

Identity Politics and Social Exclusion in India's North-East: The Case for Re-distributive Justice

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Abstract: *This paper examines how various brands of identity politics since the colonial days have served to create the basis of exclusion of groups, resulting in various forms of rifts, often envisaged in binary terms: majority-minority; sons of the soil-immigrants; local-outsiders; tribal-non-tribal; hills-plains; inter-tribal; and intra-tribal. Given the strategic and sensitive border areas, low level of development, immense cultural diversity, and participatory democratic processes, social exclusion has resulted in perceptions of marginalization, deprivation, and identity losses, all adding to the strong basis of brands of separatist movements in the garb of regionalism, sub-nationalism, and ethnic politics, most often verging on extremism and secession. It is argued that local people's anxiety for preservation of culture and language, often appearing as 'narcissist self-awareness', and their demand of autonomy, cannot be seen unilaterally as dysfunctional for a healthy civil society. Their aspirations should be seen rather as prerequisites for distributive justice, which no nation state can neglect.*

Colonial Impact and genesis of early ethnic consciousness:

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).

The British colonisation process of Assam started in 1826 and ended in 1898. The colonial regime, at the beginning, resorted to the policy of non-intervention in most of then larger Assam. Two

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administrators J.H. Hutton and N.E. Parry advocated for separation of hill areas from general administrative scheme. In 1873 was introduced "The Inner Line" in hill areas, beyond which no person could pass without a license. Local tribes-people resisted colonial interference in their midst, and thus they often attacked the British. Their resistances were depicted as 'raids' and 'uprisings' (Das 1989, 1993:28). There is long chronology of such resistance. In 1860 and 1862 entire Jaintia tribe and the Garos (1852-57, 1872) rose against imposition of taxes. The Lushai-Kuki, Manipuri and many plains - Assam tribes raided British posts in 1860-90, 1891 and 1892 - 1894 respectively. There are records of Aka / Khamti resistances -1835-1839; Naga resistances - 1835-1852, and even an agrarian movement in 1893-94. The Sonaram (1902), Kuki (1917) and Jadonang- Gaidinliu movements (Singh 1982, Das, 1989) symbolized early ethnic struggles. Consequent upon the visit of the Statutory Commission in 1920s, further apprehension of marginalisation, had grown among the tribespeople and minority communities. Colonial rulers allowed missionary activities. Association with the Christian missionaries and gradual spread of education amongst the tribes and other communities infused a sense of self-esteem. This factor is crucial to understand the birth of ethnonationalism eventually among the Nagas, Mizos, and the Manipuris. In some hills and the Brahmaputra valley, there was simultaneous revulsion for Assamese linguistic- cultural domination. This perception alienated a few tribes and thus grew discontentment among the Bodos, the Karbis, the Ahoms and many others. Under the relatively peaceful period of 1930s, which may be called 'the silent phase of identity consciousness'; the tribespeople had demanded 'participative representation' in the principal Legislative Assembly. The Khasi, Ahom, Naga, Mizo, Bodo-Kachari, Miri and Deuri were the first to demand "ethnic representation". Lalungs established a Durbar in 1967, and Koch people had similarly been conscious about their minority status. In a memorandum submitted to Assam Government the Assam-Koch-Rajbanshi-Khatriya Sammilani demanded proper representation in all bodies, quota in employment, scholarships to students and publication of their history and culture. The All Assam Garo Union was established in 1983. The Hajongs in Assam urged the Government to recognize them as a scheduled tribe.

In the long history of this region the feelings of in-group-out-group, perceived marginalisation, and 'minority-consciousness' have variously surfaced as key factors causing ethnic unrest. Depending on varied influences of marginality and ethnicity some movements remained more explicit and specific than others, in articulating and defining their objectives. Strategies of operation correspondingly varied. Ethnic conflicts in northeast originally grew essentially through primordial affiliations. The distinctive ethnicity factor amongst communities led to steady expansion of aggressive binary categories of in-group and out-group (Das 1989, 1994, 2004, 2007).

Linguistic and Religious Revivalist Movements:

Language has always been in the centre-stage of ethnic turmoil in northeast. Making Assamese as the compulsory language from class VIII onwards led to massive agitation in the Barak valley, reminiscent of the agitation launched earlier over the issue of the medium of instruction. In 1972 the Bodo led plains tribes council of Assam (PTCA) complained that the plains tribes have been “uprooted in a systematic and planned way from their own soil” and that the “step motherly” treatment of the administration, dominated by the Assamese-speaking people has reduced them as “second class citizens” of the state. The Bodo Sahitya Sabha (established in 1952) and PTCA however ultimately succeeded in making the Bodo language the medium of instruction (up to the secondary level). In doing so the Bodo-leaders opted for the Roman script - though they were ultimately convinced to accept the Devanagari script. The Mishing Agom Kebang (Mishing Sahitya Sabha) formed in 1972 and several other Mishing organizations had also worked consistently and succeeded in 1987 to introduce Mishing language as a subject of study in primary schools. The rejection of the Assamese script by the Miris, the Bodos and others dismayed the Assamese, who thought, without their tribal counterparts they may become minority, overwhelmed by the Bengali - speaking population (Miri 1993: 71). Following the recognition of native languages at primary level in Bodo - Kachari and the Karbi areas, the Mishing perception marginalisation sharpened. This led to the formation of Mishing Literary Association in 1972. In order to maintain a distinct minority linguistic identity vis-à-vis the majority Assamese, the Mishing were in favour of the Roman script. The Assam Sahitya Sabha insisted that the Assamese script should be retained for ‘Mishing language’. The Mishings were ultimately facilitated to use Roman script, and their text books came to be printed in the Roman Script, so also some newspapers and journals. The Bishnupriya Manipuri language issue, particularly in Assam, has also acquired the shape of an ethnic movement.

The Ahom, Meitei, Zeliangrong, Seng Khasi, and Zomi communities had all felt threatened by the near extinction of their original language and religion (Das and Gupta 1982, Das 1989). In Manipur Valley the Meitei revivalist leaders (before the formal inclusion of Manipur-Meitei in the Eighth schedule to the Constitution), had demanded that the Manipuri language be named “Meeteilon”. The Zeliangrong movement grew as a religious-cultural movement, originally against the spread of Christianity, but it assumed an anti –colonial political overtone. It actually came out to be the only tribal movement of north east which maintained links with the national freedom struggle (Das 1989). The Zeliangrong People’s conference (ZPC), demanded the recognition of ethnic nomenclature ‘Zeliangrong’, an acronym (Ze-Liang- - Rong), who are spread in contiguous areas of Manipur, Nagaland and Assam. In our report submitted to the government through the director – general of the anthropological survey of India, we had suggested recognition of common nomenclature as ethnographic facts supported the claims. It was recommended that an inter-state autonomous regional council for the Zeliangrong areas will be best suited to protect the cultural and economic

interests of these tribes. In 1905, when the spread of the Christianity was widely felt in Meghalaya, the Seng Khasi organization took upon itself the responsibility of defending the Khasi religion. The members of the association called themselves the 'Khasi-Khasis' so as to distinguish themselves from those 'Khasis' who had adopted the Christianity. Having initiated the process of revivalism and reformation of the Khasi religion, the Seng Khasi encouraged the people to abide by the matrilineal system of descent, to respect the kith and kin on the maternal and paternal side, to believe in God, and to serve God through service of humankind. The Seng Khasi flag came to depict a crowing cock in white and red setting. The red signifies courage and white represents the world. The Seng Khasi started organizing archery compositions and traditional dance performances such as 'Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem' and 'the Nongkrem Dance'.

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.

The following list provides names of the outfits, some of which are no more active, as they used to be.

Arunachal Pradesh:

United Liberation Volunteers of Arunachal Pradesh (ULVA),
United People's Volunteers of Arunachal Pradesh (UPVA),
United Liberation Movement of Arunachal Pradesh (ULMA).
National Liberation Front of Arunachal: Koj Tara Dragon Force (ADF).

Assam:

United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA).
Bodo Security Force (BDSF),
National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB),
Dimas National Security Force (DNSF)
Bodo Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF)
Dima Halim Daogah (DHD)
Karbi National Volunteers (KNV)
Rabha National Security Force (RNSF)
Koch-Rajbongshi Liberation Organisation (KRLO)
Hmar People's Convention- Democracy (HPC-D)
Karbi People's Front (KPF)
Barak Valley Youth Liberation Front (BVYLF)
Birsas Commando Force,
Adivasi United Liberation Front of Assam
Cobra Force.
United Liberation Front of Barak Valley
Muslim United Liberation Front of Assam (MULFA),
Muslim Liberation Tigers of Assam (MULTA),
United Social Reform Army Of Assam (USRAA),
United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS)

Manipur:

National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-I M.)
People's Liberation Army (PLA)
Revolutionary People's Front (RPF)

United National Liberation Front (UNLF)
People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleitpak (PREPAK)
Kuki National Organisation (KNO),
Kuki National Front (KNF), Kuki National Army (KNA),
Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA) Kuki Defense Force (KDF)
Kuki Front Council (KFC). Manipur People's Liberation Front (MPLF)
People's Republican Army (PRA)
Kangleitpak Communist Party (KCP)
Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL)
Manipur Liberation Tiger Army (MLTA)
Iripak Kanba Lup (IKL)
Kangleitpak Kanba Kangleitpak (KKK)
North East Minority Front (NEMF)

Mizoram :

Hmar People's Convention (HPC)
Hmar People's Convention- Democracy (HPC-D)
Hmar Revolutionary Front (HRF)
Zomi Revolutionary Army (ZRA)
Zomi Revolutionary Volunteers (ZRV)
Indigenous People's Revolutionary Alliance (IRPA)
Kom Rem People's Convention (KRPC)
Chin Kuki Revolutionary Front (CKRF)
Bru National Liberation Front,
Bru National Front (BNFM) of Mizoram,
Bru Welfare Association of Mizoram (BWAM)

Meghalaya:

Hynniewtrep Volunteer Council (HVC),
Hynniewtrep Achik Liberation Council (HALC)
Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC)
Achik Liberation Matgrik Army (ALMA),
A'chik National Volunteers Council (ANVC).
People's Liberation Front of Meghalaya (PLF-M)

Hajong United Liberation Army (HULA)

Nagaland:

National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muivah) - NSCN(IM) ,
National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Khaplang) - NSCN (K)
Naga National Council-NNC (Adino), Naga Federal Government (NFG). Naga National Council (Khodao) – NNC (K).

Tripura:

TRIPURA: National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT), All Tripura Tigers Force (ATTF), Bru National Liberation Front (BNLF).
National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT): Biswamohan Debbarma, Nayanbashi Jamatia
All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF) : Ranjit Debbarma
Tripura Tribal Volunteer Force (TTVF)
Tripura Liberation Force (TLF)
All Tripura Volunteer Force (ATVF)
Tripura National Army (TNA)
Borok National Council of Tripura (BNCT)

West Bengal:

Kamtapuri Liberation Organisation (KLO)

The larger inventory provided above highlights the severity of the ethnic dissent prevalent in the region. Amongst the above-mentioned outfits, some are non-operational; some are actually active, and some are no more active, as they used to be. It is amazing to note that at one point, more than 120 militant groups operated in India's northeast. Their demands ranged from autonomy to outright secession. In recent years, the Indian state has had considerable success in achieving stability in the region, using tactics from negotiations to military operations to root out militants. Militant outfits also used various tactics. They even joined hands as early as 1989 forming the Indo-Burmese Revolutionary Front (IBRF), which consisted of NSCN, ULFA, KNF (from India) and Chin National Front (Myanmar). The influence of IBRF diminished gradually. Until recently, the NSCN (IM), NSCN (K), Bodo Security Force (BSF), National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and Kamtapur Liberation Organisation (KLO) remained the most forceful and assertive groups. In the meantime quite a few Muslim extremist outfits too became active in the region (Das 1994). In the Manipur Hills, the most powerful defiant groups, besides the NSCN, are UNLF- (Meghen), PLA, KNO, KNF, KNA, KDF and KFC. The Kuki-Naga conflict rocked the state of Manipur in the mid-nineties. When the Naga claim of "proprietorship" over the vast hilly region of Manipur was endangered by demands for a 'Kuki Homeland', the NSCN quickly asserted its dominion. The Kuki Impi and the Zomi Council had worked tirelessly to bring about a permanent settlement. In Mizoram areas, the Reangs came to form Bru National Liberation Front whose leaders held talks with the Mizo Chief Minister. The population of displaced Reangs rose to 40,000 in camps in Tripura. The Mizos were specially perturbed when the Bru National union, formed in 1994 to protect the rights and privileges of the Reang minorities called for Autonomous District Council under the Sixth schedule of constitution. What gives strength to the demand of the Reangs (Brus) is their position as the second largest ethnic group in Mizoram. Both in pre-Independence and post-Independence eras, Tripura witnessed regular inflow of emigrants, and land alienation of tribals was rampant. The tribespeople thus became a minority in their own homeland. Tripura National Volunteers therefore did not target the state, but it opposed a community. In this respect, Bhaumik, says, "The TNV's anti-Bengali violence created a general climate of ethnic hatred, which were sharpened by large-scale alienation of the tribal lands and actual marginalization in jobs, professions and politics (1996). Prior to TNV, the Seng-khak (Clenched Fist) surfaced as a tribal insurgent group in 1967. It maintained close links with the Mizo National Front (MNF). Tribal leaders of Tripura, right from 1974, voiced demands of reservation, restoration of tribal land, and specially the restoration of native Kok-Borok as one of the official languages, and lastly the Autonomous District Council. The language and script issue, which engulfed Tripura for a long time, has hardly been addressed in right earnest.

Illegal Émigré, “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” is 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’.

Identity Politics of ‘Small ethnicities’ and ‘minority syndrome’ in Assam:

After its partitions, Assam was left with 23 tribes, comprising of 14 hill tribes of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills; and nine plains tribes inhabiting the plains of the Brahmaputra Valley. Seeing

development in the hills, some tribes became conscious to develop their sub-regions. Some tribes who had earlier launched movements rushed to renew their agitations. Thus the Ahom renewed the demand for the re-scheduling their scheduled tribe status. In order to push forward the demand of a separate Ahom State, the 'Tai-Ahom Land Committee' was formed, by merging old organisations. In 1995 the Ahoms placed a 17-point charter of demands. Showing his concern for the Ahoms, the then Ahom Chief Minister of Assam, Hiteswar Saikia, highlighted the unique cultural heritage of the Ahom people. The Karbis, have been conscious about their minority status vis-à-vis the majority - Assamese. Notwithstanding the gradual incorporation of the Karbis into the Assamese society, culturally and linguistically, the cultural incorporation was never conceded. What is more the kinship based tribal political system, territorial affiliation (Mikir hills), survival of Karbi folksongs and fable of their distinct origin, tribal mortuary rituals, and tribal costumes which survive in vibrant manner helped the Karbis to put forward their autonomy demand (Das 1989:188-90). Though the Karbi National Council demanded in 1986 only an autonomous district, but last two decades have seen the growth of the Karbi Students Association and the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) spearheading a movement for creation of a separate Karbi state. Seeing ever growing demands of the minority tribes the administration had granted the Sixth Schedule status to some plains tribes, such as the Mising, Rabha and Tiwa.

The Bodo movement is the longest social movement in the plains of Assam. The first two phases of the Bodo movement were concerned with social reforms (1947 – 1967) and consolidation of the Bodo identity vis-à-vis the Assamese community (1967 – 1987). Earlier phase of the Brahma movement (1907 onwards) was a short-lived 'Sanskritization movement' led by the Mech-Bodos. The early cultural awakenings had led to birth of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha in 1952, which demanded Bodo language as the medium of instruction at secondary level. In its modern phase (1967 onwards) a new section of Bodo elite emerged which demanded a greater share in political power. A call was given for carving a separate region called Udayachal. After second phase of mass protests, there was a Bodo Accord signed in February 1993 that had led to the creation of a Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC). The BAC was a non-starter, as the territorial boundary issue remained unresolved. The movement for maximum autonomy by the Bodos, succeeded ultimately in securing a new politico-administrative structure within the existing State of Assam following a memorandum of understanding with the Government of India on 10 February, 2003. The Bodo-majority areas have now come under the new Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC), an elective body. The BTC Accord is seen as a fulfilment of the sub-national aspirations of the Bodos of Assam. Under the BTC understanding, the Government of India provides financial assistance of Rs.100 crores per annum for 5 years for projects to develop the socio-economic infrastructure.

The North East Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Forum, comprising fifteen diverse tribal organisations in its meeting in October 1994 resolved that “The entire region has been swamped by alien people migrating from neighbouring countries and also from other parts of India”(The Telegraph, 6 October, 1994). Similarly Tribal Students Federation (TSF) was constituted by several tribal students’ organisations such as Karabi Students Union, All Tiwa Students Union, Takam Miashing Porin Kebang, All Assam Deuri Students Union, Maan-Tai Students Union, Sonwal Kachaari Students Union Dimasa Students Federation, and All Assam Tribal Students Union. The main objective of the TSF was to provide coherent direction to the various tribal movements of the region for “the right of self-determination”. An important aspect of TSF was its abhorrence to militant –armed actions. TSF failed to achieve its goals.

In view of extensive demand of Chakma and Hajong for Indian citizenship, the Arunachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly passed a unanimous resolution to deport these émigrés settled in the state. To protect the cultures of indigenous tribes the Legislative Assembly passed the Bill called “The Aarunachal Pradesh Protection of Customary Laws and Socials Practices Bill, 1994” for protection of the native tribal institutions. The All Arunachal Pradesh Students Union (AAPSU) also opposed such demands of citizenship. The Nepalese of Assamese origin demanded ‘special protected status’ under the constitution. They aimed to thwart attempts at branding them as ‘foreigners’ /illegal infiltrators. Fact remains that the Nepalese did face the Khasi anger manifested in the ‘ethnic cleansing’ of the sort in late 1980s, and which had triggered the larger Nepalese demand of the Gorkhaland (Das 1989, The Statesman, 18 July 2002). In September 1994 the North-East-Students-Organization (NESO) alleged that the Illegal Migrants (Determination of Tribunal) Act 1993, was full of loopholes and which had made detection and expulsion of illegal migrants in North East difficult. There have been strong reactions to threat of infiltration of outsiders in varied manners. Thus, the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah) made it mandatory for non- Nagas living “all over Nagalim” to make identity cards for themselves and their families.

In Assam, the Adivasis today can broadly be divided into two communities, the tea garden workers and those who came out of the tea gardens at the end of their contracts and settled in and around the tea gardens after procuring some land. Through gradual expansion these Adivasis, form nearly 20 per cent of the state population, but their representation in the legislative assembly is said to be markedly lesser (Other Backward Class, 5 May 2008, India Together News Service). Hiren Gohain has discussed the Adivasi Militancy in Assam. The All Assam Adivasi Students’ Association along with Assam Tea Tribal Students’ Association (strong in Sibsagar, Dibrugarh and Laximpur districts of upper Assam) have been agitating for years

demanding recognition of tea tribals and Adivasis as scheduled tribes. The Adivasis have been neglected by the state. Only special measures, like the campaign against poverty, can win their hearts. The state Congress leaders failed to muster political will to fulfil that demand. The latest response from the Registrar General is that some relatively homogeneous groups among this population may be considered for inclusion under this list if the state government agrees. (Gohain, 2007, Economic and Political Weekly, December 8, 2007).

Reconciliation for Self-Rule and Autonomy:

Cease Fire and Peace 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 Dhansiri region of Nagaland. Prior to 1961 Census they were identified as a 'Sub-tribe' of Kachari. In the 1971 census and afterwards they projected themselves as a distinct tribe. The 'Dimasa Jalaironi Hosoma' was established in 1972 to promote their distinct cultural identity. The Dimasa National Organisation (DNO) was born 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. A 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 Chief Minister at Tura, on 25 October 1994. The Garo Baptist Convention (GBP) played a major role in bringing the militants to the negotiating table. In Assam, Hiteswar Saikia (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. U.L.F.A. in Assam in 2005, too, has appointed a People's Consultative Group to 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-Muivah 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 (I-M) 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 (I-M) 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 Kamtapuri programmes in TV., and 're-settlement' 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 in 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, if 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. Their targets are the settlers who have migrated from former East Pakistan after partition and

subsequent settlers who have reduced the indigenous tribes of Tripura into minority (K. Chakraborty, *The Statesman* 23 November 2002).

A Recapitulation

In North-East India cultural differences and incongruity sharpened the ethnic boundaries and generated cleavages along ethnic conceit, 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 émigrés, suspected fear of linguistic –cultural subjugation, economic 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 militant outfits in North-East have now transformed themselves into terrorist entities, empty of their original objectives and ideology. For example, U.L.F.A. 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 peace 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 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. P. Routray of the Institute for Conflict Management, has rightly observed that 'this is primarily a governance issue. Poor governance 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 Sixth 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 as 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 wining 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. These need to be endured.

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