

## Chapter 16

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# SOCIO-ECONOMIC ASPECTS OF ETHNIC IDENTITY IN NORTH-EASTERN INDIA\*

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Ethnic identity is the subjective and symbolic use of certain elements of culture by a group of people to differentiate themselves from other groups. It involves claims to higher status as a group in relation to the other groups. Such self-conscious groups develop their own criteria for inclusion into and exclusion from the group. The use of ethnic identity for pursuing group interests is ethnicity which may be articulated in particular contexts at a particular time. In the initial phase of ethnic mobilization primordial identities are constructive but in subsequent phases the same identity turns into an instrument to seek political and economic advantages.

Identity formation is not the function of a single process. Various endogenous and exogenous forces influence building ethnic affinities and attachments that make identity formation a complex process. While primordial elements such as race, language and religion provide institutional frame, the cultural perception of the community towards other groups leads to the crystallization of identity. In a multiethnic society, the reaction to challenges arising out of attempts by the dominant groups towards assimilation, growing economic competition among different ethnic groups and developmental processes enforced by the state reinforce identity formation. Moreover, the whole process gets a fillip when emerged middle classes

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politicize issues of language, culture and even religion to their advantage. Thus identity formation is not the outcome of a single identifiable factor. Multiple factors come together to give rise to identity consciousness. That being the case, identity formation is a historical process the character of which is determined by time and space.

The phenomenon of ethnicity has been analyzed in terms of social approaches. The primordialist approach believes ethnicity as 'given' and takes common descent and culture as the basis of identity formation. The reconstruction of the past and showing its relationship with the present is the most common pattern of identity consolidation according to this argument. Another approach known as 'cultural-pluralist approach' refers to the co-existence of different groups in a society with incompatible socio-cultural structures, belief systems and value patterns. Under the condition, one group is dominated by the other often leading to the situation of conflict. The subjective perception of one group about the other remains different and articulation of such a perception for asserting group identity constitutes the basic assumption of this approach. The third major approach takes up modernization and development as its central concern and argues that ethnic affinities are residual phenomena. They would be dissolved with the expansion of the capitalist market. There is still another perspective which says that ethnic conflict arises from the broader political and economic environments, not from the cultural values of the ethnic groups. This approach emphasizes that ethnic conflict is the result of interactions between leaderships of centralizing states and elites from non-dominant ethnic groups. The Marxist approach, on the contrary, treats ethnicity as a reactionary impulse as against the growth of class consciousness. As such, ethnic consciousness is taken as 'false consciousness'. However, this approach can interpret racial and ethnic inequalities within the framework of dialectical epistemology.

The other related concept, multiethnicity may be briefly examined here. Multiethnicity is a historical fact and is a reality for most of the countries in the present world. Groupings and collectivities based on racial, religious, linguistic and regional

identities have extensively grown dissolving ethnic homogeneity of a great number of countries. Population shift and migration have added to the diversity. A close look at the prevailing discussion on multiethnicity shows that the term is usually perceived negatively. It is viewed as a danger to the territorial integrity of a state. But to my understanding, it is not a challenge to the survival of states with multiethnic population. History affirms that states have not only existed but progressed faster with numerous ethnic groups. The people of different ethnic groups have lived together peacefully in one state and strengthened each other with mutual advantage. This multiethnicity is neither a risk factor nor a hazard to the integrity of states.

However, multiethnicity may grow into a grave challenge to the system if the latter fails to accommodate the legitimate aspirations of various ethnic groups. In a situation of multiethnicity there are sections of people which do not form part of ethnic majority. Under such a structural condition, it is possible that even justifiable rights of minorities are ignored and neglected. Their lawful demands and genuine grievances are overlooked more often under the pressure of the ethnic majority. As such smaller ethnic communities remain under the constant threat of deprivation and discrimination.

Moreover, in a multiethnic state, minorities are apprehensive of majority's attempt towards assimilation. There is a constant fear about the loss of tradition, culture, language and even religion of the smaller communities. The oft-repeated idea of 'mainstream' is highlighted by dominant groups to pressurize smaller identities to assimilate to the larger whole. Historical grounds are constructed to show the linkages among various ethnic groups on the one hand, and dominant groups on the other.

## II

This paper is an attempt to examine some correlations between socio-economic processes and ethnic identity in the context of multiethnic situation in North-Eastern India.

Whenever and wherever India's north-east is discussed today, the reference perpetually remains terrorism and

growing ethnic violence. Sometimes Naga-Kuki conflict comes into focus and in the very next moment continuing influx of people from outside the country becomes the topic of discussion. The recent issue of settling the Chakmas and the Hajongs outside Arunachal Pradesh has already assumed significance particularly in the context of National Human Rights Commission's observation on the question. In all these wranglings tribal-non-tribal/ insider-outsider antagonism invariably occupies the central place. Actually, in these debates the ground realities of the region are either ignored or camouflaged. The portrayal of the north-east today is more mythical than real.

The North-East India stands out for its unique ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious diversity not to be found in any other region of the country. A large number of scheduled tribes with different religions, with one fourth of all the languages and dialects spoken in the country and strong impact of topographical features on identity formation have multiplied the heterogeneous composition of the region.

The ethnic heterogeneity of the region unfolds a complex feature based on distinctive historical experiences. Out of the seven states as many as four—Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland are not only tribal majority states but their culture and economy have features remarkably different from the tribal pockets elsewhere in the country. The three other units—Assam, Manipur and Tripura have a majority of non-tribal plains population but even in these states, the tribal population is substantially more than the national average. However, the similarity among these seven states in terms of numerical strength of ethnic groups does not reflect uniformity with regard to their socio-economic settings and the levels of economic development.

Compared to the other parts of the country, the colonial incorporation of the north-east started much later. While Manipur and Tripura were independent principalities maintaining relations with the British since the late nineteenth century, the colonial ruler annexed Assam in 1826 and subsequently the Naga, Mizo, Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills. The North-East Frontier Area came under its control in the

second half of the nineteenth century. Under the colonial dispensation certain areas were either 'excluded' or 'partially excluded' from the purview of the then prevailing administrative and statutory control over land and forests. However, an attempt was simultaneously made to utilize the natural resources by establishing links with the process operating outside the region. Under the condition the extension of market links, introduction of money, entry of government officials, traders, moneylenders and shopkeepers created a situation under which the vested interests from outside could grab land through alienation and control. The plains areas primarily inhabited by non-tribals were brought under revenue arrangements that were prevailing in other parts of British India while the tribal dominated hill areas remained under customary land system.<sup>1</sup>

Although by the middle of the nineteenth century, the substantial part of North-East came under the overall control of the colonial authority, no strong linkages were established with the outside market except in the case of tea plantations. The regional economy thus remained out of the orbit of the capitalist path and the people continued to lead a life of relative independence, the problem of poverty and destitution notwithstanding. The dominant mode of agricultural practices in tribal areas characterized by swidden cultivation coupled with a feeble link with the emerging capitalist penetration restricted the transformation of the internal dynamics of the tribal social settings. The strong ties of kinship, the communitarian control of land and the associated social network provided a solid base for building ethnic identity among the hill people. The relative absence of differentiation within the community was the foundation on which social cohesion and group identity could survive making self help and community sentiment relevant and functional to the community. Given the context of agrarian social structure and localized political authority and administration, it is not difficult to ascertain why the vast majority of the tribals in North-East could substantially protect their control over land, preserve their dialects and sustain their democratic structure of social and political organization unlike tribal communities elsewhere in the country. The people no doubt negotiated

and sustained their survival strategies in the most uncertain and unfavourable structural conditions but there was no direct threat to their demographic balance and social and cultural systems.

However, the situation started changing swiftly in the subsequent phases of its history. Assam opened up for tea plantation by the middle of the nineteenth century and afterwards exploitation of natural oil, coal, and forests developed at full speed. Such changes in economic activities brought a large number of immigrant labour to the area. While agriculture was almost stagnant due to the slow growth of indigenous population, new economic activities absorbed mainly outsiders. Under the circumstances, indigenous peoples' control over local resources began to decline and the process of land alienation commenced. Simultaneously, the arrival of Christian missionaries and the spread of Christianity in tribal areas during the later part of the nineteenth century not only introduced organized religion but brought about change in the life of the people through the church programmes in the fields of education and health. It was also due to the work of the Christian missionaries that linguistic consciousness emerged particularly in the tribal areas. However, the most significant development during this period was the emergence of educated modernized elite. The constitutional developments during 1920s and 1930s synchronized with the growing political consciousness in the region. The Government of India Act of 1919 provided for declaring the tribal areas as "backward tract" and the Act of 1935 as "excluded areas or partially excluded areas". Only some selected areas were allowed to send representatives to the Provincial Legislature before 1947. The attempt to turn the North-East region into an independent political entity separate from India under the Coupland Plan failed on the eve of independence.

It is apparent from the foregoing discussion that there is some amount of historical continuity in the ethnic issues being raised in North-East today. There is an element of continuity in the tension between centrifugal and centripetal forces between pre-independence and post-independence scenario.

Independence has thus marked the widening of difference between nationalism and ethnicity.

My contention, therefore, is that the phenomenon of identity and its manifestation in deteriorating inter-group relations are rooted in the nature of socio-economic development of the area. Identity is not formed instantaneously but it is the product of a historical process determined by forces unleashed by articulation of social, cultural, economic and political forces. Thus there is no uniform pattern of identity building. It depends upon situational contexts and manifests different sets of characteristics. Moreover, individuals and groups possess multiple identities but out of these the one which suits most to the demand of the given situation generally gets manifest. Numerous expressions of loyalty then follow but not in a fixed order.

Initially, the process of identity formation in North-East was based on the idea of large group formation. Attempts were made to bring several smaller tribal groups together to project a unified identity. Just after independence, the term "hill people" was made popular which was projected as a collectivity comprising hill tribes from different areas of the region. But such an identity could not sustain for long. Another attempt in this direction has been to develop generic terms to include various groups located mainly in a particular geographical territory. The Naga and the Mizo are the suitable attempts that come to mind immediately. Both these ethnic groups consist of several tribes each having distinct dialect, well demarcated territory and ostensible socio-cultural system. However, religious and racial elements have played crucial role in bringing them together. A similar attempt was made in Assam when expansive definition of Assamese identity was provided by showing that Assamese society was formed by assimilating tribals and Aryans. A 'discourse of inclusion' has been an important dimension of identity formation.<sup>2</sup>

But such a fusion of groups and collectivities may not be stable due to inherent contradictions and the process of fission sets in under the impact of new forces of change. As such small group identity assertion follows. The emerging situation among the Mizo comes in handy. Several smaller groups, till

now forming part of the larger Mizo grouping, have started asserting their separate identity by calling themselves by different names such as Zomi, Zou, Mara, Hmar, etcetra. Among the Nagas uneven pace of economic development among various tribes has led to growing competition among them causing simmering discontent and tension towards relatively developed and larger groups. A counter discourse of the tribals and some other smaller non-tribal groups in Assam against 'inclusion' in larger identity has already a long history now.<sup>3</sup>

It is required to be noted at this stage that by using ethnicity, ethnic groups articulate their demands for increased share in political power, more opportunities for economic well-being and protection of their culture and tradition. As such, these groups function as economic interest groups. Identity is thus adaptive strategy of ethnic groups under the condition of multiethnicity.

Although there is a broad consensus among scholars on the origins and course of the phenomenon of identity in North-East but no adequate attention has been paid to economic and social factors. To my understanding, the deteriorating inter-group relations in the region is primarily reflections of undergoing socio-economic forces which eventually manipulate political and communal situation.

### III

Let me briefly discuss the nature of developmental strategy adopted in tribal areas of North-East. The most significant aspect in this context is a hiatus between the proclaimed policy and adopted programmes of development undertaken in the region. While both the national and the regional planning authorities have recognized the historical specificities of the North-Eastern situation, they have failed to adopt suitable alternative strategy that could develop the region without disturbing its ecological balance and peoples' psychology. There is essentially no difference in the strategy adopted here and in the other parts of the country. The central goal of development policy is to use natural resources of the region and almost all programmes are in tune with this objective.

However, its total impact in terms of improvement of economic condition of the people has not only been minimal but more often unfavourable. What happened to the Chotanagpur tribals where a similar strategy was adopted may provide with a good lesson.<sup>4</sup> Such a strategy presupposes a particular type of priority and institutional change that destabilize socio-economic life of the people. The programmes place much reliance upon chosen groups who are expected to participate effectively and contribute towards developmental efforts. In this sense, the adopted strategy contradicts its own policy which states, 'the strategy for development should be dictated by considerations of *benefiting the people as a whole rather than the status group* (emphasis mine). Moreover, the development schemes entail emphasis on the growth of linkages with national and global markets, commercialization of indigenous designs and skills, competitive use of land and forests and far reaching changes in patterns of landownership and property relations. Obviously, it involves establishment of linkages between unequal formations, one highly developed and competitive and the other still in the age of slash and burn cultivation. The former expropriates maximum benefits, the latter increases its dependence on market forces. The fact of the matter is that the planning strategy envisaged here requires an ethos and value **gestalt** entirely unconnected with the socio-economic reality of the region.

Looking at the trends in the North-East, it can be concluded that the seeds of inequality have already been sown because of unfavourable socio-economic consequences of developmental programmes. It has already introduced distortions in the traditional socio-economic systems without an inkling of the prosperous and just social order. 'The forces generated by the nature of developmental planning have completely subordinated the interests of the indigenous people and restricted the local control over resources and gains. It has led to a shift from "the relative independence" to complete "dependence" without even passing through "interdependence"'. That being the case, the time-tested village solidarity and social harmony have been replaced by differentiated heterogeneous community creating strong vested interests from within the community itself. Most of the new deve-

lopmental schemes have benefited a handful of people who are safely aligning themselves with the dominant groups from outside. What I have been trying to argue is that the path of development adopted here has failed to harmonize its impact with the aspirations and conditions of existence of the people of this area.

In fact, problems such as tribal-non-tribal conflicts, direct secessionist demands based on assertion of ethnic identity, demands for further reorganization of states are all intertwined in the continuing backwardness and underdevelopment of the region. Dominance of non-tribals in trade and commerce, preponderance of non-tribals in modern occupations and professions and continuing influx of people from outside the country continue to be central issues frequently assuming the form of communal tension. It should not be missed that the never ending danger of influx from the neighbouring countries has perpetually caused tremendous fear in the wake of the Tripura experience when a complete reversal of demographic patterns had already taken place. Naturally, the demand for deportation of infiltrators that started with the foreign nationals was subsequently applied even to those who came to this area from other parts of the country. Initially, migrants were absorbed in agriculture but when saturation point was reached the attention shifted to other areas of economic activities.

Thus one of the explanations for the problems of North-East concerns the worsening employment situation in the region to which agricultural stagnation also is said to have made a contribution. This question was rarely highlighted earlier because the types of people who dominated the job market in areas like administration, higher education and public sector undertakings were not available among the local tribals. As a result, in almost all states of the region the number of local tribals in departments/offices like Secretariat, Bank, Post & Telegraph, Accountant General, Electricity Board, Schools and Colleges and so forth has been neglected. These offices have mainly been manned by Bengalis and Assamese. Naturally, these sections of people have been immediate targets in communal tensions, but other non tribal groups have also been enveloped under such a situation.

Another potential area of tension has been trade and business which by and large continue to be under the control of people from outside the region. Whether it is tea industry, wholesale trade, transport sector, saw-mills or even petty retail outlets all are mostly in their hands. Despite restrictions in hill areas business concerns are under *de-facto* control of outsiders through *benami* transactions. The recent trade-license controversy in Meghalaya is essentially the outcome of this feature of the economy.

There is another dimension to the problem. The economy of hill areas cannot be thought without its forest component. The intimate relationship of the forest with the hill dwellers is not only reflected in their economic activities but also in their socio-cultural settings. The complex nature of the forest question involves two basic elements-ecology and peoples' rights. Ever since 1855 memorandum restricting forest dwellers rights, several regulations have been imposed to control the rights and privileges of the traditional users of forests. These measures were taken in national interest but were set aside whenever they came in the way of revenue interests of the government. In the process, neither the people could secure their due benefits nor the ecological balance could be maintained. What is happening in the North-East is more alarming both from the viewpoints of ecology and ownership. Its complexity is further added due to the widespread practice of shifting cultivation. It is frequently argued that the forest cover in the North-East has been depleted primarily because of the continuing practice of *jhum*.<sup>6</sup> As such change in the land use pattern introduced by governmental agencies such as developing terrace farming has already started alienating people from their habitat. Such a scheme comes into direct conflict with the tribal social organization. Wherever land has been released from *jhuming* it has not remained under the control of the villagers. While in some cases, it has been utilized for plantation, in others it has passed into the hands of the dominant members of the community for permanent cultivation. Moreover, the commercial linkages and the contractual system have caused reckless felling of trees even in so called protected and reserved forests. For all practical purposes most of these forests have passed from the hands of

local people into the hands of unscrupulous merchants and traders who are engaged in large scale timber extraction for meeting demands of outside industry. Under such a system of forest utilization, the forest dwellers are reduced to the status of casual wage labourers while the state forest department and saw-mill owners become the new proprietors.

#### IV

The occasion does not permit me to go into the subject in more details. However, I would like to emphasize that disparities in the socio-economic development inevitably result in political fragmentation. Emerging regional elites and newly formed middle class tend to utilize the existing conflict potential for more share in power. Under the circumstances, dividing rather than compromising elements become the primary means of agitation towards this goal. Regional political parties and groups emerge to mobilize large section of the population on issues appropriate to common cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and economic interests in their states. They add to the bargaining power of the states and provide more strength to the periphery in bringing about a balance between the Union and the states. The prevailing situation in North East corresponds to this pattern. Ethnic identity is politically articulated for redressal of perceived or real grievances. These demands are trenchantly voiced particularly under the condition of centralizing drives of national political leadership and growing interventionist practices of the central government.

The growing social tensions alone do not essentially endanger the stability of the society. So long the state is capable of balancing the disparities by arranging a socially endurable distribution of national wealth, conflict and militancy can be contained.

#### References

1. See for details, M.N. Karna, "*The Agrarian Scene*", Seminar 366 (The North East) February 1990, pp. 30-38.
2. Kishore Bhattacharjee, "*Discourse of Inclusion: A Brief Note on the Ethnic Situation in Assam*", Paper presented at the seminar

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3. *Ibid.*
4. M.N. Karna, "Aspects of Tribal Development in North-Eastern India", in Ashish Bose, et al., *Tribal Demography and Development in North East India*, B.R. Publishing Corporation, Delhi, 1990, pp. 7-23.
5. *Report on Development of Backward Hill Areas*, National Committee on the Development of Backward Areas, Planning Commission, Government of India, March 1981, p. 21.
6. This argument has been contested by scholarly studies of P.S. Ramakrishnan. See his paper, "An Inventory of Forest Resources of the North-Eastern Region", in M. Dasgupta, et al., (eds), *Forestry Development in North-East India*, Omsons Publications, Guwahati, 1986, p. 234.