

CHAPTER FOUR

Ethnic Identity Formation in North East India

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Ethnic issues and inter-ethnic relations affect state-formation and integrative processes in India. In North East India, much of the conflictual processes seem to be originating from ethnic identity formation or ethnic consolidation and marginalized 'nationality' identity problem. Understanding of grassroot reality of North East problems and numerous social and political movements in the seven sister states requires conceptual insight and discernment of ethnic nationality. Many nationalities which contributed to the Indian nationhood have been marginalized and in many cases reduced to an ethnic state but vying for nationality identity have been instrumental to the dynamic political process in North East India. The popularity of the use of the concepts 'nation' and 'state' synonymously and the term 'society' to correspond to nation-state originated in the Western world giving rise to the ethnicity's view that approximates national group with state. In western world, it is common to find national group to organize itself into an independent political state. But when the concepts are applied to the social reality of Asian countries like India, approximation of national group with political state is simply not possible. It is therefore inexorable to recognize the multinational character of Asian and African countries. This has been validated by studies such as made by Brass (1991), Phadnis (1991), Oommen (1990) and Sharma (1996) to quote few examples.

For Brass, ethnic groups are any group of people dissimilar from other groups in objective cultural criteria containing within its members. This has become the cultural basis of ethnicity which is 'a sense of ethnic identity' to create internal cohesion and to differentiate themselves from other groups (Brass 1991:19). The Greek word 'ethnikos' from which ethnic is supposed to have been originated means 'nation'. Ethnic and national are thus synonymous in their original Greek meaning. But the concept of nation-state results in the development of multi-ethnic nation which is consequential upon the

synonymous use of the terms 'nation' and 'state', For T.K. Oommen, ethnic group is one which maintains its life-style outside its homeland. Oommen starts with the French word 'ethnie' which means "a people who share a common history, tradition, language and life-styles, but are uprooted from and/or unattached to a homeland" (Oommen 1990;10). This entails differentiation of cultural groups into more than one category. Caroline F. Ware uses 'ethnic communities' to denote groups bound together by common ties of race, nationality or culture, living together within an alien civilization but remaining culturally distinct (Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences, 1938). Thus, Ware dimly recognized the importance of territory when she says 'living together within an alien civilization', but Brass seems to elude the significance of territory. As such, the ethnic group or ethnic category they propose may be difficult to differentiate from other social categories in the social reality as well as political reality in North East India.

The crucial attributes of an ethnic group, for Oommen, is shared culture uprooted from homeland, but that of a 'nation' is common territory. But an ethnic group may become a nation by developing psychological identification with and having successful moral and political claim over a territory. In North East India, those groups which evoke 'ethnic consciousness' or shared cultural traits are not necessarily uprooted from or unattached to their ancestral homeland. Jackson makes terminological distinction between ethnic category, ethnic group and ethno-nation. *Ethnic category* signifies persons of the same social and cultural characteristics that identifies them as members of a recognizable social category. Characteristics may include race, religion, colour, customs, language, and geographical origin. Thus, the emphasis is on primordial characteristics. *Ethnic group* indicates an ethnic category that has acquired additional characteristics of identity and organization. Identity means to value one's membership in an ethnic category. *Ethnonation* arises when an ethnic group aspires an interest in public authority which may be constitutional status of special rights, provincial autonomy, and not outright sovereignty. The process by which ethnic category may be awakened and transformed into ethnic group or ethnonation is called by Jackson 'ethnic mobilization'. Thus, ethnic mobilization, for Jackson, is crucial attribute of ethnonation. But for Oommen, the important mark of a nationality is common territory. Therefore, nation or nationality for Oommen and ethnonation for Jackson are not the same thing.

Ethnicity, which is an American creation, may perhaps, be used synonymously with Jackson's ethnic mobilization. Ethnicity is more appropriately applied to the minority groups of United States and Canada. These groups design their identity from ancestral culture but unattached their homeland. They are ethnic groups vying for identity employing ethnic mobilization at various

levels. This process of asserting or reasserting cultural identity and group affiliation normally follows ethnic lines and ancestral cultural attributes, and the use of term 'ethnicity' is appropriate in such ethnic identity mobilization. But in North East India, processes of ethnic mobilization and nationality mobilization are in operation simultaneously. The people of North East India may thus be said to comprise of ethnic categories and nationalities. The Bengalis who first came to Tripura as an ethnic category soon outnumbered the original tribal Tripuris. They soon made successful claim over the territory of Tripura and became nationals. The original Tripuris, on the other hand, had been reduced to an ethnic category status by uprooting them from their homeland. Initially, Bengalis were invited as administrators, teachers, and professionals by the tribal rulers. The percentage of tribal population was gradually reduced and reached 28.44 per cent in 1981 in a population of 2.05 millions. Transfer of power from tribal to non-tribal resulted in land alienation and ethno-linguistic erosion of tribal language. The same thing happened in the case of Kacharis of Cachar district of Assam. But the Bengalis in other parts of North East India remain an 'ethnic' and have not been successful in identifying themselves with the territory of the areas they are inhabiting. But in Tripura and Cachar district of Assam, dual processes of ethnification or ethnic mobilization and nationality mobilization had been in operation. The Bengalis were successful in nationality mobilization in both areas while the Tripuris and the Kacharis have been reduced to cultural remnants as a result of ethnification.

In other hill areas of North East India, there are stable, enduring communities like the Nagas, the Mizos, the Khasis, the Garos, the Ahoms, and so on, occupying their ancestral territories for centuries. These people cannot be approximated with ethnic category or ethnic group elsewhere. They are nationalities and are to be considered as such. The problem therefore, is, as pointed out by Pakem (Pakem 1993:324) 'how to integrate the different nationalities within Indian Union into Indian nationhood. The tendency in the North East India is consolidation of cultural identity at the level of tribes or sub-tribes forming what may be called 'little nationalism'.

Different nationalities in North East India have their own specific history, language, and ancestral culture. Any attempt to ignore this through assimilation, political or administrative imposition, give rise to different forms of aggressive movement. The actual will depend on identity mobilization and ethnic/nationality formation. Objective differences like language, religion and territory are being transformed into group culture and bases of consciousness of group solidarity. For Paul Brass, nation is created by the transformation of ethnic groups into formation and its transformation into nationalism can be reversible due to elite competition and internal division and contradiction.

This was what actually happened in Mizoram at the dawn of India's inde-

pendence. Elite competition and division among the new educated elites disorganized nationality formation through political and cultural mobilization on a large scale. But if the group succeeds by its own efforts in achieving and maintaining group rights through political mobilization and action, it has gone beyond ethnicity to establish itself as a nationality.

Oommen asserts that any effort to liquidate the different cultures and/or to assimilate them into an artificially contrived 'national cultural mainstream' would invariably create unbearable stresses and strains on the polity (Oommen 1990:14). For him, nation and society are approximated. But a nation can be uprooted and turned into an 'ethnie' or ethnic group, and an ethnie may be motivated to pledge identity mobilization in order to achieve Jackson's 'ethnic group' status. And in certain instances, it may as well stake a claim to ethnonational status by endeavouring and striving an interest in public authority. This is somewhat parallel to what happens to in the case of the Chakmas in Mizoram and elsewhere in the North East, and recently of the Bru or Reang community in Mizoram. Attributes of ethnicity such as religion, language, race and culture are all important, but the crucial attributes will be determined by the context. This kind of approach has a blend of primordial, ethnicist, circumstantial, and opposition approaches. Most of the social and political movements in North East India are resistant movements to ethnification and nationality/ethnic mobilization.

The Chakmas started making their entry into Mizoram as far back as nineteenth century after the British had given them compact territorial enclosure in Arrakan and Chittagong hill tracts. The fertile land in the south west Mizoram bordering Bangladesh attracted the Chakmas. However, until 1933, the Chakmas were not given even temporary residential status. But in 1933, one Chakma chief, Debicharan, was given temporary permission to set-up a village with fifteen households. The Government Order No.4 of 1933-34, dated, Lunglei, 16 May, 1933 read: "C.I. Tais's report received. Previous paper perused. Debicharan is allowed to settle with his 15 houses in the land of Lukisuri, the . . . In the event of Dibicharan committing any misdemeanour, he is liable to be turned out on being given a month's notice". The Chakmas were treated as 'foreigners' and were levied non-Mizo foreigners' house tax (fee) of Rs.5/- per year per household.

The Chakmas continued to make illegal inroad into Mizoram even after India's Independence. The following is an extract from the Inspection note of Superintendent, Lushai Hills: "*Chakmas and Tripura Register*: No new passes are being issued. These people are foreigners, and I do not see any reason why they should not pay tax at the foreigners' rate of Rs.5/- each. Taxes must be realized at this rate from 1950-51. Mr Hydes order dated 21st March, 1944 should be republished from both Lungleh and Aijal. All chiefs and C.Is should

be asked to report the name of Chakmas and Tripuras who entered the District in violation of that order after 1944. This list must reach me by 31.1.50. Any chief who does not report the infiltration of Chakmas and Tripuras to their 'rams' will be dealt with severely. All chiefs should be warned accordingly". And subsequently the Deputy Commissioner of Lushai Hills, K.G.R. Iyer, in 1954 made the following Standing Order: "It is hereby notified for information and strict compliance by all chiefs and Headmen in the Lushai Hills District that no influx of Chakmas and Tripuras will be allowed without the prior permission in writing of the Deputy Commissioner, Lushai Hills. Serious notice will be taken if any chief/Headmen fails to report the names and particulars of new arrivals (Chakmas and Tripuras) in his jurisdiction". The Order referred to as Mr. Hydes Order, 1944 read like this:

Chakma Settlement in South Lushai Hills: The following principles will be observed in dealing with the Chakma (and Tiperah) settlements and bastis in south Lushai Hills:

1. Owing to the large number of Chakmas now settled in south Lushai Hills, most of whom have considerable families, no further application for settlement will be considered but for the most exceptional reasons.
2. No passes for separate house will be considered except where the applicant is:
 - (a) The grown up married son of a Chakma who had settled for at least ten years in the Lushai Hills.
 - (b) The grown up married grandson of such settlers.

In both these cases, the applicant himself must also be a permanent resident of the Lushai Hills. Passes for daughters will not be considered. If these marry outside Chakma, they must go to their husband's village. If they marry Lushai Chakam the husband will be covered by the same rules above.
3. The site of each Chakma basti will be decided by the chief in consultation with the Karbari, and will be reported to the Circle Interpreter. This site will not be changed without the permission of the Sub-Divisional officer or Superintendent. The name of the Karbari with the location of the basti will be reported for record in this office.
4. The bastis shall consist of not less than 15 houses which are to be concentrated in a village site, or along a lane which shall not be more than half a mile long. No dwelling shall be built outside this site, other than Jhum houses and granaries, etc.
5. The Chakma will make and maintain throughout the year a footpath from their basti to the chief village.

6. The rules about cutting Jhums on the river banks will be strictly observed, and order from this office will be obtained before any departure is made from this rule.
7. Chiefs will be responsible for the general control of the Chakmas in their 'ram'. They will normally work through the karbari who will be removable on the recommendation of the chief if he is found to be either ineffective or of bad character.
8. Mass movement of a whole or the large part of the basti from one chief's 'ram' to another will require the prior sanction of the Sub-Divisional officer or Superintendent. Individual shifting or 'pemming' of houses and families will be allowed as in Lushai villages.

Dated Lunglei
the 21st March, 1944

Sd/- E.S. Hyde,
Superintendent, South Lushai Hills.

The chiefs were thus responsible for checking infiltration and influx of Chakmas and Tripuras. The different orders issued from time to time indicated as a whole that there was mass infiltration of Chakmas and Bru or Reangs into Mizoram during the British period. Many southern and western chiefs of Mizoram did not report this illegal infiltration due to the lucrative income they derived from foreigners' tax from the infiltrators. According to the Tribal Research Institute, Mizoram, the growth rate of Chakmas population in Mizoram is as follow:

Growth rate of Chakma population in Mizoram

Year	Population	Growth rate
1901	198	—
1011	306	52.00
1921	680	125.00
1931	836	22.8
1941	5,088	508.00
1951	11,435	202.00
1961	19,327	26.41
1971	22,393	15.8
1981	39,905	78.2
1986	71,000*	

*According to Chakma estimates.

Source: Tribal Research Institute, Mizoram, Aizawl

The Chakmas entered Mizoram as an ethnic category without any formal organization or group existence. But due to neglect and lack of vision of a 'threat to territorial integrity' the Mizos let them organize themselves into an

ethnic group aspiring for group identity. This kind of identity formation started during the British period and continued with somehow more vigour and dynamism after India's Independence. They now stake a claim to nationality status by demanding Union Territory status thereby claiming a separate territorial enclosure within Mizoram. This happens after they have been conceded ethnonational status by conferring public authority in the Chamka Autonomous District Council by possibly breaking all the formal procedures in 1972.

The Bru or Reangs as they are popularly known in Mizoram, are also infiltrators into Mizoram during the British period. Like the Chakmas, the bulk of the Brus are illegal infiltrators after India's Independence. And like the Chakmas, they entered Mizoram, not as refugees, but as fragment of Bru ethnic category. They have taken longer time than the Chakmas to organize themselves into ethnic group identity formation. The Bru population in Mizoram, according to 1971 Census, was 9,828, but 1991 Census reported a population of 64,572 including Mizos and Chakmas in the Bru inhabited areas. The Bru themselves claim their total population strength at 85,000.

Eastern Panorama, July issue states: "On December, '94 the Reangs floated a political organization called Bru National Union (BNU) and on September 1997 they held a conference at Saipuilui Village in Aizawl to pass a resolution for the first time with a demand for an Autonomous Council for the Brus. This has led to acrimony as the Mizos found it unacceptable specially because of a recent furore in the State with Chakmas demanding an Union territory within Mizoran as per recommendation of petition committee of the Rajya Sabha favouring the same for the Chakmas . . . Not only some prominent leaders of the Reangs community moved from village to village telling the Reang villagers to leave Mizoram so that BNLf (Bru National Liberation Front) might use violent methods to achieve Autonomous Council, the BNLf militants themselves told Reangs to leave Mizoram as they are going to attack the Mizoram police. The Reang migration to Tripura which started as a trickle later developed into a flood after BNLf militants killed on October 21, 1997 Lalzawnliana, a forest warden and abducted two Bru labourers accompanying the later."

Thus, the Chakmas and Brus have both staked a claim to nationality status within Mizoram, which the Mizos within Mizoram will not permit. The political dynamics and future course of political development in Mizoram is going to be guided by this.

Arunachal is also lately disturbed by agitation on outsiders issue. The

genesis lies in the exodus of Tibetan refugees after the flight of Dalai Lama to India in 1959. But the actual problems started with the construction of Kaptai dam in Chittagong in 1964 leading to the large scale displacement of Chakmas. The Central Government decided to repatriate these Chakmas in Arunachal Pradesh by allocating three Chakma settlements in Changlang district in Tirap area, one near Itanagar, and the third in Kameng district. The Chakmas started as agricultural labourers, but now reclaimed land for cultivation. The Chakmas now claimed citizenship as a matter of right and pose competition for land and employment. Thus, the Chakmas entered Arunachal as refugees without ethnic group identity within Arunachal politics. They now organize themselves into ethnic group organization and stake political claim of citizenship and land ownership as they did in Mizoram. Infact, they do have political link with Chakmas in Mizoram and elsewhere.

The indigeneous Arunachalese argue that these settlements were established without consulting the local communities who resented this intrusion from the beginning. The Arunachalese have sought repatriation of Chakmas from time to time. The number of refugees is estimated at 65,000. "Quit Arunachal" notices have been issued occasionally by All Arunachal Pradesh Students Union to the Chakmas as "unwanted guests." The agitations were backed by violence, arson, denial of ration card, school admission and social boycott. It is even reported that ULFA and NSCN sought to back AAPSU demands. Others reported that the Chakmas are seeking arms to defend themselves. The NSCN has already made its entry recently and this could change what is still largely a peaceful state. The number of Chakmas is not very large, but in some areas, the Chakmas outnumber the local population who feel threatened. And in a state with a population of 864,558 where non-indigeneous population constitute almost a third, the number of Chakmas population approaching 10 per cent could make the situation alarming. What causes more concern, of course, is the fact that the Chakmas, everywhere in North-East India, are vying for nationality status and sooner or later stake a political dynamism in North East India. Political dynamics in the other states of North East India like Assam, Tripura, Manipur Meghalaya and Nagaland is no different. In Assam repatriation of refugees and infiltrators by allocating settlement areas in tribal land, notably Bodoland, for example, in the past and during the British rule and after India's Independence, pose the same problem of ethnification and identity formation and ultimately a quest for nationality status. The refugees or infiltrators may be Bengalis, Chakmas, Brus, or Tibetans, they all started as ethnic category, soon organize into ethnic group identity formation and a claim to public authority and ultimately to territorial possession to claim nationality status. The refugees or infiltrators, except in Tripura and Cachar district of Assam, have been successful in achieving the nationality status. But

it creates different levels of group adjustment. Thus, some indigenous people are uprooted from their homeland. However, most of them are not uprooted, but partially uprooted and are now in the process of regaining what they had lost. The Bodo political movement, as I see it, is based on this whereas the Arunachalese are safeguarding their nationality status by refusing ethnification at the hand of Chakmas refugees. This is also what happened in Mizoram, Meghalaya and Manipur. Many of the ills of the present day political situation in North East can be construed as the creation of the Central government or states Government.

The central Government henceforth should not take any drastic decision without consulting the local people. It is also time that the central Government recognize the 'nationality' status of the numerous groups originally inhabiting the territorial enclosure of the different states of North East India. It is also high time to have academic understanding of the nationality question and that India is to comprise of a collection of nationality and not necessarily ethnic groups to form Indian nationhood. Failure on the part of academicians as well as central and state Government authority to make distinction between ethnic category, ethnic group, ethnation and nationality result in failure to understand the political reality of North East India. But this is where the political dynamics of North East India lies.

NOTES

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