

CHAPTER 13

Understanding Ethnic Conflicts in Northeast India

H. SRIKANTH

There is no unanimity among the scholars as to what social categories can be included under the term, ethnic group. To some, it is just another way of referring to tribalism, to a few it indicates social dynamics of different uprooted minority groups living in an alien land, and to some others it can mean every religious, linguistic, racial and national groups involved in competition and conflict (Katz 1980; Amoo, 1997; Oommen 1990; Brass 1991). Most scholars working on ethnicity are concerned not so much with the social base of a community claiming to be ethnic, but with the social processes that make groups of people to identify themselves as belonging to particular communities and distinguish themselves from others based on certain real or imagined cultural traits. In their opinion, ethnicity signifies relationship between groups that consider themselves, and are regarded by others, as being culturally distinctive. In other words, ethnicity is a social identity (based on a contrast vis-à-vis others) characterized by metaphoric or fictive kinship. As such, by ethnic groups we do not refer to primitive tribes living in complete isolation. A group becomes ethnic, only in relation to other ethnic groups. To become an ethnic group, a community should have already have a minimum level of interaction with other communities inhabiting in the same region (Eriksen 1996). Usually an ethnic group distinguishes itself from others on the bases of common descent, race, language, religion, life-style, culture, tradition and history. Identity formation along ethnic lines does not, however, take place merely to claim that they are different. Ethnic consciousness grows and ethnic organizations take birth basically to assert oneself against perceived or real threats of domination and exclusion by the more powerful ethnic

groups. In this sense ethnicity is intimately related to the perceptions of gain and loss in interaction and has political, organizational and symbolic significance (Eriksen 1993).

The dominant discourse concerning ethnicity tends to concern itself with sub-national units or minorities of some kind or the other. This should not make one construe that the majorities and dominant peoples are less ethnic than the minorities. Even though the modern nations claim to raise ethnic considerations, more often than not, the elites controlling the state machinery exhibit their own ethnic bias overtly or covertly in their attitudes and actions towards the less privileged ethnic groups living in the state. In some situations, it is possible that the minority groups of their own inabilities and inferiority complex might feel threatened by the very presence of more powerful majority group and lean on ethnic ties to face their adversary. In both the situations there will be accentuation of ethnic identity consciousness, leading to the formation of ethnic based organizations and consequent ethnic mobilization and conflict. The present paper seeks to examine these social processes that generate ethnic conflicts in North-east India.

Ethnic Groups in Northeast India

Northeast India poses a real challenge to the scholars trying to understand the nature and the dynamics of ethnic movements and identity politics. In the northeast ethnicity has taken diverse forms, as insurgency movements for secession, as nationality conflicts, as movements for autonomy within the Indian Union, as agitations against the migrants and foreigners, as intra-tribal feuds, as demands for protection and promotion of language and culture and as movements for restoration of ancient religions or faiths. Because of the complexity, fluidity and ambivalence of the ground situation, grasping these diverse and often contradictory manifestations of ethnicity becomes a challenging task. Any study of ethnicity should first take into account the demography, social composition and history of the region. Northeast India is inhabited by the people belonging to diverse races, religions, cultures and languages (Das B.M. 1987; Datta Ray 1979). While the people of Assam and Tripura live mainly in the valleys, most people in Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur and Meghalaya dwell in the hilly areas. Hinduism has made inroads into Assam, Manipur and Tripura, but a substantial number of Muslims are also there in these three states. Majority of the people in Mizoram and Nagaland and over 40 per cent in Meghalaya are Christians. In Arunachal Pradesh, in addition to the

Buddhists, there are several tribes who follow their own animistic faiths. Racially majority of the people in the Northeast belong to Mongoloid race and speak Tibeto-Burman languages (Srikanth 2000: 60) There are over 420 languages/dialects in the region. Apart from the developed languages such as Assamese, Bengali and Manipuri, which are included under the Eighth Schedule, there are several dialects at different stages of development spoken by different tribal groups. Many of them do not have scripts of their own and use Roman, Devnagari or Bengali script (Miri 1982).

Contrary to the popular belief in the mainland India that Assam is peopled by the Assamese, Nagaland by the Nagas, Mizoram by the Mizos and Manipur by the Manipuris, we see in each of the states in the northeast, the people belonging to different nationalities and ethnic groups (Singh, B.P. 1987: 28-34). Assam is peopled not only by the Assamese, but also by the Bengalis and several tribal groups, who do not identify themselves as Assamese. In Manipur apart from Meiteis, there are also Nagas, Kukis and other tribal groups (Kabui 1995: 21-47). In Tripura there are different indigenous and migrant tribes, apart from the Bengalis, who now constitute the majority (Bhattacharya, S. 1992: 10-29). In Meghalaya there are three developed tribes, namely, the Khasis, the Jaintias and the Garos. The terms 'Nagas' or 'Mizos' often misleads one to believe that they all belong to one tribe. But in reality they are only generic names, under which there are several tribes and sub-tribes. Angamis, Zeliangs, Rengmas, Semas, Aos, Chang, Santam, Khenmuigan, Lothas, Yimchunger, Phom, Konyaks, are some of the important Naga tribes settled in the northeast (Elwin 1997). In India the Naga tribes are visible not only in what is now designated as Nagaland state, but also in Assam, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh. Each of the Naga tribes has its own dialect. It is only in recent years that Nagamese is used as *lingua franca* among different Naga groups. Similarly in Mizoram, there are several tribes, the important among them being Lusei, Pawi (Lai), Lakher (Mara), Ronglong, Riang and Chakma. Each of the tribes in Mizoram also has its own dialect. However, Lushai is gradually emerging as the *lingua franca* in the whole of Mizoram (Tribal Research Institute 1994). Several tribes like Aaptami, Khampti, Adi, Khowa, Nishi, Mompa, Mishmi, Nocte, Wangcho, Tangsha, Singhpo, etc. inhabit Arunachal Pradesh, each with its own dialect.

History of Northeast India

The history of Northeast India is as complex as its social composition. Before the region came under the control of the British, the region was under

control of native kings and tribal chiefs. There were Hindu kingdoms in the plains of Assam, Manipur and Tripura. Except for the Cacharis and the Jaintias, who already had developed kingdoms, the other hill areas of the northeast were under the tribal chieftains. As the idea of State was vague to them, most hill tribes did not feel the need to settle permanently at one place. Prior to the British rule, the Northeast as a whole was never under the control of any powerful kingdom or empire from its neighbours. There were continuous cultural and trade interactions between different kingdoms in the northeast and other parts of today's India (Gait 1992; Bhattacharjee J.B. 2000; Acharyya 1997). Apart from the Brahmins, several artisans and religious persons came and settled in the plain areas of the northeast. Most people living in the hill areas, however, remained aloof from the neighbours in the plains.

The British brought almost the whole of the northeast region under its direct administrative control and integrated it with British India. A few decades after the British take over, they carved out Commissionership of Assam in 1874, amalgamating the Brahmaputra valley with the present day Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and the Bengali districts of Goalpara, Sylhet and Cachar. For promoting their own colonial interests, the British rulers encouraged migration of Bengalis, Marwaris and tribal people from other parts of India into Assam. Although migration of people into Assam was not something new, it was for the first time that the people living in the plains of Brahmaputra valley for centuries had to confront the outsiders, who were more competent and powerful than the locals. Much has been said and written about the contradictions between the natives and the Bengali migrants, leading to the growth of Assamese nationality consciousness in the region (Ghosh 1977; Baruah 1994; Misra 1987). Here it, however, needs to be remembered that apart from promoting Assamese identity, the British rule had also created pan-Indian consciousness among the people living in the plain areas of Assam by exposing them to the Indian nationalist movement. Their anti-Bengali sentiments did not prevent the Assamese from joining the Indian freedom struggle. The Assamese leaders were no doubt willing to get rid off the Bengalis; whom they saw as their competitors but they never expressed the desire to become an independent nation.

Ethnic identity took a different form in the hill regions. The British, for their own reasons, chose to avoid intervening in the administration of the hill areas beyond a point. The hilly areas inhabited by the tribes were separated from the people of the rest of India through Inner Line Regulations Act of 1873 and the Scheduled District Act of 1874 (Chakraborty

1981). By regulating the flow of outsiders into the hill areas and by making the tribes settle down in particular regions, the British created the objective conditions for the rise of ethnic identity. The British policy no doubt saved the tribes from getting exploited by the plain people, but at the same time it could keep the tribes away from the winds of pan-Indian nationalist sentiments blowing across the sub-continent. The British officials and scholars promoted the feeling among the hill tribes that they were different from the Indians. Other factors like the spread of Christianity, the growth of educational avenues and the standardization of tribal dialects following the introduction Roman script, brought some kind of unity among the tribes and gave them ethnic identity as Nagas, Mizos, Khasis, Garos, etc. (Sinha 1993: 142-157; Nag 2000: 23-50). The educated among these tribes started different social and political organizations to bring unity among the tribes along ethnic lines and to articulate the needs of their people. It was beneficial for the British to keep the hill tribes away from the influence of Indian national movement. On their part, the Indian nationalist leaders also did not make sincere efforts to influence and bring the hill tribes in the northeast within the ambit of the nationalist movement. Naturally, they could not identify themselves as Indians and showed no enthusiasm in joining at the time of independence. Contrarily the Naga leaders, citing racial, linguistic, cultural and religious differences, argued that they were different from the Indians and hence they should be left to themselves after the departure of the British. A decade later, the Mizos also used similar logic to fight against the Indian State. It is however interesting to note that no such ethnic identity or anti-Indian sentiments were observed then among the primitive tribes in the sparsely populated Arunachal Pradesh, formerly NEFA, wherein neither the British government, nor the Christian missionaries evinced interest in the development of the people and of the region.

Apart from the regions being directly under the control of the British, there were princely states of Manipur and Tripura, which witnessed anti-feudal struggles. However the regional leaders, who emerged from the dominant nationalities or ethnic groups in the region, had interactions with the Indian nationalist parties and were influenced to an extent by the Indian national movement. But several tribes living in both the states had not emerged as strong ethnic groups, capable of influencing the politics in their respective states. It is apt to say that in these states the political movements for or against joining the Indian Union took place more or less independent of the will of the tribes settled in the region.

Indian State and Ethnic Uprisings in the Northeast

The end of the British rule and the subsequent partition of the country had affected the northeast region in many ways. With Sylhet merging with East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) the number of Bengalis has come down considerably in Assam, putting the Assamese in an advantageous position vis-à-vis Bengalis. Insurgent movements developed in Naga Hills and in Manipur protesting against the assimilation of those regions within the Indian state (Nag 1994: 293-317). The Indian national bourgeoisie, who took over the State power after independence, were not willing to give up their control over even those areas and the people, which were not touched by the Indian nationalism. It was a fact that initially the new rulers had very little knowledge of the people they are going to rule in the northeast. However, the political leadership in Delhi did not take much time to understand the specificity of the northeast region. To deal with the challenges posed by the ethnic movements, the Indian ruling class has adopted the carrot and the stick policy. It deployed military and para-military forces to quell the insurgent movements. But at the same time, to protect and preserve the identity and interests of the tribes, the Sixth Scheduled was incorporated in the Indian Constitution.

Later Autonomous District Councils were constituted, delegating powers to the hill tribes in many matters concerning their development. When the Nagas refused the offer and started insurgency, to win over the Nagas, a separate state of Nagaland was created for them as early as in 1962. In course of time, when the tribal leaders in Khasi-Jaintia Hills, Garo Hills and Lushai Hills agitated for a separate Hill state, the Indian State initially offered them the status of Autonomous State within Assam. But soon in 1972 the Indian government conceded the demand to create the states of Meghalaya, Manipur and Tripura. When anti-foreigners movement developed in Assam in the late seventies, the central government negotiated with the leaders of Assam agitation and concluded the Assam Accord in 1985. In 1987 Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh, which were till then the Union Territories, were given status as separate states with the Indian Union. In recent years, the government has shown willingness to concede the formation of Autonomous Councils even for the tribes living in the plain areas (Hazarika, 2000: 1066-115). The Home Minister, L.K. Advani, declared his government's willingness to talk to any insurgent groups in the northeast, provided they give up the demand for independence.

Ethnic Conflicts or Nationality Movements?

There is a tendency among a section of the scholars and the activists to explain all forms of ethnic assertions in northeast as national movements for self-determination (APRSU 1986; All India People's Resistance Forum 1996). It is possible to characterize them that way, provided we accept to see nations only as imagined communities. But if we consider that nations or nationalities are historically evolved communities of people living in a fixed territory and having a common language, cultural, psychological make-up and economic life, our conclusions would be entirely different. While some are no doubt nationalities (Assamese, Bengalis, Manipuris, etc.), some other ethnic groups are only tribes, who do not have even a common language to communicate among themselves. Although class formation in varying degrees has taken in almost all ethnic groups, the social and economic development achieved differs from group to group.

The communities thriving mainly on subsistence agriculture and jhum cultivation cannot become nations in the modern sense. Even in the case of communities like Boros, Nagas, etc. which have potentialities to develop into nationalities, there are strong tribal traits retarding their development as nationalities. In Mizoram uneasy relations exist between the Lusei, the dominant tribe and other tribal groups, especially the Reangs and the Chakmas. Still there is no unity and communication across different Naga tribes and Naga militant groups themselves have not been able to rise above tribal prejudices and loyalties. While NNC and NSCN groups talk of pan-Naga unity, the northeast has witnessed Zeliangrong movement aimed at creating a politico-administrative unit by uniting the Nagas belonging to Zemi, Liangmei and Rongmei tribes (Singh R.P. 1994: 244). Just as the Bodos decline to be identified as the Assamese, the Karbis refuse to relate themselves as Bodos and seriously contest the demand for a greater Bodoland. The Naga-Kuki clashes in Manipur, the Khamti-Mishamee conflict in Arunachal Pradesh, the Riang-Mizo discord in Mizoram, uneasy relations between the Khasis and Garos in Meghalaya and ethnic and national movements in the northeast claim to be fighting against the Indian State, more often than not, they end up as fratricidal struggles (Pakem 1990). As their goals often contradict, achieving unity among different militant ethnic groups is almost impossible. The Bodo militants' fight for Bodoland goes against the ULFA's battle for Swadhim Asom. The Naga militants demand for Nagalim jeopardizes the cause of the militants in Manipur, struggling for liberating the whole of Manipur. These antagonistic contradictions among the militant groups work to the advantage of the Indian State.

Political Economy of Ethnic Conflicts

These complexities and contradictions in the ethnic movements of the northeast cannot be explained by mere historical and cultural factors. Awareness about the history of the region is no doubt essential for comprehending the roots of ethnic problem in the region, but the varied manifestations of ethnicity in the recent decades cannot be explained by stating what happened before or at the time of Indian independence. Similarly cultural factors alone cannot make a community into an ethnic group. It becomes clear from the fact that although almost all the natives in the northeast are considered to be Mongoloid, speaking Tibeto-Burman languages, the levels of ethnic consciousness and their attitude towards the Indian State differ from community to community. The differences in the development of ethnic consciousness among the tribes in Arunachal Pradesh (previously NEFA) and other hill regions in the northeast during the British period and after, clearly point out that racial, linguistic and cultural differences automatically do not lead to the growth of ethnic consciousness. Similarly the argument that the authoritarian and oppressive nature of the Indian State is responsible for ethnic revolts in the region is also not fully justified, for the Indian State did initiate necessary political and administrative reforms to accommodate different ethnic groups within the federal set up and ensured them some amount of autonomy within the Indian Union to decide on their future. It is mainly with regard to the secessionist movements that the Indian State becomes brutal and totally repressive. The limitations of historical, cultural and political explanations compel one to look into political economy of the region to seek answers for the persistence or growth of ethnic movements in the northeast after independence.

At one point of time in history when capitalism was a progressive force, it was able to dissolve pre-capitalist economic structures and social practices. The then bourgeois nationalist movements, influenced by the ideas of liberalism, democracy and secularism, could unite different ethnic and national groups to form modern nation states. But as capitalism moved from the stage of free competition to monopoly and imperialism, it lost its progressive character and started exhibiting illiberal tendencies in politics and ideology. The bourgeois nationalism started losing its secular character and began exhibiting authoritarian and anti-democratic trends. Indian State has opted for capitalist path of development at a time when capitalism as a world system was already becoming moribund and reactionary and its economic development remained half-baked and truncated. Consequently, the economic development in India after independence has created islands of prosperity in some places, but at the same time left many other parts of the

country backward and underdeveloped. Northeast India is one such region, which remained underdeveloped and economically backward by the very logic of capitalist development in India. Even after fifty years of independence, about 90 percent of the people in the northeast live in the villages and depend on agriculture and allied activities for their survival. There are hardly any modern industries worth the name in the region (Abbi 1984). Many industrial and commercial ventures started by the state or central governments are finding it difficult to survive in the changed conditions of liberalization. Tea industry has already reached a point of stagnation. The state bureaucracy that gave employment to many educated people earlier has also come to a saturation point.

Thousands of crores of rupees pumped into northeast to contain insurgency and to initiate development has benefitted only a small segment of the population and helped to create an elite group among the tribes. In the absence of other alternative sources of employment, the communities see the control over land as very crucial for their existence. In these conditions of scarcity and underdevelopment, the very thought of losing control over land, water and forests, make the people feel all the more insecure. In the absence a radical political force of channelizing the people's discontentment for creating a more humane socio-economic order, capable of resolving the material contradictions between the communities, the people tend to organize along ethnic lines to protect their economic interests. While these conflicts over material interests are clearly articulated in different ethnic movements in Assam and Tripura, they remain latent in other north-eastern states and burst out occasionally in the form of agitations and movements against the Indian State. The agitation against laying of railway line in Meghalaya and the insistence of innerline permit for the entry of outsiders in Mizoram and Nagaland clearly express the sense of insecurity on the part of the ethnic groups.

Village Structure and Ethnic Identity Formation

Since about 90 per cent of the people in northeast live in the villages, it is essential to examine whether social composition and structure of the village economy also contribute in some way to the ethnic conflicts in the region. Because of weak capitalist base, poor communication facilities and low level of urbanization and industrialization, there is very little scope for interaction among the people of different tribes or nationalities in the region. Unlike in other parts of India, where people of different castes, tribes,

