

Ethnicity, Culture and Nationalism in North-East India: A Conspectus

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Introduction

There seems to be a general agreement among academicians and journalists alike that there are serious challenges to Indian nationalism from the north-eastern parts of India, which appear in the form of ethnicity, culture, and ethno-nationalism. In other words, the three key concepts used in the title of this paper are already given some meaning based on the dominant epistemology. It is therefore necessary to come out of this epistemology first and begin with the question: Do we have the problems of nation-building? If we have, do they lie within us or out there among the tribes of this region? If the answer is the latter do they share this perspective? Are we not trying to impose the same on them with the help of our concepts? If the problems really lie out there who are responsible—we or they?

Any meaningful exercise to find even tentative answers to these questions must begin with a critical scrutiny of the concepts like ethnicity, culture, and nationalism. These concepts are not only ambiguous in themselves but also susceptible to multiple interpretations.

Ethnicity

'Ethnicity' is a concept probably first used by David Reisman in 1953 but the concept itself is not new "nor was the phenomenon new or unrecognized previously; it was merely labelled differently" (Ronen 1986: 2). It has objective as well as subjective connotations.

Objectively, it is seen as "primordial affinities and attachments" (Isaacs 1975, Greeley 1974) and subjectively, as an "activated primordial consciousness" (Geertz 1975). Among the various scholars who have tried to define this concept, van den Berghe argues in favour of combining the subjective and objective approaches to the understanding of this concept. However, most other scholars have emphasized on the subjective aspect of it. For instance, Weber defines it as a "sense of specific honour" (1965), Barth as a "subjective process of status identification" (1981), Wallman as a "perception of group difference" (1979), Glazer and Moynihan as "interest groups" (1975), and Bell as "interest plus affective tie" (1975).

Further, Dov Ronen suggests that "ethnicity is politicized into the ethnic factor when an ethnic group is in conflict with the political elite over such issues as the use of limited resources or the allocation of benefits—issues that are particularly intense in developing Third World countries, where the greater the stakes involved, the greater the ethnic factor with which the central government must deal" (1986: 1). Hence its symbiotic relationship with the state and development process (Subba 1991). The relationship between ethnicity and state in particular has been well explored by Paul Brass (1985). Stanley Tambiah more recently reiterates that the "central problems posed by our present phase of ethnic conflicts are startlingly different, arising out of an intensified "politicization of ethnicity" and issuing in conflicts between member groups of a state and polity, which itself is thought to be in crisis ("the crisis of the state")" (1989: 339).

Anthony Smith, a renown scholar in the field, suggests that ethnic pluralism rather than ethnic homogeneity is the norm in most of the states that emerged after the two World Wars. According to him, "most of them are composed of two or more ethnic communities, jostling for influence and power, or living in uneasy harmony within the same state borders" (1981: 9). This aspect of ethnicity has been illustrated with the case study of Punjab by Chopra (1986) and many such cases from all over India by Danda (1988). In this kind of situation, the sense of separatism is sustained by the sense of cultural distinctiveness. This sense exists not only in the form of an end in itself but often as a means of protecting the

cultural identity formed by such ties. Phadnis rightly says that it is "a device as much as a focus for group mobilisation by its leadership through the select use of ethnic symbols for socio-cultural and politico-economic purposes" (1990: 16).

Rajni Kothari, on the other hand, conceives of ethnicity as a consequence of a much broader process of modernisation, which instead of doing away with religious, linguistic or cultural identities has "hardened them and provoked ethnic conflict and communal violence" (1988: 198).

It is perhaps relevant here to mention Susanna Devalle's *Discourses of Ethnicity* (1992) because she has discussed the conceptual shift from tribe to ethnicity, which according to her, has taken place without a "deep transformation in theoretical approach" (1992: 31). Nor the latter concept is free from suspicion. Another much related and recent work is that of M.G. Smith (1993). He convincingly argues that 'race' and 'ethnicity' are in analysis and theory "indiscriminately assimilated to one another" (p. 24).

Culture

The concept of culture is equally ambiguous if not more. This concept not only varies according to the aspects emphasized by various anthropologists but also according to the time it has passed through. There are endless debates, though already dated now, over whether it is value-free or value-loaded, society specific or universal, hierarchical or differential, process or structure, material or non-material, and so on (For details see Bauman 1973). One also notices a shift in its meaning from the material artefacts to the more abstract, formal, and conceptual aspects of it after the 50s. Recent conceptualizations of it, for instance, speak of it as systems of meanings, ideologies, unconscious structures, etc.

Towards further elaboration on the concept Laitin (1977) draws our attention to the hegemonic nature of culture for a better understanding of this concept. But since hegemony can only create a dominant subsystem and cannot "create a congruent and harmonious social system", he concludes, "nonmarginal affronts to the commonsensical order" are inherent in all hegemonic structures (p. 183).

Another aspect of culture that may be brought in here is its use in what is called 'reconstructive ethnography', which is relevant for anthropologists as well as other scholars engaged in the study of the north-eastern region. This perspective overlooks the social and historical conditioning of culture and treats the indigenous cultures as a category of 'traditional remains' (Devalle 1992: 40).

On the basis of the existing literature, culture is perhaps best seen as a system of symbols in constant conflict within and with other cultures in contact. It is culture understood in this sense that seems most suited to discuss the north-eastern situation.

Nationalism

This is another concept which is strongly related to culture, 'Nationalism', according to Gelner, is "primarily a political principle, which holds that the political end and the national unit should be congruent" (1987: 1). According to P.H. Van der Plank it is "an ideology consisting of values, symbols, norms and expectations, living in a social collectivity (group) and based on belief in a common descent and as a consequence a common destiny, strong enough to desire to maintain, strengthen or create a formally and legally organized society" (1975: 9).

One of the problems of defining this concept is that such an 'ideology' may be confined to a nation or, more frequently, extended to a nation-state. When it is used in the former sense it is often qualified as 'ethno-nationalism', 'protonationalism', 'sub-nationalism', 'fissiparous-nationalism', 'mini-nationalism', and what have you. Hans Kohn, however, defines it as "the supreme loyalty of the over-whelming majority of the people upon the nation-state, either existing or desired" (1968: 63).

Nationalism is also defined by Louis L Snyder as "A condition of mind, feeling, or sentiment of a group of people living in a well-defined geographic area, speaking a common language, possessing a literature in which their aspirations are expressed, attached to common traditions and customs, venerating their own heroes, and, in some cases, having the same religion" (1982: XV). The problem with this definition is that there are certain nations like the Jewish and the Palestinian, which cannot be fitted here.

The appeal of culture in all such nation-building processes is unquestionable. Spencer has well illustrated this with his study of the Sinhala culture and nationalism (1990). According to him, "nationalism is, like anthropology itself, above all a mode of cultural consciousness" (p. 283). He further writes: "Each nationalism is based upon the assumption that people are naturally divisible into different kinds—known as nations—and ideally each kind should have the responsibility for its own governance. Gellner has gone even further to define 'nation' in terms of culture though he is equally aware of the voluntaristic aspect of the concept of nation. According to him, "Two men are of the same nation if and only if they share the same culture, where culture in turn means a system of ideas and signs and associations and ways of behaving and communicating" (1987: 7).

With special reference to the Third World nationalism, Dawa Norbu gives the following characteristics: (1) societal consciousness about national identity that provides the necessary dynamics of national unity, (2) an all-encompassing value system to guide and motivate political action, (3) a pan-ethnic movement to generate social power that is utilized to achieve national unity and independence, and (4) a foreign policy centered upon the concept of national interest (1992:1-2). Excepting the fourth characteristic, which is true only of the nation-state, other characteristics fit into the nations too.

The relationship between culture and nationalism has assumed renewed significance after the emergence of the concept of 'national culture'. Its relationship with the nationalist ideology is, according to Richard G Fox, "contingent and processual: the creation of nationalist ideologies anticipates a larger project, the forming or reforming of a national culture" (1990: 4).

Here Benedict Anderson's phrase 'imagined community' (1991) becomes contextual. Like national culture, the imagined community is not given but consciously created. Similarly, a 'nation' is imagined because, as Anderson writes, "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (1991: 6). He explains the nationalist upsurges in modern era as functions of "cultural roots" rather than "self-

consciously held political ideologies (1912:12). The importance of culture in relation to nationalism has also been recently illustrated with the case of the Oromo speakers in Africa (see Baxter 1993).

The relationship between culture and nationalism has assumed added meaning particularly in view of our experience with the state which has, by and large, failed to deliver the goods. It has not only grown conceptually incompatible with culture (Nandy 1992) but virtually turned out to be the unseen patron of the dominant culture.

It is such a failure of the state that has been primarily responsible for the ethnic upsurges in the post-colonial scenario. While culture is dynamic and so are its boundaries, the static state imposes static demands on the ethnic groups which too seem to have influenced by the statist concept of culture.

The North-Eastern Scenario

The total area of the north-east comprises of 2,73,035 square kilometres and a population of 43.53 million. The density of population varies from a low of 7 persons per square kilometre in Arunachal to a high 254 persons in Assam. Similarly the literacy rate varies from 20.09 in Arunachal to 59.50 in Mizoram (Census of India, 1981). Excepting in Manipur, Tripura and Assam the tribal population are in majority. Geography plays an important role in shaping the economy, culture, and society of the region. There are distinctly dominant tribes or communities in each of these seven states which constitute this region.

This region has been described as a boiling cauldron by many academicians and journalists, who have made various efforts to explain this phenomenon. Among the various writings by this assorted group of scholars (see Singh 1987, Miglani 1989, Baruah 1989, Vidhyadharan, Hazarika 1995, etc.) one finds two points receiving a lot of attention. They are demographic and cultural factors leading to what they describe as identity crisis. Lesser attention is also received by factors like modernization and official policy towards this region.

The attempt of the various nations in the north-east to 'imagine' themselves can perhaps be best understood in such a conceptual framework. This 'imagining' was not possible during the British

rule but when India became independent its Constitution, at least in the beginning, created enough scope for such exercises to take place. The initial broadmindedness of the framers of the Constitution was however gradually undermined by a Centre which was ever more concerned with national integration rather than nation-building in true sense. The centripetal attitude of the Centre was never satiated as its very mind-set towards the region was negative, as illustrated from a letter written by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel to Pandit Nehru in 1950:

Our northern or Northeastern approaches consist of Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, Darjeeling and the Tribal areas of Assam. From the point of view of communications they are weak spots. . . The contact of these areas with us, is by no mean close and intimate. The people inhabiting these portions have no established loyalty or devotion to India. Even Darjeeling and Kalimpong areas are not free from promongoloid prejudices (cited in Subba 1991: 97).

It is such an attitude of the Indian mainstream that is probably responsible for so many past and present ethnic movements in the north-eastern India. Hence, if there is any problem of nation-building in this region, it arises from the mind-set of the mainstream rather than the region itself.

Before concluding this essay it is perhaps well to dwell briefly on why ethnicity is more vibrant in the areas bordering the international boundaries than in the heartland of the nation-state of India. This question has bothered many a scholar engaged in what is called the frontier studies. But before we try and find an answer to this question with particular reference to the north-east it has to be remembered that inter-ethnic conflict is not a post-colonial or recent phenomenon in this region. One of the author's earlier studies (1992) has shown that interethnic conflicts were not only old but inherent in the tribal life of this region. One may argue, as some journalists often do, that such conflicts have become more rampant and pervading today. Such a feeling is not unfounded because of the paramountcy of the state and its absolute control over the development resources after Independence.

Danda argues (1991) that one of the major reasons why scholarly disagreement over the ethnic status or ethnic delineation of the

various tribes and communities in the region is the fluid nature of identity. He has illustrated this with the case study of the Purum. This is perhaps a good pointer towards the understanding of the situation in this region.

With particular reference to the location of this region in the border areas, it may be recalled that this region was left backward for a very long time and development process began in right earnest only after the 1962 war with China. With development came people belonging to different nations from different regions and countries sometimes threatening the very demographic balance of the region. The Partition, creation of Bangladesh and other such events resulted in further influx of population to this region. Besides, development of education, economy, and infrastructure provided the once feud-stricken, rival clans and tribes with an opportunity to unite and fight against the outsiders whose claims as harbingers of civilization were no longer acknowledged.

In the context of this region, it may be added that secessionism in the real sense is most acutely expressed, which is evident from scores of 'insurgency' movements. Writing about this problem, Vidyadharan says: "The problem of insurgency in the entire northeast has one common underlying factor: safeguarding the prominence of tribal society and its culture and preventing it from being swamped by nontribal settlers" (1989: 44).

This fear of many tribes in the region cannot be undermined. The case of Tripura has clearly shown what a devastation can be caused by demographic topsy turvy: the indigenous tribes there have now been reduced to one third of the total population. Similar threats are perceived by the tribes of Assam and Meghalaya, if not other states too.

This article may be ended here by endorsing the view of Bhupinder Singh that there is "no tangible threat to the national integration ethos in the region and outside the country" (1987: 1009). The extra-territorial help in the form of supplies of arms, ammunitions and training to the underground guerrillas may not stop soon. The illegal trade across the border may also continue. On the other hand, the militarization of the region by the state may not come to end until it is satisfied that there is no threat from within as well as from without. The development activities initiated in the

region may further alienate some tribes and drive them towards 'insurgency', instead of solving the ethnic problems. But the very fact that India is the largest and most stable state in the subcontinent should throw the balance heavily in favour of it. Given a better understanding of the culture and ethos of the people in the region, and a more realistic relations with neighbouring countries, the "enemies within" (to borrow from Vidyadharan) should pose no great threat to the Indian statehood.

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