

Ethnicity, Ethnic Assertion and India's Northeast

Dr. Tarun Gogoi^{1*}¹Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, D. R. College, Golaghat, Assam, IndiaDOI: [10.36347/sjahss.2022.v10i01.001](https://doi.org/10.36347/sjahss.2022.v10i01.001)

| Received: 02.12.2021 | Accepted: 08.01.2022 | Published: 11.01.2022

***Corresponding author:** Dr. Tarun Gogoi

Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, D. R. College, Golaghat, Assam, India

Abstract

Review Article

At present all the regions and sub-regions of the world have been experiencing several forms of ethnic assertion and tension. The ethnic groups are mobilized on the basis of ethnicity for asserting their ethnic rights. However, the ethnic assertion should not be dismissed as an outburst of emotive and irrational sentiments. The ethnic assertion is not something which is irrational and impulsive but it is a cover through which the elites compete and struggle for power. This paper is an attempt to deal with the moot question – how ethnicity is a cause of inter-ethnic conflict and how it is being used by the elite of different ethnic groups to mobilize the respective community in the context of Northeast India in general and Assam in particular.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Ethnic Conflict, Assam, Northeast India.

Copyright © 2022 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

INTRODUCTION

At present all the regions and sub-regions of the world have been experiencing some forms of ethnic assertion and tension. Almost in all the countries of the world the ethnic groups are mobilized on the basis of ethnicity for asserting their ethnic rights. Even the developed countries of the west like USA, Canada, Great Britain and erstwhile communist countries provide glaring examples of ethnic mobilization. It is generally assumed that ethnicity is primarily concerned with the traditional society and that the spread of education and economic development would reduce the ethnic cleavages replacing the parochial sentiment by universal ideas. But surprisingly, it appears that the more society is modernized, the more ethnic demands are manifested and similarly, the more is economic development, the more is ethnic conflict [1]. Tribal loyalties, religion, language, social discrimination on the basis of caste, sharing of political power and economic opportunities have been utilized for ethnic mobilization. Ethnicity is harnessed as an ideology as well as a device to wrest greater share of power and authority. Growing sense of awareness and modernization increases the levels of competition for jobs and other economic resources among the ethnic groups which precipitate ethnic and social movement based on ethnic boundaries. Further, denial of basic human rights, breakdown of political order, discriminatory economic policy, conflicting theory of

modernization are also responsible for ethnic assertion and conflict.

The ethnic assertion should not be summarily dismissed as an outburst of emotive and irrational sentiments [2]. The ethnic assertion is not something which is irrational and impulsive but it is a cover through which the elites compete and struggle for power. Keeping in mind these facts this paper is an attempt to deal with the moot question – how ethnicity is a cause of inter-ethnic conflict and how it is being used by the elite of different ethnic groups to mobilize the respective community in the context of Northeast India in general and Assam in particular.

Ethnicity and Elite Conflict

The term 'elite' refers to influential subgroup within the ethnic group and classes. In fact, it is the educated elite who constitute an influential group within the middle class and they take the lead in ethnic movements. In certain specific circumstances elite conflict stems from the larger political and economic environments rather than from the cultural taboos of the ethnic groups. But at the same time, the cultural forms, values and practices of ethnic groups become political resources for elite in competition for political power and economic advantages. Paul Brass argues that "the process by which elite mobilize ethnic identities simplifies those beliefs and values, distorts them, and select those which are politically useful rather than central to the belief system of the group concerned" [3].

This process invariably involves competition and conflict for political power, economic benefit and social status between competing elites. The cultural and linguistic differences separate ethnically the relatively “disadvantaged aspirant elite group” from their competitors. These differences become the basis for a special claim for job and other advantages. Such claims are, by and large, associated with the efforts to mobilize the disadvantaged ethnic groups and to create a sense of identity among its members. At this stage, the process of intensifying the differences between the disadvantaged group and dominant group begins. The former may claim that the later is culturally different and descends from alien intruders and that it alone is the “sons of the soil” and represents the indigenous culture [4]. The politicization of ethnicity stresses the importance of inequality in distribution of available resources, social benefits and opportunities between distinct ethnic groups. In effect, a sense of distinct nationality arises in response to exploitation of an indigenous group by another. If the disadvantaged ethnic group is a minority concentrated in a geographical area, its elite will demand the ‘legitimate’ share of political power in the political system. They will also call for some kind of politico-administrative devolution or decentralization of power or in some cases for secession [5]. This concept of “elite conflict” have been kept in mind in order to examine the questions raised above.

Ethnicity in Northeast India

The Northeast is comprised of seven Indian states, i.e. Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. Unlike any other region in India, its location has got its strategic importance as it is surrounded by China, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Bhutan. It is connected with the rest of India through a bottleneck in the Siliguri corridor of West Bengal. Northeast is covered by both the hills and the plains. While the hill areas cover 70% and the plains cover remaining 30% of its total areas. The hill areas of Northeast are sparsely populated and the plains are densely populated. It may be noted that out of seven states of the region, four states are predominantly tribal and the remaining three states too possess substantial tribal population (Assam, Manipur and Tripura).

The northeast India is rich in mineral resources like oil, natural gas, coal and limestone. Besides there is fertile soil for producing tea, rice, jute and immense forest resources. With all these resources this region can be a self-sufficient zone if the resources could be mobilized with proper planning. But, the people of the frontier region still feel that they are neglected, exploited and discriminated.

The most important causes of slow development of the northeast region has been the

continuation of tribal and feudal society with a little of capital formation and commodity production for a long time. During the pre-British period, the indigenous accumulation and capital formation did not take place. Besides during the colonial rule, the infrastructure necessary for indigenous economic development were not grown adequately. Even after more than sixty years of independence, it appears to the people of northeast that Indian state treats the entire region primarily as a supplier of raw materials and a market for goods produced in the rest of the country. Thus there has been a widespread feeling that northeast is being treated as a colony of the Indian state and as such it is portrayed as a “Colonial Hinterland” [6]. However, the backwardness of the region is not the sole reason behind the upsurge of ethnic nationalities.

In northeast India, there are more than three hundred culturally distinct ethnic groups of various sizes and at various stages of development. There are hill tribes such as the Nagas, Mizos, Khasis, Jaintias, Karbis, Dimasas, Kacharis etc. and plain tribes like Bodos, Rabhas, Sonowals, Lalungs (Tiwas), Misings, Deuris etc. The tribal communities of northeast India remained virtually isolated from social and political development taking place elsewhere in the country. There was little scope, particularly, for the hill tribals for participation in the electoral processes. However, the tribals of the plains like the Bodos, Rabhas, Sonowals, Lalungs (Tiwas), Misings and Deuris were somehow integrated with both Pan-Indian and Pan-Assamese nationalism. The Ahoms, Chutias, Koches, Morans, Matakas who are of Mongoloid origin virtually integrated with the Assamese nationality. Another important segment of Assamese nationality has been the upper caste minority Hindus – Assamese Brahmins, Kayasthas, Kalitas, Keots and other low caste Assamese and Assamese Muslims. However, two large migrant groups – the tea garden labourers and Muslim peasants who came from the East Bengal were not well integrated with the Assamese nationality in colonial Assam. Nevertheless, during the colonial period and even after, the Assamese have been the most advanced nationality in the northeast and among the Assamese the upper-caste Assamese Hindus are the most articulate and dominant group in an economically backward, multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-lingual society of the northeast [7].

As a reaction against the domination of Assamese caste-Hindus, there emerged western educated articulate tribal elites in the hills. They acted as opinion builder and motivators of socio-political awareness among the hill tribals. At the advent of independence, they even laboured under suspicion that the rule of ‘white people’ in the hitherto “Excluded Areas” would be replaced by their “more advanced neighbours of the plains in free India” [8]. By and large the hill elite believed that in a free India the plainsmen

would be in an advantageous position to exploit them on a more permanent basis. This feeling of the hills was mainly shared by the newly emerged western educated elite and tribal chiefs. As a measure of meeting the aspiration of the hill people, the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution was introduced which created an Autonomous District Council in addition to other measures for protecting their interest. But gradually the hill elite started realizing that the autonomy accorded to them through this statutory provision was not adequate to safeguard their interest under the Assamese elite dominated administration [9]. In fact, they became concerned with their oppressed status in the Assamese elite dominated undivided Assam. As a matter of fact, there was a compulsion on the part of the hill elite to agitate not primarily because of the threat to their own ethnic identity, language, tradition and culture but because they felt that their individual right in the political sphere was virtually threatened. Indeed, the personal ambition of the hill elite was very much involved in the Hill State movement in the sixties which aroused the tribal sentiment in the hills against the Assamese. Subsequently, therefore, the demand for creating new hill states in the northeast had to be conceded. As such in the post-colonial period the hill tribal became increasingly conscious of their distinct identity which they utilized for the purpose of fulfillment of political aspiration.

Ethnic Mobilization and Conflict in Northeast India

In post independent India, like the national ruling class, regional ruling classes have emerged which tries to assert its autonomy at the regional level. As such together with the Indian ruling class, the Assamese ruling class has been asserting their autonomy and identity at the regional level. The Assamese ruling class, composed of a few tea planters, owner of powerful regional press, transport operators, contractors, professionals, bureaucrats and the rural gentry, use the state machinery for their interest and try to establish their socio-cultural hegemony over the entire Assamese society. It has always been reluctant to share power and benefits even with other oppressed and backward sections of the Assamese nationality. More importantly, this class has been successful in projecting its own class interest as the interest of the entire Assamese masses. Similarly, it has also been able to project its own identity crisis as the crisis of the Assamese as a whole.

In post-colonial Assam the Assamese ruling class was not much concerned with the problem faced by the plains tribals. The plain tribals - the Bodos, Misings, Sonowal-Kacharis, Deuris, Rabhas, Tiwas etc.- were experiencing the problem of land alienation, poverty, indebtedness, unemployment and political oppression. Therefore, in post-colonial Assam some of the groups, particularly the ethnic communities, who considered themselves as a component of the larger

Assamese society and had assimilated with the Assamese are now trying to revive their own identity and demand for political autonomy because of their oppressed status and hatred against the caste Hindu dominated Assamese ruling class [10]. Although the tea garden labourers and immigrant Muslims have virtually accepted their own oppressed status and the dominant position of the Assamese caste-Hindu elite, the autochthon tribals and other ethnic groups are not prepared to accept the dominance. This feeling manifests in the movements for distinct identity launched by the ethnic groups under the leadership of their respective emerging educated elites. The intolerant attitude of Assamese ruling class and opinion builders of Assam further deteriorates the situation. It refuses to recognize that small communities as nationalities and the asserting of identity by the ethnic groups is viewed as a threat to the Assamese nation-building process [11].

Therefore, since the late sixties of the last century, the plain tribals became more conscious and articulate about their distinct ethnic identity and started utilizing their distinctness as a measure of gaining political power, and removing their socio-economic backwardness. The issues of language and culture and other primordial factors came to be articulated in the wake of emerging conflict between the elites at various levels because of clash of interest. The conflict of interest generated by a sense of deprivation and negligence motivates the elites of the ethnic communities to bring about emotional integration in their respective communities so that they can fight against the dominant community. Thus, the elite tend to generalize their conflicts and build up movements mobilizing their respective communities politically.

In view of this, India's Northeastern region has been experiencing ethnic assertions ever since the independence of the country. The process of proliferation of ethnic movements is so rapid and continuous in this region that it is really difficult to find parallels in human history. These movements are threatening to destabilize the existing social and political arrangements leading to serious inter-ethnic conflicts. Many of these are taking recourse to extra-constitutional methods and in certain well known cases like those of the Asomiyas, Nagas, Mizos, Kokboroks, Khasis, Garos, Bodos and even small communities like the Hmars, some section are resorting to violent means. It is interesting to note that the trend of ethnic articulation has been influencing the reality in such a manner that previously unheard of ethnic identities are emerging in the region. Three Naga tribes, Chakrii, Keza and Sangtang got together to form a new tribe, Chakhesang. Relatively advanced sections of some backward communities at times create new ethnic identities, apparently articulating the interest of the communities included in the new groups, but actually

furthering the interest of the relevant dominant elite [12].

The cases of tribal communities in Meghalaya and Arunachal present us with a different picture. More than one tribal community come together to ask for a political administrative unit with the avowed objective of protecting the interest of the concerned communities but soon realize that they have conflicting interest. When Meghalaya was formed it was expected that the new state would facilitate the fulfillment of the aspirations of the Khasis, the Garos and the Jaintias. But now after two decades of the existence of the state a section of the Garos have started arguing that their interest can be protected only if they have a separate Garo state. The small tribes of what is now known as Arunachal appear to have arrived at a holistic identity of Arunachalis in the state created out of the erstwhile NEFA. But here again, the inter-tribal conflicts have started acquiring political domination bordering on the demand for self-determination.

The history of ethnic assertions in this region, now known as Northeast India, has been closely connected with the history of political evolution, administrative structuring, and of course the emergence of new social forces. In the absence of powerful feudal or bourgeois classes, the educated elites of the various communities have come to occupy hegemonic positions in their respective communities and have started competing with the relatively advanced sections of their nearest rival communities for material gains. For example, the anti-foreigner movement launched by the All Assam Students' Union in the late seventies and early eighties, very often the elite competitions which successfully mobilized the masses of the relevant communities remain competitions for land, jobs and business opportunities camouflaged in emotive slogans for protection of cultural identities [13]. Similar movements launched by the organizations of other communities of the region are also generated by competitions of same nature.

Since hegemony makes access to these opportunities easy the elites of various communities compete for hegemony too. This competition acquires additional edge from the natural concern of the educated elite for protection and development of cultural identities. It should be remembered that unlike the bourgeoisie the educated elite does not have capital as base of its power. It also does not have the numerical strength of the proletariat. Therefore it has to use emotive issues to establish hegemony. The essential qualifications necessary for successful participation in liberal democratic practices make the educated elite of the ethnic communities the obvious candidates for such hegemony. And therefore competition for hegemony with emotive slogans will remain a source of ethnic conflicts in the area. Competitions and conflicts would

continue till such time as the political aspirations of the elites and the communities mobilized by them remain unfulfilled [14].

CONCLUSION

Inter-ethnic conflicts adversely affect the rights and freedom of the individuals. Contemporary politics of Northeast India is replete with such interference. In most cases the organizations representing interests of a particular community are totally intolerant of the efforts of other communities of the area at organizing themselves or expressing their views. While the freedom of expression of an entire community is sought to be suppressed by the dominant sections of the indigenous communities the rights of the individual members of the non-indigenous communities are violated with impunity. In situations of inter-ethnic conflicts communities violate rights not only of the members of other communities but also they trample the individual rights of the members of their communities. Nevertheless, the existing conflict may be removed to some extent by mobilizing the masses of all sections far beyond the interest of dominant elite of the communities as well as to end exploitation of the Indian State. The progressive sections of elite of all nationalities can make a united effort in this regard.

REFERENCES

1. Phukon, G. (2004). *Inter-Ethnic conflict in Northeast India*, New Delhi, South Asian Publishers, p. 1.
2. *Ibid*, p.83.
3. Brass, P. R. (1991). *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, New Delhi, Sage Publications, p. 17.
4. See, Barnett, Marguerite R., 1976, *The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South Asia*. Princeton University Press, cited in Paul Brass, *ibid*. p. 33.
5. See Paul Brass, *ibid*. p.46.
6. For details see, Misra, Tilotamma, "Assam: A Colonial Hinterland", *Economic and Political Weekly*, August 9, 1980.
7. Phukon, G. (2004). *Inter-Ethnic conflict in Northeast India*, New Delhi, South Asian Publishers, p. 87.
8. *Constituent Assembly Debates*. Vol. XI, p. 711.
9. Memorandum of the United Mizo Freedom Organisation, Lushai Hills, submitted to the Secretary, States Reorganisation Commission, New Delhi, on 28th May, 1954.
10. See, Hussain, M. (1997). Roots of ethnic conflict and violence: Understanding nationality and ethnic processes in India's Northeast, *Indian Journal of Secularism*, I(2).
11. Baruah, A. K., & Sarmah, M. (1991). "Nationality question in Assam: Some conceptual issues", in Misra, U. Nation Building and Development in Northeast India, Guwahati, p. 20.
12. Baruah, A. K. (2004). "Conflicts and Communities: A Northeast Indian Perspective", in Phukon, Girin

-
- (ed.) Inter-Ethnic Conflict in Northeast India, New Delhi, p.32.
13. Baruah, A. K. (2004). “*Assamese Middle Classes and the Xenophobic Tendencies in Assamese Society*”, *Frontier*, 14(12), cited in Inter-Ethnic Conflict in Northeast India, New Delhi, p. 32.
14. Baruah, A. K. (2004). “*Conflicts and Communities: A Northeast Indian Perspective*”, in Girin Phukon (ed.) *Inter-Ethnic Conflict in Northeast India*, New Delhi, p.33-34.