on the ground of ethnic symbol are very easy. Thus ethnic groups play a very important role in Politics. The northeastern region witnessed the issue of ethnic conflict and therefore is called conflict ridden area. The ethnic clashes that took place on the basis of ethnicity were Kuki-Naga ethnic clashes (1992-1998), Meities Muslims (1993), Kuki-Paite(1997-1998), Chaksesangs-Tangkhuls(1995-1996)<sup>[4]</sup>.

The tension of ethnic conflict emerged through the feeling of deprivations and unreturned expectations towards communities concerned. This insight is normally associated with the feelings of political, social, economical and cultural insecurities and apathy<sup>[5]</sup>. In Assam, ethnic violence took place in linguistic form in post independent period. The first riot on language started in 1960-61 before and after passing of the Official Language Bill by the state assembly<sup>[6]</sup>. The second riot of language movement out broke in 1972, when Gauhati University and Dibrugarh University decided to introduce Assamese as the medium of instruction in the collegiate level<sup>[7]</sup>. This resulted in violent inter-ethnic clashes between ethnic Assamese and Hindu Bengalis leading to massive deaths and destructions in the state. Assam, having a favorable economic growth and development has attracted economic opportunities resulting in mass migration from Bangladesh o India, especially Assam. This led to the immense flooding of people from Bangladesh and ultimately

threatening the job, employment, identity and language of native Assamese making the state overcrowded. Despite of accusations of Assamese leaders against the central government as well as dominating political parties for ignoring the Assamese demands, the conditions of migration is still unfavorable. These shades of ignorance of demand resulted in numerous “sons of soils movements” in Assam since 1970s. The flow of foreigners within Assam has increased the tension and conflict between Assamese and Bengali Muslims in the mid of 1980’s<sup>[8]</sup>. This tensions has taken the shape of more violence under the leadership of the NDFB( National Democratic Front Of Bodoland) and the ULFA ( United Liberation Front of Assam). Apart from linguistic issues of ethnic violence, the state has also underwent through another form of ethnic violence between Bodo and Santhals (early 1996), Karbi- Kuki and Dimasahamr(2003), Karbi- Dimasa (2005), Garo-Rabha (2011), Bodo-Muslim (2008 and 2012) and so on<sup>[9]</sup>.

Ethnic conflict has become a common phenomenon in India, since independence wherein ethnic factor has played central role in the Indian Politics for gaining political power. Political parties have been dually using ethnicity for their own political gains. On one hand, culture, language and ethnic sentiments are politicized by the political parties to ignite ethnic conflicts. And on the other hand, the technique of politicization is used to resolve ethnic violence. Political parties use ethnic conflicts in real or imagined sense to appeal to pride, historic achievements and current injustices to win elections and gain power. The political parties and ethnic leaders greatly use racial-ethnic identity questions, culture and linguistic questions to appeal to their respective fellow ethnic groups. The political parties nominate those individuals as ethnic leaders who enjoy high standing in their ethnic constituencies such as Chandrababu Naidu in Andhra Pradesh, Late Jayalalitha in Tamil Nadu and Prafulla Kumar Mahanta in Assam. The communal ethnic group had led to the organization of different sub-national political identity movements on the basis of language and culture within the region of North East India<sup>[10]</sup>. Politicisation at one time, inhibits the growth of ethnic consciousness among the ethnic groups regarding their own rights and existence, but at the same time its extremity in politics worsens the situations therefore increasing the politics of identity crisis and sub-nationalism in Assam<sup>[11]</sup>. In northeast India, the demand for separate identity is very high for which various ethnic, linguistic and religious groups undertook numerous movements such as identity movements, autonomy movements, secessionist movements etc.

#### **The grounds behind the politics of diverse types of movement in north east India are**

**Presence of manifold ethnic groups:** North east India is rich in diverse ethnic groups having peculiar historical and structural background passing from one generation to another. Therefore for the preservation and the upliftment of their ethnical and cultural uniqueness the groups have been consistently involved in conflict like situation.

**Historical Legacy:** Historically Northeast India was never a part of Indian Union. Before the arrival of Britishers this

region was rule by Raja’s or Maharaja’s. It was from 1826 that the region came under British control. Therefore after Independence of India various ethnic groups started to develop a sense of regional or separate tendency due to their past history.

**Economic Underdevelopment:** The uneven growth of development as well as underdevelopment in tribal as well as plain areas of North East region of India. It is however asserted that the national mainstream has ignored the North East status vehemently in terms of providing sufficient economic resources for their development. It is alleged that despite of contributing a large sum of national earning through exporting natural resources they are not getting enough for their development in return for it. Consequently the ethnic groups such as Karbi, Kuki, Dimasa, Bodo, Naga, Mizu are in continuous conflict and disappointment with the national mainstream sometimes leading to the demand of autonomous status<sup>[12]</sup>.

**The attitude of the people:** The attitude of the people of plain areas towards the people of hill tribes of east Assam has been perceived to be discriminatory and big brotherly in nature. Therefore a condition of unlikeness and conflict aroused between plains people and hills people on the basis of differences in language and culture leading to the foundation of separate states like Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya, etc.

**Linguistic identity crisis:** Assamese language was imposed on the tribal people of North East India through the implementation of Assam State Language Bill (1960). The bill has ensured the safeguard of Assamese identity based on Assamese language. This imposition of Assamese language has threatened the identity of hill people and was therefore afraid of being dominated by people having Assamese identity<sup>[3]</sup>. The bill has bothered the hill elites as they were linguistically different from Assamese speaking people. These disturbances led to the separation of Nagaland in 1963 by reducing the territorial size of Assam. Likewise, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh got separated on the basis of language.

**Illegal Immigration:** The continuous inflow of foreigners to the North East India has led to the politics of identity movement by ethnic groups. The national as well as international migration in North East India since British colonial period to present time has increased the insecurity level of local inhabitants. Despite of taking certain measures for the deportation of the foreigners, the risk of demographic imbalance, economic scarcity, political havoc and unemployment remain a common occurrence. The insecurity of various ethnic groups for losing their distinctive identity has resulted in ethnic violence and conflicts.

**Developmental Projects:** The displacement of the tribal people due to globalization and developmental projects has evicted them from their own inhabited area. They face major loss in terms of their land, livelihood, and identity without receiving any compensation or any alternative for acquisition and requisition of their land. Education among various ethnic

groups has brought consciousness and awareness regarding their backwardness and deprivation in respect of social, economic and cultural context. To preserve their ethnic identity numerous movements have been undertaken by the aboriginal people of North east India. Besides the emergence of educated middle class elite, poverty, and unemployment, attitude of the government are also responsible for the emergence of ethnic assertion and conflict in this region.

**Ethnicity and politics:** Language, culture and religion are directly connected with the emotions of the people so these issues are being used as an instrument of politics. In Assam, Bodo, Missing, Tea Tribes etc are organized and mobilized to create ethnic conflicts in order to preserve distinct linguistic identity. Political deprivation among various groups of north east tribes has resulted into a feeling of regionalism among ethnic groups instead of nationalist feeling. They thought that without political power, economic development is not possible. Therefore they are trying to involve in politics. Like language, religion is also very sensitive issue and politicians are not far from doing politics under the banner of religion. Besides the fear of losing own cultural identity, socio economic and political deprivation, various ethnic groups started secessionist movement and some become insurgent. Therefore it can be said that identity assertion of the ethnic people and politics on the basis of ethnic symbols are the two sides of the same coin in northeastern region.

### Conclusions

It is not possible to remove ethnic assertion entirely from our society because every group tries to preserve their identity. Therefore there ought to be a need to protect the identity of all ethnic groups instead of removing the identity of each and every group keeping the feeling of nationalism intact. Role of government in providing equal status and recognition to all ethnic groups, role of civil society in the spreading of nationalism rather than extreme regionalism, and peaceful negotiation with insurgents and secessionist group will positively help in avoiding ethnic conflict in northeastern region. In last few decades the politics of north east India is progressively designed by the politics of identity through religion, language, culture, region, caste etc. Therefore it is pressing need for the central and state governments to take positive steps to resolve these identity issues.

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