

Inter-Ethnic Conflicts in NE-India: The Hmar-Dimasa Case

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Cleansing the Other

THE SCENE OF conflict in most of the States in NE-India is reflected in the breakdown of public order and the deterioration of inter-community relationships. The rise of ethnically biased attacks, assaults and related offences is steeply on the rise and one is puzzled as to whether it should be explained in the light of ethnic claims and assertions or from the perspective of a total collapse of humanitarian concerns. Ethnically biased insurgencies in NE-India demonstrate a shift, from appropriation to State and its machineries, to inter-ethnic issues of self-determination and as a result one observes that ethnic claims and contests of groups seem to centre around cleansing of the 'other'. The basic initiative for conflict resolution or peace making process springs from, ironically, not in settlement of demands with the government or authorities but by re-settling the terms of inter-ethnic negotiation.¹ It is more ironical when the State is invited as a facilitator in the process of inter-community dialogue. In a context of bourgeoisie democracy like India, it is extremely difficult to study the subtle play of class and caste interests in such anarchic loosening of violence and the fickle change of sides by the actors of the conflict. A settlement of terms or an opening up of a space for dialogue between communities usually takes the form of a strategy of containment if not a strategy of disengaging the insurgent groups from targeting 'others'. A more rational step towards peace initiative amidst such a climate of unrest has been through a public denouncement of violence by the people in lived experience of violence and therefore this develops a sense of urgency in bringing an end to the cycle of violence

and counter violence.² A resolution of conflict of the outstanding issues of contention becomes an issue of legitimation, which makes it possible to break the stalemate that arises out of disagreement on political and economic perspectives between the parties. What emerges from our reading of the conflict in the various States of NE-India is that there is a possibility of a creative engagement in dialogue and negotiation between parties in conflict. In a multilateral engagement between insurgents, governments at local, State and national levels, social organizations, individuals and others, what is focused upon is a many angled reading of various political and social developments, each of which present something new and different. There is no way in which the multitude of shades of reading could be reduced to a single dominant and overwhelming idea of conflict and its resolution. A look at a few States in NE-India would explain the nature of the conflict between the State and the parties involved in ethnic or insurgent claims.

In the case of Assam, operations recently carried out against the ULFA in Bhutan has opened up a rethinking of the whole issue of 'sovereignty' and 'national identity' from a more engaged position, namely, whether to treat the Indian State as a friend or as an enemy or emphasize on 'democratic alternatives' by committing oneself to dominant discourses of citizenship.³ An apparent defeat of ULFA during army operations renewed some sympathies with them, but an overall rethinking on issues of Assam's sovereignty prevented something like SULFA phenomenon, while it aggravated greater insecurity and human rights violation at the micro-level operations of insurgents and the government. On the front of Bodo insurgency, a significant section of insurgents sans NDFB have come back to the mainstream. It has become an imperative to prove the sincerity of the government on the ground by implementing provision of peace accord signed with Bodo Territorial Council (BLT). But creation of BLT without taking into account aspirations of communities like Koch, Santhal and other non-Bodo communities created a political upsurge of organized protests against BTC. The peace process initiated in Bodo areas entered into a phase of internal dissent from non-Bodos, as they felt neglected. On the public to civic sphere of Assam, the rise of frustration among the youth and the students largely belonging to Assamese middle class has erupted into urban ethnic violence against Biharis, apparently in protest against possibility of recruitment of 'non-locals' in third and fourth grade of railway jobs. This presented a different dimension of organized public violence refusing to be neutralized as long as the central government does not declare a preferential treatment to the locals alone.⁴ To add to this already nuanced and complicated scenario of violence, inter-ethnic clashes such as Hmar-Dimasa clashes were carried on with a vengeance

on both sides proving the limitations of government's claim to maintenance of public order. To worsen the already ravaged scenario in North Cachar Hills district of Assam, the eruption of Kuki-Karbi clashes in Karbi Anglong and consequent upon that the exodus of Khasi-Pnars from Karbi Anglong gave a blow to the fragile inter-ethnic situation of Assam. In all such cases of inter-ethnic clashes, an increasing desperation and distance between communities requires a re-building of trust and direct redressal of grievances of one community against the other.

National Liberation and Inter-Ethnic Conflict

In the context of Nagaland, the much hyped 'peace process' in Nagaland revolves around three major issues: (i) greater Nagalim, (ii) reconciliation and unity between various Naga factions, and (iii) powers and authorities to be re-drawn once NSCN(I-M) lays down its struggle against Indian State. Although none of these three issues concern sovereignty or secession from India, what it points to is an actual framework of sharing power and a greater accommodation of Naga interest within the federal structure of Indian Union. But the major achievement of peace-making process is that various Naga factional civil society organs have been made a part of a comprehensive dialogue. Such a dialogue has considerably improved mutual self-understanding and strengthened the grounds for a negotiated settlement of the vexed Naga problem. But the major point of contention between Nagaland and Manipur over the inclusion of Naga inhabited districts of Manipur within greater Nagalim still remains unsettled. The Assam assembly has already passed unanimous resolution debunking the idea of inclusion of Naga inhabited areas of Assam within NSCN(I-M)'s proposed Nagalim. Also the clashes in Golaghat district of Assam in evicting the encroachers from the Assam side of Nagaland border has already spilled a lot of bad blood between Assam and Nagaland. One can notice here a competition of ethnic hegemony based on a notion of territory and ethnic homogeneity. This is symptomatic of a past that involved fragile inter-ethnic habitat in border areas, lack of homogeneity between various distinct linguistic and cultural groups within a generic identity like Naga and linguistic division of States. In the case of Assam-Nagaland border dispute, the politics of encroachment by Nagas of Mokukchong and the fear of border villages being claimed by greater Nagalim centre on linguistic demarcation of state boundary. In fact it opens a Pandora's box of repeating the whole linguistic politics of 60's and 70's with an increased competition for ethnic and linguistic homogeneity and claims of territoriality. Especially, creation of pockets of homogeneity within the

habitats of other communities and then claiming such territories as part of a larger homeland has become a part of agenda for national recognition.

In contrast the Meghalaya, insurgent groups such as HNLC and ANVC are currently operating in two different parts of the State. HNLC is mainly concentrated on Eastern Meghalaya, while ANVC operates from the West of Meghalaya. This division of territory between two insurgent groups is based upon the assumption of an imaginary boundary drawn between two linguistic groups within the same State. The government attained quick success in disorienting and weakening HNLC, while ANVC with active support from ULFA is still carrying on its struggle for a separate Garo homeland. Although attempts to establish peace with ANVC has now achieved success, still civil society's initiatives for peace with ANVC has brought in a compulsion for the government to address issues concerning deprivation and backwardness of Garo Hills. The initiative to establish peace with ANVC repeatedly broke because of the irredentist approaches taken by two major political parties of the State, namely Cong (I) and NCP (Sangma), once again based on their respective support bases divided on ethnic lines.

In the case of Mizoram, although the Chief Minister Zoramthanga is himself involved in dialogue with the Centre and various insurgent groups of the region, his own State is witnessing inter-ethnic clashes centred around issues of citizenship and legitimate right of inhabitation by smaller ethnic groups such as Brus, Hmars, Paites, etc. The relationship between Mizos as the dominant ethnic group and these smaller groups is often getting clouded into a mist of distrust and suspicion. The Bru National Liberation Fronts' demands for autonomy and legitimate citizenship of Brus in Mizoram are still awaited, although government of Mizoram, in principle accepted their demands. The failure of the Hmar Autonomous Council at Serchip is another pointer to Mizoram's failure to settle the ethnic differences in its own State. At yet another level various segments within the Mizo community such as Paites, Baites, etc. are expressing their dissonance over discrimination as compared to Lusheis and therefore they are giving rise to a discourse of difference. One could visualize early signs of ethnic discord in Mizoram, which needs immediate attention and mitigation. Peace making process or conflict resolution in the region, therefore needs to address specific questions of ethnic differences along with long standing issues of self-determination.

Hmar-Dimasa Conflict

The Hmar-Dimasa conflict in Cachar and North Cachar Hills is yet another offshoot of inter-ethnic conflicts discussed here. A few important

points to be noted in this conflict are that the Hmars and Dimasas have been residing in these areas for several decades. The root of the Hmar-Dimasa ethnic feud can be traced to February 24, 2003, in the abduction of three important members of the Dima Halam Daogah (DHD) a rebel group active in the area, by cadres of its former ally the NSCN (I-M) faction. This abduction, as reported from various sources, was carried out with the help of Hmar rebels of the HPC-D (Washir Hussain, 2008). In this context, it may be mentioned that the relationship between the NSCN (I-M) and the DHD had become bitter on account of two reasons – one, that the NSCN (I-M) had demanded greater tax on the extortion booty collected by both the groups or otherwise, from Dimasa inhabited areas. The second reason for the bitterness is the DHD's claim to Dimapur as a cultural traditional site of their demand for 'Dimaraji'. In this context, the selection of the HPC-D group as an ally by the NSCN (I-M) seems to be a strategic arrangement to hit back their long time ally DHD, now turned enemy (*NE Times*, June 22, 2003). This attack by the HPC-D, on the instigation of the NSCN (I-M) further led to a string of retaliatory attacks by the Dimasa armed group. On March 3, 2003, Dimasa militants, said to be cadres of the DHD – a group that had entered into a ceasefire with the government in 2002 struck back by kidnapping three Hmar farmers. Two days later, on March 5, 2003, armed Dimasas attacked two Hmar villages in North Cachar Hills district (adjoining Cachar district where the March 31, 2003 killings took place) forcing nearly 800 Hmars to desert their homes and flee to Lakhipur, on the Assam-Mizoram border. Again on March 26, Dimasa rebels launched fresh attack on some Hmar villages in the area and ordered the Hmar people to leave North Cachar Hills or face dire consequences. These attacks and counter-attacks culminated in the latest massacre that has worsened relations between the two ethnic groups that are concentrated in these southern Assam districts. A closer look into this conflict reveals an interesting phenomenon in the nature of their conflict. Both these groups are tribals, small in number residing in areas inhabited by other ethnic majorities like the Bengalis from East Pakistan or Sylhet. The 1991 Census put the total population of Dimasas in Assam at 65,104, and the Hmars at 11,189. Apart from the immediate instigations and provocations by NSCN (I-M) the latest inter-ethnic attacks is seen as a claim to 'homeland' and territorial supremacy. It is also seen as a problem of land alienation – a pattern to change from tribal community ownership of land from *jhum* cultivation to private ownership for settled agriculture. A common property resource had suddenly become the cause for conflict fuelled by consumerism. Thus, one also sees an economic dimension to this conflict in an ethnic community shifting from a tribal past to a consumerist present of liberalization. Added to the cultural and economic aspects of the conflict discussed

here, is a religious dimension whereby the Hmars are Christians mostly and the Dimasas Hindu. Such a situation is a very convenient site for religious fundamentalists to add fuel to the fire.

As a result the situation of inter-ethnic conflict has become extremely murky increasing the possibility of full scale ethnic riots in the under-protected and sensitive areas. To sum up, several factors have contributed to this uneasy climate. First is the alignment of rebel groups that are at play in the local conflict, in this case, the Hmar rebels and the NSCN-(I-M), second is the turf war between the two ethnic groups, backed by rebel outfits claiming to represent the respective communities; and finally the entire conflict has assumed religious overtones.

An easy comprehension of the nature of the conflict and the parties involved in it has been complicated by the faxed statement of a unheard group. While the police was convinced that the HPC-D was behind the previous week's killing of the Dimasa farmer, a less known group called Hmar People Defence Wing (HP-DW) claimed to have carried out the March 31 2003 massacre, and not the HPC-D. The groups' self-styled commander, Hmar Hnam Santu, said in the statement that a group of DHD militants barged into a church in North Cachar Hills district while a service was in progress, – "The DHD militants molested churchgoers, snatched away their offerings and forced them to bow down before them saying that they were more powerful than the Almighty", a local media report quoted Santu as saying. Such confusing statement has added to the problems of security forces battling violent insurgencies and ethnic conflagrations in this State of 26 million people.

The ethnic riots between the Bodo and the Adivasi Santhal communities in the western Assam since 1996 have already drained the State exchequer, besides tying down army, police and paramilitary troupes in a vast stretch in the States' western parts. More than 100,000 displaced people belonging to both the Bodo and Santhal communities, are still living in so-called relief camps, in sub-human conditions. It may be mentioned here that the Hmar-Dimasa conflict has also resulted into a Pnar-Jaintia exodus from Cachar and North-Cachar as the Hmar outfit suspects the Pnars to have alliance with the Dimasas. The forced exodus of the Pnar-Jaintia communities, through ultimatum and life threats have created pressure of population influx in the Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya, now added by the forced out Pnars from Karbi Anglong. An interesting feature to be noted here in this true or untrue alliance of the Dimasas and the Pnars is that the Pnars in the Cachar and North Cachar Hills are mostly Christian converts.

Wide Angles of the Conflict

Therefore the Hmar-Dimasa conflict is an interesting case of inter-ethnic conflict having its bearing on other communities. Such an interesting case of strategic alliance and conflict has necessitated a fresh look at the study and understanding of inter-ethnic conflict in this region. What is to be noted here is that the insurgent outfits struggling for attaining rights of the community embark into protecting the community from other antagonistic community(ies). Two things are significant in this context: firstly, a locally confined support base of an ethnic insurgent group is victimized and displaced by insurgents of another community and secondly, ethnic insurgency involves a neo-conservative component of fighting the 'other'. In case of Hmar-Dimasa, conflict between insurgents of two groups over their areas of supremacy and *by dicto*, claims over territory that includes the other communities opens up a front against the other, a diversion from fighting against the State, the common enemy. The critical question is, how far does such internecine conflict strengthen the agenda of the state in repressing ethnic insurgencies? An answer to this question could be located by identifying the current state of insurgent groups in North Cachar and Cachar hills of Assam. As far as HPC-D is concerned, they have remained armed but they do not voice an agenda for homeland after they placed the demand for 'development council' for themselves in Southern Assam district of Cachar in 1996. In North Cachar hills they could not attain the minimum developmental rights, not to speak of a Council or something of that sort. In a sense the Hmar demand for autonomy remained un-addressed by the State and it didn't receive any support from the dominant Dimasas. Rather they became suspect since the time the Hmars had attained some amount of autonomy in Cachar that prompted the Dimasa organizations to distance themselves from Hmars. The Dimasa insurgent outfit went a step further in thinking the Hmars to be an obstacle in attaining homeland for Dimasas. This alienation of Hmars got its heightened expression in DHD asking Hmars to leave North Cachar hills since 1999. Since then, the close relationship between Hmars and Dimasas started getting strained by incidents of extortion, threats and manhandling of Hmars by Dimasa militants. Politically, the HPC-D got into intervening into such cases of harassment of Hmars making them take an oppositional position in relation to DHD's demand for Dimaraji. HPC-D toughened its stand of opposing Dimaraji causing DHD to react strongly against HPC-D. Such an internecine rift and a politics of response and counter-response between HPC-D and DHD culminated into bloody clashes. The State fully capitalized such instances of clash in perpetuating the rift between the two ethnic groups and then repress them eventually.

In the post-riot situation, what has eventually cropped up is the need for an impartial inquiry into the events that led to the massacre of Dimasas and the involvement of various Hmar outfits in it. Although the Government of Assam has ordered for an impartial inquiry in February, 2003, no culprits so far have been brought to book. Even the alleged cases of burning of Hmar villages by the DHD and cases of torture and killings of Hmars needed to be inquired into by an impartial inquiry. But the State, in no way is sincere in unravelling the actors and factors behind such genocidal events. In a sense the State is sheltering and harbouring such killer gangs by delaying the outcome of inquiries and by keeping in dark, facts that resulted into such unfortunate killings.

Killings and counter-killings between Dimasas and Hmars have led the ethnic insurgencies to a path of exclusivist and xenophobic politicking. Such a diversion from the cause of ethnic identity assertion to clash with one's immediate neighbouring ethnic group marks a substantial dilution of ethnic insurgency and turns it into a tool of hegemony of one ethnic community over the other.

From Homeland to a Figure of Adversary

If all these ethnic clashes are based on a search for territorial superiority and hegemony, how does one reconcile with the loss that one suffers by being on the receiving end? In Hmar-Dimasa clashes, the political legitimacy of Dimasa claims of a homeland gets shrouded by killing of Dimasas in Cachar district of Southern Assam, an off-centre of the struggle for homeland. The conflict shifted to Cachar from North Cachar as Dimasas attacked two Hmar villages adjoining Cachar district. As a retaliation, the HPC-D operating in Cachar attacked the village *Kachurthal* adjoining Mizoram border inhabited by Dimasas and killed 23 innocent Dimasa farmers and left several people injured. This shift of a site of revenge and retaliation in an apparently different locality is the latest form of politics of ethnic insurgency. It becomes a case of revenge outside one's proposed homeland that shows *how revenge is a part of politics of self-determination*, while at the same time it is a strategy of restraining the other. This is a kind of overcoming the limits of one's own politics of self-determination that is tied only to claims of homeland and a return of the other in an-other terrain. The self-other relationship operates at a deeper level of inclusion and exclusion in an-other terrain like Cachar. If Dimasas are enemies to Hmars in their own North Cachar, they can become enemies of Hmars in an-other terrain, not lying at the centre of their politics of homeland. This is also how the other (HPC-D) establishes itself as a superior political force by making DHD realize its failure to protect its own kinsmen outside their area of influence. As

DHD can't face HPC-D in Cachar, the HPC-D restrains DHD from committing acts of violence on Hmars in North Cachar. For a displaced community like Hmars from North Cachar, HPC-D's killings of Dimasas in Cachar might appear as penalization of Dimasas, but the fact remains that Dimasas of Cachar are in no way involved in committing violence on Hmars of North Cachar. Further HPC-D's failure in restraining DHD in North Cachar and DHD's failure in restraining HPC-D in Cachar are entries of an un-balanceable balance sheet of ethnic self-determination. The State as a third party further displaces the balance sheet away from conflicting communities by way of allowing them to balance revenge from both sides. This is a decentring of self-identity by the politics of revenge that requires figures of persecution that tries to deny the other its otherness: *Hmars are denied their distinct self-identity within North Cachar by the Dimasas and Hmars need the figure of persecution in Dimasas in order to face their own inquisition in states of Mizoram and Manipur.* This results into playing of a politics of guilt and culpability and creating an adversary in rival political and social elements, an ideological construction of the other in somebody in proximity. Further, the politics of self-determination decentres itself in crystallizing and consolidating itself through its other, who is constantly separated and brought in to surround every political act by a figure of adversary.⁵ The grand assumption is that the adversary is working on behalf of the State better than their own political programmes and hence a group that attempts to protect the interest of their own community needs to draw its agenda in which the possibility of violence on the other could be encrypted. To sum up, it could be said that the Hmar-Dimasa conflict demonstrates the fact that the politics of self-determination encrypts an agenda of violence on the other and fails to establish a meaningful dialogue with the other.⁶ Further if the claims of self-determination is mediated by the State and the other, how does the self-determination ensure one's own people who are not subjects of political production, rather are subjects who can cognize themselves in their self-identity both from inside and outside.

NOTES

1. S.M.Dubey, "Inter-Ethnic Alliance, Tribal Movements and Integration in North-East India" in K.S. Singh (ed.) *Tribal Movements in India*, Vol.1 (New Delhi: Manohar, 1982): 8.
2. Sukalpa Bhattacharjee, "State, Insurgency and (Wo)Man's Human Rights: Two Cases from the North East India" in Ranju R.Dhamala

- and Sukalpa Bhattacharjee (ed.) *Human Rights and Insurgency: The North-East India* (New Delhi: Shipra, 2002): 136.
3. Sukalpa Bhattacharjee and Prasenjit Biswas, "The Outsider, The State and Nations from Below :North East India as a Subject of Exclusion" in Kousar Azam (ed.) *Ethnicity, Identity and the State in South Asia* (New Delhi: South Asian): 234-39.
 4. Rafiul Ahmed and Prasenjit Biswas, *Political Economy of Underdevelopment in North-East India* (New Delhi: Akansha): 114.
 5. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (ed.), *Religion* (Stanford, California: Stanford university Press, 1998): 123.
 6. See Washir Hussain, "Assam: A New Rebel Turf War", *South Asia Intelligence Review Weekly Assessments & Briefings*, Vol.I, No.38, April 7, 2003.