

# Ethnophilosophy: Politics of Culture in North-East India

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## I

The epistemic violence involved in producing a universal human subject in the Western Rationalist and Enlightenment philosophies forces multiple specificities of cultural ontologies into submission to unity and coherence of a universal *episteme* that takes an Archimedean perspective upon humans-as-such. Ethnophilosophy focusses upon the specific ethno-cultural characteristics of a particular community and does not speak for universal human being and hence, it was used as an intellectual invective against those African philosophers who developed philosophy out of world-views of African communities.<sup>1</sup> The term 'Ethnophilosophy' was given an inferior meaning such as tribal, traditional, static, pre-critical, etc. to point out the limitations of interpreting cultures of various communities without a universal criterion of reason and truth. Despite such denouncements, Ethnophilosophy remains as an exploration into myriad of ontologies with a perspectivist criterion of reason and truth without abstracting it into a universal essence, it remains contextual and particular and throws a radical challenge to the Western *episteme* that grades human cultures in its conspicuous yardsticks. The universalising impulses of Western *episteme* with its corresponding project of Western hegemony are undercut by the Ethnophilosophical interpretations of cultures of various communities and hence posit a challenging face to Western ethnocentrism.<sup>2</sup>

Within the philosophical discourses, the critique of Western

Rationalism on the count that it universalizes and essentialises the difference and heterogeneity has acquired a very strong current. For the purpose of this paper, not more than a very general and casual reference to the critique can be made here. But what these critiques have developed can be used electively to explain the north-east Indian situation. This paper aims at developing an Ethnophilosophical explanation of the north-east Indian situation.

To begin with, the term Ethnophilosophy signifies the philosophy of ethnic communities. An ethnic community has a distinct cultural and linguistic tradition in reference to which it makes a claim of distinct identity that can't be tempered with. As such, Ethnophilosophy develops a philosophical perspective upon those ethnic particulars. The task of Ethnophilosophy is to inquire into the constitution of ethnic communities not in general but in particular and provide a philosophical explanation to the specific features of ethnic communities. Moreover, in its philosophical exegesis, Ethnophilosophy can construct certain categories that facilitate an intelligible explanation of life and culture of ethnic communities and so, it does not confine itself with what is 'given' in the community, but crosses it over by giving rise to certain explanatory constructs. Ethnophilosophy posits a particular criterion of truth and reason relevant to the context of an ethnic community and does not decontextualize the criterion to the level of human community as such. The philosophical import of such an Ethnophilosophical stand is that there is no question of transcending the bounds of ethnic form of life with a value-loaded notion of being ashamed of one's communal backwardness or placing the responsibility of deliverance upon the perceived advanced communities, or desperately searching for cultural equivalences with others. The philosophical positions are bound within an ethnic identity and are not closed upon that community, but open to cross-cultural contrast without diluting its contextual relevance and not surrendering it to the terror of homogeneity and universality.<sup>3</sup> It allows coexistence of multiple standards of judgment without attaching privilege to a particular one, yet opening up a terrain of multiplicities without closing it upon any finality.

All these inklings into Ethnophilosophy suggest the necessity of constructing an ethnic identity. But such an identity is constructed

in a genre of discourse, which is produced by a community in articulating itself.<sup>4</sup> Such discourses are decentered by nature, as it encompass myriads of experiences that occur in the context of life of a community. Therefore, the historical experiences through which an ethnic community has undergone operate in their discourses and such experiences are not closed upon the community, as it bear traces of the manifold of their experiences to retroact the community as the subject of the discourse of experience. The ethnic community creates its own such discourses that go into producing its self-image retroactively and such self-images evolve in the discourses, while the discourses evolve in the experiences of the community.<sup>5</sup> At the centre of the discourse, the ethnic community finds itself and decenters itself to evolve into newer and newer forms with the changing experiences. It remains an important question how such community experiences shape certain cognizable features of their life, which they share and consider as characteristic to their life. The process of such common sharing of certain features in idea and action of community has been variously theorized, but suffice it to say here that such process of sharing a common experience and evolving common features of life mark the construction of an ethnic identity.<sup>6</sup> Ethnophilosophy also variously inquires and systematizes multi-faceted aspects of construction of ethnic communities.

Ethnophilosophy establishes distinct cultural criterion of specific ethnic communities by which things can be judged from the perspective of that community. Each such criterion of evaluation is singular for a community, so that the community is epistemologically empowered to free itself from the influence of dominant episteme (s) and can hold its autonomous epistemic paradigm that gives it specificity and particularity. At heuristic level, the characteristics of universal epistemologies, such as consistency, coherence and intelligibility, etc. can be re-constructed and re-suscitated in the life-world of an ethnic community.<sup>7</sup> The cultural features of an ethnic community is an almost monadic composition that provides sufficient reason for the cultural norms, values and ideals for them. Therefore, reason and judgement are not only culture specific, but these are also evolved with a speciality in particular cultures. The construction of an ethnic community marks a cultural process that gives specific categories of knowledge, truth and justice to that

community. What is significant here is to note that in the process of construction of an ethnic community's identity, culture and episteme, all are combined in a heterarchical chain, the linkages of which are contingent without necessarily assuming a hierarchical construction. So, ethnic construction of reality is best expressed in the cognizable cultural processes that can be deciphered within the community.<sup>8</sup>

Apart from such stress on culture-specific interpretation given in Ethnophilosophy, one should look into the discourses of experience of the community that shape their political articulation and various other effective assertions of identity. How far such assertions of identity stem from the cultural norms and values of the community can be an apt subject of investigation in ethnophilosophy. The present paper shall take up certain features of culture of ethnic communities of the north-east India to demonstrate its role in their political articulation.

## II

Some suitable examples need to be taken at this point. The assertion of Naga identity is a case in point in understanding its Ethnophilosophical imports. In the U.N. Conference on Indigenous Peoples at Geneva, Mr. Isak Chisi Swu, the Chairman of N.S.C.N asserted,<sup>9</sup>

It is completely 47 years now since India invaded Nagaland. Burma joined forces with India since 1962 when Newin took over state power. They sent their armed forces wave upon wave and operated Nagaland nook and corner. In the process, thousands of Nagas were slaughtered—the fact which outside world do not know still. Fighting continues unabated till today, but freedom is ours and we will relinquish nothing of it to the aggressor. Whatever befalls.

This discourse of Naga leader asserts the inalienable right of freedom, which means both an autonomy of agency assigned to the Naga people in general vis-a-vis freedom from the domination of the Indian State. The discourse harps about a war-like situation existing between the Indian State and the Naga people in which the Nagas are the victims. The regime of the Indian state not only produces victims of direct repression but also constricts the cultural

and moral autonomy of Naga selfhood or communityhood by withdrawing the right to decide their own fate.

From an Ethnophilosophical perspective, one can mark here a clash between two identities, one Naga and another Indian. The point of clash is freedom, which is taken away allegedly by one of the parties. If freedom is intrinsic to the ontos of the Nagas, it can't be taken away, but it can only be blocked by the manipulations of extraneous agencies. Does conforming to an Indian identity infringe freedom of the Nagas as they have claimed? For an Ethnophilosophical answer to this question, one cannot assail the political articulation of Naga identity, as its very assertion presupposes an essential difference and distinctness from Indian identity.<sup>10</sup> This sense of difference and distinctness stem out of the already constituted self-image of the Nagas through the discourses of their life experiences embracing their way of life. But the self-image of the Nagas as Indians remains blurred and indistinct to the Nagas, as they feel it imposing and dominating.

The stereotypical answer of the Indian state would be that of the principle of 'unity in diversity'. But such a principle smacks of a vague universality without spelling out the concrete terms of unity. Various smaller identities have a wounded attachment to the presumed unity of the Indian identity, because of their experience of being marginalised. What seems today by 'unity' is the territorial integrity of the Indian state born in 1947, which is enforced by the instrumental means adapted by the agencies of the Indian state. It does not have a cultural legitimacy because it is internally fragmented into conflicting identities that are roped together by an enforcing agency and therefore the future of such an unity is always bleak and fragile.

Does Indian identity give cultural recognition to various ethnic identities? The various ethnic identities are recognized by a logic of subsumption. The logic is this: all such identities are recognized provided they recognize them to be 'Indians'. The Indian state stands as the arbiter of this logic. Another face of this logic of subsumption is this that various ethnic identities need to articulate their identities in such a manner that they can get a share from the Indian state in terms of benefits and goods. Therefore, at the heart of the matter, there lies a conflict of recognition and redistribution.<sup>11</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to expose the conflict of identities stemming out from their political and cultural articulation. The articulation of an Indian identity remains as a finished product out of diverse cultural articulation of myriads of identities. But the crux question is, whether such a finished product is possible without an imposing homogeneity and force of suppression? The next part shall briefly deal into such questions.

### III

The question relating to the Indian identity can be expressed for our convenience as what is the ontological status of being Indian? The variety of communities existing within the Indian state are commonly referred as Indian. So, the term 'Indian' does not denote an uncontaminated pure essence, rather it is a name for difference and distinctness. But the notion of Indian identity is essentialized and territorialized to mean a unique tradition variously described by various schools of thoughts and so, it received plural interpretations without necessarily upholding plurality of interpretive communities/identities. Therefore, 'Indian' remained as an overarching construction, a synthetic category to subsume various ontologies and took the shape of a discursive identity that provides an umbrella to various root-differences and hence, gets subverted from within. As a discursive identity the term Indian cannot reproduce the self-same ontology, as it will have to iterate otherness into it and will have to defer and differ from within to play the life of the concept 'Indian'. But the discursive construction of the Indian follows the thread of uniformity and monologue to reproduce self-sameness and hence, does violence to multiplicities within and without.

This situation of failure of the Indian identity to abstract an essence out of multiplicities turns it to a mere 'spectre', the spectrality of which is discursively reproduced. But in the process of its construction, it produces its inalienable others within itself.

How this otherness is construed shall demonstrate the politics of culture involved in the assertion of ethnic identities. Todorov sees three-ways of grouping relations with the other: an axiological dimension consisting of value-judgements on the other, a praxeological dimension consisting of distancing or coming closer

to the other in terms of intercultural contact and assimilation and an epistemological dimension concerned with identity and know ability of the other.<sup>12</sup> Going by this understanding of otherness, several N.E. Indian communities remain as other to the Indian identity. So, far as axiological dimension is concerned, there are discourses of the Indian State that consider the identities like Naga and Mizo as 'insurgents' or disturbing elements. Even the constitutional recognition to them as 'scheduled tribes' grants them a package of rights, but undermines their cultural status by calling them 'tribes', which is a colonial ethnographic construct. After their conversion to christianity, they are perceived as 'other' by the dominant religious groups of the country. So, the value-judgements about them do not portray them in beckoning light. So far as praxeological dimension is concerned, the culture contact is of the nature of transforming the cultures of various N.E. Indian identities and turning their cultures to submit to the powerful images and products of modern culture-industry. This process of intrusion into their culture has been so devastating that the cultural symbols of these communities need preservation and protection. Their culture have lost the free space of contact with others to flourish and develop spontaneously in their respective form of life. So far as epistemological dimension is concerned, the knowability of their identity is conceived in terms of dominant criterion of reason construed in terms of dominant processes like Sanskritization, Islamization or Westernization, etc. and hence there remains a cognitive distortion about them in which they are given or thrust upon an image as mirrored in the dominant paradigm of knowledge. There is no place for local knowledge and narratives, as these are dubbed as epistemologically tenuous.

#### IV

The experience of otherness within the spectre of Indian identity drives the N.E. Indian identities to articulate their suffering and marginalization through a sort of rebel consciousness against the Indian state. As the Indian state withdraws the right to self-determination to such identities, so there brews a perpetual tension and conflict in any assertion of such identities. The significant aspect

of this chaotic situation is this that most of these communities harp on the theme of difference and distinctness by referring to their distinctive ethnic-cultural symbols and practices.<sup>13</sup> This generates a quest for their self-identity in terms of reviving their own tradition with an inspired cultural sensitivity that gets heightened in the struggle against the domination by dominant cultural process.

Some scholars do dismiss such a stimulated cultural sensitivity as ethnic paranoia or pathology,<sup>14</sup> but it signifies a process which is a response to what a community perceives to be dangerous and harmful to their existence. What a community perceives need not necessarily be a false-consciousness or misrecognition, but it means taking a position, which can be termed as 'war of positions'. It is important for the Ethnophilosophers to go into the subjectivity of an ethnic community to reveal the world disclosed to them in their own terms and not to go into the factors or causes of their state of being to produce a subjectivity. In other words, Ethnophilosophy treats ethnic community as independent autonomous subjects without turning them into objects of epistemic investigation. It look into the inside or what goes into the inside of an ethnic community and therefore, it is the most authentic inquiry into the ethnic identity. Following this line of argument, one can conclude that ethnic communities of the N.E. India are authentically asserting their being, even though all such assertions need a critical examination. The very cultural distinctness of each such ethnic community is untemperable and so, the cultural articulation generates surplus involving a political assertion and political assertion of an ethnic community heightens the cultural sensibility.<sup>15</sup> No enforcement or law can suppress this potential of freedom inherent in the assertion of an ethnic identity.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The term 'Ethnophilosophy' was originally coined by Paulin Hountondji in 1970, who is a philosopher from the Republic of Benin to condemn African philosophers. One can refer to the book *African Philosophy: Myth And Reality* by Paulin Hountondji, London, 1983, Ch. 1 'An Alienated Literature'.
2. A Critique of Western ethnocentrism is given in *Writing Culture: The*

*Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus, O.U.P., 1990

3. *The differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. G.V.D. Abbeele, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1980, p. 55 in which Lyotard calls for multiple criterion of truth and prescribes heterogeneity as the yardstick of justice. The present argument follows Lyotard.
4. *Ibid*, p. 159.
5. *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Richard Rortly, Cambridge, 1989.
6. Pierre Bourdieu's brilliant interpretation of this process of formation of common experiences of a community is worth remembering. Especially Bourdieu's notion of immaterial forms of Capital—cultural, symbolic and social are of relevance here.
7. For a detailed discussion on Life-World, refer to Jurgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2. Polity Press, 1987.
8. Peter Winch, *Trying to Make Sense*, 1987, pp. 195-207.
9. Quoted from the Statement by Chisi Swu in the UN Conference on Indigenous Peoples', held on 27th July, 1994.
10. V.R. Kirshna Iyer: *Saga of the Nagas*, EPW, March 19, 1994.
11. Nancy Fraser: *From Redistribution to Recognition? . . .* NLR, 212.
12. Todorov, *La Conquete de l' Amerique La Question de l' antre*, du Seuil, Paris, 1982.
13. William Connolly, *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiation of Political Paradox*, Ithaca, 1990, p. 64.
14. Joseph Rothschild: *Ethnopolitics: A Conceptual Framework*, Columbia University Press, 1981. p. 63.
15. Craig Calhoun: *Culture, History and Specificity in Postmodernism and Social Theory*, ed. S. Seidmen and D.G. Wagner, Basil Blackwell, 1992, pp. 244-288.