

DYNAMICS OF  
IDENTITY AND  
INTERGROUP  
RELATIONS IN  
NORTH-EAST  
INDIA



Edited by  
**Kailash S. Aggarwal**

The volume brings together papers which were originally presented in a Seminar held at the Institute in late 1996. All of them have been revised by their authors for publication in this volume. India's North-East is still an enigma to many living in the rest of the country and the volatility it has exhibited in the recent past is a matter of rather helpless concern for the Indian State as well as others. The book should help remove at least part of the enigma and may show the way to transforming our 'helplessness' into a sensitively constructive response.

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# Dynamics of Identity and Intergroup Relations in North-East India

Edited by  
KAILASH S. AGGARWAL



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## In lieu of an Introduction

### An emancipatory approach to the North-East Crisis

The Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, held a Seminar on "Dynamics of Identity and Inter-group Relations in North East India" during 12 to 14 November, 1996. As pointed out in the statement for inviting paper contributors and participants, the basic purpose of the seminar was to develop perspectives and frameworks so that the identity crises and inter-group/inter-community relations, especially conflicts and tensions in the North East could become the study of in depth, dispassionate, academic debate and discussion. The basic issues of focus were: (i) questions of identity, in relation to ethnicity, language and religion; (ii) inter-group relations; and (iii) directions for the future. . . . It was hoped that some definite policy guidelines would emerge from the deliberations of the Seminar and that these might hopefully and actually be considered seriously by political decision makers. Whether or not we succeeded in developing, albeit implicitly at least, the policy indicators, or, for that matter, in genuinely uncovering and highlighting the ground reality, as it obtains in the region, is for you to judge.

But, when you judge, we feel it necessary to point out that this volume represents only a graphic, linguistic reproduction of what transcribed during the three days of marathon interacting about the North-East reality that most of the participants had lived with, suffered, struggled to understand and worked hard to articulate. Seen thus, this volume does not even represent the tip of iceberg for, as yet, we have no way of reproducing/representing 'communication' and 'interactions' which involve so much of eye-movements and bodily gestures, tonal variations, assertive and withdrawal syndromes, flattering and trivialising expressions, patterns of turn-taking and much more. Further, we have solid ground to believe that the deliberations during the Seminar proved to be far from being dispassionate and academic; they were profoundly involved and intense, representing a deep restlessness to find some way out—a ray of hope.

In retrospect, the idea of holding such a seminar had been propelling many of us, academic and activists as well as academic-interventionists, for quite some time. Fortunately, the *seedling* for this Seminar happened in rounds of discussion in 1995, which quickly led to a serious search for deeper understanding and programmatizing. Professor Sujata Miri's insightful, useful and mostly informed comments and suggestions finally led to a concretization of the problematic and writing down the statement. Retrospecting further, many of us who had gone over as 'teachers' to the North-East, or had taken up teaching being part of North-East, felt that we were under the siege of academic experts from all sides, of all hues and ideologies. We felt the impulsive need to assimilate, rather internalize, an increasing amount of knowledge about the people, their societies, cultures, histories and world-views, quite apart from our professional disciplines. Indeed, during our functioning as teachers, we found ourselves increasingly paying greater attention to events and incidents that many would despise, but for us, it all has had been a great 'learning' experience, though without any conceivable direct relationship to the lives of people, communities and societies.

Since the early 90s particularly, recurring bouts of violence has damaged the whole fabric of civic governance and culture in the North East, though the epicentre of armed violence keeps changing from state to state, district to district. Normal processes of all the three wings of governance—the legislature, judiciary and executive—have, more often than not, been suspended at best and subverted at worst. There have been phenomenal violations of human rights; virtually a war culture has emerged, built around discourses on the 'enemy'. The army has taken over functions of policing in many areas; massive stores of military weapons have been built up in private hands. In the entire region, the overall situation has produced a generation of politicians, from within the native communities and societies, who are highly skilled in conflict-related communication and negotiation, but have little or no experience in the normal business of government, nor do they have any clear vision or alternatives. The region has by now absorbed political, diplomatic and military resources out of all proportions.

In the North-East, virtually all aspects of community life has become politicised, and in many areas, militarized. Religiously homogenous as well as heterogeneous communities and societies are at war; valued social relationships have been ruptured, inter-personal and intra-community trust has been destroyed, quite often by government and security forces as well as opposition armed groups and 'informants'. The erection of social, cultural, psychological and physical barriers

have broken long established patterns of community living; open communities have turned into closed ones.

To boot, throughout the region of North-East, cultural development has been stunted. Questions of cultural and national identity, quite often in conflict and competition, dominate the intense public discourse, especially in the native languages print media. The normal and necessary processes of culture criticism and creative innovation have been distorted by the subjective perception of the need to show—or to avoid showing—solidarity with one or the other of the protagonists. A dialect of cultural oppression of the 'other' and repression of the 'self' has been set in motion. A set of negative images and symbols of the North-East have been 'cooked' and fixed. The state and the media have had a great role to play in this, consciously, but mostly impulsively or compulsively. The region's celebrated self-sufficient economy has gone into fee fall. Clearly, the economic costs of all this can feasibly and gradually be reversed; the human costs can never be.

A point on the role of the theory is in order here. Interpretations of the situation, of social, cultural, economic and political reality in the North-East, in its being and becoming, suffer in their use of theoretical models. Most scholars, particularly from the academia, tend to use formal and explicit models. Many historians would structure their account of the groups and communities in the region in terms of the categories of Indian nation building. Others use Gramscian concepts of historic bloc and hegemony. Marxists would construct their explanatory narrative around notions of modes of production and class struggles, derived from political economy. Refreshingly, however, as you would find for yourself, most contributors to this Seminar have tended to look at things empirically and intuitively, leaving their conceptual and analytical models implicit.

The disadvantages of an academic proper approach the tendency to impose rigid or inappropriate theoretical categories on the reality are well known. We are afraid, the contemporary as well as historical events, incidents and processes bypass the boundaries of given theoretical concepts and model. But, we are also acutely aware, without explicit theoretical reflection crucial issues may become elusive. Theoretical models are particularly useful in understanding the dynamics and interplay of subjective and objective perceptions of 'self' and the 'other', in identifying the structures of intra—and inter-group relationships as well as the dynamics of change over a period of time. They are much more essential when one has to move from interpretations to practical proposals and guidelines. In the ultimate analysis, of course, these

models need to be used with great sensitivity, as heuristics and as sources of insight. To us, the strength of this volume lies in the fact that most theoretical interpretations have been worked out from engagement with the ground reality as well as primary and secondary material.

Many a scholars and writers in and on the North-East define the region's crisis as one of identity and/or ideology. The North-East crisis, we are told, is one conflicting ethnicity and nationalism, a matter *ultimately* of identities and allegiances. Others stress structural relationships, in particular the role of political and economic equality, within the region and between the region and the Indian *Centre*. The term *step-motherly treatment*, meted out by the *Centre* to different groups, communities and states, has been used umpteen times. The different perspectives on the situation and the actual crisis are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, structural inequality matters so much precisely because it exists between virtually every large community in North-East and the Indian State, each asserting a different ethnic-racial linguistic national identity. In fact, it is highly useful to see structural relations, ideas and meanings as inter-penetrating in all areas of social life. Thus, community differences and relations, as well as differences and relations between the government and the governed, depend upon pre-existing constructs of 'self' and 'other', whether Christians/Hindus/Muslims, Assamese/Meities/Nagas, or native/immigrants. But, the origins and dynamics of such symbolic distinctions are interwoven with actual experiences rooted in social and structural relationships—position in the government and the economy, demographic strength, access to the means of social and cultural dominance and, overtime, such structurally based experiences have become constitutive components of community/group identity.

Speaking very broadly, social theory tends to oscillate between an overtly *material* and an overtly cultural view of reality, which include questions of identity and inter-group relations—a tendency to consider culture as secondary to the material or to interpret reality as the expression of cultural symbols, images, ideas and language. Though it is not really necessary to attempt a theoretical synthesis of these two basic aspects of reality, we need to seek to capture something of the interplay between them. We also need to consider ideologies as elaborations of the meanings implicit in daily life into complex contextual systems. Ideologies operate at a level removed from daily experience and seldom accurately reflect the ambiguous, ambivalent, mixed, often contradictory, beliefs of ordinary people. Nonetheless, they are centrally important, reached for in times of stress as the logical presuppositions

of common sense assumptions and as a source of community level justification. They play a central role in identity formation and projection, as well as determining the form and content of inter-community relations—in fact, in sharpening conflicts between groups and/or communities, preventing ideas and views from developing in a plural way. They too serve to defend or advance structurally based interests. Ideological critique without structural change has limited capacity to transform even ideology.

Next, most interpretations of the crisis in the North-East posit a geographic locus to it. While some scholars identify the conditions of crisis as internal, seeing the groups and communities in North-East in conflict and competition, others would see it as 'external', mostly as a conflict between North-East substreams, and the Indian mainstream. In the internal crisis understanding, the crisis is rooted in conflict primarily between different communities, minorities and majorities, dominant and dominated, within North-East and, to that extent, there is no essential conflict between the people of India and of North-East, or between the Central and state governments. The former interpretation has an obvious political appeal, for example, to the Indian state and its political actors who wish to reassure themselves that the conflict is not of their making. It has a similar appeal even to the native elite and leadership whose vested interests are dependent on the survival of the region and its constituent states as geo-political units in perpetual conflict and crisis. More importantly, this interpretation, at least at first sight, appears to have analytic merit. It is within the North-East and among the different communities there, that most of the overt conflict and violence have occurred during the past two decades or so. It was mobilisation of the civic population, rather than pressure from outside actors and governments, that provoked, fueled and continue to do so, the Naga-Kuki conflict, mostly armed and violent, in Manipur, for example.

Questions of space and causality cannot, however, be resolved so simply. Societies, unlike states, are not bounded realms but are structures of social relationships that are infinitely extensible. Moreover, North-East as such can lay few claims even to be considered 'a society'; it is a region, and, like all regions, is formed by the wider systems and cultures in which it is embedded. Overt conflict and violence may be concentrated within North-East, but the causes of conflict are not necessarily so located. In fact, they are not. It would be hard to deny the covert and overt role of the Indian State, and its virtually permanently stationed armed and security forces, supported by legal and legislative

measures, in contributing to, and sometimes in *seedling* and *nurturing* the violent, conflictual state of affairs in the North-East. Indeed, we would argue that causes and conditions of any conflict and crisis must be seen to have multiple and interlocking spatial loci, among others of course.

Rather than working with preconceived notions of what is internal and what is external in the sources of North East crisis, it might be worthwhile to adopt a more realistic and differentiated approach. This need not preclude us from considering the North East, and the states within it, as a distinct socio-cultural unit(s). On the contrary, we need to devote our work in understanding the structures and relationships there. With no shred of doubt at all, it seems essential to see both the existence of the North East and the crisis within it as the product of a historic system of relationships that in its origins and dynamics operates of the level of the Indian state on one side and the state governments, native communities and local armed opposition groups on the other. While several dimensions of this system had their roots during British colonial rule, position of the country in 1947 gave birth to new dimensions, further deepening the crisis. In sum, it might be worth the while to see North East as a region, or perhaps as a system or both, that is both a contingent and a fully open social world.

Virtually all accounts of the North East crisis begin with a historical account as a backdrop to the contemporary. Analysis of the crisis then proceeds synchronically by reference to ongoing inter—and intra-group conflicts, unnerving reports of violations of human rights, both state's and private groups' atrocities, violence and extortions and ideologies, institutions and structural conditions. History as a living force enters into this analysis, mostly in the form of beliefs, erroneous or otherwise, of people about the past and the interpretations they make of these beliefs of the past. This approach rigidly separates past from present, and, thus, it is ill equipped to grasp processes of change arising from evolving/developing systems of relationships. To capture the dynamics of the crisis, the central aim of this Seminar, it is required that we identify and empathetically understand these developing systems of relationships. In fact, identifying historical systems poses many problems as the search for 'grand narratives' has often proved futile, rather counter productive, in fact in most cases. The emphasis needs to be on pluralities, fragmentation, discontinuities and a multiplicity of readings and on the deconstruction of claims to anything else. Thus, it is necessary to allow for change and contingency and to avoid any suggestions of an underlying determinism.

Any periodisation of the development of North-East crisis is too complex, and yet our concern has to be to grasp its overall pattern and dynamic. Some writers locate the origins of the crisis between 15th to 18th centuries when the valley parts of the region, particularly in Assam and Manipur, came under Hindu influence patronised by the ruling kings. Others stress the later part of 19th century as the period that produced conflicting religions (Hindus vs. Christians), conflicting societies (valley vs. hills) and conflicting ideologies (of ethno-nationalism). Still others stress the years after Indian independence, when the North-East got cut off from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), when supposedly independent nations were annexed to India by force, which in fact destroyed the people's distinctive political forms and cultural ethos. We need to understand the nature of crisis generated in different periods as combinations of continuity and change, understanding the successive periods of crises as conjunctures setting the conditions for events that then impacted back on the developing system of relationships. To put a proposal the systems of relationships may be looked at in terms of three interlocking levels—a set of differences, a structure of dominance and dependence and a tendency towards community/communal division.

The concepts of ethnic groups and community as well as community conflicts are much contested in general and particularly in their applicability to the North-East. Some see community as a purely ideological concept that masks divisions of class and gender. Talk of 'two communities seems to posit two monolithic blocks, denying internal differences and cross-cutting commonalities. Some accept that community division does exist today in the North-East, while others see them to be in the process of irretrievable fragmentation. For others, the stress on community division obscures the fact that North-East incorporates a multiplicity of communities, each internally diverse, and in itself a community, albeit a divided one. It is sometimes argued that an intellectual focus on sectarian communities emphasizes, and thereby reinforces, 'unreal' communal division—that a focus on gender, class or ideology would help further to pluralise politics in North-East. There is validity to many of these points. The important point of caution that needs to be underscored here is that we use the concept of community in a non-totalising and variable way that allows for overlapping memberships of different communities that may have different degrees of solidarity and bondedness, thus allowing for multiple (acts of) identities.

The literature on North-East brings out different aspects of what

divides the communities. Some stress differences of *ethnic origin*, others *religion*, others *habitat*, others *tribal vs. non-tribal*, others *natives vs. migrants* and so on and so forth. These dimensions of differences are combined by some, while others invoke those that serve the purposes of the time. Some do acknowledge all these and other aspects of division but see the ethnic/national one as ultimately the most important. Still others focus on more recent politico-ideological identities and allegiances. To our understanding, there has been as yet no systematic attempt to clarify in a more theoretical way the relations between these structures of difference; too often they have been taken separately as the basis for contradictory, and inherently reductionist, explanations of crisis and conflict.

We feel it necessary to stress the relative autonomy of the different dimensions of difference and show how they develop, interrelate, overlap and interact with wider forces to form a basis for identity formation and intergroup relations, harmonious or conflictual. It is clear that since the 16th-17th centuries, four main socio-cultural dimensions; (i) *religion* (Hinduism, Christianity, Islam and ancestral), (ii) *ethnicity* (Meitei, Mizo, Naga etc.); (iii) *race* (Aryan vs Mongoloid) and (iv) *colonialism* (Indian state vs North East peoples) have intertwined and mutually conditioned each other. These differences have had many and varied political and ideological articulations. Of these, two in particular are crucial. One is the distinction between 'civility' and 'barbarism', a distinction which emerged during the period of British colonialism and has continued to date, though with different images and symbols, most of which are highly dehumanising. The second, much more recent, is that between nationalism and subnationalism as conflicting bases of identity and political loyalty, e.g. Indians and Nagas. Thus conceived, the distinction between an Indian and a Naga is quite different from ethnic distinctions between, say, a Tamil and a Bengali.

The role of relations of dominance, dependence and inequality is a highly important theme in the literature on the North East crisis. Inequality between the communities with the North-East and between North East communities and the Indian mainstream communities has received a good deal of attention, through its extent, causes and effects are in dispute. The contribution of the Indian state to the internal relations of inequality is perhaps less controversial. We need to approach this issue historically, by reference to the way in which relationships between different geographical units, ethnic groups and communities on the one hand and the Indian state on the other were forged, after

transfer of power from the British to Indian, into a structure of dominance, dependence and inequality, which has in fact defined the interests and parameters of actions of the parties to it.

It is worth pointing out here that socio-cultural, ethnoracial or ideological difference alone need not necessarily produce oppositional communities and intense communal conflicts. Inter-group relations become conflictual and lasting when there is a differential basis of access to power and resources. We might locate the roots of the structure of dominance, dependence and inequality in the mode of the integration—annexation—merger of the different parts of North East into the Indian states after India's independence. Most native communities today claim that they were annexed by force and coercion. The vibrancy with which this argument is put forth, particularly by armed opposition groups, is worth serious attention. The patterns of conflict continue to be reproduced as the structure of dominance, dependence and inequality continues to generate radically opposed interests, communalisation and power struggle.

Since the '80s in particular, the writings on the North East crisis has become increasingly specialized and there is now a wide range of sub fields in the literature—economic and demographic analysis, studies of intergroup/community relations, political analysis, questions of identity and ethnicity, impact of globalisation, media etc. and so forth. What is lacking, and perhaps most required, is a comprehensively integrated interpretation, with a concern for multi-determination and the role of power. The dimensions of difference between the Indian state and North East provide the elements out of which relations of dominance, dependence and inequality can be constructed. The structure of dominance generates interest of its own; defending or advancing those interests provide further basis for community solidarity and even sharper community division. Community division intensifies in turn the sense of socio-cultural and ideological difference and the interests on which the structure of dominance rests. The system has thereby self-reproducing tendencies.

It should by now be clear that the explanation of continuity does not imply a static situation or an underlying structural or cultural determinism. We need to draw attention to the contingent as well as the structural conditions which have given rise to the developing system of relationships, and stress change as much as continuity. The actors work under structural conditions with which they are unhappy and against which they struggle; but their actions reproduce these conditions

as much as they modify them. Marx's celebrated dictum 'Man make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted—from the past'—seems singularly appropriate and illuminating.

To suggest any readymade package as a solution to the North East crisis would sound naïve. Yet, one can attempt to suggest an emancipatory approach to the solution, though only in very broad terms. Three general paradigms—integrationism, regionalism and dualism—in numerous variations, of course, seem to inform our search for a solution to the North-East crisis. Each of these approaches posits a definite institutional form of settlement respectively, political integration within the Indian state, power-sharing in a federal structure between the Indian state and the North Eastern states (and within them) and joint or shared authority. All of these exist to some degree, in one form or another, within the Indian constitutional arrangements. And, yet, if they have not worked, one has to analyze deeper to find an answer to WHY. Then, perhaps we could also think in terms of making changes in the constitutional dispensation. Perhaps a different approach—different in terms of substantive goals and general direction—needs to be developed on the basis of a genuine and involved analysis of the North East crisis. *If the crisis is a product of a specific system of relationships which constitutes multiple communities at different levels with radically conflicting interests, aspirations and identities, the solution lies in dismantling that system and creatively developing a process in emancipatory terms.*

The concept of emancipation has a long lineage in social theory, from the enlightenment through Marx to contemporary critical theory. It is commonly used to describe the process whereby a particular group frees itself from political subordination by another. It also has a more general sense: a process by which the participants, in a system which determines, distorts and limits their potentialities, come together actively to transform it, and in the process, transform themselves. Here, we feel the necessity of conceiving the term 'emancipation' as general rather than particular and partial rather than total. It seems to dismantle a system which constitutes communities in fluid, and mutually antagonistic and destructive relationships. However, it is partial in the sense that the immediate emphasis is only in dismantling this one system. It does not address the struggles of women and other groups for full participation and social justice. In the process of restructuring

of the system, emancipation demands, however, that different struggles converge and mutually reinforce each other.

Emancipation aims to resolve conflict, not simply to manage or contain it. Its immediate and long-term aim is not a compromise political settlement (as they don't work—Assam Accord, Mizo Accord or what you have), but a common endeavour to dismantle the root causes of conflict and crises. It is conceived as a process that must win very broad political support. It demands a commitment on the part of all parties concerned to engage in such a process, a conscious decision to participate in dismantling the conditions of conflict. But it is a long-term process of creation of the conditions under which political resolutions become feasible. What the *final agreed political constitutional settlement* will be is impossible to predict; it might be some variant of the present Indian Union, a form of federal set up with greater autonomy for constituent units, or a totally reconstituted North-East. But, whatever the form of settlement, it can bring in *a ray of hope* only if the conditions of conflict are dismantled. We might thus define North-Eastness as not primarily a question of birth, blood or language; it is the condition of being involved in the North-East situation and crisis, and usually being mauled by it. It is time to reconstruct the North-East situation. This Seminar was intended as an involved contribution to that task.

This volume represents mostly the involved contributions, based more on existential experiences than on academic engagements. We don't intend to make an editorial intervention between the readers and the writers. We would however like to point out that a number of committed prospective participants could not make it to the Seminar, perhaps because of their deep involvement within their living, working context. Most importantly, Dr. K. Suresh Singh, whose verbal presentation and involved intervention through out the Seminar enriched the deliberations, but who *unfortunately, could not send us a written script* and hence we miss it in the volume. Professor Sujata Miri was involved at every stage—conceptualising the Seminar to identifying prospective contributors, though she chose to remain anonymous. She figures only in the 'Panel discussion', adding a superbly unique dimension to the winding up of the Seminar. In fact, the 'Panel Discussion' session turned out to be a superbly free float of ideas and feelings, further adding to the rich exploration of ideas, positions and ideologies.

To conclude, it must be underscored that while many established intellectuals could not make it to the seminar despite prior commitment,

scholar—activists (in fact, in the North-East contexts, scholars, academics and activists are mostly rolled into one) from farther towns bore the burden of travelling all the way to Shimla, reflecting their honest commitment to work out a '*ray of hope*'.

We cannot feel this introduction to be complete without recording the hearty cooperation of Professor Mrinal Miri who helped all throughout the Seminar beyond his official capacity. We must thank of course M. Rashid Khan for typesetting the manuscript. But then, S.A. Jabbar, and A.K. Sharma's contributions have been whole hearted and we record our heartfelt gratefulness to them in particular.

KAILASH S. AGGARWAL