

**POLITICS
OF
REGIONALISM
IN
NORTHEAST
INDIA**

GIRIN PHUKON

The ingredients of politics of regionalism in the Northeast region can be traced back to the pre-independence period. Since the nineteen sixties, with the emergence of region oriented leadership, several regional demands began to be voiced leading to regional and sub-regional movements. It is interesting to examine whether the urge of diverse groups inhabiting this region for maintaining distinct identities as displayed through various regional movements is entirely new or is this the culmination of the undercurrents in the politics of the late forties? Did these groups seek any kind of constitutional protection against the "threat" to their socio-cultural identities as being perceived today? How far would it be correct to say that regional movements have been able to fulfill regional interests? An endeavour has been made to examine these questions in the research articles included in this volume, some of which were earlier published in eminent journals. The book deals with the beginnings of the heavy influx of people into Assam (even during the British period) and documents the continuing alarm in the minds of the people in the subsequent decades. The emergence of the AGP (which recently returned to power with a convincing majority) forms a full separate chapter. The historical background provides interesting information on related topics such as the "Search for Tai-Ahom Identity in Assam."

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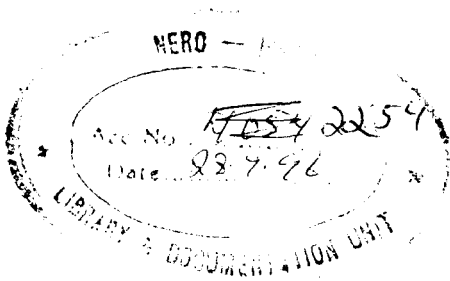
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ETHNIC NATIONALISM IN NORTHEAST INDIA : OVER VIEW OF ITS LEGACY

The urges of different ethnic groups of Northeast India for maintaining their distinct identities have been a living phenomenon in the politics of the region in particular and of the country in general. They have their own language, dialect, culture, customs, tradition, historical background and so on. And they are not prepared to merge their culture completely with the national mainstream and want to maintain their distinct identity. As a means of maintaining this they have been demanding for separate states on the basis of their respective ethnic identity. More importantly, some sections of these groups have been carrying on an underground movement demanding a sovereign independent state outside the Indian union. A movement of this kind naturally involves the question of integration of this region with the rest of the country. In some quarters it is believed that such spearatist tendencies and sub-regional urges are being exploited by the super-power rivalry of the contemporary world and that the various movements of ethnic groups of this region are being spearheaded by some foreign agents with an ulterior motive. This study, however, reveals that such an assumption is not the sole criterion to understand the problems and sentiments of the ethnic groups. While there may be some substance in it in the sense that different foreign agents might have taken advantage of the ethnic sentiments, nevertheless the activities of the foreign agents are not real sources of separatist feeling of the ethnic groups. The ingredients of ethnic nationalism in this region may be traced back to the pre-independence period. Thus this study is an attempt to examine the centrifugal and sub-regional sentiments of some of the ethnic groups of Northeast India which they expressed at the advent of independence as a measure of maintaining their distinct ethnic identities.

II

The Naga Hills Districts Tribal Council was formed in April 1945 with a view to uniting the multilingual Nagas and engaging themselves in social activities. Later on, within a year this was recognised with the name and style, the Naga National Council (NNC), a federation of various tribal councils of the Hills under the presidentship of T. Aliba Imti Ao. At the initial stage, it demanded autonomy within Assam and opposed both the 'Crown Colony'² and the 'Grouping Plan' under the Cabinet Mission Plan of 16 May, 1946. But suddenly in February 1947, it demanded an interim Government for the Nagas, initially for a period of ten years; after which the Nagas would be free to decide their own political status. This demand was formally placed before the Government in June of the same year. The NNC even gave an ultimatum to the Government of India on 4 November, 1947, giving thirty day's notice for satisfactory settlement of their demands. Further, it warned the Government that if their demands were not conceded, the Naga people would not co-operate with the existing Government.³ This movement for autonomy was, however, transformed into one for the establishment of a sovereign independent Nagaland after Angami Zapu Phizo became the president of NNC in November 1949. Later on, it virtually transformed itself into a parallel Government for the Nagas.

Like the Nagas, a section of the Mizos too expressed centrifugal urges and demanded a sovereign 'Mizo State'. In the late forties there were two political organisations of the Mizos, namely the 'Mizo Union' and the 'United Mizo freedom Organisation' which came into existence in April 1946 and July 1947 respectively. Whereas the 'Mizo Union' was for the continuation of link with India on the basis of full local autonomy, the latter propagated secession of all contiguous Mizo areas from India and demanded their merger with Burma on the ground of racial affinity.⁵ The Mizo Union submitted a Memorandum to the President, Constituent Assembly in April 1947 urging for the consolidation of all Mizo areas into a single administrative unit and its self-determination within Assam.⁶ But later on, in 1949 it demanded the amalgamation of the contiguous Mizo areas of Tripura, Manipur, Mizoram and Cachar to form an autonomous greater Mizoram.⁷ In the subsequent period, however, the dominant elite of the Mizo Hills tended to produce a rebellious psyche among its people.

In 1946, the Khasi-Jayantia Political Association was formed with the initiative of the Tribal Chiefs (syiems). It demanded a federation of the Khasi areas with adequate "cultural and political autonomy" within a "sovereign Assam".⁸ In the Garo Hills, the Garo National Council (GNC) came into existence in March 1946.⁹ It also put forward the claims for an autonomous Garo region. The GNC, however, wanted to maintain its link with the province of Assam as well as the Central Government.¹⁰ Similarly in the Mikir Hills (Karbi Anglong) the 'Karbi Durbar', the first political organisation of the Karbis was formed in early 1947. It emphasised on the protection of local customs, consolidation of Karbi areas into a single administrative unit and an extension of the franchise.¹¹

Thus it appears that in the late forties of this century, there had been a strong sub-regional and even a separatist urge among a section of the people of the hills. One of the reasons for this was that these hill tribes had very little scope of mingling with the people of the plains during the British rule. The British administered them separately from the plains and they were not sufficiently integrated with the people of the plains. Whether this was done deliberately in consonance with the policy of 'divide and rule'; as many local historians claim,¹² or it was due to a policy of not disturbing susceptibilities of the hill people, is difficult to assess accurately. It may, however, be argued that although the British might not have made direct efforts to divide the people of the hills and the plains, indirectly their policy had this effect. As a result, the hill people were afraid of the plainsmen more than they were of the British. They even laboured under a suspicion that the rule of 'white people' in the hitherto "Excluded Areas" would be replaced by their "more advanced" neighbours of the plains in free India.¹³ By and large, the hill elite believed that in a free India the plainsmen would be in an advantageous position to exploit them on a more permanent basis.¹⁴ This feeling of the hills was mainly shared by the newly emerged western educated hill middle class and the tribal chiefs (Syiems). They thought that if the hill areas were completely integrated with the plains, they would lose their traditional privileges and socio-political dominance in the hills.

In addition to this, there were some other factors which also stood in the way of integration between the hills and the plains. The hills were not bound with the plains by any ties of religion and language. On the other hand, the Christian Missionaries, through the help of the

British Administration, succeeded in converting a sizable section of the hill people under the cover of certain philanthropic and welfare activities. At the same time the people of the plains had failed to establish adequate political communication with the hills. This fact was even admitted by *The Assam Tribune* which generally championed the views of the Assamese elite. Thus one of its editorials maintained:

The plains people and their leaders have hardly made in the past planned efforts to develop closer ties between the two sections of the population or devoted any of their time to the problems with which the hill people are confronted.¹⁵

This attitude of the Assamese elite towards the hill people led the latter to believe that after the end of the British rule they would not get full scope for the development of hill culture on the lines of their own tradition if they did not remain aloof from the plains. The cause of this fear was again admitted by *The Assam Tribune* thus : 'the fault is entirely ours, the plains people's, for we have done absolutely nothing to earn their confidence to prove that we have no evil designs on our brothers and sisters in the hills.'¹⁶

It is, however, interesting to note that although the Assamese elite made themselves responsible for the fears and suspicions of the hill people, they at the same time alleged that this was mainly due to the result of, as *The Assam Tribune* put it, "well thought out imperialist policy."¹⁷ In fact, when the Assamese elite failed to influence the hill people, they felt that the British pursued a policy of 'deliberate segregation' of the hill people from the people of the plains. Such assertions made often by the Assamese elite were, however, not without justification. As already noted, while the British might have made no direct effort to divide the people of the hills and the plains, it seems that they took full advantage of the existing differences between these people.

In the plains of Assam, the Ahoms had expressed remarkable separatist urges at the advent of independence. They had been the latest rulers of the Assam Valley and after six centuries of their rule in Assam, the British had taken over the country from them in 1826. It is interesting to note that not only did most of the dominant elite in the Assamese society in the Pre-British period come from the Ahoms, they had also made a deep and indelible impress on Assamese society during the six centuries of their rule. In fact, they made formidable

contribution in the consolidation of Assamese society during the six centuries of their rule. In fact, they made formidable contribution in the consolidation of Assamese society and they were absorbed into the Hindu social structure. But it is strange that some of these people, after the advent of the British rule insisted on retaining their distinct identity from the larger Assamese society. Mention may be made that they opposed the proposed Scheme for tabulating the "Ahoms" as "Hindus" in the Census operation of 1941 and demanded that the word "Ahom" be retained in the Census report.¹⁸ Under the British administration, this community became backward educationally, socially and even economically. As a result, the Ahoms failed to occupy prominent place in the British administration. Important positions were held either by the Bengalis or the Assamese caste Hindus who were of Aryan origin. The Ahom elite felt that they were deprived of their "legitimate share" of administrative jobs and other privileges under the British Government. Considering their contribution to the history of Assam and their numerical strength, they felt that they deserved much more than what they could achieve.¹⁹ Indeed, from a position of dominance, they sank to the position of backwardness, the Ahoms gradually began to organise themselves which culminated in the formation of the All Assam Ahom Association in 1893 (subsequently renamed as the Ahom Sabha). It stood for the preservation of distinct ethnic identity of the Ahoms. Although the Ahoms adopted the Assamese as their mother tongue leaving their original Tai language and contributed a great deal in the formation of a greater Assamese society, they did not want that the 'Ahom' identity should completely be submerged by the Assamese caste Hindu culture. They, however, asserted that the Ahoms were an inseparable part of the larger Assamese society and the uplift of the Ahoms would ultimately serve the greater interest of the Assamese society.²⁰ Thus while endorsing this views, they argued that "the rise of Ahoms" was essential "for the progress of the Assamese people as a whole".²¹ It, therefore, seems that the Ahom elite wanted to maintain their distinct identity within the Assamese society regarding their dominant position in the province. As a measure of maintaining distinct identity and prosperity of the Ahoms, they demanded the recognition of Ahoms as a "minority Community."²² And more importantly, with the growing demand for Pakistan, they realised that the question of distinct Ahom identity of Assam as a whole. Eventually, they made a strong case for sovereign independent status for Assam and expressed considerable separatist sentiment. In several meetings of the All Assam

Association, resolutions were adopted to this effect. For instance, in an Executive Committee meeting of the All Assam Ahom Association held on 29 September, 1944 at Sibsagar, it was resolved that :

“In view of the peculiar position of Assam, both geographically and otherwise, and the great preponderance of the Mongolian races with their distinctive language, cultures and religions in the population of the province, Assam without Sylhet has a legitimate claim for free and independent existence in the event of India being divided territorially into Pakistan and Hindustan zones and that Mahatma Gandhi and Mr. Jinnah should leave the question of Assam without Sylhet to the people of the soil to settle.”²³

A Similar resolution was passed in a meeting of the executive committee of “North Bank District Ahom Association” held on 23, September, 1944 at Lakhimpur which pleaded that in the event of India being divided into Hindustan and Pakistan, Assam should be separated from India and constituted into a dominion on the basis of history, culture and nationality.²⁴ In a similar vein Padmeswar Gogoi, a representative of the Ahom Association in the inaugural session of the “All Assam Tribes and Races Federation” held at Shillong on 21 March, 1945 argues :

Geographically Assam is naturally protected and detached from Hindustan proper. Ethnically, Assam is a Mongoloid tract which will naturally afford the best compact society amongst the free indigenous races and tribes of the land. Historically and politically she has a tradition behind, which is unique and glorious in the history of the Far East and bears eloquent testimony to the fact that Assam can never be a digestible part of India now or in future. Therefore, Assam should be separated from India and constituted into a sovereign state.²⁵

Almost a similar particularistic sentiment was expressed by the tribal elite of the plains of Assam. Like the Ahoms the plains tribals had also contradictions with the Assamese caste Hindus. The tribal elite did not want that their distinct tribal identity be completely submerged by the Assamese caste Hindu culture. It needs to be mentioned that Assamese culture does not necessarily imply the culture of the Assamese caste Hindus alone, although they left an indelible impact on it. In fact, the Assamese culture is the result of a continuous process of socio-cultural fusion among diverse linguistic and ethnic

traits for centuries. The tribal communities of Assam did not lag behind in this process. Many of them had already undergone a process of de-tribalisation through initiation into Hinduism and more importantly, through renunciation of their mother tongue in favour of the Assamese language. By and large, these people had contributed significantly towards the Assamese nation building process by assimilating with the mainstream of Assamese culture.

Despite this fact, a section of the tribal elite strongly felt that they were markedly different from the Assamese caste Hindus. It appeared to them that they remained economically, educationally and even politically much more backward than the Assamese caste Hindus. They believed that the dominant upper caste elite of the province were mainly responsible for their backwardness²⁶ Endorsing this view of the tribals, the Communist Party of India alleged that the Assamese caste Hindus, ‘the most advanced community of Assam’ had ‘systematically neglected’ the tribal interest.²⁷ A similar remark was made by Sir Andrew Clow, the then Governor of Assam (1942-46) and he maintained that the Assamese both caste Hindus and the Muslims professed solicitude for the tribes, but neither had troubled to study the question nor had any real sympathy with the tribes.²⁸ At any rate, the growing sense of negligence and deprivation among the tribals led to the formation of the ‘All Assam Plains Tribal League’ in the thirties of this century.²⁹ The tribal leaders realised the necessity of such an organisation to exert pressure on the Government and the national political parties so as to fulfil their needs and aspirations. In fact, the Congress did not try to synthesise the interests of the caste Hindus with those of the plains tribals and to bring them within the mainstream of the national movement. Moreover, no practical attempt was made to socialise the tribes in the emerging political culture of the state and to bring them into the mainstream of the Valley culture. In effect, it led the plains tribals to believe that though they were the original inhabitants of the province, the Assamese middle class had dispossessed them of their original rights. As a result, they became increasingly conscious of their distinct identity.

At the same time, it has to be noted that the tribal elite were not only afraid of the dominance of Assamese caste Hindus, they were also apprehensive of the possible ‘danger’ from the non-assamese Indians of the province. It was very often complained that the non-Assamese cultivators, particularly from Bengal, had been allowed to occupy lands

within the tribal belts. In fact, the tribal elite were critical of the immigration policy of the Saadulla Government which they characterised as a "policy of invitation" to landless peasants.³⁰ They felt that no efforts were being made either by the Muslim League or by the Congress to safeguard the interest of the tribals. This led them to believe that the increasing number of non-tribals in the tribal belts in particular, and non-Assamese Indians in the province in general, were posing a threat to the tribal identity. While being conscious of their distinct identity and anxious to preserve and develop their own socio-cultural heritage some of the tribal elite even thought to make their homeland (Assam) a sovereign independent state outside the Indian Union in the event of India being divided into Hindustan and Pakistan. As a matter of fact, a section of the tribal elite did not want that Assam should be a part either of Hindustan or of Pakistan and they desired that it should maintain sovereign status. They thought that if Assam became free, the influx of non-Assamese Indians particularly into the tribal belt of Assam could be checked and more importantly, the tribals would be in a better position within a sovereign Assam to protect their interest. In view of this, in the middle of the forties, a feeling grew among some of the plains tribal elite in favour of an independent political existence for Assam as a means of safeguarding their distinct tribal identity. Thus Bhimor Deori, the General Secretary of the Assam Plains Tribal League, in an official statement released to the press emphatically demanded that:

Assam proper and its hills should be constituted into a separate sovereign state. Assam and its hills should not be made a part of province of any Indian federation—Hindustan or Pakistan without the consent of its people.³¹

Endorsing this sentiment Rabinchandra Kachari, another tribal leader asserted that Assam, with her distinct racial and culture identity, should fight for independence.³² A similar view was also expressed by Sitanath Brahmachaudhury, President of the thirteenth Session of the Kachari Sanmilan, a constituent body of the Tribal League, held at Sibsagar on 4 and 5 May 1945.³³ Although, there were differences between the Ahoms and other tribal communities (both in the hills and the plains) in respect of religious beliefs, languages and dialects, sub-regional pulls and allegiances they felt much closer to each other due to their cultural affinities (fundamentally all of them belonged to the Mongoloid and the Tibeto-Burman culture distinct from the Aryans.)

Moreover, basic problems that they were facing (such as the crisis of identity, the felling of a sense of deprivation) were mostly similar in nature. therefore, they tended to unite together and make a common working arrangement in quest of their distinct identity. Thus the "All Assam Tribes and Races Federation"³⁴ was formed at Shillong in 1944 at an enthusiastic get-together of representatives of various tribes and races of Assam with a view to securing their political, economic and cultural welfare by promoting co-operation and solidarity among them.³⁵

The growing publicity of the two-nation theory made the tribes and races of Assam more articulate and conscious of their distinct identity. In the event of the division of the nation, into Hindustan and Pakistan, the tribes and races of Assam did not wish to be classed with either of the parties and demanded a sovereign independent status for Assam as a means of safeguarding their distinct identity. Thus the first convention of the "All Assam Tribes and Races Federation" held at Shillong from 21 to 23 March 1945, unanimously resolved that:

"In view of the fact that historically, Assam proper, with its hills, was never a part or province of India, and that its people, particularly the Tribes and the Races inhabiting it are ethnically and culturally different from the people of the rest of India, this convention is emphatically opposed to Assam proper with its hills being included into any proposed division of India-Pakistan or Hindustan and demands that it should be constituted into a separate Free State into which the Hill Districts bordering Assam be incorporated."³⁶

Their demand for a separate independent state appeared to them quite 'legitimate' because they believed that if the Muslim could claim a separate state on the basis of their distinct religious identity, the tribes and races of Assam could also definitely put forward a similar claim on the basis of their history, culture and distinct ethnic identity. Since they were not completely assimilated with the mainstream of Indian culture till then, they found no reason why they should become a part of the rest of the country. Moreover, it was very much in their mind that they were never a part of India prior to the British rule in this region. In fact, only in a sovereign Assam (which they dreamt of) a section of the Mongoloid and other non-Aryan elite felt that they would be able to maintain their dominant status and their tradition and culture would be well protected. By and large, they apprehended that if Assam was not separated from India, their future destiny would be

controlled either by the Hindus or the Muslims. Moreover, they were also thinking that unlike the Mongoloid and non-Aryan communities in Assam, the Assamese caste Hindus and the Muslims traced their origin to other parts of India. Therefore, even if Assam became a unit of Indian federation, the numerical strength of both the Assamese Hindus and the Muslims would, in the due course, increase in Assam through the influx of people (both Hindus and Muslims) from other parts of India which would ultimately create the problem of crisis of identity for the non-Aryan and Mongoloid communities.

In any case, the tribes and races of Assam were not sufficiently organised, capable of asserting the demand for a sovereign independent Assam. On the other hand, the Indian National Congress in Assam was strong enough to check the centrifugal urges developed among a section of the tribals and the Ahoms. Moreover, the prevailing political climate was not favourable for accommodating such a demand. Eventually, in the late forties, when the Constitution was being framed, the leaders of the tribes and races pleaded for adequate constitutional safeguards to preserve and protect their distinct ethnic identity. In view of this, they emphatically demanded that :

These communities must be assured separate political existence in the new Constitution by providing for them, in the case of the hill tribes, local autonomy and in the case of others, separate electorate. They must be allowed to live their own life with their own customs and culture with out any encroachment either by the Hindus or by the Muslims.³⁷

While demanding these special privileges to them in the new Constitution, they asserted the fact that the setting up of autonomous administrative unit among these tribes was “vital to the peace and tranquility” of this region. As a matter of fact, they warned the Congress leaders that ‘a denial’ of their ‘just rights’ might bring ‘chaos and insecurity’ to this “most vulnerable frontier of India.”³⁸ Thus it appears that at the advent of independence, the Ahoms and the tribals, both in the hills and the plains, expressed a remarkable separatist sentiment and constituted a strong regional force when the Constitution was on the anvil.

III

This study, therefore, shows that the present separatist tendencies and sub-regional urges of some sections of the ethnic groups of Northeast

India are not entirely the product of post-independence period. These were rather rooted in the past. In fact, there were already strong regional and sub-regional sentiments or even urges for separate independent state in the minds of the then elite of these ethnic communities prior to independence. Even after thirtyfive years of independence, similar feelings and sentiments have been persisting. The assumption that the phenomenon of ethnic nationalism in Northeast India is the sole creation of conspiracy of the foreign agents is misleading. To emphasise such an assumption is to deny the genuine causes of backwardness of the ethno-cultural groups of this region. Moreover, such an assumption would obviously lead to the conclusions that : (i) the problems faced by the ethnic communities of this region are not genuine; (ii) leadership of the country is leaving no stone unturned for the solution of ethnic problems; and (iii) whatever movement they (ethnic groups) have been launching for the fulfilment of their respective demands is the handiwork of the foreign agents working in this region. Such conclusions would obviously weaken some of the legitimate demands of these groups and conceal the root causes of their problems. It is necessary to note that during the last three and a half decades, little attention has been paid to these feelings and sentiments of the ethnic groups expressed at the advent of independence. As a result, they could not be brought into the national mainstream and most of them remained more backward than other advanced communities even within an underdeveloped region. In fact, long negligence, slow and unbalanced economic development of the region and exploitation of the backward section by the advanced majority in the fair name of development and industrialisation are fanning the flame of ethnic group consciousness. Added to this, the various ethnic groups feel that the larger, powerful and advanced sections, in due course will override the interest of smaller and backward ethnic groups in spite of constitutional safeguards. Therefore as a measure of protecting their interest some of them demand either complete independence or separate state. Thus the demands for independent Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur by extremist sections of the agitationists and for separate Udayachal, Karbi state, Tai Mongoloid state by a section of population of these groups are nothing but venting of concealed and dormant feelings for distinct ethnic identity which they expressed even at the advent of independence. Hence, the phenomenon of ethnic group nationalism in Northeast India is to be understood in the context of this legacy. Secondly, this problem is to be viewed from the point of view of economic development. It may be

added that one of the important reasons for such a sense of regionalism in the form of ethnic nationalism is the uneven economic development at the national level in general and at the regional level in particular. But this state of affairs could be brought to an end only if the capitalist path of economic development which invariably creates uneven development is completely abandoned. This would obviously necessitate drastic socio-economic restructuring of the country as a whole.

Notes and References

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13. See speech of Rev. J.J. M, Nichols Roy in *Constituent Assembly Debates* (hereinafter *CAD*), Vol. XI p. 711.
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21. See Statement of Radha Kanta Handique, in *The Assam Tribune*, 25 April 1941
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26. See *Demands of the Tribal Communities of Assam: A Memorandum issued by the Conference of leaders of Tribal Communities of Assam*, Shillong, July 1946, p. 2.
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33. *Ibid*, 19 May 1945.
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