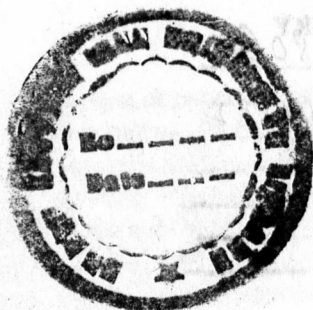


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ETHNICITY, CULTURE AND NATIONALISM IN
NORTH-EAST INDIA

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Edited by *Agrawala*

M.M. AGRAWAL

North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong



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Foreword

The present volume is a collection of papers presented at a seminar on Ethnicity, Culture and Nationalism: Problems in the Context of North-East India. The seminar was held in the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong in the month of September 1995, with financial assistance from the ICSSR, Regional Centre, Shillong.

The broad objective of the seminar has been to evolve a fresh understanding of the issues and problems that beset this part of the country. The seminar aimed at removing some of the misunderstandings and misconceptions through its deliberations, and to contribute to the ongoing dialogue in evolving conceptual tools and analytical framework for an authentic understanding of the problems.

As the mounting tension between the dominant discourses on nationalism and the various forms of local movements are intensifying, such a seminar can throw some light on the dark areas of our nation-building enterprise vis-a-vis identifying the areas of strength and weakness. In the context of perplexing insurgency and economic backwardness of the North-East region, the spirit of such a seminar is likely to illuminate the path of reconciliation and co-operation among various communities and the agencies of the state.

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Introduction

M.M. AGRAWAL

I believe that in articulating the problems that arise in this context, the centrality of the notion of culture cannot be undermined. Historians and anthropologists, for example, who in the past would have studied individual achievements and isolated communities are now trying to understand their subjects by locating them in cultural spaces constructed out of shifting relations of interdependencies. Similarly political scientists who in the past would have considered states, nations or other political collectives as unitary agent or hollow abstractions would no doubt treat them as inter-connected cultural systems. But **culture**, notwithstanding the richness of other notions under review, is as Raymond Williams has said ~~is one of the two or three most complicated words in English language~~. This truth is reflected in the extraordinary variety of definitions available of the concept. Those who are close to the subject would recall that in 1951 cultural anthropologists Clyde Kluckhohn and Alfred Kroeber undertook to compile and study the current thinking on the subject. They reviewed 164 definitions of culture and classified them under a variety of headings as historical, psychological, descriptive, normative, structural and genetic, etc. Nonetheless, they tried to extract a common core in all these:

“Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived) and selected ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action.”¹

A quick analysis of the acclaimed "core element" would reveal that it shifts the focus of culture from behavioural in the first half of the definition, to intellectual elements in the second half "behaviour acquired and transmitted" to "ideas and especially their attached values". There is conflict in other elements as well, for example, between "distinctive achievements" and "traditional ideas".

Kroeber himself had earlier adopted, following Herbert Spencer's sociological theory, what is known as super-organic approach to culture. A recent robust statement of this position reads: "..... a culture cannot exist without bodies and minds to flesh it out; but culture is also something both of and beyond the participating members. Its totality is palpably greater than the sum of its parts, for it is superorganic and superindividual in nature, an entity with a structure, set of processes, and momentum of its own, though clearly not untouched by historical events and socio-economic conditions."²

This explanation of culture seems to me self-defeating. By putting culture in a metaphysical realm it fails to explain, on the one hand, how minds and bodies "flesh it out", and on the other, how human history embraces culture—it prices itself out of the market.

Still recent studies, sensitive to the above mentioned drawbacks, have met with better success. Researchers at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (at the University of Birmingham), for example, maintain: the term 'culture' refers to 'the way, the forms' in which group "handle" the raw material 'of their social and material existence' 'culture' refers to the codes with which meaning is constructed, conveyed and understood. It is better expressed in a geographical metaphor: cultures are *maps of meaning* through which the world is made intelligible. Cultures are not simply systems of meaning and value carried around in the head. They are made concrete through patterns of social organization. Culture is 'the way the social relations of a group are structured and shaped: but it is also the way those shapes are experienced, understood and interpreted'.³ This way of looking at culture is clearly a development upon the works of Richard Hoggart (the author of *The Uses of Literacy* and a life-long champion of popular, working-class culture) and Raymond Williams (the author of *Culture and Society*, a Marxist Professor of Drama at Cambridge). Nevertheless, it seems to me that they have still not succeeded in capturing the essential character

of the inner dynamism of cultures. They tend to represent cultures as fixed and abstract systems of traditions, meanings and values either simply carried over from generation to generation, or embodied in 'patterns of social organization'. But cultures are not inert or dormant systems. In so far as Clarke and others recognize the agency of cultural systems, its active role is still limited to structuring and reshaping social relations in a more or less mechanical and utilitarian fashion. But cultures are *dynamic* in deeper sense—as a qualification of human creativity. Culture's 'agency' in no other than the human agency endowed with freedom, creativity and rationality, appropriated in the open-ended *quest* of the *ultimate, meaning and value* of life. A quest is not a 'search' which is always for the already 'known'. A quest progresses by its internal arguments and conflicts, and brings its own discipline.⁴ Since it is a co-operative activity, it brings into play the virtues of self-assessment and criticism, sincerity, integrity, and openness to the qualities of other cultures and ethical values of natural justice and respect for other persons. No collective or communitarian quest can be conducted without these virtues. Closed, isolated cultures lacking the discipline of self-criticism and respect for others are notoriously prone to decadence.

The upshot of these observations is that a culture is not a unique permanent entity conferring some *essential* identity upon a community. It is a holistic—a spiritual—movement towards the realization of the classical 'holy trinity' of Truth, Goodness and Beauty in an indefinite variety of ways in numerous forms of life. Its relative merit is to be judged by the degree of its success in this teleological enterprise.

In the Humanities, traditionally, culture appears as a *unitary* notion. The unitary notion considers culture as the intellectual and artistic product of a select group of the elite, as in the famous word of Matthew Arnold: 'the best that has been thought or known'. But who decides what is best? T.S. Eliot for example, identifies the British culture with a select list of activities patronized by the upper class and calls it 'characteristic activities of a people'. These include: Derbyday, Henley Regatta, Cowes, the twelfth of August, a cup final, the dog races, the pintable, the dart-board, Wensleydale cheese, boiled cabbage cut into sections, beet-root in vinegar, nineteenth-

century Gothic churches and the music of Elgar'.⁵ But the Unitary notion of culture flies in the face of both logic and facts. Consider Hanif Kureshi's list of the same which includes: Yoga exercises, going to Indian restaurants, the music of Bob Morley, the novels of Salman Rushdie, then Buddhism, the Hare Krishna temple and the films of Sylvester Stallone, therapy hamburgers, visit to gay bars, the dole office and the taking of drugs.

It is clear that there is no logical way of settling the dispute between Eliot and Kureshi. The elitist culture smacks of authoritarianism and appears inherently undemocratic. And when it comes to the facts we are alarmed by the bulk of the different ways of construing and classifying cultures.

The elite and the popular ('Mass culture' of the Frankfurt School, for example in Theodor Adorno) is the most familiar contrast. But there are cultures: high and low, masculine and feminine, black and white, gay and straight, tribal and non-tribal, etc. "Lain Chambers for instance contrasts 'official culture' with 'popular culture' the one present in art galleries, museums and university courses, demanding cultivated tastes and formally imparted knowledge; the other more incidental, transitory, and expendable not separated from daily life . . . the latter is further complicated by its historical associations with folklore and rural traditions".⁶

We are forced to recognize the radical plurality of culture. Once we break loose of the unitary notion of culture, the relation of culture with politics becomes glaringly evident. The plurality logically implies the political. For, surely, in multicultural, diversified societies of today, meanings will be determined and contested according to the interests of all those who belong to it. This political connection of the cultural explains its relevance to nationality.

Today considerations of nationality have become central to politics. Nationality determines the nature and scope of political activity. We have moved a long way away from the days of the Greek city states or from small autonomous tribal entities. One is astonished at the success of the idea, in such a short period (some two hundred years) of its evolution, to find that in the contemporary world, like it or not, it has managed to re-organize all levels of power-relations around itself. No one is willing to listen to you unless you constituted a nation. Today there are no legitimate 'states

without being counted as nations as well: what is the secret of this success? Those who still doubt the reality of nationality, make the mistake of a pure theoretician who starts from a definition of his choice and finds that it picks out nothing in the world. But the fact is that the world is organized around nationality. We have an assembly of nations and we cannot ignore it. Yet, it seems true that "nation" does not have its own "raw material" out of which it is constructed. It is clearly a political construct out of ~~the raw materials of culture~~. This fact is significant, for it logically implies that a nation can exist only in inter-cultural spaces. And this in turn implies that it can be constituted only in a historically negotiated consensus (though some degree of coercion is always involved) between independent cultural groups. Since this consensus is a developing and an ongoing affair, it follows that all nations are in a sense 'unfinished entities'. It is not a self-subsistent or a created entity complete and everlasting. Nations, one might say, in the existentialist idiom, have no 'given' essences. Their existence is prior to their essence which can be constructed in a variety of ways depending upon the willingness and the resourcefulness of the cultures that participate in it, at various levels of its existence. Various essentialist criteria of national identity have been tried out in the past—culture, language, race, ethnicity and even religion—but none have stood the test of time. The idea of a unique essence of nationality is an illusion of societies of long standing civilizational history, old countries like ours. But can one even imagine a generative essence for the modern nations of America or Africa? The answer is obviously "no".

The nation-states of the contemporary world once created tend to resist change. There can only be a pragmatic justification for that. In the last analysis, the unity and the continuity of nations depends upon the attitudes and the degree of agreement between its cultural partners. Moreover, this agreement cannot be sufficient if it exists only at the level of power-sharing. There has to be a solid basis for sharing power in the first place. This basis can exist only in healthy economic and social relationships. For some the talk of 'sub-nationality' gets a foothold here. A more positive approach to my mind, is to limit the activities of a nation-state as such to the pursuit of secular goals. By 'secular', however, I do not mean (as it is

presently understood) 'the tolerance of all religions', (for that in my understanding is clearly a *religious* attitude) but that area of human needs and aspirations which cuts across the differences of religion and similar categories such as caste or tribe, or categories in which identities are supposed to be authenticated and validated by reference to some super-natural ordination.

Nationality, then is a mechanism by which a plurality of cultures organize the instrumentality of their resources for the common good. At any given point in the time strength and the weakness of the national identity will depend upon the degree of commitment of the cultural groups involved. This shows that nationality is essentially a participatory enterprise. And participation has to exist at all levels of national life. The notion of participation invoked here embraces, apart from power-sharing, all other movements: legal, economic, ethical, educational, environmental, etc., which are deemed to be for the benefit of the 'whole'. Looked at, in this way the participatory is 'contributory'; it is not simply a matter of asserting rights, legal or 'human'. It is a creative exercise in co-existence through the 'whole'.

If my analysis of the concept is fair, it is evident that, ideally, a nation is inherently a democratic institution. It cannot be imposed from the above or referred to an *authority*—natural or supernatural. In the modern sense of the word 'nation', the idea of a religious nation-state seems to me self-contradictory. Nationality should prove itself to be appropriate to the 'quest' that is the primordial good of mankind.

I must be very brief with ethnicity. An extraordinary ambiguity in the notion to my mind, makes it less attractive for cultural or political employment. Yet many turn to it for enlightenment. Of late, it has been suggested that it is ethnicity that provides the right soil for nationality. But from what I have said about the character or nationality, it would appear that such a view is not only misleading but also mischievous. Traditionally, ethnicity refers to a racial classification of human groups, and usually coupled with a linguistic identity. But by both these features ethnic groups are identified at different levels. In the 18th Century there were only four or five races recognized. Today there are more than 400. The value of these classifications are primarily for anthropological research. The

racess cut across various language groups and a given language may belong to various races. Today, it will be generally agreed that 'race' signifying a fundamental division of mankind, with moral and cultural significance is a total myth. The genetic science claims to have shown that the whole human race is due to one woman, subjected to environmental differentiations. Moreover, there seems to be no agreed systematic approach to the determination of ethnicity. The term is frequently extended to engage religions and national identities. In United States of America all Indians are called 'ethnic Indians'. Similarly, they have ethnic Chinese, ethnic Blacks and Portiricans and so on, clearly and ambiguously referring to their nationality, colour and language etc. In Britain, Sikhs are treated as an ethnic community distinct from other Punjabi speaking people. In Australia all Asians are clubbed together as ethnic Asians and so on. Thus it is clear that ethnicity is neither an unitary notion nor has an agreed sense in terms of its contents. The academic interest in ethnicity is quite innocuous. But to hail it as the 'sacred' ground for nationality can at best be misleading. We have seen that we do not need a foundation of that kind. We have suggested that far from requiring a cultural or ethnic uniformity to stand on, 'nation' is just that construct which needs just the opposite—a diversity. The modern concept of nationality will be redundant if it were identical with ethnic or cultural homogeneity. A nation is not a unity in diversity but a unity of diverse existents. The political significance of ethnicity (whatever that may be), therefore, can arise only through its contribution to respective cultures. Those who find it of independent significance are usually victims (or leaders) of demagogic politics. This is not surprising, for fundamentalism of all kinds trade on ambiguities in notions open to a variety of interpretations. This much is clear however, that the politics of ethnicity is anti-democracy; its monistic absolutism is anti-dialogical.

From the above conceptual background, we can take a perspective upon some of the problem peculiar to the North-East. Most of them, relevant to the present discourse seem to be rooted in two areas; one is the essentialist, foundationalist, unhistorical understanding of the notions of ethnicity, culture and nationality, which we have considered and rejected. I have suggested that ~~diversity of culture and ethnicity, far from being an obstacle to~~

nation-building, actually are necessary presuppositions of it. The second set of problems arise from the conflation of 'cultural politics' with the politics of culture. The latter represents ethnocentricity and attempt to subordinate subaltern or smaller cultural groups to a dominant culture. It is this attempt that has to be subverted, and not the attempt at national consolidation. The politics of culture is essentially undemocratic. But it is played very subtly. The dominant culture institutions of the nation, such as the Doordarshan, English National Newspaper, The Republic Day celebrations, religious events, Higher Education, etc., are exploited to communicate what is called a 'preferred readings' of what is a 'fact' in local and national conflicts. The challenge has to be met here in its own terms. By contrast cultural politics is the very essence of democratic participation in nationhood. It is by contesting cultural meanings that we evolve a just network of both power and social relationships. It is unfortunate that we have created the myth of the "main stream" and then many of the problems of the North-East are presented as the problem of relationship between the so called main stream and the tribals, either as a problem of assimilation or of resistance to assimilation. Those who wish to resist assimilation often project it as a problem of maintaining their respective cultural or ethnic identities. Such a move inevitably turns counter-productive, undermining modernization and material progress. It is not the "main stream" but the *de facto* dominant culture that is the obstacle. The myth of the "main stream" has to be exploded. All the same, I must admit that the problems I have sketched leaves out much of the reality of the North-East; they are thorny and difficult to solve. But then that is what we are here for.

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3. Cf. Peter Jackson, *Maps of Meaning*, Unwin Hyman, London, 1989. p. 2.
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5. Peter Jackson, *op. cit.*, p. 77.
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