



Identity Movements in North East India: A Special Reference to the state of Assam

Priyanka Borkotoky

Department of political science
M. Phil, Dibrugarh University, Assam, India

ABSTRACT : *The North East part of India possesses a distinctive geo-political character mainly due to distinctive location from the main land, diverse geographical framework, ethnic diversities, economic backwardness and uneven level of development. North –East India has been a homeland of various religious, ethnic, linguistic and cultural groups. In this circumstances, various ethnic, linguistic and religious groups demand their separate identity and indulged in identity movement, autonomy movements, secessionist movement etc. In this paper, an attempt has been made to evaluate the various factors responsible for the politics of identity movement in North East India especially the state of Assam..*

Keywords: *Ethnic groups, identity movement, indigenous minority groups, North East India (N.E), tribal people.*

I. Introduction:

North East India is a politically vital and strategically vulnerable region of India [1] which consists of eight states namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura and Sikkim. This region is surrounded by four foreign countries, namely China, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Bhutan. It is virtually a land-locked area since it is connected with the rest of India through a narrow, thirty-kilometre corridor of foot hills land in North Bangle. Such unparalleled location of the region has invariably converted the North East India into an isolated pocket, where a feeling of alienation and separation find it easy to get developed [1]. Apart from these; it is mentionable that the population of North East India is so much heterogeneous. It consists of many different caste, classes, race, language, religion etc. In this circumstance, various ethnic, linguistic and religious groups demand their separate identity and



they are opting for identity movements, autonomy movements, secessionist movements etc.

II. Objectives of the Study:

The main objective of this paper is to evaluate the various factors responsible for politics of identity movement in North East India specially the state of Assam.

III. Methodology:

Here, descriptive and analytical method has been used and required information are collected from secondary sources such as books, journals, newspapers etc.

We all know that in North East India in many a times various ethnic, linguistic and religious groups demands their separate identity and they are going for identity movement, autonomy movement, secessionist movement etc. The major factors responsible for politics of identity movement in North East India can be discussed as follows.

IV. Result and Discussion:

Existence of Diversified ethnic Groups:

North East India is full of diversified ethnic groups living together generation after generation having distinctive historical and structural setting. As a result they have been struggling for upliftment on the basis of their ethnic distinctiveness and for this reason they are indulge in identity movement

Economic underdevelopment:

Economic underdevelopment as well as uneven pace of development leads the root cause of the resurgence of ethnic groups in the N.E region of India. It is alleged that the national mainstream has deliberately deprived the N.E states of adequate economic resources for their development. For example in case of Assam we can say that Assam has been contributing a large measures of national earnings by exporting oil, tea, coal, textile, forest resources and many others but in return it get a little for their development. So, the Assamese as an ethnic group



is in constant conflict with the national mainstream[2]. In this way various other ethnic group such as Karbi, Demasa, Kuki, Bodo, Naga, Mizu and many others also is in constant conflict with the national mainstream for their economic deprivation. They even go for demanding their autonomous states.

Perception of Hill Tribes towards people of plain areas:

The hill tribes of east while Assam have developed a perception that not only the national mainstream has discriminated against them but also the big brotherly attitude and treatment of plain men of Assam also contributed in this respect.[3] Such perception lead to the conflict between plains people and the hill's people on the basis of lingo-cultural distinctiveness and this ended with the formation of separate states like Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya etc.

Imposition of Assamese Language on the tribal people of North East India:

Imposition of Assamese Language on the tribal people of North East India creates a sense of ethnic identity among them. The government of Assam passed the Assam state language bill (1960) which ensures the safeguard of Assamese identity based on Assamese language. It made adverse effects on the hill people as they afraid of dominating and losing their distinctive linguistic identity because of Assamese language and identity. For instance united Mizu freedom organization while submitting a memorandum to the state reorganization commission at New Delhi strongly complain that the domination of Assamese language would divided the people of Assam into so many administrative units and in this way the Assamese people would carry on their imperialist policy over the Non -Assamese people. [4]

This bill obviously made the hills elite disturbed as they are linguistically different from the Assamese speaking people. It got manifested in the separation of Nagaland in 1963 by reducing the territorial size of Assam. Similarly Mizoram, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh were also got separated in order to maintain their linguistic identity.



Heterogeneous Population:

The population of Assam is so heterogeneous that both the indigenous and non indigenous minority groups have got an opportunity to make impact on her contemporary politics ever since the days of independence. The minority groups as divided into indigenous and non indigenous category. The Muslims and the people coming from outside Assam and neighbouring states constitute the non-indigenous minority groups. On the other hand the small groups of indigenous people locally origin but who have in course of time developed a feelings that they are socially backward, economically discriminated and politically deprived. They are called as the indigenous minority groups. With the spread of education there emerged an educated middle class among the minority groups. They have developed a sense of their all round backwardness. As a means of eradicating the backwardness the educated middle class of a minority groups started organising their people on community lines which culminated in the formation of a host of socio-cultural and political organization. These organizations representing minority groups placed a variety of demands and grievances before the government. They even go for demanding their separate identity.

Presence of outsider or unchecked flow of foreigner:

The presence of outsider or unchecked flow of foreigners to the North East India is another major factor responsible for politics of identity movement in North East India. So far as the migration to the North East India is concern its beginning can be dated back to the British colonial period and it is continuing till today in a unchecked way specially from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bihar, Nepal, Odessa, etc. Though there take certain measures for the deportation and detection of foreigner from time to time but the deportation of foreigner from North East India is remain an utopia. Such unchecked population to the North East India posses a great threat such as demographic imbalance, economic deprivation, political unrest & instability, employment problem, socio-cultural and linguistic threats towards the people of North East India. As a result various ethnic groups of North East India become conscious for losing their own distinctive lingo-cultural and ethnic identity and started identity movement.



Spread of Education and Democratization of Indian Policy:

Spread of Education and Democratization of Indian Policy is held responsible for the growth of ethnic identity consciousness that leading to ethnic movement and ethnic conflict in North East India.[5] With the spread of education among the various ethnic groups they become aware of their all-round backwardness and their deprivation in many aspects. They feel that they are depriving in economic, social, cultural and many aspects. So, they feel that they have to protect their own distinctive socio-cultural linguistic identity. A sense of ethnic consciousness emerged among them. It leads to the growth of identity movement in North East India.

Displacement of Tribal People:

Displacement of tribal People is one of the burning questions of today's politics of North East India. It is held responsible for the growth of politics of identity movement in North East India. It is because when an industry was set up in a tribal area, the people were evicted from their land and their land was being requisitioned. But there was a little effort to rehabilitate them. For example, in 1932 more than a 1000 tribal people Udalguri (Assam) were evacuated in order to establish Dhansiri irrigation project. According to a survey organized by the Tribal Research Institute 'A large number of villagers that they b have neither received any compensation nor any alternative land due to acquisition.' [6]

As a result of these factors there arises lots of ethnic conflict among the various ethnic groups of North East India and they even go for demanding their autonomous states by using violence means also. In Nagaland a state of North East India, there is primarily an ongoing conflict extended over from the neighbouring states of Assam and Manipur. Since 1993 there are continuous clashes between Naga and Kuki in Nagaland, where the Naga groups are majority.[7] Initially it started between the Thankul and Kukis in the Chandel district areas.

In Manipur, though the issue of ethnic conflicts are not found in its history but with the rising of the various outfits both in the valley and the hills, ethnic



clashes over conflicting interest has increased in the state. It resulted to death of nearly a thousand people and an enormous loss of property.

In Tripura, ethnic conflict is an old as its insurgency. Since 1980 Tripura has witnessed serious ethnic conflict between tribal and non-tribal Bengalis primarily for expulsion of Bengali immigrants who came to Tripura after 1949.

In Assam the consent for ethnic conflict got nourished in 1979 primarily when the middle class people headed by the All Assam student Union started protecting against the illegal migration from Bangladesh and was later joined by the ULFA, attacking the Bangladeshis settling in the state. During the last two decades, Assam has witnessed five major ethnic conflicts. These are between the Bodos and the Santhals in 1993, 1996 & 1998, between Karbis and Kukis in 2003 and between the Karbis and Demasas in 2005. [8]

Following independence the people of North East India especially the hill tribes started expressing their reluctant to remain as an integral part of Indian republic. The Naga people immediately after independence under the banner of national socialist council of Nagaland claimed for the creation of a sovereign greater Nagaland. For this purpose the NSCN build up an insurgent and violent movement. Unfortunately a separate state call Nagaland within the framework of Indian constitution was created in 1963. Even after founding the state of Nagaland a dissatisfied section of NSCN under two faction, NSCN (Idhaq-muilah) and NSCN (Khaplang) have been continuing their struggle for the realization of their long cherished dream of a greater independent Nagaland. In fact this demand has remained unfulfilled till date. Similarly, the Mizu national front demanded the autonomous Mizu state. In 1972 a separate state was founded under the leadership of Landanga, who happen to be the chief architect of violent struggle under the banner of Mizu national front. Similar was the case with the present state of Meghalaya, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, and Tripura which were converted into full-fledged states. In this context the case of Assam can't be left untouched. An insurgent outfit called ULFA came into being on 7th April 1979 who use violence means of safeguarding Assam and Assamese identity and their all- round development in the form of an independent state.[9] Likewise,



Bodo a plain tribe being disappointed with the regional party government formed in 1985. Because the 'All Assam Bodo Student Union' demanded certain administrative safeguard specially lands and forests but their demands were turn down by the regional party government. They forced the central and state government of Assam to constitute Bodo territorial administrative district. Despite so the NDFB led by Ranjan Doimari is still continuing its militant activities for an independent Bodoland.

V.Conclusion:

The identity movement in North East India is one of the serious issues which possess a great threat towards the people of North East India. It highly violates human rights. Therefore, there is a need for state initiatives coordinated by the central government for a multi-pronged approach towards the prevailing insecurity in the region. Both the central and state government should give importance on the all-round development of the various ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic groups both the hills and the plains. Apart from these, proper attention should be given for checking illegal migration which is the root cause of these movements. At last, the civil society and various NGO should come forward and take initiative in this regard.

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