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Social Exclusion and Ethnic Mobilisation in Northeast India: Understanding the role of Elites

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Abstract **Review Article**

The Northeast India has been passing through a serious ethnic conflict and turmoil ever since the independence of the country. The ethnic assertion of different groups are the manifestation of the urges and aspirations of these ethnic communities against exclusion and for their all round development. These assertions may be understood as a form of elite conflict. In fact, 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 questions such as how the elites of different communities mobilise the people of their respective communities? What strategies do they adopt to push through their objectives? What kind of exclusion motivates the elites of the ethnic communities to organise their respective communities? It is found in the study that the existing exclusion and conflict among the diverse communities of northeast India may be removed to some extent by mobilisation of the masses of all sections of people far beyond the interest of dominant Assamese elite and the elite of the ethnic communities as well as to end exploitation of the Indian State.

Keywords: Social exclusion, ethnic mobilization, elite conflict, extremism, Northeast India.

INTRODUCTION

Social Exclusion is a universal phenomenon. It refers to the process and outcome of keeping a social group outside the power centres and resources. Social exclusion is a powerful form of discriminatory practice. Exclusion has taken the form of segregating a group of people from the social, political, economic, cultural, educational and religious domain of societal life. Further it also culminates into a system of domination and subjugation. All these processes not only lead to oppression and exploitation, but also keep certain social groups away from the mainstream development. As long as the individuals and social groups who are subject to exclusion remain silent, there would be no conflict. Social exclusion may be of various kinds, such as exclusion from livelihood, exclusion from social services, welfare and security networks, exclusion from political choice, exclusion from popular organization and solidarity, and exclusion from understanding of what is happening (Wolf, 1995: 81-101). It results in the denial of access to opportunities, public goods, public offices and institutions and self respect in public spheres. Social exclusion is the inability of our society to keep all groups and individuals within reach of what we expect as a society or to release their full potentials (Power and Wilson, 2000:27). The socially excluded is deprived of social recognition, self-respect and social values. The basis of exclusion can be race, ethnicity, gender, religion, language, region, caste and so on. There is an inbuilt tendency towards social exclusion in liberal democratic states (Taylor, 1998:147). It leads to injustice to certain communities as it denies the access to public offices and primary goods (Rawls, 1971).

On the other hand, ethnicity refers to the ideas of primordialism based on descent, race, kinship, territory, language, history, etc. with distinctions from another group of people sharing certain common attributes among themselves. It is also defined as "the sense of collective belonging to a named community of common myths or origin and shared memories, associated with a historic homeland" (Smith, 1999: 262). Ethnicity is based on group identity and often invented or constructed. In certain cases, ethnic identity is intrinsically connected with language. Ethnicity is often considered as the outward expression of discrimination – discrimination in access to resources and opportunities (Yinger, 1997:169). For Paul Brass, the ethnic groups are any group of people dissimilar

from other groups in objective cultural criteria containing within its members. This has become the cultural basis of ethnicity which is 'a sense of ethnic identity to create internal cohesion and to differentiate themselves from other groups (Brass 1991: 19). For T K Oommen, ethnic group is one which maintains its life style outside its homeland. Oommen starts with the French word 'ethnie' which means "a people who share a common history, tradition, language and life-styles, but are uprooted from and/or unattached to a homeland" (Oommen 2009:10). Caroline F. Ware uses 'ethnic communities' to denote groups bound together by common ties of race, nationality or culture, living together within an alien civilization but remaining culturally distinct (Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences, 1938). In Northeast India, those groups which evoke 'ethnic consciousness' or shared cultural traits are not necessarily uprooted from or unattached to their ancestral homeland. Jackson makes terminological distinction between ethnic category, ethnic group and ethno-nation. Ethnic category signifies persons of the same social and cultural characteristics that identify them as members of a recognizable social category. Characteristics may include race, religion, colour, customs, language, and geographical origin. Thus the emphasis is on primordial characteristics. Ethnic group indicates an ethnic category that has acquired additional characteristics of identity and organisation. Identity means to value one's membership in an ethnic category. Ethno-nation arises when an ethnic group aspires an interest in public authority which may be constitutional status of special rights, provincial autonomy and not outright sovereignty. The process by which ethnic category may be awakened and transformed into ethnic group or ethno-nation is called by Jackson 'ethnic mobilisation'. Ethnicity, which is an American creation, may perhaps, be used synonymously with Jackson's ethnic mobilisation. Ethnicity is more appropriately applied to the minority groups of United States and Canada. These groups designed their identity from ancestral culture but unattached their homeland. They are ethnic groups vying for identity employing ethnic mobilisation at various levels (Nunthara 2000: 51-52).

Social exclusion leads to ethnic identity crisis and in turn identity assertion. Paul Brass identified that ethnic identity formation involves three processes. Firstly, "within the ethnic group itself for control over its material and symbolic resources", secondly, "between ethnic groups as a competition for rights, privileges, and available resources", and thirdly, "between the state and the groups that dominate it, on the one hand, and the populations that inhabit its territory on the other" (Brass, 1991: 247). Social exclusion prevents groups from full participation in social, economic and political life and from asserting their rights. It is viewed that "ethnicity or ethnic identity also involves, in addition to subjective self-consciousness, a claim to status and recognition, either as a superior group or as a group at least equal to other groups" (Brass, 1991: 19).

Ethnicity and Extremism in Northeast India

The Northeastern region of India is often described as the 'miniature India' consisting of different races, cultures, languages and religions, leading to a diversity rarely seen elsewhere in India. With an area of about 2.6 lakh square kilometer, it is a conglomeration of around 475 ethnic groups and subgroups, speaking over 400 languages (Bhaumik, 2009: 1). The region, connected to the mainland India with a narrow corridor, consists of eight states and has international border with neighbouring countries, namely Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal, China, and Bhutan. In the international scene, it is a strategic location linked to South and South-East Asia. From internal security point of view, the region has been seen as the 'problem child' since the very inception of the Indian republic because the region has been experiencing law and order problems in the form of inter and intra ethnic conflicts and resultant human rights violations.

The politics of Northeast India has been marked by ethnicity and extremism for decades. The assertion of various ethnic identities and the policies of the Indian state in containing ethnic extremism make the region distinct from the rest of the country. The root cause of ethnic assertion can be found in the identity crisis of various tribal communities. Most of the ethnic assertions are due to ethnic groups' veiled attempts to protect their identity, culture and language. In fact, ethnicity is a sense of ethnic awareness. Ethnic mobilization is conditioned by the overall political and economic environment. As the state operates under the laws of market economy within the broad politico-economic environment giving birth to uneven economic development, it widens the gaps among ethnic groups. Therefore, ethnicity is the outward reaction of various socio-cultural groups against the existing politico-economic system wherein either inequality or competition acts as catalyst in mobilizing people on the basis of ethnicity (Phukon, 2003: 15). In other words, the basis of ethnic assertion can be seen in two contexts. Firstly, the tribal communities' subjective consciousness of being excluded, oppressed and marginalized. Secondly, the process of development failed to address the legitimate concerns of the people. Though after independence, the Indian state tried to integrate and assimilate various ethnic communities in the mainstream national identity, the development process generated a feeling of alienation among them. Moreover, development led to the unequal distribution of resources across the communities and regions. Thus, both non-economic (subjective consciousness) and economic (material) factors created a sense of exclusion among some ethnic communities (Bijukumar, 2013: 19-35).

India's constitutional democracy and ethnic communities of Northeast India

In post-independent period, India's constitutional democracy followed a policy of accommodation and assimilation and protected the interests of tribal communities by adopting special provisions. The Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution gives special privileges to the tribal communities of Northeast India. In spite of this, they are confronting with multiple kinds of exclusion. All these institutional mechanisms proved to be futile as 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 the discontented communities, the efforts did not yield much result. While the state is engaging in nation-building through the construction of national identity, smaller identities move in the opposite direction, when they feel that they are about to lose their identity. In this context, various ethnic groups are seeking larger space in state and are trying to protect their peculiar identity. The state also makes provisions for the creation of autonomous district councils. In spite of all these accommodations, the state initiative to integrate all communities and groups proved to be counter-productive.

The Indian postcolonial development process tried to integrate and assimilate ethnic communities towards the mainstream development process while ignoring their cultural and economic specificities. The centralized planning and the capitalist modernization further lead to the exclusion of various tribal communities from mainstream (Biswas and Suklabaidya, 2008: 124). The indigenous way of development of the ethnic communities was disturbed by the penetration of the capitalist development leading to underdevelopment, displacement of communities from their settlement and livelihood and erosion of community life. Thus, the postcolonial modernization initiated by the newly independent India generated some kind of discontent among the communities leading towards violence (Gurr, 1970: 317; Gohain, 1997: 391). The problem of ethnicity and extremism is further aggregated by the regional consciousness aroused by elites, especially the middle class (Singh, 1998; Baruah, 1991; Sharma, 1990). Again the dominant communities allied with state power exclude certain groups from accessing resources, institutions and opportunities, generating a feeling of exclusion of other groups. In such situation, smaller ethnic communities assert for resources and opportunities. The assertion of marginalized identities and its extremist posture are giving a new direction to state politics. The Northeast region of India was to be reorganized in the sixties and early seventies of the last century creating a number of states such as Nagaland (1963), Meghalaya (1972), Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram (1987) to meet the demands of these ethnic groups. Even after reorganization of original state of Assam, the demand for creation of more states still continues. It is argued that the creation of separate state further fanned the fire when "various smaller and bigger communities started to demand establishment of more states; on the other hand, the state showed their inability to deliver the basic goods" (Madhab, 1999: 320). Again the ethnic mobilization assumes an extremist posture when various ethnic movement arousing emotive issues to expand its mass base among the society. Another kind of social exclusion visible is in the area of language. The introduction of the Assam Official Language Act 1960 had its repercussion on the Mizos, Khasis, Garos and Bodos, and it further reinforced the demand for separate political identity and consciousness among the divergent ethnic groups in the united Assam.

Thus, social exclusion and ethnic mobilization reinforce each other in many contexts. In the post-independent period, the nationalist leadership in connivance with the regional counterparts adopted a number of policies aimed at promoting the process of national integration in the Indian state. But in the national assimilation process, the smaller communities increasingly felt insecure about protecting their ethnic identity in the apprehension of being submerged in the bigger national identity. Hence, these suppressed ethnic communities have initiated some measures to protect and preserve their identity. Though they share common Indian identity, they equally carry their regional or in some cases sub regional or community based identities. Such regional or community based identities were not given due importance by nationalist leadership and regional ruling elite who viewed it as a threat to India's unity and integrity; instead they used a number of coercive measures to subside these identities. The inability of successive Indian national and regional state governments to understand these diversities itself created crisis of Indian nation-state. Therefore, it would be worthwhile to study the problem of social exclusion to understand ethnic mobilization and extremism in the context of Northeast India.

Social exclusion and elite conflict in Northeast India

The northeast India has been passing through a serious ethnic conflict and turmoil ever since the independence of the country. The ethnic assertion of the Nagas, Mizos, Tripura tribals, Meities of Manipur, the Assamese movement on the issue of infiltration, the assertion of the Khasis, Garos, Karbis in the hills, the Bodos, Kacharies, Tiwas, Rabhas, Misings, Ahoms, Chutias, Deories, Koch Rajbanshis, Moran, Matak in the plains are the manifestation of the urges and aspirations of these ethnic communities against exclusion and for their all round development. These assertions may be understood as a form of elite conflict (Phukon 2003: 35). In fact, 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 questions such as how the elites of different communities mobilise the people of their respective communities? What strategies do they adopt to push through their objectives? What kind of exclusion motivates the elites of the ethnic communities to organise their respective communities?

The term 'elite' refers to influential sub-group within the ethnic group and classes. 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. 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. The resources become symbols for the identification of members of the group which create a political identity. To Paul Brass "the elite mobilise 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" (Brass 1991: 17). The assertion of Hmars in Mizoram against the domination of Mizos and the assertion of Garos against Khasis in Meghalaya is a self-evident factor to prove this argument. There is competition and conflict for political power, economic benefit and social status between competing elites. The cultural and linguistic differences separate the relatively disadvantaged aspirant elite group from their competitors in the dominant group. These differences become the basis for a special claim for job and other advantages. Such claims are associated with the efforts to mobilise the disadvantaged ethnic groups and to create a sense of identity among its members. Thus, the process of intensifying the differences between the disadvantaged group and dominant group may begin. As a result of modernisation process, many ethnic groups may assimilate to the language and culture of the ruling ethnic group. The politicisation of ethnicity, however, 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 social class. If the disadvantaged ethnic group is a minority concentrated in a geographical area, its elites will demand the 'legitimate' share of political power in the political system. They will also call for some kind of politico-administrative devolution or decentralisation of political power or in some cases for secession (Brass, 46). Keeping in view these ideas on elite conflict we are going to examine the questions raised above in the context of northeast India.

The northeast comprises of seven Indian states, i.e. Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. It is covered by both the hills consisting nearly 70% areas and the plains consisting of 30% 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 i.e. Assam, Manipur and Tripura too possess substantial tribal population. The tribal population inhabiting this region are of Mongoloid origin. In addition to this, the northeast is rich in mineral resources like oil, natural gas, coal and limestone. Besides, there are fertile soils for producing tea, rice, jute; and immense forest resources like timber, rivers, and waterfalls with enormous potentialities to produce hydroelectric power. However, the people of the frontier region still feel that they are neglected, exploited and discriminated.

One of the most important causes of slow development of the region has been the continuation of tribal and feudal society with a little of capital formation and commodity production for a long time. During pre-British period, trade and commerce did not grow sufficiently to bring the heterogeneous tribes and ethnic communities together by absorbing them in a common market. Besides during the colonial period, the infrastructure necessary for indigenous economic development were not grown adequately. On the contrary, the imperialist rulers exploited the natural resources without reinvestment for the development of the region. Even after several decades of independence, it appears to the people of the region 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. Hence, 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".

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 were somehow integrated with both pan-Indian and pan-Assamese nationalism. More importantly, they were virtually aryanised long before Assam was colonised. It may, however, be noted that racially a large number of people of Assam belonged to Mongoloid stock such as Ahoms, Chutias, Koches, Morans, and Sonowal Kacharis who virtually integrated with the Assamese nationality. Another very important segment of Assamese nationality has been the upper-caste minority Hindus and other low caste Assamese and Assamese Muslims. However, two large migrant groups the tea garden labourers and Muslim peasants 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.

As a result of exposure to Christianity and western education, there emerged articulate tribal elites in the hills. They acted as opinion builders and motivators of socio-political awareness among the hill tribal. At the advent of independence, they even laboured under a 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 (CAD, Vo. XI, p. 711). 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 hill elite and the tribal chiefs. They thought that if the hill areas were completely integrated with the plains, they would lose their traditional privileges and socio-political dominance in the hills. As a measure of meeting the aspiration of the hill people, the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution was introduced to create an Autonomous District Council in addition to other measures for protecting their interest. As such, the Nagas, Mizos, Khasis, Jayantias, Karbis and Dimasa Kacharis enjoyed autonomy in respect of managing their affairs. But gradually they started realising that the autonomy accorded to them through this statutory provision was not adequate to safeguard their interest under the Assamese elite dominated Assam administration (Memorandum of UMFO, 28 May, 1954). The language policy of Assam Government (1960) making the Assamese as the Official Language of the state further alienated the hill tribal from the Assamese. 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 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 (Phukon 2003: 40). 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 fulfilment of their political aspiration.

After independence of India, the composition of ruling class had changed significantly. The Indian ruling class is composed of national bourgeoisie, landlords and bureaucrats. It operates at two levels national and regional. Despite being a part of the Indian ruling class, the regional or state ruling class tries to assert its autonomy at the regional level in order to derive concessions to ensure its survival and power. The state enables the ruling class to exercise monopoly over political and economic power. The national bourgeoisie with the help of regional bourgeoisie reap benefit of development and convert weaker nationalities into 'colonial hinterland'. As such together with the Indian ruling class the Assamese ruling class have been asserting their autonomy and identity at the regional level. The Assamese ruling class use the state machinery for their interest and try to establish their socio-cultural hegemony over the entire Assamese society. Further, it has always been reluctant to share power and benefits even with the other oppressed and backward section of the Assamese nationality. As a result, the ethnic communities, who once 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 (Hussain, 1997). The autochthon tribals and other ethnic groups are not prepared to accept the dominance of the Assamese caste Hindu elite. This feeling manifests in the movements for distinct identity launched by the ethnic groups under the leadership of their respective emerging educated elite. The intolerant attitude of the Assamese ruling class and opinion builders of Assam to the movements further deteriorates the situation.

It may be noted that the tribals remained much more backward socially, economically and even politically than other sections of the Assamese society, in spite of being the first natives of Assam. In the post-colonial Assam the Assamese ruling class were not much concerned with the problem faced by the plains tribals. They were experiencing the problem of land alienation, poverty, indebtedness, unemployment and political oppression. The hill tribes were given autonomy in managing their own affairs under the provision of Sixth Schedule but similar facilities were not extended to the plain tribals. Although, the plain tribals dominated areas were classified as 'Tribal Blocks' and 'Tribal Belt' to protect the tribals from the encroachment of non-tribals into their areas, the non-tribals were allowed to acquire land and settle in the tribal areas. In view of this, since the late sixties of the last century, the plains tribals became more conscious and articulate about distinct ethnic identity and started utilising 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 generalise their conflicts and build up movements mobilising their respective communities politically.

It is worthwhile to mention that upper caste dominant Assamese middle class acquired the hegemonic position not only in Assam but also in the entire northeast. The nationalism developed in Assam under the leadership of this class and therefore it became the dominant nationality in the region. As a result, the ideas, values and culture of this class came to be imposed on other ethnic communities. This generated considerable resentment among the non-dominant ethnic groups which culminated in the formation of different organisations among them. Initially the dominant Assamese elite did not show much interest in the cultures of the ethnic groups. But when the emerging educated elite of these groups began to assert their distinctness, the Assamese ruling class wanted them to be assimilated with the so called main-stream Assamese culture. Therefore, they started pressing for recognition of Assamese as the official language of the state. To counteract this move the emerging elite of these communities started mobilising their respective communities in a bid to resist the cultural expansionism of the dominant section of the Assamese (Baruah and Sarmah, 1991: 20). The Bodo elite were the first to resist the Assamese hegemony. They considered the dominant Assamese elite as their immediate enemy and the big brotherly attitude of the later further added fuel to the fire. As such a similar situation arose even in the case of other tribal and non-tribal ethnic groups such as the Misings, Karbis, Tiwas, Rabhas, Deoris, Chutias and Ahoms and so on.

However, under the present leadership of either dominant Assamese elite or of the ethnic elite a drastic change of the basic socio-economic structure of the country is not possible because of their bourgeoisie class character (Phukon, 2003: 46). They mobilise the people of their respective communities with emotive slogan mainly for the purpose of their own interest. In fact, they project their interest as the interest of the entire community. Nevertheless, the existing exclusion and conflict among the diverse communities of northeast India may be removed to some extent by mobilisation of the masses of all sections of people far beyond the interest of dominant Assamese elite and the elite of the ethnic communities as well as to end exploitation of the Indian State.

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