

POLTICAL & SOCIAL EXCLUSION NORTH-EAST INDIA

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Northeast India is a politically vital and strategically vulnerable region of India. Surrounded by five countries, it is connected with the rest of India through a narrow, thirty-kilometre corridor. North-East India, then called Assam, is divided into Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. Diversities in terms of Mongoloid ethnic origins, linguistic variation and religious pluralism characterise the region. This ethnic-linguistic-ecological historical heritage characterizes the pervasiveness of the ethnic populations and Tibeto-Burman languages in northeast. North-East mountain ranges and river valleys indeed divide up South- East Asia from South Asia. This predominant tribal region, replete with protracted records of isolation, difficult terrain, and lack of intense inter-ethnic contacts, had witnessed formation of three types of society and polity such as 'tribe', 'chiefdom' and 'state' (Das 1989). The clans and age set systems within them had often functioned hierarchically involving unequal statuses (Das 1993). Full-fledged state-formation took place in the 4th century A.D.. Hinduism remained confined to some pockets, including the royal families, among the Kachari, Ahom, Jaintia, Koch, Tripuri, and Meitei. Penetration of Sarania dharma of Shankar Dev was felt in some plains tribal societies, who became followers of Sarania even while simultaneously pursuing tribal religions often replete with animal sacrifices' (Das 2003).

Ethnic Conflict and Militancy:

On the eve of Independence of India, several ethnic groups had variously made effective use of the factors of ethnicity and regionalism as basis of ethnic rage, and democratic struggle for self-rule, greater autonomy and militant actions. Other factors such as frontier location, development process, rise of Christianity and democratic process, partition of country, influx of 'infiltrators and minority syndrome variously led to claims of separatism among the communities. The more assertive tribes who consistently rebelled against their incorporation within the new Indian nation-state such as the Nagas and Mizos ultimately succeeded in attaining status of 'statehood and greater autonomy. Thereby they also succeeded in changing their minority status to that of a majority status in respective hilly states. Even after the formation of Nagaland, however, the Naga movement had not

died, as A.Z Phizo, who had originally given the call for a long Naga struggle' in 1953, continued to occupy centre-stage later also (Das 1982, 1994, 2004, 2007). The Naga movement, in which both 'ethnicity' and 'extreme nationalism' were used as operational strategies, is regarded as the mother of all movements in northeast India. The origin of ethnicity among the Nagas may be traced first in the formation of a Naga Club in 1918, which consisted of the Naga headmen and members of English educated Naga middle class (Das 1982). The Nagas formed the Naga Hills District Tribal Council in 1945, which was renamed as Naga National Council in 1946 (Das1993: 33). NNC had gradually articulated the sense of "Naga nationalism" (Das1982, 2001). It also emphasised the theme of Naga oneness as a moral category (Imchen 1993), NSCN (IM) led the Naga movement in its modern phase. In order to globalise the Naga cause, NSCN (IM) took a delegation to the UN Conference of 'Indigenous Peoples', held in July 1994. Muivah established links with the Asia Indigenous People's Pact and the Belgium-based Flemish Support for Indigenous People. The Nagaland Assembly also passed a resolution in 1994, extending support to the demand of the greater Nagaland - Nagalim.. Outside the hills, the Ahoms (who formed the Ahom League, in the wake of 1935 Act) and the Bodos (by forming PTCA) had consistently raised the questions of tribal self-rule' right from the colonial era. The All Assam Ahom Association (formed originally in 1893) was perhaps the earliest ethnic association of its kind (Das 2001). From the 1980's onwards, virtually the entire Northeast was plagued by various ethnic movements. Most of the movements were non-violent in earlier stages, but gradually assumed severe militant nature. In the seven states of the Northeast India reportedly more than 30 'insurgent groups operated, carrying on protracted armed-struggle. Among them the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM, NSCN-K) and the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) remained prominent ones. Even though some scholars have tried to apply typology of class-formation to describe the ethnic conflict in the region, it may be argued that there are innumerable ethnic - regional factors buttressed by typical tribal features, which seem to influence the escalation of unrest.

Illegal Emigré, "Anti-Infiltrator-Movement" and Terrorism:

There is a long history of incursion of outsiders, emigration and resettlement in Assam. One can see this broadly in four spheres; tea plantation related manual labour, Bengali Muslim emigration (mostly occupying agriculture), Hindu Bengali migration (mostly occupying service sector), and Marwari migration in trading sector. Bangladesh war resulted in over 10, 00,000 refugees taking shelter, who never returned. Modern Bangladeshi "infiltration however said to be a more severe

phenomenon. It was alleged that Bangladesh Char area dialects spoken by the migrant Muslims, were declared as Assamese dialect to the census enumerators. Politicians too encouraged the Bangladeshi Muslims and other minorities into Assam, giving voting rights. This was a narrow exercise in electoral politics (Dixit 1998, 2003). This last wave of illegal- exodus from Bangladesh is a more dangerous phenomenon, as some among these infiltrators are said to have gotten involved in terrorist activities in parts of urban India. It is said fear within the native Assamese community of being overwhelmed by the unabated influx of illegal Bangladeshi migrants from across the porous border triggered off the long drawn "Anti-Foreigner mass uprising -1979-1985, spearheaded by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU). It ended by arriving at an agreement, Assam Accord- 15 August 1985. The Accord fixed 25 March 1971 as the cut-off date for detection and expulsion of the illegal foreign migrants. The Assam movement was led by AASU. All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad AAGSP, which was umbrella organization of several outfits, including Asom Sahitya Sabha, emerged as the political forum the AASU. In 1985, AAGSP swept the elections on the wave of anti-foreigner sentiments. The ULFA's inception dates back to the frenzied years of the Assam Movement when a section of the militant youth lost faith in peaceful programmes of AASU and the AAGSP. According to Baruah (1992) ULFA combined Naxalism, with a strong dose of "sub-nationalism. In 1990, the ULFA had forged links with various insurgent outfits inside and outside the country, including the PLA NSCN and even JKLF in Kashmir. In 1986, ULFA first established contacts with the then unified National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) of Myanmar for training and arms. Subsequently, links were established with Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI). The ULFA, according to Gohain, 'advocated a line of "de nationalization" or "divesting oneself of ethnic identities except that of Assamese identity. It characterized India as a "colonial state and the northeast as the colony, though no serious economic analysis substantiating this assertion had come to light.

A Recancellation for Self Rule & Atonomy :

Cease Fire & Pease Accords :

Noteworthy peace initiatives were undertaken during the 1960s and 1970s involving several militant outfits of the region. However it was during 1994 that several underground organisations came over ground and surrendered before the government authorities, particularly in Assam, Meghalaya and Mizoram. These organisations were the Dimasa National Security Force (DNSF). Achik Liberation Matgrik Army (ALMA) and Hmar People's Convention (HPC). The Dimasa Kachari generally live

in North Cachar Hills, Cachar, Karbi-Anglong, Nowgong (all in Assam) and Dhansin region Nagaland Prior to 1961 Census they were identified as a Sub-tribe of Kachar. In the 1971 census and afterwards they projected themselves as a distinct tribe. The Dimas Jalairani Hosoma' was established in 1972 to promote their distinct cultural identity The Dimasa National Organisation (DNO) was bom in 1979. In March 1979 the Dimasa demanded the proper preservation of ancient Dimasa monuments and relics. In 1980, Nikhil Hidimba Barman Samity, Cachar, demanded reorganization of the Dimasa speaking areas of Northeast India Even though the Dimasa National Security Force (DNSP) had close ties with the NSCN its leaders realized the futility of their actions and thus they had surrendered before the Assam State government authorities in 1994 breakthrough achieved during 1994 was the signing of the Hmar Peace Pact. An accord was signed at Aizal on 27 July 1994 between the Hmar People's Convention (HPC) and the Mizoram government, bringing an end to seven years old Hmar insurgency. The accord envisaged the setting up of a Hill Development council in Hmar inhabited north Mizoram. In Meghalaya also the Achik Liberation Magrik Army (ALMA), trained by the NSCN and inspired by the ULFA, surrendered before the Meghalaya Chiel Minister at Tura on 25 October 1994. The Garo Baptist Convention (GBP) played a major rule in bringing the militants to the negotiating table. In Assam, Hiteswar Sakia (Congress) led government declared "grant of total autonomy to several major ethnic tribes. Besides the Bodo Accord (1993), his government signed accords with the Karbi and Dimasa tribals Self ruling bodies were provided to Rabhas, Mishings and Lalung (Tiwas) In Assam, many organizations have ceasefire agreements with the government: U.P.D.S since January 1, 2004, the U.P.D.S since May 23, 2002 and the N.D.F.B. since May 25 2005. Similarly, in the state of Meghalaya, the Achik National Volunteer Council has had a ceasefire agreement with the government since July 23 2004 ULFA in Assam in 2005, too, has appointed a People's Consultative Group o prepare the groundwork for eventual dialogue with the government.

The Naga peace initiative has a long tradition. Diverse perceptions surrounded the earlier 19 point Agreement of 1960 and the Shillong Accord of 1975. In recent times the Naga Hoho convened a series of meetings of Church leaders and NGOs from all Naga areas culminating in a call for journey of conscience to seek reconciliation and to rebuild the Naga society A Declaration was adopted in 2001 to pursue the cause of peace. Since 1998-99 peace parleys particularly with the NSCN (IM) has been generally successful. The NSCN (IM) has been demanding a homeland for all Nagas living in North East, which will be called Nagalim' These peace initiatives have led to what is

termed as bilateral cease-fire whereby belligerence and hostility is halted. Even during cease-fire the cause for worry has been the fratricidal schisms between the different factions of the Naga National Council, the Isak-Murvah group and Khaplang faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland. There has been success of peace talks with the Khaplang faction too. It is also pleasing that substantive issues have been discussed. At the same time in a statement titled "Journey for Peace" the NSCN (IM) has recognized the legitimate aspirations of all neighbouring people including the Meiteis, the Assamese and others and appealed to them to let us end tension between us (Navalakha 2003). NSCN (IM) has appreciated the government of India's understanding of the unique history of the Naga people" The Kamtapur movement, initiated by the Kamtapur People's Party (KPP), involves the Koch and Rajbanshi communities, who call themselves Kamtapuris. The Kamtapuri ethnicity and language question gave birth to this movement, which started as a peaceful movement, but turned violent after the movement came in contact of the some Assam based militant outfits such as ULFA in 1999-2000. Apart from the demand for a separate state to be carved out from five north Bengal districts, the Eleven point charter of the KPP includes the recognition of the Kamtapuri language, introduction of Kamtapur programmes in TV, and empowerment of the people who arrived after 1971. The KPP supporters mostly of Rajbanshi origin consider themselves indigenous to the region and they feel they have the right to self-determination. Today indeed the situations mainly Manipur, Assam and Tripura remain disturbing. The Manipuri militants have shown no inclination for peace talks. All Tripura Tiger Force and the National Liberation Front of Tripura, which operate from camps in Bangladesh, will be weakened by the Naga peace accord. It is reached (The Statesman 23 November 2002). The NLFT has link with the NSCN and the ATTF has links with the ULFA. Though the NLFT talks of secession, the state is not their enemy.

A Recapitulation:

In North-East India cultural differences and incongruity sharpened the ethnic boundaries and generated cleavages along ethnic lines, leading to inter-ethnic discord. Ethnic unrest in northeast is as old as the country's independence. The Indian independence along with the partition, influx of emigrés, suspected fear of linguistic-cultural subjugation, economic partition, negligence, and failure to value approaching political institutions variously infused in the minds of the ethnic communities a sense of narcissistic self-awareness. The spectre of social exclusion, minority-syndrome and ethnic rivalry remained the driving force for protests demanding autonomy in the shape of homeland/state/ or autonomous district council, within constitutional framework. Some of

the movements followed the violent paths. While the former opted for constitutional path, the later sought an extra-constitutional/secessionist ideational path. Ever increasing evidences, however, now indicate that most of the mistant outfits in North-East have now transformed themselves into terrorist entities, empty of their original objectives and ideology. For example, ULFA in Assam, since 1990s, has repudiated its earlier anti-Bangladeshi position Vested interest and quarrel over interests led militant groups to clash among themselves. It will be incorrect to attach terrorist label to N.S.C.N, but the media reports suggest that most fatalities in Nagaland are the result of the infighting between the two factions of the N.S.C.N., rather than from government forces. Despite several successful pesce initiatives the security force operations are in place by utilizing the army, state police forces and the paramilitary forces to contain militancy.

Poor governance has been a major problem in the region. Wasbir Hussain says the region is caught in a vicious cycle of lack of economic development and then militancy and the resultant violence further retard economic growth. Under the circumstances, it is natural to find the people of the region harbouring a sense of alienation from the Indian mainstream and feel neglected. We or the have noted above how the state of Assam is under siege with the aspirations of different communities and groups showing no signs of a decline despite attempts at devolution of power to the grassroots level, B.I.P. Routmay of the institute for Conflict Management, has rightly observed that this is primarily a governance issue. Poor govemance is the main trigger factor for ethnic groups clamouring for autonomy. Such demands from newer groups are here to stay Special provisions for self-governance and autonomy are provided for people of North East within the Constitution of India, particularly through such Acts as the Sich Schedule. NEC and Department of North Eastern Region (DONER). The DONER and the North-Eastern Council, under the central control need more effectively to tackle the problems of unemployment, underemployment, and economic backwardness of the region. Let the people's representatives monitor the activities of these institutions. The DONER has an annual budget of Rs.550 crores. The NEC has another Rs 500 crores earmarked for the region. These are apart from the enormous amount of funding available to the States through different central schemes, one-time packages announced by successive Prime Ministers, Peace Packages provided to States like Nagaland and Mizoram, grants by international development agencies like the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), which in 2003 approved a master project of Rs.2, 000 crores for the Northeast These institutional arrangements and provisions need to be appropriately regulated to assuage ethnic misgivings. In

more recent years the peace initiatives, such as the bilateral cease-fire, and the peace talks held between militant leaders and government representatives, symbolize the determination of the Nation-state to resort to a broad-spectrum consensus on vital issues by adhering to flexibility and extendibility. These are basic foundations aimed at the national consolidation, which should be strengthened. Peace, development and proper linkages are bound together and are intrinsic to harmony in the region. Gradually the region has increasingly witnessed not only naturalisation of electoral politics, but also slow adaptation of national political parties

Resurgence of ethnic identity and persistence of ethnicised politics does not indicate repudiation of the political state. Their concern for variously perceived threats to their distinct ethnic identities and their anxiety for preservation of culture and language and their demand of autonomy can not be seen dysfunctional for a healthy civil society. Their aspirations should be seen rather as prerequisites for distributive justice, to which no nation state can neglect. Indian path of institutional adjustments aimed at winning over and changing the opinion of hostile ethnic groups and extending special safeguards to hill States have helped solve ethnic problems to a great extent.

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