IDENTITY ISSUES IN NORTH EASTERN STATES - A CHALLENGE TO INDIAN POLICY OF INTEGRATION AND DEMOCRATIZATION

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Abstract: North East India is politically vital and strategically a vulnerable region. It is known as the hot spot of ethnic violence, extremism and insurgency. The Indian Government's post and ongoing process of national integration, state building and democratic consolidation have further aggravated the conflict scenario in the region. The eight States comprising the North East is populated by nearly 40 million habitants who vary in language, race, tribe, religion and regional heritage. The clubbing of all these under the tag of" Northeast "has tended to have a homogenizing effect with its own sets of implications for policy formulation and implementation and local aversion. Identity issues on social and ethnic lines have been a dominant development in the region since independence. The region has witnessed the emergence of number of extremist organizations challenging the sovereignty and integrity of the Union of India. The founding Fathers of the Indian Constitution wanted to strengthen the union against possible disruptive and disintegrative pressure and as such not much weight was given to the need for reflecting India's cultural design.

The study is based on secondary data collected from books, journals, articles and website. The focus of this paper is to study, analyze and understand the challenges which failed to satisfy the needs of the ethnic groups of the region desperate to protect their identity and culture.

Keywords: Democratic Consolidation, Ethnic Insurgency, Extremist Organization, Identity Crisis, National Integration and Vulnerable Region.

Introduction: Identity issues are generally understood as a phenomenon which leads to a counter movement to protect against oppression and injustice that is met out by various communities on the basis of their racial, religious, cultural, gender or ethnic identity. However mere sense of belonging to certain identity does not crystallize into a movement. It leads to movement only when the symbols of identity i.e. language, race or ethnicity are utilized by elites to mobilize group sentiments. (Brass 1999:15) The growing concept of identity crisis in North Eastern states is the direct outcome of negligence, isolation policy of the government since pre-independent era, the Constitutional federal structure and unequal development.

North East Region of India is the homeland of different ethnic groups with a variety of cultures speaking different languages and dialects. B.G.Verghese (2004:280) describes the region as "another India, the most diverse part of a most diverse country, very different, relatively little known and certainly not too well understood, once a coy but know turbulent and in transition within the Indian transition". It includes the Seven Sisters- Arunachal Pradesh, Assam. Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland , Tripura and Sikkim covering an area of 262,189 sq.km and constituting about 7.98% of country's total geographical area. The region has a long international boundary, about 96%with China and Bhutan in the north, Myanmar in the east, Nepal in west and Bangladesh in the south and west. The region represents nearly 3.8%of the total human population of the country and exhibits a great diversity of ethnic groups. Estimated 171 out of a total 573 schedule tribes in India inhabit the remote, inhospitable terrains in North East Region. The significant linguistic, ethnic and cultural diversity, not only among the people of different states, but also within each state in the region, is an important feature of the region. The region is the home to over 200 of the 635 tribal groups in the country, speaking about 220 dialects with the strong tradition of social and cultural identity. Ethnic identity is dear to the most communities and is always triggered by the fear of losing their distinct identity, resulting in the formation of regional identities and conflicts.

The consolidation of identities along the lines of tribe and community has become increasingly manifest in the recent years in the region. The concept of Identity conflict in context of North East Region can be analyzed by its historical social formation, constitutional federal set up, economic imbalance and government's policies to tackle the situation.

Historical Social Formation: The hills and plains of the region have been occupied by different steams of Mongoloid people who came from the north and the east at different periods, well before the onset of colonial rule. It is generally agreed that the Mongoloids, mentioned as the KIRATAS in ancient Sanskrit literature, once occupied practically the whole of the north eastern region. The diverse Mongoloid groups which eventually settled in different habitats and ecological settings crystallized into distinct tribal societies. Century's before the advent of British rule in the region, there was a high degree of fluidity in the socio-cultural arena so that intermingling of various streams of people, including biological admixture produced diverse social alignments and group identities. The boundaries of the groups were never very rigid. It is this flexibility, characteristic of a frontier tract experiencing considerable population movement from different directions, provided scope for shifting alliance and identities.Pre-colonial social setting was more fluid and flexible than the subsequent colonial and post-colonial periods. The tribe had never been a fixed or static category and there were many instances of change from tribal to non-tribal status. The numerous culturally and politically discrete communities lived in contact and communication with their respective neighboring population.

The condition radically altered during the period of British colonial rule. The annexation of Assam by the East India Company brought the people of this region into greater and deeper contact with socio-political changes prevailing in the rest of the country. The channels of contact and the level of communication were further accentuated in the early part of the 20th century. The British set in motion a series of moves in order to establish a degree of political and administrative dominance over the plains as well the hills. The British policies and the activities of the Christian missionaries who came into the region contributed significantly in creating a freeze effect on the communities and social formations. Colonial rule and missionary activities also contributed significantly detailing the character and tenor of identity movements among the tribal and non-tribal in the post-independence period.

The impact of British administration became manifest through various means and measures such as the introduction of Inner Line Regulation in 1873 and the declaration of most of the hilly areas as "Excluded Areas" under the provision of Government of India Act 1935. Thus most tribal communities of the hills remained cut off from social and political developments taking place elsewhere. An organized colonial economy with strict monitoring of exploitable resources, coupled with immigration of diverse groups in a short period of time. The earlier resilience of the regional social system was lost forever. Each community tended to become a rigid social formation and this was to the utmost advantage of the colonial rulers. The accentuation of tribal, non-tribal differences and the formation of rigid social blocks of indigenous castes and communities as well as recent migrants were important developments in the colonial.

Following Independence, the government's approach to the tribal areas was altered radically. The old policy of maintaining status quo and isolation was replaced by a policy of development and integration. The post-Independence period has been one of acceleration in the pace of social change and modernization of various tribal groups their effective induction within the framework of the nation-state. However, during the last six and half decades since independence, the freeze effect in the various social formations became more vivid, functional and effective in turning tribes, castes, communities and language groups into ethnic blocks. Thus, while the pre-colonial settings were fluid and flexible, the colonial and post-colonial settings were more rigid resulting in distinct cultural orientation called regionalism. Ethnic self-consciousness and its consolidation and asserting along the lines of tribe, community or language groups have become increasingly manifest in the recent years in the entire region. Emergence of tribal social formations, often with demand for specified territories as politico-administrative units are the common feature of north –east India. Regional identities in context of smooth integration of tribal and non-tribal of various language groups, of local and immigrants appears to be fraught with many hurdles towards Indian federal structure.

Constitutional Framework: In the issue of regional identities and national integration, the nature and functioning of federal power structure occupies an important place. The foundations of federalism were laid down on the grounds of concern for the unity and integrity of a culturally diverse nation. In view of historical experiences of disruptive and disintegrative sectarian forces and the context of partition prevailing at the time of independence, the founding fathers of the Indian Constitution wanted to strengthen against possible pressures. Thus the basis of structuring the federation was "administrative convenience". Unlike the American and Soviet Constitution, the states In India has no inherent, not even notional right to secede from the Union or demand

self-determination. In fact the Union in India was empowered to suppress any such separatist or secessionist pressure if and when they arose.

With administrative convenience the avowed guiding principle for designing the federation, not much weight was given to the need for reflecting India's cultural design. No specific provisions for religious or cultural minorities were incorporated, except that they were given equal rights. The principle of "preventive discrimination", applied in case of schedule castes and schedule tribes, was designed more to undo their social and economic backwardness then to help them to preserve and promote their cultural distinctiveness.

The Constitution's initial provisions and subsequent amendments provided for self-government under special administrative provisions for the tribal areas of North East, Naga's, Mizo's, Manipuri and Tripura under Articles 371 and 371A-I was turned down by the Constituent Assembly refused to endorse proposals for constituting states on a linguistic basis. In 1953 the linguistic basis of reorganizing states was accepted and was carried forward under the recommendations of the State Reorganization Commission since 1956 and was broadly completed by the end of 1960's. This was the major development towards incorporating cultural identities into political and administrative units. The federal devolution of power strengthened this expression of cultural diversity.

To deal with the feeling of discrimination, the Constitution of India contained a special provision in the form of the Sixth Schedule for the administration of tribal areas. It was meant to protect their communities in the hill areas of the North East. Under it the "tribal" areas were divided into two parts, Part-A, and Part—B. Part-A has autonomous Districts administered by the Government of Assam, with a limited representation in the State Legislative Assembly and in National Parliament. Part-B was by the Governor of Assam acting as an agent of the President of India. The United Khasi and Jaintia Hills District, the Garo Hills District, the Lishai Hills District, the Naga Hills District, the North Cachar Hills District and the Mikir Hills District were placed in Part-A. The North East Frontier Tract, the Balipara Frontier tract, the Tirap Frontier Tract, the Abor Hill and Mishmi Hills Districts and the Naga Tribal area came under Part-B. Tripura and Manipur were made special administrative regions under the control of the central government. The recognition of the states on linguistic terms further aggravated the scene. The tribal areas under the Sixth Schedule got statehood and one by one and became Seven States. The process of getting divided on the line of ethnicity did not stop here. The aspirations of distinct identity, among the ethnic groups resulted in number of movements demanding autonomy.

Challenges: Freedom from the British rule and independence did not bring any solace to the ethnic communities of the region as the dominant nationality suppressed smaller nationalities. The major factors that contributed to the social exclusion and subsequent emergence of ethnic mobilization are the pitfalls of national building process, the faulty modernization process and the nature of nation state. The nation building process undermined the specificities of the ethnic minorities of the region and generated fear among them. The modernization, especially the capitalist modernization weaned away the traditional values, norms and practices which were inherent in the tribal communities. Moreover, the, modern nation state erected arbitrary boundaries in place of traditional ethnic boundaries.

After independence, India's constitutional democracy instead adopting a confrontationist approach followed a policy of accommodation and assimilation. The constitution provides institutional accommodation for the tribal communities of the region through various measures like protective discrimination policies. In Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Mizoram interest of tribal are protected by invoking Inner Line Permit. In spite of all these accommodations, the tribal communities are confronting with multiple kinds of exclusions.

Further, 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 discontented communities, did not yield much result. In case of North East States, while the Union was trying to construct national identity, the smaller identities moved in opposite direction when they felt that they are about to lose their identity. Various ethnic groups are seeking larger space in the state and are trying to protect their peculiar identity.

The post-colonial development process tried to integrate and assimilate ethnic communities towards the mainstream development process ignoring their cultural and economic specificities. The centralized Planning Commission and the capitalist modernization further lead to the exclusion of various tribal communities. The indigenous way of development was disturbed by the penetration of capitalist development leading to under-

development, displacement of communities from their settlement and livelihood and erosion of community life.

In some parts of North east, the issue of regional identity assertion is related to the migration that resulted in the sense of exclusion. Since independence the region witnessed migration of Bangladeshis, Nepalese and migrant workers from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The 'insider 'and 'outsider' syndrome crippled the social, political, economic and cultural life of the tribal communities. The threat to their survival due to illegal migration created further social exclusion. Apart from creating the feeling of 'us' and 'them', it led to the alienation of natural resources and cultural specificities of ethnic groups leading to identity crisis.

The problem of ethnicity is further aggregated by region consciousness aroused by the elites, especially the middle class (Singh, 1998, Baruah 1991; Sharma, 1990). In context of North east middle class are the promoter of regional identity movements. For instance, the Assam movement emerged as the Assamese middle class movements whose interest was mostly affected by the migration of outsiders. (Baruah, 1991).

Another dimension of the regional identity formation is the dominant communities allied with the state power exclude certain groups from accessing resources, institutions and opportunities generating a feeling of exclusion. In such situation smaller groups assert for resources and opportunities. This assertion of marginalized identities and its extremist posture are giving a new dimension to state politics. In this context, democratic policies are overshadowed by regional and ethnic politics.

The various policies made by the Indian government are always a matter of discontentment and fear of losing their identity among the ethnic groups. The diversity of the north east region makes it extremely difficult to formulate a policy that can be followed uniformly throughout the region, although the region is often mistaken as a homogenous entity of tribal's settled in the hills. Since independence the Indian government has adopted several policies towards the region. Scholars of the region often question as to how a country has a policy towards its own? In Mrinal Miri's words (2001),"To whom, or for whom, do you have a policy? What is the object of the policy? ....The Northeast is the part of this country and at the same time we think that the people of North east should be made the object of the policy". He reiterates that human beings do not have policy towards the family members and friends. To be made an object implies that the people of the region are not in relationships of human concerns such as love, friendship, understanding of the others, but in relationship of the manager and the managed where the idea of management and idea of policy are almost the same. (Miri, 2002: 920)Policies are made to derive some advantage and manipulate for benefit.

It is, however true that the Indian government has adopted several policies towards the region since independence and many of these policies have changed in the past decades. Such policies were basically measures to solve the problems of alienation, insurgency, ethnicity and regional identity and to bring about economic development in the region. Both internal and external factors are responsible for the formulation and abandonment of such policies. The policy of "leaving them alone" to the development initiatives based on state- centric security approach has kept the region isolated and under developed.

Recommendations: No regional groups of Northeast seriously consider formal independence as an option from Indian federation. India's constitutional framework is practically workable and has stood the test of time and will remain so for future. However certain features allowing for the protection of specific identities need to be implemented in their letter and spirit for satisfying regional aspirations. This will alleviate their perceived sense of alienation and fear of loss of identity.

Fear psychosis and other apprehensions to great extent have led to the rise of regional identities and militant outfits. A vicious cycle has been created wherein so called threats to identity and perceived step motherly treatment by the mainland and Central government have led to the growth of fissiparous elements. This has in turn constricted the opening up of the Northeast, particularly the tribal areas of the region, resulting in deteriorating security milieu and economic backwardness. As against this negative scenario, there is a shining example of modus Vivendi between the tribal's and the State government in Tripura. Once the tribal's of Tripura were given political and socio-economic space through the Tripura Tribal Autonomous District Council, the militant activities of the National Liberation Front of Tripura and All Tripura Tiger Force became controlled.

The Union Government should therefore reiterate its commitment to uphold the Constitutional provisions enshrined in Article 371, expand the scope of the Sixth Schedule: concerning the tribal areas of the region and empower the autonomous council institutions. This will put at rest the fears among the regional people on their resources being taken out of the region without providing and concomitant benefit for their own economic development. Conflicts like that between the Centre and Nagaland over the extraction of petroleum, which saw Nagaland claiming that its rights under Article 371are being violated and the Centre invoking the Minerals and Mines Development Act (Note: enacted under the powers vested in the Union government as per the Union List Serial 53 of the Constitution) would then not arise. Moreover, enhanced administrative and financial empowerment of these councils is likely to lead to deeper sense of involvement of the people of these units, with their own socio-economic progress and programmes at the national level and improved developmental outcomes.

The division or splitting up of the present North –East States to satisfy local or regional identity at the sub-state level is no solution. Emotive consequences are likely if such divisions are attempted of States like Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya and Manipur to satisfy some regional aspirations. Instead Centre's endeavor should be towards highlighting the Constitutional protective measures and devolution –cum –empowerment at sub-state level to impact significantly the lives of the people. A solution which satisfies some regional aspiration but leads to anxiety and apprehension among the others who might be in harmony with the existing state structure has to be avoided.

The North-East has to be treated differently considering its historical backdrop and geopolitical realities. Some Central institutions is require to put in place that provides for appropriate interventions in the realm of infrastructure development with funding support under the aegis and oversight of federal constitutional structure. While the basic administration system remains with the autonomous councils where they are established and with the State government in the area where the council do not operate. A revamped North Eastern Council, an institution created under an Act of Parliament in 1972, could be one such instrument for this purpose. This would satisfy the need for introducing accountability and democratic practice into the conflict resolution machinery in the North East.

Conclusion: To conclude in a multicultural nation like India Federalism ironically appears to be looked upon both as a bogy and as savior. The realization that the people of North East needed special support to have their voice heard in a large polity in which they had little contact, was evident since independence. The demands for regional identity are not out of blue. They are the outcome of certain internal contradictions in pre-colonial, colonial and post post-colonial Indian situation. . The political history of Independent India does not offer a more radical example of meeting local aspirations. While there is always room for creative 'political solution' of perennial regional problems through building of consensus and continually enlarging the scope of 'democratization', it is doubtful if political paradigm admits further radical innovations. To meet the regional aspirations of the people of North East the government of India has so far adopted two models of autonomy-one in the Sixth Scheduled districts and another the autonomy enjoined with the state as provided under the Constitution of India. The Sixth Schedule model has been a progressive constitutional arrangement. But on closer scrutiny, the model has several inherent drawbacks. The provision that all laws and regulations made by the district councils require the consent of the State Governor appears to be a major drawback. More progressive in the implementation of internal self-determination policy could be a better solution for regional identity demand and challenges. The goal of internal self-determination is not the breakup of existing state, not the estrangement of peoples, but their rapprochement, the establishment of friendly relations and cooperation between them. The internal right of self-determination can be implemented through various mechanism and arrangements within the framework of a nation state and ultimately be a powerful tool for genuine democracy.

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