

5. Ethnic Tension and Conflicts: North Eastern Experience

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Northeast India is home to many ethnic communities and is also rich in natural resources, yet relatively undeveloped economically. The social landscape has been characterised by a great deal of racial, linguistic and ethnic diversity that creates ethnic tensions and conflicts within individual states and across state and national boundaries. This paper summarises some thoughts on ethnic tension and conflicts in Northeast India and attempts to highlight the issues involved, which are of general interest and of concern for the region. The paper then proposes some popular solutions.

1. Theoretical Background

Historically, the region has always been a battleground of differences. It is only in recent times that the process of fusion seems to have overshadowed fissionary tendencies.

Defining the Problem

W. W. Hunter (1879) the British Administrator observes that different communities inhabited the mountains and plains of the Northeast starting from the tenth through the eighteenth centuries A.D. During these centuries, there were constant frictions and tensions between numerous ethnic groups, tribes and peoples of the valleys. A series of wars took place, with the Chutiyas, Ahoms, Kacharis, Tripuris, Meiteis, Mons, Burmese, Shuns and others struggling for the upper hand in the low-lying areas. The Hill people were involved in these conflicts one way or the other.

¹ I am grateful to my students who had participated and contributed in my teaching on this topic. I have revised and expanded my class lectures. I alone am responsible for all inadequacies.

Accounts of Elwin (1962, 1964), Furer Haimendorf (1969, 1976), Hutton (1921), Mills (1922, 1926, 1937) and other British administrators also show that various ethnic groups, for example the Angami, Sema, Lotha, Ao, Rengma and Konyak and other Naga tribes were involved in feuds, inter-khel (clan) quarrels and headhunting. It was only in 1918 with the formation of the Naga Club that a feeling of a common Naga origin and solidarity began. A memorandum signed in 1929 by 20 persons belonging to different Naga groups was submitted to the Simon Commission calling for protection of the Naga groups from the plainsmen (Das 1982: 41-43). Intra-Naga rivalry has surfaced again and again in recent years among the various militant groups. In Manipur, the tension is massive because of the multiplicity of ethnic groups (See Zehol 1998). A series of conflicts took place between the Hmar and Kuki in the 1960s (Chaube 1973: 210; Zehol 1998: 93). The Meiteis of Manipur have always resented the fact that assimilation between them and the Kukis never really occurred. Yet the major movement is not directed towards the Kukis but is for the deportation of the foreign nationals i.e. the Bengalis and Nepalis.

About Arunachal Pradesh, Elwin (1964: 13) wrote: "In temper aggressive, reserved and suspicious, they have quarrelled among themselves for generations; there are still old blood-feuds taking their toll of human life and cattle-theft had long been common." Ethnic conflicts have not ceased altogether, yet the people of Arunachal Pradesh are forming a broader solidarity to counter the interests of the Chakma (who came from East Pakistan when they were displaced by the Kaptai dam in the 1960s) and Tibetan refugees. In Mizoram, ethnic relations among the various tribal groups were not always without tension or conflict. But when there was a problem of outsiders mainly of the Chakmas, the various ethnic groups forgot their differences and fought the 'outsiders'. In Tripura, the major upsurge has been the diminishing proportion of the tribes as the outsider (Bengali) population has overtaken them by large numbers. The two are trying to hold on to what is

their land and security, so the tension and conflict persists. In Meghalaya, ethnic tensions were often reported among the major ethnic groups, the Khasis, Jaintias and the Garos yet all of them participated in the movement for statehood until it was formed in 1972. Today, the Garos do not like the employment policy of the Meghalaya Government and there is a rising demand for a separate state under the initiative of the Garo, Khasi or Jaintia militant groups.

In a nutshell, conflict seems eternal in the Northeast. Ethnicity feels like a double-edged sword. It unites most communities for political demands from outsiders but fails to organise the communities within as a common entity. These observations show that ethnic tension and conflicts have been a part of the North Eastern reality. That is the focus of this paper. It discusses the ethnic groups of Northeast India, with examples taken from Manipur and Nagaland. After a look at the ethnic differences within each state, a reflection will follow on the immigrant issue. Some would like the "illegal immigrants" to be expelled. We will look at the implications of this stand and see whether that is the only alternative.

In order to understand this issue, the paper will look at the theoretical issues before discussing some practical considerations. The tradition of academic writings on ethnicity and race relations has been influenced visibly by the academic heritage as well as the empirical location of the academician. To organise academic writings one can adopt the two schemes of academic disciplines and conceptual issues.

On the Basis of Academic Disciplines

Ethnicity and race are subjects which have come to the attention of every core academic discipline in the social sciences, to name them in alphabetic order, anthropology, economics, history, human geography, political science, psychology and sociology. It will be interesting to note the thrusts in each, and the pattern of shifts within each. Initially the anthropologists for the most part

confined their study to tribal communities, while sociologists to colour-race relations in the urban industrial areas. The psychologists may be said to have initiated their engagement with the analysis of the anti-Semitic situation in Europe. It yielded much literature on prejudice, but later they extended their focus to the analysis of urban situations with reference to the people of colour in an urban situation. This yielded much material on stereotypes. In political science, in a very different vein academic attention shifted to ethnicity formulated with comparative political analysis of developing societies and Third World countries. Such a neat designation of key thrust areas with each of the academic disciplines should not be carried too far. In course of time there has been a variety of academic excursions.

During the several decades in which study of racial and ethnic relations has occupied an important place among social scientists, theoretical disagreements have often rested on different levels of analysis from which they proceed. Rather than seeing these different levels as part of an inter-dependent system, the tendency in many cases has been to emphasise one level as fundamental. We can identify three broad categories or dimensions: a. The early observers, to whom prejudice and discrimination was the main characteristic. b. A second level of analysis, which sees inter-racial and inter-ethnic relations as expressions of a struggle for power, income and prestige. It is within this that the Marxist perspective of analysis has developed. c. The level of analysis, which draws attention to the process by which individuals are socialised and the nature of self-regard, wants and values instilled by their society.

An analysis of the tradition, which has developed in anthropology, needs some closer attention. According to one appraisal (Despres 1975), reflecting more specifically on the literature of social anthropology, one is tempted to consider ethnic studies B.B. and A.B. (Before Barth and after Barth). Before Barth, excluding a few studies of racial and cultural minorities, ethnic phenomena received their most explicit theoretical attention in the

work of those anthropologists who were concerned with the organisation of plural societies. Barth perceived ethnic exchanges as situations disclosing a more inclusive system of ecological, political, social and cultural relations and the structure and organisation of their respective communities, which needs to be explained in terms of part of this system. Barth (1969) thus explained that ethnic groups are formed to the extent that actors use ethnic identities to categorise themselves and others for purposes of interaction. He added that a stable system of inter-ethnic relations presupposes a structuring of interaction along the boundaries of ethnic groups, that is to say, it presupposes a set of rules governing situations of inter-ethnic contact. According to one scheme a distinction can be made between the subjective view and the objective view of ethnicity. "Ethnic groups are defined both by the cultural modalities of their behaviour (including most importantly their linguistic behaviour), and by their subjective views of themselves and each other" (Van den Berghe 1973: 72). There is a striking lack of unanimity about the concept of ethnicity (see also Hutchinson and Smith 1996: 4). It was initially equated with race; later anthropologists recognised only the Caucasoid, Mongoloid and Negroid while ethnic groups were innumerable. In other words, an ethnic group redefines itself from time to time to include some and exclude others.

Conceptual issues

We may turn our attention to the issues relating to the definition of 'tribe', 'ethnic group' and 'ethnicity' with examples drawn from Manipur. A look at the theories that have developed around the ethnic communities, particularly those of Manipur can help one get an understanding of the conflicts because these theories are based on the authors' understanding of the field reality.

Tribes

There has remained considerable imprecision on the definition of groups, in terms of distinction between 'tribe', 'clan' and 'sub-

tribe'. It has been possible to identify between 1873 (Brown) and 1986 (Kamkhenthang), nine different schemes for the classification of the tribes inhabiting Manipur (see Zehol 1998: 123-129). Some of the main features noticed are:

Brown (1873), and Dun (1886) divide the tribes into two broad categories, the Nagas and the Kukis, Shakespeare (1912) refers to the Lushai-Kuki Clans rather than the Lushais or the Kukis. In his introduction he refers to "the many clans living in the hill tracts... of the Kuki race." He explains: "The term Kuki, like Naga, Chin, and many others, is not recognised by the people to whom we apply it, and I will not attempt to give its derivation, but it has come to have a fairly definite meaning, and we now understand by it certain closely allied clans, with well marked characteristics, belonging to the Tibeto-Burman stock." Brown, in 1873, identified 8 major tribal communities in Manipur. In 1981 the number has increased to 29, according to the official classification adopted by the Government of Manipur. It appears that Dun (1886) has multiplied the total number of distinct groups by including many more groups which hold village or lineage-based identity rather than any distinct ethnic identity.

The issue relating to definition appeared when we came to the definition of the Thadous *vis-à-vis* the Kukis. Do we consider the Thadous as a clan or a sub-tribe of the Kukis? Whatever decision we take, how do we define (a) clan and (b) sub-tribe? In the Chin-Kuki-Mizo experience, how do we define, each of the three, *viz.*, the Chins, the Kukis and the Mizos? In more specific terms, the question before us is: Do we consider each of the three, the Chins, the Kukis and the Mizos, individually as a 'tribe'? In that case, what do we consider the double-hyphenated group, the Chin-Kuki-Mizo? Or are they to be considered a tribe or a bigger ethnic solidarity, within a larger territorial context? In case a common language, or more correctly, a language easily intelligible to each of the three is the factor for common identity of a tribe, then by referring to the 'local' cultural differences, what designation do

we give to each of the three groups? In the Zeliangrong experience, how do we define each of the three, the Zemeis, the Liangmeis and the Rongmeis who have given themselves the common nomenclature of Zeliangrong? Are they tribes? In that case, what designation will we give to the Zeliangrong? That of a tribe? In such a situation what would we like to consider as the comprehensive definition of a tribe?

This discussion is important because the Kuki-Paite conflict in the 1990s was mainly around the identity of the Thadou and the Kuki. The question raised was who is a Kuki? Is it only the Thadou whose language came to be used in the meetings of the ethnic groups that formed a common entity or do the smaller groups have equal rights? The feeling of the numerically small communities that the Thadou were using the organisation for their own domination was basic to the conflict (Haokip 2008a: 189-191).

The notion of a 'tribe' has engaged the attention of anthropologists nearly all through the history of the discipline, and without any conclusive results. The concept seems to have defied any standardised definition by the anthropologists all through. According to *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* (1960), "a tribe may be defined as a politically or socially coherent and autonomous group occupying or claiming a particular territory." In the international Encyclopaedia of the social sciences, there is an entry on "Tribal Society" according to which in the general usage, the word 'tribe' is taken to denote a primary aggregate of people living in a primitive or barbarous condition under a headman or chief. The unnecessary moralistic overtones that this usage implies can be avoided or minimised by the use of the expression 'tribal society' or 'pre-literate society'. At the same time, the word 'tribe' need not be discarded. Indeed, it can be a technical term denoting a territorially defined political unit, a usage that recalls the original use of the word for the political divisions or patrician orders of the Roman state (Lewis 1968). The patrician-plebeian division was not identical to that of the tribes. The Roman division was based mainly on class

and social categories while the tribes are divided territorially. However, the Roman division into social and cultural groups can function as a framework for an understanding of the tribes.

The existence of distinct social or cultural groups within societies is widespread and ancient. It has occurred in the communities of Africa and in those of modern United States. It has occurred from such ancient days as those of the Old Testament, to those of the years on the eve of the 20th century. At this point, one may quote Morris (1968: 167).

It would be wise, for the sake of clarity, to make the distinction between a social group and a social category. By a group (we) mean an aggregation of people recruited on clear principles, which are bound to one another by formal, institutionalised rules and characteristics, informal behaviour... Members usually identify themselves with a group and give it a name. In practice social groups vary in the degree to which they are corporate, and in certain situations one of the principal difficulties of analysis may be to decide whether a particular social entity is in fact a social group or a mere category of the population, such as red-haired people, selected by a criterion that in the context socially neutral and that does not prescribe uniform behaviour". He later argues that, "Ethnic divisions may simply be categories of the population as are Welshman, and Scotsman living in England, or Indians, Chinese, and Creoles in Mauritius, who are beginning to lose a sense of ethnic separateness. It is, therefore, always important to be sure what is the exact sociological status of an ethnic or cultural division. Clarity in analysis depends upon it.

The issues before us, with such arguments, and also our own observations from Manipur, especially those emerging from the different schemes of classifications of the 'tribes' that have been made, are:

1. How to solve such issues as posed by Shakespeare when he relates about the Lushai-Kuki clans, and our own experiences, such as those of Zeliangrongs? As asked above, how does one distinguish between a clan-tribe, sub-tribe and wider category such as the Kukis or the Zeliangrongs?
2. What criteria do we need to adopt in making use of the terms 'tribe' and 'ethnic group'. The answer to these questions came from a two-stage clarification adopted by us. In the broader context we adopted a classification as follows. Bearing in mind the nature of the field observation from Manipur, that of the communities involved in a constant process of defining-redefining their respective identity, we will need to base our analysis on the social category according to which the people identify themselves as belonging to a particular group.

We also felt that for purposes of clarity, it will be advisable not to press the academic, classical definition of a 'tribe', on the contrary, to adopt operational definitions for such notions as 'tribe' or ethnic group, and use the designations 'tribe', 'clan', 'sub-tribe', and 'ethnic group' synonymously, if and when necessary, but only after providing the operational clarification. Operational clarification, or adopting an operational definition, involves 'to operate' the empirical observations in terms of certain distinctions which will help categorisation, classification, and then ordering of the data. Whenever a concept is operationally defined, its meaning is made more explicit and more specific. The term hypothesis in such stands refers, in fact, to the assumptions, which the investigator makes at the outset.

Referring back to our field observations, we consider the Kukis as well as the Thadous, distinct tribes and sub-tribes at one point of analysis, and a tribe and its clan at another point of analysis. In the early history of these communities, the original group was the Kuki tribe, which was spread to a cluster of villages, within a specified territory. In the course of time, to be specific the translation of the Bible into the Thadou dialect of the Kuki tribe, began the

process of this dialect group of the Kukis beginning to consolidate itself as a group distinct from the rest of the Kuki community. At this point of history, for the purpose of analysis, we will designate the Thadous as a distinct tribe, with the explanation that it has emerged from the original Kuki tribe. We may view the situation from another position as well. In case the Thadous today want to be identified as a group distinct from the other Kukis, who are we to prevent them from doing this?

Ethnic Group

One of the issues before us, as will be clear from the foregoing discussion, is related to 'substituting' the notion of tribe or 'community' with that of 'ethnic group'. In this relation the specific issues are: What defines an ethnic group? Does it substitute for the notion of tribe and of non-tribal communities? Does the use of the notion of ethnic groups foresee at some point of time later, the redundancy of the notion of tribe? In the process of formulating a reply to these queries, two situations drew our attention: Within anthropology, what implies the traditions of 'ethnography', 'ethnology' and now the study of ethnicity? Note, the root word 'ethnos' is common to each of the three. The paradigm shift is in anthropology, consequent upon the publication of *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* by Barth (1969). In anthropology, in fact, one can identify a two-stage paradigm shift, initially from early ethnography to ethnology and then to comparative analysis, and the second phase of paradigm shift with the publication of the volume by Barth (1969). The early ethnographers based their generalisations about a 'particular society' on the basis of observation from a micro-situation, often a village or on interviews with a few knowledgeable persons. As a result, the notion of 'society' was never explicitly enunciated. What attracted attention was culturally significant behaviour, rather than the 'boundary' of a society and the internal organisation/structure that distinguishes it from others.

After 1945, with the end of World War II, there was a marked

shift in the approaches of the ethnographers. As observed by Firth, the classical study material of anthropologists seemed to be vanishing fast, and they had to search for new subjects for their study, such as those of refined methodology, formulation of theories and the study of culture change. "Following World War II, ethnography began to attract more theoretical and methodological attention" (Conklin 1968: 174).

What comprises ethnology has, interestingly, three distinct sets of meanings. In the United Kingdom, the name 'ethnography' is generally used for purely descriptive accounts of a people or peoples. Ethnology goes beyond this description. In the first place it seeks to provide a classification of peoples by comparing them with reference to their similarities and differences. People or ethnic groups resemble or differ from each other by racial characteristics, by language, and by their modes of life and mode of thought, from the kind of dwellings they inhabit or the kind of clothes they wear to the kind of beliefs they hold. Ethnologists distinguish between the racial characteristics of a people and their cultural characteristics and between racial and cultural classifications (Radcliffe-Brown 1958: 136).

One may note that Radcliffe-Brown, who represents the interpretation as adopted in the United Kingdom, refers to race, people and ethnic groups. This distinction, as we will note presently, has had a bearing on the present day perception and analysis of the ethnic phenomena.

In sharp contrast to the definition of ethnology in the United Kingdom, in Continental Europe ethnology refers to what comprises social anthropology in the United Kingdom. Much different from these two, in the United States, in the early years of Boas and Kroeber, ethnology is referred to as the study of the evolution of the communities. Towards the end of the 19th century, two schools of ethnology were founded, one by Boas in the United States and the other by Ratzel and Frobenius in Germany. Both schools emphasised the historical processes of diffusion and

migration. In the United States, by the 1950s, Murdock laid the foundation of cross-cultural studies, and through this, that of comparative analysis. Such cross-cultural studies stem from the evolutionary interests of the 19th century.

The principal weakness of most cross-cultural studies so far is that their instances hop, skip and jump across the map in such a manner that continuity of geographical distribution and other clues of genetic explanations are missing.... Although significant positive correlations in cross-cultural research are relatively easy to find, causal relationships are more difficult to establish, and the direction of causation is still more elusive.... Naroll (1964) has drawn attention to the many problems surrounding the nature of the ethnic unit used in cross-cultural correlations. Its definition is crucial to such studies (Driver 1968: 184).

As regards the redundancy of the notion of 'tribe', the straight answer to this has to be that 'such notions cannot be redundant as long as the people identify themselves as such.' Given the paradigm shift that has appeared among anthropologists with the publication of the volume by Barth (1969: 2), the guiding argument is that, "the starting point for such an examination must be a recognition that 'ethnic group' are categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves." With such guiding consideration, the notion of 'tribe' will obviously never be redundant as long as the people identify themselves as such. It may be interesting and relevant to note here that with the paradigm shift from focus on tribe to ethnic groups, there has been a concurrent shift in focus from structural organisational considerations of the respective group to process-based experiences of inter-group relations. While the early ethnographers confined their attention to the structural features and cultural traits of a particular tribe, the paradigm shift took the attention to the processes of inter-group relations.

While such a paradigm shift appeared in the perspectives of social

scientists, and more so, in that of anthropologists, social analysts have not been able to distance themselves from the issues of race identity. As a result, any discussion on ethnic relations has invariably included a discussion on race relations as well. As Mason (1986: 5) explains:

The problem of origin has long dogged the study of many aspects of human behaviour. It takes on special significance in the field of race and ethnic relations.... Ethnicity may be a resource in the making of a group's history, but the process of categorisation, of which racism is the most striking example in the 19th and 20th centuries, illustrates that the superior capacity of some groups to define the circumstances under which that history is made is a crucial feature of a symmetrical power relations.

In the realm of sociology of knowledge, academic disciplines like ethnography, ethnology as well as analytical concepts such as ethnicity, ethnic group relations, carry their own history. Knowledge is society specific and time specific. "Traditionally, the plural society thesis has been seen as the principal example of the attempt to develop a special theory of race and ethnicity" (op. cit). The notion of 'ethnic groups' over a period of time and in different soils has referred to different categories of groups. To the Western colonisers, it referred by and large to the tribal communities in Africa and Asia. The colonisers and the academicians in communion with them found the notion of race more convenient to refer to them. Across the Pacific, in the United States, the notion of ethnic groups draws attention to cultural minority groups, like those with a Mexican, Italian or similar origin, who have now settled in the United States. With the development of their resistance in the United States in the 1960s, many of these groups are also identified now as ethnic groups.

In Manipur, the distinctiveness of identity and all that it can mean to the person or persons concerned, is clearly defined through two factors, territorial affiliation, and the language or dialect of

the people. A Thadou distinguishes himself from the neighbouring Kabuis on the basis of the difference of language, while the Chin-Kuki-Mizo appellation provides a good example of how territorial affiliation brings different names to the same cultural-linguistic group. The section of population which resides in Manipur has been known for long as the Kukis, while those who have inhabited the neighbouring Mizo Hills are known as Mizos and those across the border in Myanmar (Burma) are designated as Chins. With all such examples from Manipur, and the academic debate on the issue of identification of ethnic groups, we consider it operationally convenient to refer to each community, which wants to be identified differently, such as the Chins, the Kukis, the Thadous and numerous others, as an ethnic group. The issue of defining the boundary of an ethnic group is not to be decided in terms of any set criteria adopted by the analyst. Instead, it has to be in terms of how the people themselves feel: the distinction between 'we' and 'they', the 'insider' and the 'outsider'.

Ethnicity

As regards ethnicity, the same as in relation to the cognate concept of 'ethnic groups', we need to view it from the standpoint of the content as well as the context. In terms of content, ethnicity refers to an overt expression of feeling of differentiation, such as the situation of how the other Kuki group of people differentiated themselves from the Thadous. This is a consciously expressed feeling. In social science literature, we find extensive discussion on the notion of ethnicity, but a close look at these readily reveals that the attention to this notion has refracted to diverse directions rather than going deep to an analysis of what it implies. Smith (1981: 3) argues that ethnicity should not be treated as a given, like primordial givens. As we note from the available data, every discussion which is intended to be on ethnicity, refracts to a discussion on ethnic group boundaries and identities.

Etymologically, the term traces its origin from the "ethnic",

which relates to a community of physical and mental traits posed by members of a group as a product of their common hereditary and cultural traditions. According to Webster's Dictionary (1978), it is a noun from the expression ethnic, and refers to certain qualities or affiliation based on hereditary as well as cultural considerations. Winick's (1964) Dictionary of Anthropology does not include an entry on ethnicity. It has an entry on ethnic, which refers to a group distinguishable by certain common cultural attributes such as language. It is interesting to note that such unconcern or marginal reference to the notion of ethnicity has continued with the social science disciplines. As a result, thus far no comprehensive definition has been provided.

2. Northeast Experience

Coming back to the main discussion, ethnic tension and conflicts have been a part of the Northeast reality. In pre-colonial days, tension and conflicts were based on tribal principles of heroism, justice, honour, pride, recognition, customary obligation or feeling of revenge. The recent conflicts and solidarities appear to be guided by common interests like the 'deportation of foreigners' rather than natural and inherent characteristic of tribal life. One can see this in the works of Hutton (1921); Elwin (1962, 1964); Furer Haimendorf (1969, 1976); Chaube (1973); Das (1982); Kabui (1982); Majumdar (1982) Mukherjee and Mukherjee (1982) and Zehol (1998).

Hills and Plains Relations

In the colonial times, Assam in the area today known as the Northeast was characterised by "... unstable relations of the indigenous population with the colonial rulers on the one hand, and the plains people on the other" (Roy Burman 1984: 174). This unstable relationship between the tribal people in the hilly areas and the rulers in the plains continued even after Independence. In addition, the plains people of Assam had themselves to face uneasy

inter-ethnic relations. After India's Independence the relationship between the political centre and the tribal folk in the Northeast was characterised by mutual alienation (Lal 1984: 202) arising from an inadequate understanding of each other, including a "colossal ignorance, even in otherwise informed circles, regarding these areas" (Horam 1984: 190). The tribal people felt neglected by the centre and the centre feared the insurgencies in this sensitive border area, particularly in Nagaland. Horam (1984: 192) claims that the 'trouble' of these regions has political and not economic roots. Hence, we see the problem of 'understanding' as a major issue in the Northeast.

The most obvious tension, caused by development, is the problem of the large number of Bangladeshi immigrants in Assam. This theme is getting more and more attention and is being well described in the social science literature. Dubey (1984: 134) argues that Northeast India is part of a social-cultural plural India, stating, for example, that the Nagas and Manipuris are mentioned in the Mahabharata. He stresses the fusion of mainstream India with the tribal areas, including the tribal areas of Northeast India. However, Roy Burman (1984: 175) states:

They may have had historical relations with some parts of the country. In others they had such relations with other countries. At the same time, the ethos of their social organisation has often been different from that associated with caste. In fact, caste formation and permeation of caste values have been formal, only in some of the areas of the region, and those too in an incomplete manner. Hence, the network of traditional social relations linking up the region with the rest of the country covers only limited areas. One thus sees that even among scholars there is no consensus on the relationship between Northeast India and "mainland" India.

Development and Immigration

The most prestigious aim of post-independence India is to rise up as a modern and united nation-state. Ethnic tension, conflicts and backwardness are therefore seen as threats to the state. However, at times both goals seem to be hampered by impracticability. In general, we might assume that a successful development of industry with low unemployment makes an impact on the stability of a society, but the opposite, too, can be the case. Today's development is accompanied both by cross-border trade and exchange of goods and of labour. P. C. Goswami (1984) highlights this relationship between development and immigration on account of the population growth in Assam. When employment opportunities are abundant then immigration does help to develop the economy of an area. But once the demand for a particular type of unskilled labour that comes from an immigrant group is satisfied, ethnic tensions against the immigrants are likely to appear because of the fear that the immigrants may take up work that is normally done by the local people.

One example from Northeast India is the immigration of Bengalis into Assam. B. P. Singh (1987: 140) says that: "In attempting to enhance the land revenue and augment the exchequer by exploitation of the natural resources of the region, the British found that the shortage of manpower in Assam was the greatest obstacle to the fulfilment of their plans." Consequently, immigration became a social factor in Assam ever since the development of the tea gardens around 1850. The plantations required a large number of workers, who were conscripted from all over India. After 1891 those workers were joined by Muslims from East Bengal and also from the beginning of the 20th century, unnoticed, by Nepali graziers. Already around 1935, ethnic tension became visible as labourers started to settle down on tribal land to cultivate it. Even so, in the beginning they contributed to the strengthening of the Assamese economy. Later, as they began to settle down, they also contributed to the competition in the Assamese

economy for resources, in particular for adequate employment opportunities (Ganguly 1984: 106; Goswami 1984: 37).

Immigration continued and was even speeded up after India's independence by the development of this region. As a result, some claim that 50 percent of the Assam population is made up of those who migrated from outside at some point in time. The local people felt that this was a point of danger and crisis (Goswami 1984: 39; Singh 1987: 163). This has special relevance to a democratic country like India where the relative number of citizens decides political elections and the distribution of power. In course of time 'migrant communities' could gain more and more control over primary sources of livelihood like land and over secondary sources like government jobs (Singh 1987: 141). Goswami (1984: 39) further claims that: "This state of affairs (immigration) has encouraged the growth of anti-India and secessionist groups amongst the tribals." By giving census data, B.P. Singh (1987: 140-141) shows that the population growth between 1901 and 1981 in the present day Assam is 505.01 percent; in Mizoram 491.71; in Nagaland by 661.48; in Tripura 1,088.63, in Manipur 404 percent, and in Meghalaya 289.95 percent.

Writing on immigration tends to be biased and full of the writer's prejudice. For example, Goswami's (1984: 40) prejudices become clear in sentences like: "The united and aggressive immigrants from foreign countries have already created disturbances in the hitherto peaceful countryside, in the name of looking after minority interest." When one pays attention to the adjectives he uses to characterise both sides, one realises that such writings can become easily social and ethnic dynamite in the struggle for resources like employment, education and land.

Goswami (1984: 59) also supports the stand that a large number of foreigners in Assam should be deported to their country of origin. Public opinion is often in favour of deportation as a quick solution, but this is a conceptual error as well as an unworkable policy, particularly in the case of Assam and

Bangladesh. The first reason is that Bangladesh is a neighbouring country. The Government may perhaps be able to forcefully deport people from far-off places back to their home but not to one's neighbour with whom one shares 4,096.7 kilometres of border and with whom one needs to have good relations particularly in a globalising context. The relationship between India and Bangladesh is likewise close, as this border area was an integrated market in pre-independence days and "a symbol of traditional pattern of economic exchange and long socio-cultural intercourse" (Lama 2006: 5). People complemented each other, including in what Barth (1969: 16-19) describes as ecological interdependence.

The second major reason is that, given the extremely high population density of Bangladesh and the relatively low density in Assam, a balancing out of the population seems to be unavoidable. Immigration will have to become an inseparable part of development programmes in Assam. However, there has been an insider-outsider issue around immigration. The feeling of hostility to those who are "not like us or not from where we are from" is only natural. In this light, the North Easterners may be a little cruder, while in other cultures the notion that the immigrants are 'tribal' people and are 'savages' automatically gave rise to a superiority complex towards the outsiders. The original inhabitants felt that they refused to learn the local ways and manners as they practised their 'outside' habits which are seen as a nuisance. So attempts are made to get rid of them.

The important question should not be *if*, but *how* to handle this growing challenge for the common good including the good of those immigrants already living for decades in Assam. One agrees with B.P. Singh (1987: 162) that: "However tempting it might be, no State system can order or reorder in a chronological fashion the processes of cultural, economic and political change or, in the alternative, keep the social system in static form."

Resources and Removal of Poverty

All in all, immigration in a way allows one to learn new things as well as to try to hold on to the past. So one can only hope that immigration is not seen as a stumbling block to development but as a step towards progress in all spheres of life. That requires access to resources. The Constitution of India obliges the Government to uplift the "scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and other backward classes." In competing for the funds of the Centre J. B. Ganguly (1984: 101, 103) claims that, contrary to public opinion, the North Eastern States of India have not been neglected but that they have benefited from this positive discrimination by getting support from the Centre far above average, since the region has a relatively high proportion of tribal communities.

Ganguly tries to find out why the Northeast could not make a very effective use of the financial aid given to it. It seems to me that it is not simply the amount of money given by the central government that makes the mainly tribal population of the Northeast feel that the government cares for them, but the outcome of development projects. The development projects do in many aspects bring benefits such as education to the Northeast. But Ganguly (1984: 104) claims that the educational institutions are not tailored to the needs of the region with its different cultural and developmental needs, but are just a copy of the mainland educational system and therefore often ineffective, leaving behind huge numbers of highly qualified but unemployed young people.

Like Goswami, he too takes Assam and its problems with development and immigration as an example. But he goes beyond it to suggest a solution. He suggests that the main objective of economic planning should be removal of the poverty of the masses, not high economic growth in itself. He adds that employment opportunities should be spread over the whole region and concentrated in a few areas by limiting development to them (Ganguly 1984: 109).

Pattern of Ethnic tension

Ethnic tension in the Northeast follows a clear hierarchical-horizontal pattern, stratified by the number of people, quantity of money, amount of power, attention and privileges that a group is perceived as getting from the government. The overall perception is that on top of those who get the benefits is the Hindu mainstream, followed by the Bengalis. Then come the Assamese and, right at the bottom, are the hill tribes (Chaube 1973, Singh 1987). Psychologically the conflict is stimulated mainly by the fear of losing privileges.

That takes many groups back to their own community which they perceive as indigenous that keeps losing privileges. Development itself implies a dynamic process. Within this dynamic process, seeing the numbers, power and resources shrinking a section of society fears assimilation into the growing group that is considered superior and is presented as the mainstream of India. On the other hand, the section of society that is presented as the mainstream and is growing depends for their livelihood or security heavily on those peripheral sections and their resources. That makes demography a very sensitive issue (see Barth 1969: 20). Thus, demography becomes crucial in ethnic tensions and conflicts. The immigrants would thus gain centre stage.

In an article "*Horizontal Inequalities: A Neglected Dimension of Development*" Steward (2001: 2) argues that conflicts which look like clashes between different cultures very often have their origin in "severe inequalities between culturally defined groups". She calls them *horizontal inequalities*. Steward predicts that given "... inequalities in resource access and outcomes, coinciding with cultural differences, culture can become a powerful mobilising agent that can lead to a range of political disturbances." This could be a summary of the ethnic tension and conflicts in Northeast India.

Conclusion: Search for Solutions

One can conclude from what has been said above that a

reduction of tension must be achieved through a reduction of horizontal inequalities. How does one reduce these inequalities? Steward (2001: 31) states that: "Development policy ought to include policies to monitor and correct such horizontal inequalities." These affirmative actions are aiming at the "... elimination in discrimination and providing positive bias in favour of certain groups' affirmative action." Another way suggested is verticalisation of the decision-making process. The concept of verticalisation, which is not new but has been stressed by many scholars for decades, does not mean explicitly decentralisation or distancing power from the centre. It involves bringing the decision-making process either to the people or the people to this process not as observers but as equal and active participants. Many think that this approach is a departure from the colonial or post-colonial concept of 'development from above' or the so-called 'downward filtration theory' or the trickle down effect, based on the assumption that development will trickle down to the grassroots after the elites are developed to the maximum. Or, as our discredited supply-siders say, "A rising tide lifts all boats."

But this theory has been proved wrong after decades of implementation. Ultimately it has led to the affirmation of the validity of the concept of verticalisation where people's enthusiasm and participation is concentrated to the utmost. Steward's suggestions can be called economic or social verticalisation. But there is a need to add a political dimension to it. One may need to add many more areas into the social setting that need verticalisation today. What it does not mean at all is to mainstream a diverse region like Northeast India. It requires an effort to achieve one of the goals of development – the key to social and ethnic peace – human dignity.