



# Social Exclusion and Ethnic Nationalism: A Northeastern perspective

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**Abstract:** North East India has been witnessing a series of socio-political movements in the ethnic line since the time of independence of the country. Almost every community of this region is seen to be resorting to such movements for registering its demands. Such demands of a particular group are also noted to be changing with the passing of time in response to changing socio-political contexts. But Indian and regional political elites have been utter failures in resolving the longstanding demands of various ethnic communities leading to socio-economic and cultural anxieties. In view of the prevailing exclusionary tendencies it may be contended that most of the institutional means of accommodation such as granting autonomy to particular ethnic groups in a particular region and even the formation of separate state for some communities failed to yield desired results. The exclusionary tendencies created by both the governments and the dominant communities lead to the ethnic assertion of certain ethnic communities. This paper is an endeavour to engage with the question of whether these proliferating ethno-national movements can be understood as the reflections of the top-down model of nationalism of the larger Indian state or they can be read as something more organically evolved at their local specific situations such as exclusionary tendencies.

## **Key Words:**

**Social Exclusion, Ethnic Nationalism, Identity Assertion, Northeast India**

Social exclusion refers to individual or group exclusion from society, other groups or individuals. It may be of various kinds such as exclusion from livelihood, exclusion from social services, welfare and security networks, exclusion from political choice, exclusion from popular organization and solidarity, and exclusion from understanding of what is happening (Wolf, 1995: 81-101). It results in the denial of access to opportunities, public goods, public offices and institutions and self respect in the public spheres. Social exclusion is the inability of our society to keep all groups and individuals within reach of what we expect as a society or to release their full potentials (Power and Wilson, 2000:27). The socially excluded is deprived of social recognition, self-respect and social values. The basis of exclusion can be race, ethnicity, gender, religion, language, region, caste or so on. There is an inbuilt tendency towards social exclusion in liberal democratic states (Taylor, 1998: 147). It leads to injustice to certain communities as it denies the access to public offices and primary goods (Rawls, 1971). On the other hand, ethnicity refers

to the ideas of primordialism based on descent, race, kinship, territory, language, history, etc. with distinctions from another group of people sharing certain common attributes among themselves. It is also defined as “the sense of collective belonging to a named community of common myths or origin and shared memories, associated with a historic homeland” (Smith, 1999: 262). Ethnicity is based on group identity and often invented or constructed. In certain cases, ethnic identity is intrinsically connected with language. Ethnicity is often considered as the outward expression of discrimination – discrimination in access to resources and opportunities (Yinger, 1997: 169).

Social exclusion leads to ethnic identity crisis and in turn identity assertion. Paul Brass identified that ethnic identity formation involves three processes. Firstly, “within the ethnic group itself for control over its material and symbolic resources”, secondly, “between ethnic groups as a competition for rights, privileges, and available resources”, and thirdly, “between the state and the groups that dominate it, on the one hand, and the populations that inhabit its territory on the other” (Brass, 1991: 247). Social exclusion prevents groups from full participation in social, economic and political life and from asserting their rights. It is viewed that “ethnicity or ethnic identity also involves, in addition to subjective self-consciousness, a claim to status and recognition, either as a superior group or as a group at least equal to other groups” (Brass, 1991: 19).

The basic objectives of the present paper is to examine, to what extent, social exclusion has been contributing towards the growth of ethnic mobilization in northeast India. Besides, it highlights how the post-colonial development process initiated by Indian government generated feeling of alienation and discontentment among the communities in northeast India. In addition to these, the paper focuses on the role of elites in arousing regional consciousness leading to ethnicity and extremism and analyses the role of dominant communities allied with state power excluding certain groups from accessing resources, institutions and opportunities, generating a feeling of exclusion among the others.

The northeastern region of India is often described as the ‘miniature India’ consisting of different races, cultures, languages and religions, leading to a diversity rarely seen elsewhere in India. With an area of about 2.6 lakh square kilometer, it is a conglomeration of around 475 ethnic groups and subgroups, speaking over 400 languages (Bhaumik, 2009: 1). The region, connected to the mainland India with a narrow corridor, consists of eight states and has international border with neighbouring countries, namely Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal, China, and Bhutan. In the international scene, it is a strategic location linked to South and South-East Asia. From internal security point of view, the region has been seen as the ‘problem child’ since the very inception of the Indian republic because the region has been experiencing law and order problems in the form of inter and intra ethnic conflicts and resultant human rights violations.

The politics of northeast India has been marked by ethnicity and extremism for decades. The assertion of various ethnic identities and the policies of the Indian state in containing ethnic extremism make the region distinct from the rest of the country. The root cause of ethnic assertion can be found in the identity crisis of various tribal communities. Most of the ethnic assertions are due to ethnic groups’ veiled attempts to protect their identity, culture and language. In fact, ethnicity is a sense of ethnic awareness. Ethnic mobilization is conditioned by the overall political and economic environment. As the state operates under the laws of market economy within the broad politico-economic environment giving birth to uneven economic development, it widens the gaps among ethnic groups. Therefore, ethnicity is the outward reaction of various socio-cultural groups against the existing politico-economic system wherein either inequality or competition acts as catalyst in mobilizing people on the basis of ethnicity (Phukon, 2003: 15). In other words, the basis of ethnic assertion can be seen in two contexts. Firstly, the tribal communities’ subjective consciousness of being excluded, oppressed and marginalized. Secondly, the process of development failed to address the legitimate concerns of the people. Though after independence, the Indian state tried to integrate and assimilate various ethnic communities in the

mainstream national identity, the development process generated a feeling of alienation among them. Moreover, development led to the unequal distribution of resources across the communities and regions. Thus, both non-economic (subjective consciousness) and economic (material) factors created a sense of exclusion among some ethnic communities (Bijukumar, 2013: 19-3).

In post-independent period, India's constitutional democracy followed a policy of accommodation and assimilation and protected the interests of tribal communities by adopting special provisions. The Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution gives special status to the traditional institutions and makes provisions for the creation of autonomous district councils. In spite of all these accommodations, the tribal communities are confronting with multiple kinds of exclusion. All these institutional mechanisms proved to be futile as in the process of nation-building some communities were left out either because of their low numerical strength or due to low bargaining power with the power structure. Though the postcolonial states initiated a number of policies to ensure 'inclusiveness' for the discontented communities, the efforts did not yield much result. While the state is engaging in nation-building through the construction of national identity, smaller identities move in the opposite direction, when they feel that they are about to lose their identity. In this context, various ethnic groups are seeking larger space in state and are trying to protect their peculiar identity. The state initiative to integrate all communities and groups proved to be counter-productive.

The Indian postcolonial development process tried to integrate and assimilate ethnic communities towards the mainstream development process while ignoring their cultural and economic specificities. The centralized planning and the capitalist modernization further lead to the exclusion of various tribal communities from mainstream (Biswas and Suklabaidya, 2008: 124). The indigenous way of development of the ethnic communities was disturbed by the penetration of the capitalist development leading to underdevelopment, displacement of communities from their settlement and livelihood and erosion of community life. Thus, the postcolonial modernization initiated by the newly independent India generated some kind of discontent among the communities leading towards violence (Gurr, 1970: 317; Gohain, 1997: 391). The problem of ethnicity and extremism is further aggregated by the regional consciousness aroused by elites, especially the middle class (Singh, 1998; Baruah, 1991; Sharma, 1990). Again the dominant communities allied with state power exclude certain groups from accessing resources, institutions and opportunities, generating a feeling of exclusion of other groups. In such situation, smaller ethnic communities assert for resources and opportunities. The assertion of marginalized identities and its extremist posture are giving a new direction to state politics. Northeast region of India was to be reorganized in the sixties and early seventies of the last century creating a number of states such as Nagaland (1963), Meghalaya (1972), Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram (1987) to meet the demands of these ethnic groups. Even after reorganization of original state of Assam, the demand for creation of more states still continues. It is argued that the creation of separate state further fanned the fire when "various smaller and bigger communities started to demand establishment of more states; on the other hand, the state showed their inability to deliver the basic goods" (Madhab, 1999: 320). Again the ethnic mobilization assumes an extremist posture when various ethnic movement arousing emotive issues to expand its mass base among the society. Another kind of social exclusion visible is in the area of language. The introduction of the Assam Official Language Act 1960, had its repercussion on the Mizos, Khasis, Garos and Bodos, and it further reinforced the demand for separate political identity and consciousness among the divergent ethnic groups in the United Assam.

Thus, social exclusion and ethnic mobilization reinforce each other in many contexts. In the post-independent period, the nationalist leadership in connivance with the regional counterparts adopted a number of policies aimed at promoting the process of national integration in the Indian state. But in the national assimilation process, the smaller communities increasingly felt insecure about protecting their ethnic identity in the apprehension of being submerged in the bigger national identity. Hence, these suppressed ethnic communities have initiated some measures to protect and preserve their identity. Though they share common Indian identity, they equally carry their regional or in some cases sub

regional or community based identities. Such regional or community based identities were not given due importance by nationalist leadership and regional ruling elite who viewed it as a threat to India's unity and integrity; instead they used a number of coercive measures to subside these identities. The inability of successive Indian national and regional state governments to understand these diversities itself created crisis of Indian nation-state.

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