

ETHNICITY AND ETHNIC MOVEMENTS IN NORTH-EAST INDIA WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ASSAM

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Abstract:

Ethnicity refers to shared cultural practices, perspectives and distinctions that set apart one group of people to another. The dimension of ethnicity is very prominent in the countries comprising multi-ethnic societies. The socio-political history of India reveals several ethnic movements which gained momentum during colonial era and became effective undergoing through certain modification in its ideologies in post-independent years. There have been a number of ethnic movements in the north-east in order to preserve ones' ethnic identity. In this paper, an attempt has been made to conceptualize the Ethnicity and Ethnic Movements in North-East India with special reference to Assam. The methodology of this paper is descriptive and required informations are collected from different secondary sources like books, research articles, different government documents etc. An ethnic group is a distinct category of the population in a larger society whose culture is usually different from that of others. Among the ethnic movements in the North-east region, the movement laid down in Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur and Tripura deserves special mention. Among the various ethnic movements in Assam, the Bodo movement for autonomy, Tiwa movement, the Mishing, the Deoris, the Morans, the Sonowal Kacharis and intensive ethnic conflict was surfaced in the hill areas of Karbi Anglong (formerly Mikir hills) and Dima Hasao movements are prominent.

Index Terms: Ethnicity, Ethnic movement, North-East India, Assam.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Ethnicity is a category of people or a social group of people that shares a common ancestry culture, religion, language, society or nation. It is usually an inherited status based on the society in which one lives. Ethnicity refers to shared cultural practices, perspectives and distinctions that set apart one group of people to another. Ethnicity is a human product which surfaces and very much present in one or the other form even in most developed countries. The dimension of ethnicity is very prominent in the countries comprising multi-ethnic societies. Contemporary history shows a series of ethnic movements in South East Asian countries where western colonial rule continued for a considerable length of time. The socio-political history of India reveals several ethnic movements which gained momentum during colonial era and became effective undergoing through certain modification in its ideologies in post-independent years. The North-East region of India too attracts the attention in this regard. There have been a number of ethnic movements

in the north-east in order to preserve ones' ethnic identity. The main reason being that when a particular group attains its demand due to ethnic polarization and movements, other groups who are also in the similar situation get encouraged to follow the same means to attain their aspirations. On the one hand, people of the region are not satisfied with the central government and its policies towards the northeast and on the other hand, there is tension among the tribes of the region in order to preserve their distinct identity. Today, most of the north eastern states do experience ethnic conflicts due to which the region has a bad reputation and this has also adversely affected the developmental activities of the region as well.

As we know that Assam is one of the most ethnically rich and diverse states of north-east India. It is a home to variety of tribes, each with a distinct socio-cultural history. However, such a demographically and racially diverse state has not remained free from ethnically induced tensions. It has and still is witnessing a host of ethnic movements and conflicts, each trying to assert the identity of the tribe in question and some of even to the extent of challenging the foundation of Indian state.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

- i) To study the concept of ethnicity.
- ii) To study the ethnic movements in North-east India.
- iii) To study the ethnic movements in Assam.

3. METHODOLOGY:

The methodology of this paper is descriptive and required informations are collected from different secondary sources like books, research articles, different government documents etc.

4.1 CONCEPT OF ETHNICITY:

The word ethnic derived from Greek word 'ethnikos' refers to (a) nations not converted into Christianity, (b) races or large groups of people having common traits , and (c) groups in an exotic primitive culture. Ethnicity is a term used by the people to identify themselves within a multicultural society. The concept of ethnicity refers to the identification and labelling of a group of people. The literature on ethnicity defines ethnic groups as people who see themselves or are seen by others as sharing a distinctive and enduring collective identity based on a common belief, a common origin, a common history, a common destiny and culturally specific practices. Theoretical works on ethnicity have brought out clearly that ethnic identity struggles are waged not by isolated tribal communities, but by politicized cultural communities who want to enter into the threshold of modern way of life. Many times identity assertions and movements are neither for seeking restoration of their past, nor to preserve their unique cultural heritage. Ethnicity can be referred to a common tradition, a system of shared values and culture by a group of people within a cultural unit who identify themselves as a distinct entity different from other cultures (Pyal, 2006; Rizvi, 2006).

The word 'ethnic' is now being increasingly used to identify groups of people who have evolved from their primitive stages of tribe and clan identity into a more cohesive group looking for a coherent political identity" (Mukhim, 2007: 97). Ethnic groups are differentiated from other groups as they identify themselves with some distinct characteristics and mode of living (Palanithurai, 1993). An ethnic group is a

distinct category of the population in a larger society whose culture is usually different from that of others. The members of such group feel that they are bound together by common ties of race or nationality or culture (Morris, 1968).

4.2 ETHNIC MOVEMENTS IN NORTH EAST INDIA:

Among the ethnic movements in the region, the movement laid down by the Naga National Council for an independent Nagaland deserves special mention. Nagaland did not have strong legal and political relationship with present day India in its historical past. The historical Naga Club requested the Simon Commission in 1929 to keep the Naga hills out of the proposed reforms. Starting from the point several militant groups like Naga National Council, NSCN etc., fought against Indian army. The Nagas have a long history of bloodshed and insurgency in post independent years.

The secessionist activities in Manipur started in 1948 when Hyam Irabot, a Maoist communist wanted to liberate Manipur from feudalism and semi-colonialism of Manipur kings and Indian state. Its unsuccessful story did not negate the emergence of several other secessionist groups in the State. Among them the movement of People's Liberation Army (PLA), People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK), Kangleipak communist party (KCP) may be mentioned.

The secessionist movement of Mizoram under the coverage of Mizo National Front has been over by now. The highly tribal concentrated State had experienced a lot of hard days due to the insurgency adopted by MNF to capture power and political autonomy. Though in due course of time the insurgent groups came under the umbrella of Indian constitution and formed a separate State sidelining from the former State of Assam, the new threat from Hmar People's Convention (HPC), a tribal group minority in Mizoram.

The reason for the origin of insurgency in Tripura is the conflict between Bengalis and tribals. The tribal people in Tripura have been out-numbered by the Bengali infiltration from Bangladesh as well as West Bengal. The underground groups like Tripura National Volunteers (TNV) and All Tripura Tribal Force (ATTF) are active in the state and they have been fighting on an ethnic basis for the better power adjustment of the tribal people in the State.

4.3 ETHNIC MOVEMENTS IN ASSAM:

In recent years, a series of ethnic movements came to front in Assam. Among them, the movement of the Bodo, Karbi, Tiwa, Mishing, Deori and Sonowal kacharis deserve mention. The socio-cultural and political backgrounds of these movements are attached with several common phenomena. The Bodos, one of the largest Indo-Mongoloid groups in Assam, have occupied an extensive area in the middle and lower Assam.

There are several other ethnic movements in the State which are in different levels of development. Among them the Tiwa movement for autonomy, the Mishing movement, the Deoris, the Morans, and the Sonowal Kacharis are prominent. The Tiwa (formerly known as Lalung Kachari) are inhabiting the middle Assam basically in Nagaon, Morigaon and Kamrup districts.

History delineates little about the political situation of Bodo people. Probably the people were not represented by any known king of their own and used to remain subject to different rulers of non-tribal

origin at different points of time without losing their socio-cultural and political identity at least at local level. History mentions only about the Kachari kingdom of the Dimasa group that is too in the south of the state which had a constant conflict with the Ahom kingdom.

The demands of tribal groups date back to 1933 when the Tribal League was formed in Assam. But when the League transformed into an innocent socio-cultural organisation after the independence, the Plain Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) was formed in the year 1967. The decision of the State Government of Assam to recognise Assamese as State's official language in 1960 made the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (Literary organisation) to fight relentlessly for the introduction of Bodo language in the primary school level which ultimately was extended to secondary school level. The PTCA and All Bodo Student Union (ABSU) jointly moved for a separate homeland for the tribal people of the area demanding a union territory "Udayachal" in 1973. Since 1987 the demand has been made for a separate state to be called "Bodoland" on the north bank of the Brahmaputra. And in order to catch the attention of the govt. and to full fill their demand they sometimes resorted to violent means. The demand for Bodoland was basically one of the ethnic cultural recognition and the focus of ethnic identity was sharper than in the previous Udayachal movement.

The next intensive ethnic conflict was surfaced in the hill areas of Karbi Anglong (formerly Mikir hills) and Dima Hasao. These areas were treated as excluded and partially excluded area by the colonial rules which are still attached with the political Assam. Though there was ethnic tension in socio-economic spheres the political importance of Karbi ethnic identity got its momentum only after the decision of the State Government of Assam to make Assamese as official language. Compared to Bodoland movement, the Karbi movement was mild one and non- violent nature.

5. CONCLUSION:

Today, ethnicity has become an important tool not only for the mobilization but also in the struggle for preserving one's political authority, territory, natural and material resources. India, more particularly the North-East India is a land of various ethnic and tribal groups. It has described as the cultural mosaic of diverse tribal communities, linguistics and ethnic identities. This very sensitive region has been in much debate prior to independence. It's because of the ethnicity and extremism prevailed in this particular region. When we are talking about the increasing frequency of the ethnic movement in the region we see a gradual deepening of insurgency and identity questions on the part of the diverse ethnic groups inhabited here. It is very important to note here that to reduce ethnic conflict effort should be made to bring in positive peace that is enduring and welfares in nature. The groups as well as people at large must be made to realize that all problems can be solved through peaceful talks. The ultimate aim of all human being is peace and it cannot be made a lasting one through use of gun.

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