

Interethnic relationship in northeast India and the "Negative Solidarity" thesis

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Abstract : The objective of this paper is to explain why certain ethnic groups form solidarities for some time and again break away. What is the basic principle which works behind both the fission and fusion of certain ethnic solidarities? Many instances have been cited here from the seven states of northeast India to illustrate that ethnic solidarities are never permanent or inherent. While arguing in the line of the non-Marxian conflict theorists like Gluckman and Coser I suggest here the concept of 'negative solidarity'. This, I find, after a review of the available concepts, helpful in explaining fusion and fission—the two contradictory tendencies in ethnic relationships. The fusion takes place because they tend to suspend their clan allegiance temporarily for the sake of a common interest. Once this common interest is gone the clan allegiance reigns supreme throwing them in conflicting situations even with those with whom solidarities were formed earlier.

INTRODUCTION : DEFINING ETHNICITY

There is a striking lack of unanimity about the concept of ethnicity. It was initially equated with 'race' but later anthropologists recognized only three races—Caucasoid, Mongoloid and Negroid—while ethnic groups were innumerable. Though 'race' and 'ethnicity' sometimes overlap even today, a synonymous use of these two concepts was abandoned.

It may be said without much penchant for subjectivity-objectivity dichotomy that most conceptualizations of 'ethnicity' have been subjective rather than objective. Of those who hold the objective view of ethnicity H. Isaacs is prominent. He considers it as "made up of what a person is born with or acquires at birth" (1975 : 30).

The main exponents of the subjectivist view of this concept are Weber, Glazer and Moynihan, and Wallman. I shall briefly present their views in their own words so that the readers may have the scope to recheck their standpoint. Let me begin with what Weber wrote :

Those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent—because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration—in such a way that this belief is important for the continuation of non-kinship communal relationship, we shall call "ethnic groups", regardless of whether an objective blood relationship exists or not (1965 : 306).

In a slightly different vein, Glazer and Moynihan write thus :

.....there is some legitimacy to finding that forms of identification based on social realities as different as religion, language, and national origin all have something in common, such that a new

term is coined to refer to all of them—'ethnicity'. What they have in common is that they have all become effective foci for group mobilization for concrete political ends challenging for primacy for such mobilization of *class* on the one hand and *nation* on the other (1975 : 18). Emphasis in original.

The simplest subjective definition of ethnicity is perhaps that of Wallman who says :

.....ethnicity is the process by which 'their' difference is used to enhance the sense of 'us' for purposes of organization or identification (1979 : 3).

Van den Berghe, an oft-quoted sociologist in the field of polyethnic studies, advocates the middle path. He says :

Any conception of ethnicity which reduces either the objective or the subjective side of it to an insignificant role distorts reality..... Ethnic groups are defined both by the objective cultural modalities of their behaviour (including most importantly their linguistic behaviour), any by their subjective views of themselves and each other (1975 : 72).

The objective bases of ethnicity like religion, language, and culture cannot be overlooked but the linkages based on these are never fixed. They are broadened or cut short depending on the exigencies of time. In other words, an ethnic group redefines itself from time to time to include some and exclude others. Most generally, primordial values simply serve as effective means of forming solidarities for achieving certain common goals which are often prescribed by and beneficial to the dominant section or class within an ethnic group.

This being realized, many national political parties take resort to exploiting the ethnic sentiments of their voters in their bid to win as many votes as possible. But the same political parties, once in power, condemn the ethnic solidarities as 'sub-nationalism', 'infra-nationalism', and 'proto-nationalism' and consider these as potential threats to national integration. Incidentally even the academicians, instead of advocating that such solidarities are normal features of a social life, often echo the voice of the politicians in power.

Therefore, the important question about ethnicity is not its vagueness but its vulnerability. Its vulnerability is indeed so naked that it is exploited at all levels—village, block, subdivision, district, state, and even nation. The northeast India is, however, perhaps more replete with such exploitation than any other part of India.

INTERETHNIC RELATIONSHIP IN NORTHEAST INDIA

The northeast India includes the following seven states : Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura, and Arunachal

Pradesh. The number of ethnic groups and the total geographical area falling in this region being indeed large it is not possible to go into the details here. Therefore, I have picked up a few instances from each state and shown how they fall in a neat pattern.

If we go through the history of northeast India we find it replete with interethnic feuds, wars or conflicts until the beginning of the twentieth century. It is only recently that the process of fusion seems to have overshadowed fissionary tendencies. About the roots of interethnic conflicts in this region, Chaube writes :

The story of interethnic politics in northeast India is the story of disintegration of a once composite state of Assam. It has not made Assam, long in quest of linguistic homogeneity, a unilingual state but has given birth to a number of relatively homogeneous state dominated by different Scheduled Tribes or their alliances but hardly tribal in content. Abandoning the dream of "tribal" freedom the dominant elite in the hill areas aspire for territorial autonomy within India. The territorial system of government has drastically altered the orientation of ethnic aspirations of the northeast Indians and has given birth to new political identities (1975 : 195).

In Assam, there are profuse references to the warring Ahoms and Koches who later united to fight against the Muslim invasion, but the Bodos (Chutiyas of Sadiya and Kacharis of Dhansiri Valley) and the Ahoms continued with their bellicosity in the greater part of the sixteenth century. The plains tribals like Rabha, Hojai, Hajong, Deori, Mech, and Lalung were also not always in friendly terms but, according to Mukherjee and Mukherjee (1982 : 253-54), later joined the Udayachal Movement which is concentrated in the northern parts of Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang districts.

In Meghalaya, a lack of friendship was often noticed among the Khyntiam Khasis of the Shillong plateau, the Pnar Khasis or Jaintias, War Khasis of the southern border and the Bhois of the northern border. The conflict between the Christian Khasis and the orthodox Seng Khasis is also not new. In Garo Hills, Majumdar observes that the various sub-ethnic groups like Abengs, Matchis, Chisaks, Gara-Ganachings, and Atongs, who represented different *a'kkhings* (territorial possessions of a particular lineage) have often been at war with each other (1982 : 204). But following World War II, when a Garo Corps was raised, a chance for them to develop a sense of solidarity was present for the first time (Majumdar 1982 : 207).

Despite a long history of ethnic conflicts within themselves, they all participated jointly in the movement for a separate hill state which finally took place in 1972. But now the Garos have begun to resent the employment policy of the Khasi dominated Meghalaya Government

(State 1978 : May 17). What is more, there is a rising demand for a separate tribal state comprising Khasi and Jaintia hills within Meghalaya under the initiative of Hynniewtrep National Front (HNF) led by H. S. Shylla (TI 1981 : Dec 2). Yet all the major ethnic groups are showing enough solidarity about the alleged occupation of hundreds of square miles in Kamrup district by the Assam Government (Jafa 1982).

Coming to Nagaland, the early accounts of Hutton, Elwin, Furer Haimendorf, and other British administrators show that the various Naga groups were usually at loggerheads. Furer Haimendorf, for instance, has referred to the feuds, inter-*khel* quarrels and head-hunting among the Angami Nagas (1976 : 13). A common feeling for Naga solidarity began only after the establishment of the Naga Club in Kohima in 1918. The first memorandum submitted to the Simon Commission in 1929 was signed by twenty people belonging to different Naga groups calling for their protection from the plainsmen (Das 1982 : 41-43).

In recent years, intra-Naga rivalry has again surfaced. In 1980, 20 Nagas assumed to be the members of Angami, Khesang, and Ao tribes were killed by a rival Naga group led by Muivah Tangkhul and Isak Swu (Stat 1980 : Mar 27). In 1981 again, 31 Nagas were killed in a gun battle between two factions of the underground Nagas at Ayiching in northern Burma (Stat 1981 : Aug 4). It is also reported that a new solidarity has come about between Zemei, Liangmei and Rongmei Nagas to counter the Kuki Nagas through what is known as Zeliangrong Movement (Kabui 1982 : 53-66).

In Mizoram too, the interethnic relations among the various groups were not always without clash or conflict. But when the problem of 'infiltrators', mainly of the Chakmas from Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, became prominent a crisis of Mizo identity was felt which led them to forget their differences and fight the 'outsiders'. Even an 'action programme' had been finalised by the Students' Conference of Mizoram (SCM) to eliminate those Chakmas who came in after 1961 (Stat 1983 : July 1). (The number of Chakmas is reported to have increased from 3,000 at the time of Independence to 20,000 by 1983 (Stat 1983 : Jan 12).) But should there have been no Chakma problem the solidarity which is seen now would probably have not come at all.

In Manipur, a series of quarrels took place between the Hmar and Kuki (Chaube 1973 : 195). Assimilation never really occurred between the Kukis and Vaisnavite Meities—something which the latter have always resented ; but the movement for deportation of the 'foreign nationals' among the Meities is not directed towards the Kukis. It is meant only for the Mizos, Bengalis, and Nepalis (Stat 1980 : Apr 20). Though there are many Kukis who have settled recently, the ancient hatchet with them

is irretrievably buried for the simple reason that if this is not done the 'anti-foreigners' movement' may itself fizzle out.

Even in Tripura, occasional conflicts among the various tribes occurred down the ages but when the non-tribal population, the Bengalis in particular, posed a threat to their survival all the tribal groups patched up their wounds and came under the Tripura Upajati Yuba Samity (TUYS). As a part of this development, there was a week-long orgy of killing, arson and violence in June 1980.

The same is true of Arunachal Pradesh. On the Begnis or Daflas of this State, Elwin writes :

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 has long been common (1964 : 13).

And on the Namsingias and Bordwaris of the same State :

Since then (massacre of 1875) the Nagas of this frontier have given no trouble directly, but the Namsingias and Bordwaris have for years been at feud among themselves, and there is always some danger of a collision between the members of these or other warring clans taking place within our border (1962 : 25).

The people of Arunachal Pradesh have changed significantly in recent years and though interethnic conflicts have not ceased altogether they are forming broader solidarities to counter the interests of the Chakma and Tibetan refugees.

The above instances show that interethnic conflicts have always been a part of the northeast reality. Conflicts and clashes seem inherent and natural traits of the tribal society of this region. But while the earlier conflicts were based more on the feelings of vengeance, customary obligations and the tribal ethos of heroism the recent conflicts and solidarities appear to be guided by some interest. When a number of local tribes or a dominant single tribe have a common interest (like the deportation of 'foreign nationals') they form a solidarity and again split up once there is no more a common interest.

It therefore appears that interethnic solidarities are tentatively based on common interest rather than natural, inherent and permanent propensities. What looks more natural, inherent and permanent characteristic of the tribal life in this region is the interethnic conflicts or clashes which are actually due to allegiance to clan. Since the political boundaries could not take care of the ethnic boundaries, the ethnic problem gained stability.

A CRITIQUE OF AVAILABLE THESES

Not much theoretical work has been done in the field of interethnic

relations even outside India. For instance, Leo Drespres, one of the leading scholars in this field, admits that 'a theoretical framework capable of informing comparative ethnic studies has not yet emerged' (1975 : 191). This admission is also supported by S. Wallman (1979 : ix). However, the few available analytical models may be discussed here.

Surajit Sinha (1982 : 163-79) has surveyed the leading models available for explaining the tribal solidarity movements. He deals mainly with Bose's 'subnationalism', RoyBurman's 'infranationalism', Oran's 'rank syndrome', and Wallace's 'revitalization'. After testing these models on the tribal situation in India he concludes that these are rather inadequate to explain the tribal state of affairs today.

But his own suggestion (1982 : 173) in this regard to find the extent to which the solidarity movements are 'genuine' or 'spurious' (the concepts of Edward Sapir) does not seem very helpful except at conceptual level. The dividing line between the elites and masses is difficult to locate in the absence of any acceptable criterion to define their boundaries. Following his suggestion without first solving this problem therefore becomes superficial and an intellectual mimicry.

In this context, Durkheim's concept of 'mechanical solidarity' apparently fits into the situation in northeast India. He defines it as a solidarity of resemblance, different from 'organic solidarity' which is defined by differences. Solidarity of the former type is possible in simple societies where members of an ethnic group share the same emotions, hold the same values and consider the same things as sacred (1960 : 70-110).

Thus, his 'mechanical solidarity' seems pretty close to the situation in northeast India. However, this concept is inadequate for the following reasons :

First, it deals with a situation characteristic of the 'primitive' societies but the northeastern tribal societies have overgrown this stage and can be analytically put in the 'transitional' phase.

Second, his 'cohesion' or 'solidarity' is of 'individuals' as members of a group or society while the ethnic solidarities in northeast India are formed of groups which are often quite large.

Finally, though the various ethnic groups forming solidarities often share the same emotions they often do not hold the same values or regard the same objects as sacred. This is particularly seen between the Christian and non-Christian tribal members of the region.

THE 'NEGATIVE SOLIDARITY' THESIS

In the absence of any satisfactory theory for explaining both fusion and fission in ethnic relations, I propose the 'negative solidarity' thesis. By 'negative solidarity' I mean a solidarity which is not natural, inherent or

permanent or, in other words, a solidarity which is artificial, adopted and temporary. These three terms—artificial, adopted and temporary—need therefore to be qualified here.

The ethnic solidarities in northeast India may be considered as 'artificial' because such solidarities are not natural. Tribal solidarities have a strong clan or kin base which is only to be expected of them. The interethnic conflicts are thus a part of their social life or at least it appears so when one recapitulates the history of northeast India. Whatever may be the extent of modernization, the demands of 'tribalism' are still hard on them. If the clan or kin solidarity was earlier maintained by the chiefs or the village elders and founded by the communal system of ownership, now it is done by the educated members of the society or the panchayat members. And it is they who aggravate or neutralize ethnic differences, depending on the way they conceptualise their problem or visualize the solution of their common difficulties.

Such solidarities are moreover 'adopted' and not 'inherent'. The solidarities come into being for different reasons at different times and places, out of the process of their adaptation to or encounter with the changing social, political and economic situations. Thus, the differences between the Garos and Khasis would not probably have come about if they were still struggling for separation from Assam. Furthermore, there would be no Garo or Khasi solidarity today without the present tussle between them.

Finally, such solidarities are temporary. Such solidarities, however strong they may appear at one point of time, are bound to break down, as it has been amply shown earlier in this paper, and new solidarities formed with different interests at stake. If such solidarities were permanent, there would be no demand today for a smaller tribal state within Meghalaya.

The ethnic solidarities are 'negative' yet in another sense. Such solidarities as 'interest groups' apparently seek to fulfil their own interests, whether economic, social, cultural, or political. Thus the objective of such solidarities themselves may not be 'negative' but its consequences are usually so. Such solidarities cannot help affecting the interests of other ethnic groups, for instance, the 'foreign nationals' in most states of northeast India.

Promotion of the interest of a group or a number of groups cannot be thought of in isolation because the very question of backwardness, exploitation, numerical domination or employment opportunities (which form the issues of ethnic conflicts or solidarities) is relative. We cannot think of an isolated condition of progress or backwardness, domination or subordination, affluence or poverty; we must also ask: in relation to, or, in comparison with, what or whom?

CONCLUSION

Looking at the 'negative solidarity' thesis from a higher theoretical plane, it appears that it lends support to the non-Marxian theories of Max Gluckman (1976) and Lewis Coser (1976). To say that the ethnic solidarities are artificial, adopted and temporary is enough to indicate that 'conflict' is inherent in any society and society lives through it. Otherwise the society would disintegrate. The northeast experience only confirms that solidarities are often achieved in the midst of conflicts, if not through conflicts themselves.

One shortcoming found both in Gluckman and Coser is perhaps that they tend to consider the conflicting groups as 'homogeneous', which they are not, at least not in the present situation in northeast India. The tribal societies which are segmentary and otherwise worthy of being considered as homogeneous have shown widespread and economic differences. A small category of people commonly described as 'elites' have emerged from each ethnic group there. Though the boundary line between elites and masses is difficult to discern as I mentioned earlier, Surajit Sinha makes a score here for no one denies the existence of the elites.

It may be noted further that it is the elites who actually decide the fate of such solidarities. The common bread-winning toil is usually not much concerned. Therefore, a group solidarity is more often an elite solidarity, and logically a group conflict is an elite conflict though in either case the masses may participate too.

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