

Ethnicity and Ethnic Identities in North-East India

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Ethnicity related issues and conflicts have received considerable attention of scholars working on social and political dynamics of North-East India. Every year seminars and workshops are organized in different universities and colleges across North-East India to understand ethno-dynamics in the region. A cursory look at research papers and publications of the scholars on North-East also shows that many of them have the prefix, “ethnic” attached to the titles of the books and articles. No doubt, these publications and papers brought to focus certain dimensions of ethnic reality in North-East. However, there are several aspects of ethnicity, which needs to be explored in greater depth. One such feature that deserves attention is the issue of ethnic identity.

Ethnic identity is the pivot around which much of the politics of North-East India revolves. Identity aspirations are capable of influencing, inspiring and mobilizing the communities in pursuit of self-government, autonomy or independence. In one sense, identity struggles have the potential to undermine the dominant power structures that cease to be democratic and responsive. But taken to another extreme, identity assertions can also end up in chains of fratricidal conflicts, leading to genocide and mutual destruction. North-East India provides instances of multiple forms of manifestations of ethnic identity . Hence there is a serious need for undertaking research to comprehend the different aspects

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and dimensions of ethnic identity.

Any study on ethnic identity should start with prior understanding of what one means by an ethnic community. Elsewhere in the country and even abroad, the term 'ethnic community' is used in academics to refer to different politicized cultural groups – religious, linguistic, racial, tribal and immigrant communities – which are already drawn into the hold of modernity. Coming to North-East India, although one comes across certain works, wherein conflicts between nationalities and linguistic communities were viewed as ethnic conflicts, it should be admitted that most studies on ethnic politics identify ethnic movements with tribal movements. Very often the terms - tribes, ethnic communities and nationalities - are used as inter-exchangeable expressions. Very little efforts are made to distinguish one from the other. Even those who claim to be conscious of differences in the meanings and content of the terms, continue to use these expressions uncritically, partly for convenience and partly for political reasons.

Theoretical works on ethnicity have brought out clearly that ethnic identity struggles are waged not by isolated tribal communities, but by politicized cultural communities already drawn into the web of modernity. Identity assertions, in essence, if not in form, are not for seeking restoration of their past, nor are they necessarily secessionist in their objectives. Nearly all of them are basically struggles of modernizing communities seeking autonomy and respectable accommodation in the nation state structures. The ethnic communities in North-Eastern states may invoke their tribal roots to unite their people against other competitors, but they do not have any intention of preserving or reverting back to 'pristine' tribal ways of life.

Some dimensions of ethnic identity become evident, when one examines the nature of ethnic conflicts in the region. Several works on North-East have reflected on ethnic conflicts in the region but most of them are empirical, historical and descriptive in nature. When it comes to theoretical content, one can see their works oscillating between primordial and instrumentalist explanations. According to scholars like Geertz and Grosby, peoples' identities emanate from the primordial human givens such as kinship, race, culture, religion, language and traditions. In line with the primordial tradition, many scholars from anthropology and sociology have written books on different tribes,

viewing them as ethnic communities that existed since time immemorial. In North-East India several communities have been claiming separate identities based on the above mentioned 'naturally inherited' features. But very often one encounters instances wherein some culturally-related communities start espousing separate identities and also the apparently unconnected communities bonding up together with one identity. Reliance on primordialism cannot explain these contradictory social processes, which question the salience of the 'naturally givens' in the development of ethnic identity. It is also pointed out that most conflicts between communities although packaged in the name of kinship, culture and traditions, are actually motivated by material concerns – land, jobs, political power etc. Further, economic inequalities have made their appearance felt in almost all indigenous communities, raising questions about their 'tribal' nature. Identities do not emerge naturally and spontaneously, as primordialists tend to contend, but they need to be socially constructed.

Rational Choice models developed by scholars like Michael Hechter explain ethnic dynamics by looking at ethnicity as means or resource mobilized in pursuit of particular material objectives. It assumes that the emerging social forces - be it middle class or ethnic elite - which attained hegemony over the rest of the community, consciously use ethnic identities as resources to promote group or sectional interests. The instrumentalist studies on ethnicity of this kind emphasize on how the emerging classes and elites within the traditional communities form organizations, invent traditions, articulate ethnic differences and practice ethnic politics to achieve the materialist goals that have been set. Some scholars working on North-East did take instrumentalist position to explain ethnic processes in the region. Their studies took note of changes taking place within the tribal societies ever since the region came under British rule. They show how factors like colonial rule, Christian missionaries and modern education contributed to the birth of educated elite that played an important role in giving shape to ethnic identity of the respective community. Ethnic identity politics in the region is viewed from economic interests, ideological hegemony and political expectations of the upcoming indigenous educated middle class elites. Despite its merits, the instrumentalist interpretations of ethnic processes in North-East have their limitations as well. First, the indigenous elite are themselves

a part of the community and hence it cannot construct or articulate any identities which are not acceptable to the members of the community. The parameters that a community sets for elite maneuvers should not be ignored. Secondly, the indigenous elites are not always homogeneous. Factionalism and competition within the emerging indigenous elite can give birth to more than one identity in a given culturally-related group of people. Finally, ethnic identities and sentiments are not always amenable to cost-benefit calculations.

The instrumentalist interpretations of ethnicity run into difficulties at times due to complex nature of the political economy of nation states within which several communities emerge, evolve and develop. Even in developing countries like India, the operation of market forces is able to integrate several inaccessible areas of North-Eastern region into the Indian national market. Developments like growth of settled cultivation, commercialization of agriculture, increase in mining activities, state induced development projects and programmes etc. have given birth to indigenous business entrepreneurs, contractors, real estate owners and rich peasants, and along with them a class of landless peasants, unemployed or underemployed youth and casual labourers working in unorganized sectors. Hence it would be wrong to focus only on ethnic elites, ignoring interests and dynamics of different antagonistic classes that have come into existence. But at the same time, development of classes should not however drive one to place North-Eastern societies on par with advanced societies. In the more advanced societies where classes and class struggles are the norm, the ruling classes, as scholars like Bonacich point out, invoke ethnic sentiments to divide the working masses to their advantage. Class explanation has its limits in transitional societies which are simultaneously witnessing the birth of ethnic communities as well as classes. Notwithstanding the process of class differentiation taking place in each of the communities, one cannot subsume ethnic rivalries and conflicts operating in the region to the calculated interests of the ruling classes. More sophisticated theories are required for understanding the inter-relationship between class and ethnic politics in underdeveloped regions like North-East India.

One way of enhancing our understanding of ethnic identities is by relating them to the study of ethnic boundaries. Scholars like Fredrik Barth, Sylvia Fuller, and Andrea Wimmer have come out with complex

socio-political processes involved in construction and maintenance of ethnic boundaries. Ethnic identities make sense only within the ethnic boundaries. But just as ethnic boundaries are subject to contestations and change, ethnic identities need not be permanent. There is every possibility of new ethnic identities emerging and the old ones disappearing. Many such instances of changes in identity and boundaries are visible in North-Eastern region but very few academics working on North-East have reflected on the relationship between ethnic identities and ethnic boundaries.

As mentioned earlier, ethnic communities are much more than mere tribes. Presence of primordial attributes such as kinship ties, racial and cultural similarities are not enough to make a cultural group into an ethnic community. Transformation of tribes into ethnic communities requires several other material and psychological conditions. In their works on nations and national identities, scholars like Ernst Gellner, Anthony D. Smith, and Benedict Anderson have thrown light on factors like evolution of linguistic communities, development of print media, growth of literature, penetration of market forces, expansion of transport and communication networks, weakening of primordial loyalties, increasing competition and claims over national resources, working of democratic institutions and politics etc. in contributing to national politics. Although ethnic communities cannot claim the status of nations, some factors relevant to the advent of national identities seem relevant to the growth of ethnic identities as well. There is a need to bring in all these missing or neglected links in the study of social forces and ethnic politics in the region.

Further, post-colonial studies initiated by scholars like Partha Chatterjee have thrown light on how colonial and post-colonial states through administrative interventions such as census studies, anthropological surveys, classification of people on the bases of cultural and racial differences, and official recognition of certain communities have facilitated the growth of ethnic identities. Systematic studies of ethnic dynamics in North-East India along these lines are still its infancy. A recent book edited by Sanjib Baruah (2009) has a few interventions along these lines. Similarly, substantial literature has come out in recent years explaining how policies of liberalization and globalization, far from eliminating ethnic loyalties, in fact reify and recreate ethnic identities

and ethnic politics. Of late, because of BIMSTEC and the Look East policy, the North-Eastern region, which borders East and South East Asian countries and also Bangladesh and Nepal, has acquired considerable significance. Positive or negative effects of the policies of liberalization and globalization pursued by the Government of India on ethnic identity assertions and conflicts in the region need much more attention than the ones given so far. It is possible to have a new look at the manifestations of ethnic identities from these perspectives and vantage points.

Very often ethnic identities are by-products of ethnic movements and conflicts. While it is true that the identities inspire the ethnic movement, it is also true that the course of the movement further consolidates and strengthens ethnic identities. Similarly, the causes, course and effects of ethnic conflicts contribute to further reinforcement of the ethnic identities. Conversely the cessation of conflicts and establishment of peace lead to weakening of certain ethnic identities. North-East India bears witness to all these processes of appearance and disappearance, strengthening and weakening, and making and breaking of ethnic identities. Unfortunately, these empirical realities have not been properly theorized.

At the end, one may also note that ethnic identity manifests in different forms in North-East India. Social forces that facilitate or abet or lead ethnic politics are not always same. Even when they are similar, the manner in which each of them reacts may differ from situation to situation. Hence no single theory of ethnicity could explain identity politics of the northeastern region as a whole. Which theory of ethnicity is relevant or useful for explaining a particular ethnic identity movement or conflict can be assessed only after empirical study of the ethnic phenomenon. Very often we may have to use a variety of theories to understand the ethnic complexities. Hence scholars trying to understand ethnic identities should be open to all theories and possibilities and not restrict themselves to preconceived theories and explanations.

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