

Conceptualising Social Change in North-east India: Isolation and Integration

M.N. Karna

Social change is one of the central concerns of sociology and it is likely to remain so as to change itself is an integral part of human condition. Sociology as a discipline started as a quest for explanations for social change and it is still confronted with the questions such as how society changes, in what direction and which factors bring about change. Given the ubiquitous nature to change, there is still a great deal to understand about its complexion and scope. The literature on the subject is thus replete with discussions and debates on direction, sources, patterns and spheres of social change. Today concepts and theories of social change have proliferated and become more complex as has been the case with the character of change itself. My intention currently is to learn and analyze notions of isolation and integration as process of change and show their relevance in assessing the directions of social change in North East India.

The term isolation is used differently from society. Because of this relativity, a proper definition of isolation is always negative. It is a condition in which certain relations with other human beings are lacking. Generally, a distinction is made between physical isolation and social isolation. While solidarity confinement or infectious disease type isolation is typical example of practiced of physical isolation, social isolation is revealed in untouchability practiced in caste system or of sacred society. In the study of race

relations, sociologists generally distinguish between segregation and isolation. "Segregation occurs within an area that depends on common social services, such as towns or cities, village or small settlement. Such an area is segregated if number of different groups is not represented proportionally in various sectors of social life. Isolation on the other hand, occurs when members of different races or ethnic groups are distributed unevenly across countries or other areas. For example, in the context of race relations if one city is all white and another black, there is little with one another because they live in different self-contained, communities, resulting in racial isolation.

Moreover, when the notion of isolation is extended to the domain of public policy it is applied to keep certain ethnic groups isolated to protect policy their identity. It is particularly so in multi-ethnic societies where the value of cultural diversity is recognized as an essential element of the national policy of the State. Under the conditions, some restrictions on the freedom of dominant groups are required for the protection of cultural identities.

Integration is the opposite of isolation. Its defined as "the process of site of interaction between members of a group which results in reciprocal accommodation and an increased sense of identification with the group." In this sense, integration is a type of group thinking in which out of different intellectual contributions of each a consensus is arrived at though both intellectual and emotional responses, such integration has to be contrasted with compromise or subjugation of a minority to majority control.

In the context of social change however, the concept of integration is used *in perpetuum* with the adjective 'social' involving a process operating at the group level. Social integration is thus a process of coordinating the various classes, ethnic groups or other diverse elements of a society into a unified whole In order to provide a further refinement to the concept the British sociologist David Lockwood has coined another term, system integration to avoid fundamental problems in both the functionalist theories of the 1950s and the conflict theories of sociologists such as Ralf Dahrendorf and John Rex who criticized functionalist approaches. According to this formulation, "social integration refers to the principles by which individuals or actors are related to one another in a society, system integration refers to the relationships between parts of a

society or social system." It has been further clarified that despite the use of the word integration there is no assumption that the relationships so described are always harmonious. In other words, the terms social integration and system integration can embrace both order and conflict.

Extending the conceptual clarification of these terms further it may be pointed out that in general following Max Weber's precepts about social stratification, status-based societies are likely to lead to harmonious forms of social integration, and class societies to conflictual forms of social integration. System integration, on the other contrary, is the way in which different parts of a social system, (its institutions) interrelate. Thus any comprehensive macro-sociological theory of change must attempt to link social integration and system integration.

Of late, Anthony Giddens has also attempted to use this distinction. In his recent work he seeks to use it as a way of replacing the micro versus macro distinction. By doing so he has brought into focus the problems of agency and structure. Social integration comes to refer to situations where actors are physically 'co-present' and system integration to where they are not. To put it in a nutshell, the distinction between social integration and system integration is fundamental to any theory of change, which seeks to unite micro and macro levels of analysis. Against this background our attempt now will be to see whether concepts of isolation and integration may be used to analyze patterns of change taking place in North Eastern region.

It will not be out of place to recall that on the eve of India's independence a fierce debate was initiated on the issue of tribal policy at the political level that highlighted three approaches to solve problems of the tribals. A group of anthropologists and administrators advocated the policy of isolation so that the cultural identity of various tribal communities could be protected. They were apprehensive of dangers of cultural contacts with the outside world. As against this, some sociologists argued that the solution of tribal problems lies in assimilation of these communities into the Hindu society, as they are the degraded Hindus. The third approach was that of their integration with the larger Indian society. According to this understanding, neither isolation nor assimilation but integration is the path for the solution of problems of tribals in India.

The idea of integration dominant as a process of change was articulated at different levels and expressed in the proclaimed slogan of national or emotional integration. Adherents of isolationist and assimilationist approaches were relegated to the background under the quest for nation building. However, efforts towards emotional integration also came to naught, as smaller identities in different parts of the country felt threatened under the growing robustness of dominant identities.

Though integration as a process of change is disapproved by the ideologues of the marginal communities but trends of transition essentially reveal a different pattern. I intend to argue here that integration as a process of change is in action both within and across the communities. While the process within the community is calculated and deliberate, it is operating in a disguised form across the communities. Integration in the first case is articulated in ethnic terms, in case of the latter the relationships are established in institutional terms.

I would like to elucidate this point by briefly highlighting the prevailing situation in North East. The process of identity formation in the tribal areas in this region was initially based on the idea of large group formation. Attempts were made to bring several smaller groups together to project a unified identity. The term 'hill people' was made popular and projected as a collectivity comprising hill tribes from different areas of the region. But such an identity could not sustain for long. Likewise another attempt in this direction has been to develop generic terms to include various groups primarily located in a particular geographical territory. The Naga and the Mizo are two obvious examples, which come to mind immediately. Both these ethnic groups consist of several tribes, each having a distinct dialect, a well-demarcated territory and visible socio-cultural system. However the process of fission has already set in under the impact of new forces of change. Now the current trend is the consolidation of distinct group identity exclusively in terms of the traditional boundaries. This I call social integration in the present context.

The integration beyond the community, on the other hand, is termed system integration, which involves linkages of institution and activities with the outside world. Such a process of integration is not always intended consequence of change because communities and groups are not autonomous to determine the

path of change. For example, the participation of people in economic activities in the tribal areas of North East was restricted by the very nature of economy existing till recently which kept within bounds their integration with the outside market. The economy was out of the ambit of the capitalist path and the people continued to lead life of independence, the problem of poverty and privation notwithstanding. The situation started changing subsequently in the wake of expanding economic enterprises necessitating linkages with outside -market.

The issues presented so far should provide us with a context within which the contemporary scenario emerging in the tribal areas can be examined, for example, from the point of view of agrarian question. What the emerging processes reveal in the North East must bear a relationship to the pre-existing elements from which they emerged but the same may not be adequately assessed without identifying new forces of change. The relationship between the old and the new must therefore be analyzed not a priori but by interpreting contemporary history from the viewpoint of change. In this regard, the concrete evaluation of processes involving the impact of integration should proceed from a particular theoretical angle to arrive at a precise and proper perspective.