Understanding Ethnic Conflict in North-East India

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Abstract

The author tries to go into the multifaceted dynamics that informs and sustains ethnic tensions and violence in the North-East of India against migrant groups. Finding existing theoretical frameworks inadequate for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, he advocates a multi-pronged approach that takes into consideration history and history making, the changing notions of community, claims to land and developmental politics that would lead to an acceptance of the irreversibility of phenomenon steeped in the country's colonial past and present cartographic demarcations as the basic truth in the quest for a solution.

Introduction: Towards a Theory of Ethnic Conflict :

About two decades back I proposed a thesis called "negative solidarity thesis" in the context of inter-ethnic relationship in North-East India. The article, which was "published in 1988, was based on published literature on this ethnically volatile region, which quite clearly indicated that both fusion and fission in inter-ethnic solidarities in the region were not only very old, but were also *ad hoc*, impermanent, and based on suspicion or fear of reprisal from enemy groups. This was why I called it 'negative solidarity'. I would think that the thesis still holds water about formation and dissolution of solidarities within and

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between various ethnic groups in the region.

I spoke on this thesis at several universities in India, including the Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta and North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, during 1984-85 when a violent ethnic movement of the Nepalis engulfed the villages and tea gardens of Darjeeling and Dooars areas of West Bengal. Various factors were responsible for bringing the racially, socially, religiously, and linguistically heterogeneous Nepalis together to fight the might of the government of West Bengal, which reacted to this movement for a separate statehood within the Union of India by the Nepalis of Darjeeling and Dooars areas of West Bengal with utmost brutality. The media based in this state had little or no sympathy with the movement. Even the communists who had proposed a far more radical demand -an independent nation-state called Gorkhasthan -during the middle of the twentieth century, when they were not in power, changed their stance when the Gorkhaland movement broke out under their own regime (see Subba 1992 for details).

Circumstances forced me to reflect on the question of both inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic fusion and fission that characterised the Nepalis during the Gorkhaland movement, and to see the probable causes as well as consequences of this movement. I did this in the book *Ethnicity, State and Development (1992).* After examining half a dozen theories that apparently sought to explain the phenomenon of ethnic movement in terms of cultural distinctiveness, internal colonialism, relative deprivation, and the like I found that none of them could satisfactorily explain what happened in Darjeeling and Dooars. There was considerable substance in each theory but each left something unattended. One of the theoretical formulations that came closest to the phenomenon I was studying was based on a triadic relationship between ethnicity, state and development. Writing on African ethnicity, Chazan (1986) for instance wrote :

> The centrality of government as purveyor of development and distribution of ; social goods meant that state intervention contributed heavily to the sharpening of \ the social realities

> of ethnicity and class. The rhythm of ethnic politics was largely a function of state actions and of the fluctuations in the composition of state officeholders (1986: 149).

In the same book, Dov Ronen perhaps better elucidates this triadic relationship in the following words:

> Since social mobility reduced the salience of a rigid class identity in Europe, and since modem class distinctions were not yet institutionalised in the Third World, the always available ethnic identity presented itself as a convenient rallying point to be utilized as a political instrument for developmental gains. Ethnic identity by the mid-1960s had become an organizational form, a weapon, a tool, and/or a means for the attainment of goals, just as integrative national identity often was in the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth centuries... Numerous studies of European ethnicity have shown that it is not poverty but prospects for advancement that enhance the utilization of ethnic identity. The case in the "development world" has been similar (1986: 6).

The various development initiatives in the region taken by the federating states or the government at New Delhi have resulted in import of skilled and/or cheap labour from outside the region in large scales, particularly from Bangladesh, Bihar and Nepal. Such labourers have contributed significantly to the development of the region but also have shown little or no propensity to go back to the places of their origin primarily because there are no buyers for the only asset they have - labour -back home, and secondarily because they continue to be employed at a much higher wage in the region than back home. Besides higher wage, the North-East region of India also gives them better educational facilities for their children than they are available in the places of their origin. If the living conditions in Nepal, Bangladesh, or even Bihar in India were better they would certainly not have stayed back in the region and become victims of ethnic cleansing by local communities in the region.

Let me draw on the authority of Stanley Tambiah here to

temporarily close the theoretical discussion on ethnic conflict in this region. In his 1988 American Ethnological Society Distinguished Lecture, Tambiah envisages three overlapping scenarios of major ethnic conflicts in recent times of which the second scenario is particularly pertinent to Northeast India. He wrote:

> The second scenario relates not so much to the declining fortunes of well-placed communities, but to the rising expectations and capacities of satellite minorities on the periphery who find themselves under the domination of majorities entrenched at the center, and sometimes are in addition faced with the majority advancing into their frontier "homelands".. .Sometimes these satellite communities have sought advance through the ministrations of Christian missionaries, and in any case, in the new post-independence polities, they have requested "affirmative action", proportionate to their demographic numbers, with regard to their participation in the task of nation-state making and in the education programs of the dominant centers (Tambiah 1989: 346).

Cutting across the three scenarios, he writes: 'The present plethora of ethnic conflicts, whether viewed negatively as divisive and destructive of the state, or positively as a drive toward realistic devolutionary politics, coincides with an increasing sense of shrinking economic horizons and political embattlement.' (ibid: 347). This is perhaps the most succinct formulation of the ethnic conflicts appropriate for the region under discussion.

Ethnic Conflict in North-East India

North-East India has witnessed some of the most intense, widespread and recurring ethnic violence against ethnic minorities, especially Nepalis, during the past four decades or so. The intensity may be low here and high there, low now and high then, but not one of

the seven federating states of this region is free from this phenomenon, which is particularly complex in this region due to its organic relationship with insurgency and secessionism. This situation has drawn the attention of several social scientists and journalists, who have tried their best to understand the problems of ethnicity and nationalism in the region and have written quite extensively on the subject. Ideas about the reasons for such problems in the region are indeed diverse, ranging from those who consider it as a colonial legacy to those who see them as fallout of India's 'neo' or 'internal' colonialism. There are also those who see it as the manifestation of lack of development, and those who treat it as the handiwork of some foreign hand, especially the Inter-Services Intelligence of Pakistan. Interestingly, every senior army or police officer, missionary, teacher, journalist, politician, doctor, trader, etc. in the region has an idea about why North-East is what it is. They certainly have a right to hold their opinions or to reflect on what ails the region. And what they say is not necessarily folktale. Yet the region seems to evade any solution to its ever-worsening ethnic problems resulting in bloody ethnic conflicts every now and then.

There seems to be a consensus among most people in North-East India that the continuing ethnic tension and active insurgency here for the past four decades or so are primarily responsible for the tardy development in the region. The ethnic situation here is seen to have deterred potential investors and tourists who would otherwise, some believe, overwhelm the region with finance and help it develop beyond recognition. There is another group of people, which sees the tardy development itself as the most important cause of rampant ethnic strife here. This group draws our attention particularly to the nature of development in the region, which is allegedly characterized by siphoning off of raw materials from the region or exploitation of the region's natural resources, be it tea, timber, oil, or uranium whereas the outsiders see it as an over-pampered region, what with one of the highest per capita investment, North Eastern Council, Ministry of Development of North-East Region, and a cell for the region in every ministry of the central government. The intellectuals of the region are, on the other hand, jittery

about the over-sensitiveness of the government of India towards its international border, and according to them, India should instead focus on development opportunities the region offers through trade with neighbouring countries (Baruah 2005). In fact, some of them are rather enthusiastic about the prospect of an open border for the economy of the region without, of course, looking into the cultural cost of the same to the local people (Pakem 1996). More often than not cross-border trade bypasses the border economy and leaves only problems like sexually transmitted diseases, AIDS and drugs abuse for the local people to live with.

It is pointless to argue whether ethnic unrest and insurgency are responsible for lack of development in the region or the latter is responsible for the former. The more important thing is to realize that there is a relationship between the two, and this relationship has matured considerably in the past four decades or so to lend itself to any simplistic understanding. One objective of this paper is therefore to draw the attention of scholars to this increasingly complex relationship, made further complex by historical, cultural, linguistic, and geographical cleavages between the communities living within this region and linkages with people living outside the region. Once we have had a more holistic understanding of this relationship we hope to be able to see the road map to solution about which we all are rather impatient.

A. History

We often talk about history, but rarely try and link it with contemporary ethnic or insurgency problems of the region. We all know that knowledge of history is important to understand the present, but how exactly it helps us to understand the contemporary problems of the region is rarely clear. First of all, historical understanding of the region has achieved some degree of maturity only recently, if the proceedings of the annual conferences of North-East India History Association are any indication, but historical understanding of the people in the region leaves a lot to be desired due partly to the lingering

conservatism in historiography and the failure of the oral to proxy for the written. But it is ultimately people's history, rather than the state's, which will be useful for understanding why communities in the region are behaving the way they are - engaging in killings, evictions, reprisals, and secessionism.

The failure of historians in this regard has encouraged a host of people to rewrite their histories without any training. For instance, several Nepali writers from the Northeast have begun their history in the region from the time of the Mahabharata and the Upanishads, which a trained historian would laugh at. Then they write about the royal matrimonial linkages between Nepal and the kingdoms of Northeast India, which do not say much about the history of Nepalis in the region. When they come to the colonial period they start reconstructing their history on the basis of a few stray documents. Such history -better perhaps called "folk history" -however holds a huge potential to turn the emotions of the people in favour of a particular position their leaders take. Thus, if the historians do not come forward, the history of various communities in the region will continue to be written and dictated by those who are not qualified to do so.

On the other hand, various scholars writing on the region, including historians, have not been too careful about the words they use in their writings like "migrants", "foreigners", "locals", "plainspeople", "tribals", and "Hindus". When whole communities are given such labels without any consideration for local histories and family histories the implications of such histories can sometimes be harmful for the communities in question. Hence, the social scientists of this region need to be more careful about the words they use than they have so far been. One of the reasons why the Nepalis, who constitute a miniscule population in most parts of Northeast India but with their own distinct identity, have been victims of such ethnic lashes in the region is because the history of the region repeatedly says that they are immigrants from Nepal.

B. Community

The word "community" itself has undergone tremendous change in terms of its ramification from the beginning of colonial times to the present. Illiteracy, absence of infra-structure, and lack of opportunities for interaction beyond the limits of village boundaries, weekly markets, and annual festivals in the beginning of colonial times created a spatially narrow sense of community that was often confined to a couple of villages. This remained much the same in the region through the colonial days. Territoriality, language, village and culture were all important then in defining who belonged to a community and who did not. These forces are still important but various developments since the colonial times have made it possible for the concept of community to graduate from "natural" to "imagined" in the sense Benedict Anderson (1991) used it. Literacy, link languages, media, travel, schools, hospitals, churches, etc. have played important roles in forcing almost every community to rediscover its boundaries, which spatially now extend far beyond the limits set by territory, language or culture.

While, in this spatial sense, the concept of "community" has widened, it has narrowed in a different yet very significant sense. Each local community, at least during the early colonial period, was inclusive. Not only was its land freely given to persons who did not even belong to the community but they were even adopted as members of the same. The adoption rituals were fairly simple. In most cases, the persons to be adopted simply had to cook the food to be served to a congregation of people belonging to a particular clan or village, which was followed by granting of clan and/or village name to them. Such rituals have vanished almost completely as each community has grown increasingly exclusive and xenophobic today, and the easy targets of the new, metamorphosed community are the relatively voice-less migrant communities of the region.

C. Land

Despite its ever-decreasing fertility, land has always been one

of the most important indicators of who belongs to a community and who does not. If its productive value has gone down due to overall deterioration of the environment its symbolic as well as market value has actually been on the rise. The role of market in changing the nature of ownership of land is a subject not much explored, nor is the relationship between land and kinship or land and state understood as sufficiently about the region as one does about Orissa (Bailey 1972) or East Nepal (Caplan 1970). Who actually is the owner of a piece of land is often not answerable in the hill areas of North-East India, which began to change from communal to individual proprietorship during the past one hundred years or so only.

In the post-independent North-East India both real and perceived encroachment of land belonging to the natives by the so-called "outsiders" or "foreigners" has been one of the most important issues for several violent nativistic movements resulting in ethnic cleansing and ethnocide. For instance, innumerable Nepalis were evicted from towns and villages in Meghalaya during 1986-87. Drums were beaten on the streets to spread the words of ominous order for departure within 12 hours, and no one dared to defy the order. The policemen who are under the control of the state governments remain either passive onlookers or conveniently arrive late. They do not take any action on those who take the law unto their hands with impunity. All this happens so quickly that the victims, I who are always minorities and migrants from outside, rarely get any opportunity to take away any of their property, which is usually found plundered and destroyed when they dare to return from the temporary refugee camps set up for them by members of their own community or by the state. And there is rarely any compensation ever paid to the victims who rarely are voters and who tarely insure their property either in anticipation of such an event unfolding in their lives. The urban areas or development sites of the region, which are the ones normally characterised by multi-ethnic composition, are particularly growing vulnerable to ethnic conflicts and violence. Even the human rights organisations in the region are known for their allegiance to certain local organisations only.

The leaders of such nativist movements have successfully constructed a discourse in which the "outsiders" are not only sources of all social vices but have increasing control of the land that sometimes in the past "belonged" to the local people. From all accounts this "belonging" was notional and based on "collective memory", which might not be accepted as a valid basis for claim of land ownership in the court of law, but ironically it is the state, which gives cognisance to "collective memory". The party in power is more than ever ready to accommodate such cultural claims to landownership to build its own electoral base. It after all has nothing to lose in doing so even if it amounts to denial of human rights to migrant communities.

D. Migration

The question of migration from across the international borders is indeed one of the most volatile questions raised by local scholars, politicians, journalists, NGOs, students' unions, etc. of the region in all platforms, be they political, academic or cultural. And in raising this issue the most vocal and powerful in the whole region are incidentally students' bodies, They have taken upon their shoulders issues that ought to have been addressed normally by political parties and in the process are admittedly one of the politically most powerful and aggressive forces in the region today. If they do not concern themselves with anything it is of course the welfare of the students themselves.

Indeed one must keep the issue of migration uppermost in one's mind while trying to understand the ethnic tension and conflicts in the region. This is because this issue is linked with the fear of being swamped by them, losing land and other scare resources, greater competition for employment, fear of cultural and linguistic erosion due to external influence, and finally losing the political power to them. Such fears are not always unfounded if one were to see what happened in Tripura and Sikkim and what has already happened in Assam.. Not surprisingly, the nativists in North-East India are never tired of harping on such issues even where there clearly exist no such threats.

Although almost every community in the region is migrant if a much longer historical time-frame is kept in mind, not all are labelled so socially. Two migrant communities that have engaged the minds of most scholars in the region are the Nepalis and Bangladeshis because the other migrant communities are not only tribes but also numerically too far less significant than these two. Both of them are referred to as "foreigners" and "illegal migrants" by the local people in the region who often take it upon themselves to identify such people and deport them, although such activities are equally illegal. The migration of Nepalis to the region falls in the purview of the Indo- Nepal Friendship Treaty of 1950, which legitimises the immigration of the Nepalis to India as much as it legitimises the emigration of Indians to Nepal and gives both the categories of people similar privileges relating to movement, property, employment, etc. Demographically the Nepalis do not constitute more than 3 percent of the total population in any district of the region nor do they generally occupy the same niches as the local people do. Yet thousands of them were evicted from Mizoram in 1967, Assam in 1979-80, Manipur in 1980, and Meghalaya in 1986-87. Both the federal states and the Central government remained mute spectators to the inhuman treatment meted out to them in utter violation of the bilateral treaty mentioned above (for details see Subba 1992).

State, Development and Migrant Communities

The Northeast India represents a typical situation where migrant communities from outside the region are increasingly under attack not only academically and politically, but even physically. They are seen as grabbing all development opportunities, occupying the lands that belonged once to the local communities, vying for the jobs that could be monopolised by the local educated youths, and even taking away the seats in various state assemblies and the national parliament. Incidentally these are not mere allegations.

It is a fact that Hindu migrants in Tripura came from erstwhile East Bengal, called East Pakistan after Indian independence and

Bangladesh after 1971. The Muslim migrants who are gradually overwhelming Assam have a similar history of origin, although the districts from which they have migrated are often different. And it is next to impossible to reverse this, no matter what measures India takes to do so, as Bangladesh authorities do not accept them officially as their people. Even if they were willing to accept them back would the people return? The answer is a clear no. This is the reason why the local people are getting increasingly intolerant even about populations who do not pose any demographic threat to them at present. The local people see the state as the patron of migrants as they are attractive vote banks to various dominant parties who come to power. On the other hand, the minority groups often feel that they are deprived of the state resources, which are reserved for the local communities only.

Such a development of the region has been responsible to a significant extent for the kind of unrest it exhibits. Once we have unrest culture, it deters development inputs in many ways. The notoriety of the region circulated outside it through the media as well as personal experiences of the people who have lived in the region is largely responsible for the scant development inputs the region receives. Such accounts, when shared with their friends and relatives far away from the region, assume the status of folktales, which are then handed down from one generation to another giving each generation an opportunity to add to or subtract something from the folktales. And they continue almost independently of official information available on the region. One such 'folktale' sees the region as an unsafe place, with no evening life, where life comes to a grinding halt almost with sunset, where one may be physically assaulted, kidnapped, or killed in the cross firing between the armed forces of the state and the armed secessionist groups. In reality, all this stands grossly exaggerated.

The picture one gets of this region is therefore seldom positive. If one has lived in this region for a considerable period of time it is a reason enough to feel proud of oneself and demand attention of people to listen to one's weird, often concocted, stories, be they on Khasi matriliny, Jaintia magic, or Naga-Mizos eating dog's meat. The

widespread secessionism, poor infra-structure, xenophobia of the people, "sons of the soil" policy of the state governments, etc. do not send positive signals about the region to potential tourists, leave alone investors from outside and there is hardly any investment potential from within the region. Whatever little entrepreneurship has developed from within the region is too weak to support extra-state expenses on development or to generate a synergy of development. Unfortunately, the successful entrepreneurs from the region, with a few exceptions, are reportedly busy in self-aggrandizement and investing on real estate in the Indian metropolises rather than on development of the region they belong to. They no longer feel safe in the region that is ruled by parallel governments -one elected and the other underground. They were relatively safe till a couple of decades back when the militant groups extorted only the entrepreneurs from outside. With the departure of many entrepreneurs from outside and the increase in the number of underground militia and combat forces, their resources are eroding and their catchment areas shrinking, forcing them to extort their own entrepreneurs as well. The "Look East" policy of the government of India on which Sanjib Baruah (2005) pins a lot of hope also promises, among others, to give a new lease of life to the sagging economy of the underground regime in the region.

At present the insurgent groups are reportedly hard-pressed to raise their revenue from every development project worth its name, be it road construction, hydel project, bus terminus, aerodrome, or star hotel. Even the salaried persons and petty traders are not spared in some states of the region like Nagaland and Manipur. According to conventional estimates one fourth of the development funds pumped into the region goes towards maintenance of the insurgent camps in Burma and Bangladesh and their establishments in Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya and the foothills of Arunachal Pradesh. It is a commonplace knowledge today that more the development fund for the region more is the share of the underground.

In this kind of situation, the ones at the receiving end are almost invariably the migrant groups who have been living in the region since at

least the colonial times. While even local people are killed at times in cross-fire or are arrested on grounds of suspicion and interrogated by the security forces without caring the least for their dignity and honour the minority groups from outside are often the victims of the ire of the local students and insurgent groups as well as the security forces of the state. Hence they are doubly insecure in the region. If they had any place to go, where they were assured of some source of livelihood at least the landless and recent immigrants, who constitute a larger percentage of the migrant populations, would leave the region. The region would be deprived of the much-needed cheap and efficient labour force, which is vital for the region's ongoing development projects, but who cares.

Conclusion: Towards Solution

Any discussion on ethnic conflicts in North-East India always ends with the question, "So what is the solution?" Several meaningful suggestions have been floated in the literature on the region, which may be enumerated here as follows: (i) opening its borders for trade with neighbouring countries, (ii) accelerated economic development of the region, (iii) creating jobs for the region's unemployed youths, (iv) improving the infra-structure of the region, (v) improving the bilateral relations with neighbouring countries, (vi) empowering the indigenous political institutions for better governance, (vii) fencing the international border to stop infiltration, and so on. I think a durable solution lies in paying due attention to all these solutions, but that will not be enough. Certain other factors need attention, too.

One, the present mindset of the people of the region towards the Centre as well as that of the Centre towards this region have to undergo qualitative change for any meaningful improvement of the region. The Centre must understand and appreciate the historical circumstances under which the various areas of the region came under the Union of India and address the yet unresolved issues of political unification of the region rather than seek solace by pumping money into

the region and allowing it to grow dependent on it. On the other hand, the people of the region should stop equating India with New Delhi, or Hindus, or plainsmen, as India is much more than that. The racial, political, religious, and linguistic variation that India is trying to come to terms has to be appreciated by the people of the region as well.

Two, the change of mindset has to be effected also at the level of local versus outsider/migrant communities, which is perhaps more difficult to achieve than the changing the mindset of the Centre and the people from the region towards each other for the simple reason that a psychological wedge has been driven by various social, economic and political forces over the past several decades between the locals and outsiders. It is not easy to wish this wedge away even by the highly literate leaders and administrators. The increasing claims for separate identity and measures for internal solidarity both within and between the migrant communities make it all the more difficult for the local people to forget the wedge.

Three, due to cheap long-distance communication facilities available today the members of each community are in touch with each other wherever they are. What happens to even one of them in one place may be responded to, violently rather than rationally, by the members of the same community where 'they are in majority. If a Bihari is beaten in Assam, an innocent Assamese may be dragged out of the train in Bihar and adequately revenged, as it actually happened a couple of years ago. Similarly if an Indian is harassed in Kathmandu or Birganj, the industrially prominent town in the terai, an innocent Nepali in India will have to face the flak if not an assault on him or her. Therefore, the Nepalis in dominant situations, such as in Nepal and Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalayas, need to be careful about how they treat the members of minority groups there, for any irrational or arrogant behaviour on their part can result in the suffering of the Nepalis in Northeast India or where they are in minority and voiceless such as in India's metropolises like Delhi, Kolkata and Mumbai.

Finally, but most importantly, genuine steps should be taken for

mapping of specific ethnic groups that are antagonistic and living in a state of tension, creation of opportunity for them to communicate with each other, expression of their grievances against each other, and searching for solutions that are mutually acceptable. In our experience, the interventions so far -whether governmental, non-governmental, journalistic or academic -are always post-facto, after enough damage has already been caused to one or both sides. It is time now to be pro-active on these matters so that its unfortunate consequences are avoided or minimised. The tension felt by ethnic groups can in fact be easily gauged from their literary and cultural expressions much before they turn violent and inhuman. If we ignore the early warning systems in such mediums we have to face the consequences we normally do.

If the solutions are left only to the local people the most common solution sought in most parts of the world, including North-East India, is ethnic cleansing. If Asians have been driven out from Uganda, Turks from Greece, Arabs from Israel, Indians from Fiji, the Bodos, Kukis, Nagas, Mizos, Khasis, etc. have also tried, with various degrees of success, to drive out the migrants from the states dominated by them. Left to them it can lead to carnage of the migrant minority like the one in Nellie in Assam (Kimura 2003). Left to them, they would also seek territorial integration of the areas inhabited by them, which would be an impossible proposition for most nation-states in the world today, and have remained unfulfilled for the Chinese to unite with their people in Hongkong, Swedish with their people in Finland, or closer home the Kashmiris in India and Pakistan, Garos in Meghalaya and outside it (Assam and Bangladesh), Nagas in Nagaland and outside it (Assam, Manipur and Myanmar), and so on. On the basis of extensive study of such cases from allover the world Uri Ra' anan (1980) seeks solutions through a customised representative polity without redrawing the existing maps. Any attempt to undo the existing territorial maps, even of the states of North-East India, is likely to create more problems than solve them, lead to further resurgence of ethnicity than its burial, and give mandate to the nation-state to become more violent than it already is. Territoriality is today like sovereignty -non-negotiable under any

circumstances -and is, at least overtly, upheld by all nation-states of the world and the United Nations. I think the search for any solution to the problems of ethnic conflict and insurgency in Northeast India has to begin with the acceptance of this truth, not by interrogating the same.❑

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