



## ISSUES OF IDENTITY POLITICS AND ETHNIC CONFLICT IN NORTH EAST INDIA

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### ABSTRACT

#### KEYWORDS:

*Conflict, Identity, Crisis,  
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*The interrogation of identity is very much complex and conflict situation in northeast India in general and Assam as special. North-East India is a vital and strategically vulnerable border region, consist of the eight states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland Tripura and Sikkim, all the states of North East is linguistically and religiously diverse in nature. Diversities in terms of linguistic variation, Mongoloid ethnic origins and religious pluralism characterise the region. The main juncture of the discord in North East India is a fear of linguistic cultural subjugation and contributory factors of economic negligence and the failures of political segment. The root cause of Identity Politics in North East is weird mentality of ethnic people which is “we want special privileges” because of the sense of deprivation in Political, Economic and Cultural sense. There have been a number of ethnic movements in the northeast in order to preserve one’s Identity. Therefore, there is a linkage between ethnic identity and ethnic conflict. Identity is the birthright of an individual. Ethnic Movement is directly a threat for the nation. Therefore, 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 hill and the plains. Apart from that proper attention should be given for checking illegal migration which is the root cause of Identity Crisis.*

### INTRODUCTION

Talking about ‘identity politics’ in the tribal communities one thinks in terms of politics centring on the demands of ‘preservation of identity’. The tribal communities in the north-eastern region have been expressing fears of losing their identity as a result of increasing interaction with the non-tribal communities. They have been articulating demands for further constitutional and administrative provisions to safeguard their ‘tribal’ identity. Issues of ‘identity politics’ have been discussed by sociologists in their studies on ethnic groups in modern states whose citizens belong to different communities. The communities that I am concerned with here are the tribal communities inhabiting the north-eastern parts of India. These tribes inhabit their own territories (homeland), and live not as fragments but as communities. These communities are designated as ‘tribal’ by the Constitution of India without consideration of any anthropological definition of tribe. These communities have accepted this label while referring to themselves.

Identity politics is starts from identity crisis. Crisis is a part of human civilisation. People come across a number of crisis in their personal, professional, cultural, political, religious and social interaction. One of the major crisis a community experiences is when their identity is questioned or at stake. When a group feels that they are deprived of

something that they deserve, people begin to polarize and fight for their demands. Most of the major conflicts occurred in the history of north east India is based on identity. The main juncture of the discord in northeast India is a fear of linguistic cultural subjugation and contributory factors of economic negligence and the failures of political segment. The root cause of identity politics in northeast is weird mentality of ethnic people which is “we want special privileges” because of the sense of deprivation they started asserting.

Historically Naga Movement was the first reflection of identity crisis. After 1886 the annexation of Naga territories all competing sub-tribes of Naga group came under united administrative control of British power. They did not accept the British rules because they already had their own traditional political institution to which Naga were only loyal. This was perhaps the first stage of Naga Identity formation.

The political dimension of identity is very complex. India is a multiethnic nation-state. Here, the political conflicts around identities assume different forms and versions at various times due to divergence of regions and its people. Moreover, there are differences in people’s expression of their community identities at the local, state and national levels. As such India has vivid experiences in respect of politics of identity. In Maharashtra, the region had emerged as the symbol of distinctiveness of its people. In other parts like Punjab and

Kashmir religious identity has become the major issue of conflict between the Centre and the respective ethnic groups, while in North-East India linguistic identity has caught the political limelight. This variation is the result of defining distinctiveness along various aspects of identity like region, religion, caste and language etc.

The biggest and most interesting manifestation of the identity crisis in Assam has been started because of large linguistic and cultural groups. The reorganisation of states on the basis of language was a major step towards accommodating different identities into the political mainstream of the country. According to the estimate made by K.S. Singh (1996), Northeast India has 382 culturally and regionally distinct communities of various sizes at various stages of development. The leaders of such communities have begun to identify the values and interests which appeared to be universal to their respective communities. The articulation of such interest has led to much tension because such interests of a community invariably come in conflict with interests of other communities. The movements of various communities either asserting a new identity or preserving and protecting their ethnic identity from assimilation are the most significant aspects of the contemporary socio-political realities of Northeast India. The movements launched by the Assamese, the Bengalis, the Nagas, the Kukis, the Khasis, the Garo, the Mizos, the Bodos, the Karbis, and the Bishnupriyas among others are significant. Many smaller groups with somewhat blurred cultural markers are now also beginning to assert their identities, some of which are even busily intervening in separate identities. At times, such assertions emerged as a result of political strategy for national and state level elections. For instance, the Assamiya-Bengali and the Bodo-Non Bodo conflicts in the Bodo inhabited areas of Assam have a close relationship with the politics of domination and autonomy.

### **THE BEGINNING OF IDENTITY CRISIS IN NORTHEAST**

If we look at the tribal demographic situation and its transformation over the last one hundred years during 1872-1971 the tribal population were increase vigorously. But some percentage of the tribal population they give up their own language. Roughly one out three tribal's do not speak tribal language. It is somehow the reason of rising identity crisis.

The emergence of middle class and Christian Church in pre-independence era played vital role in the beginning of identity crisis. Administrative protection and Christianity appear to be the common denominators of the new identities that grow in northeast India in British period. Chaube also argues that because of the impact of Christian Missionary the educated youth of tribal community in different region of northeast they were apathetic to the movement but because of Identity crisis and lack of co-operation with mainland of India the frustrated youth becomes secessionist. Church which gave the people of Northeast India their linguistic consciousness and tribal people raised the first voice of protest against the system of tribal slavery.

### **IDENTITY POLITICS AMONG THE ETHNIC COMMUNITIES IN NORTHEAST**

Northeast India is enclosed by Bangladesh, Bhutan and Tibet and linked with mainland India by a narrow corridor between Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. The population of north east consists of the inhabitants who migrated into the

region at various periods of history from Tibet, Burma, Thailand, Bengal and elsewhere. Migration is the prime cause of conflict in northeast. The migrated ethnic groups in the valley were plains tribes and other backward groups and the Bengali Non-Bengali immigrants. Immigration of muslims from Tripura. The ethno-cultural factor is the Prime cause of complexity in Northeast. A study by Hussain pointed out that the demographic division of the population of Assam in 1971 was the root cause of clashes. According to 1971 census report, Assam had a tribal population of 16,06,648. The tribal population in Assam was significant both numerically and percentage wise. This tribal stands at uneven levels in relation to one another in terms of social cultural economic and political development.

If we see that the identity politics in the context of historical experiences of the hill tribes in the north-eastern region of India. During the last nine centuries was historical experience of these tribes over this period has helped in the formation of their tribal identity because from there period the intensity and frequently of inter-tribal interactions gradually increased. The northeast India had been experience of British divide and rule policy. The British had divided the hill areas into two categories based on their levels of development: Excluded Areas and Partially Excluded Areas. The British wanted to keep the tribal under the Excluded Areas segregated from the influence of the people in the plains of Assam the hidden motive was to reduce the risks to their lives from the attacks by the tribal.

In north east India we have witnessed that identity politics and identity crisis became converted into identity movement for example Naga movement. The primary object of the Naga movement is sovereignty. Naga Movement is one of the major long standing and least known armed struggle between different Naga outfit and Government of India. It is such a problem which has been handling by all the prime minister of india including the first Jawaharlal Nehru to present Narendra Modi with a view to find a way of solution. This reflects the depth of Naga problem and politics. Naga movement is regarded as the mother of all Separatists movements of the North-Eastern region. Manipur, a state of 2.7 million people, is home to three major ethnic groups, namely the Kuki, Naga, and Meitei. While the Meiteis, who are primarily settled in four valley districts, clamour for the territorial integrity of the state, the Kukis and the Nagas call for separate administrative arrangements in the hill areas. These competing agendas underlie the state's continued instability and underdevelopment and threaten to cause new rounds of instability. Ethnic violence in Manipur from 1992 to 1997 between the two ethnic groups resulted in the death of over 1,000 people, the destruction of thousands of homes, and the displacement of tens of thousands of people. While the physical violence has ceased, tensions between the two groups still lingers. The simmering tension has led to different forms of agitation from both sides, with each making competing claims and counterclaims.

### **TENSION AROUND IDENTITY AND NATION**

The identity crisis of the North East India is a product of historical experiences of various communities. Theoretically speaking, ethnic identity is the symbolic use of certain markers of culture by a community to differentiate itself from other groups and communities. It involves claims to a higher status as a group in relation to others. Such self-conscious groups

develop their own criteria for inclusion into and exclusion from the group. The use of ethnic identity for pursuing group interests is ethnicity which is initially utilised for people's mobilisation. Subsequently the same identity turns into an instrument to seek political and economic advantages (Karna 1999b) take a violent turn and some may even have armed wings which may eventually separate themselves from the parent body and acquire a structure of their own. In modern day concept Identity crisis became violent in nature, It is thus seen that North-East is mired with a host of problems that is connected with the common thread of "threat to identity". The Government has by and large failed to resolve the identity crisis posed to the people in the different states of North East.

### **VIOLENCE AND THE STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY**

The people of Northeast employed democratic means to assert their ethnic identity. However, these means failed to achieve desired result. Thus in sheer frustration many groups in Northeast took up armed struggles against the Indian Government. Thus, the unarmed peaceful movement against the influx and economic exploitation transferred to an armed national liberation struggle. The main intention of Government of India many military operations is to suppress the legitimate aspiration of the people of the Northeast, and their basic and fundamental rights. There are endless lists of gross human rights violations during this period by Indian occupation forces. They have killed hundreds of innocent people, hundred more have disappeared in their custody and many of our womenfolk have been raped while many more hundreds have been severely tortured to become handicapped. It is the reflection of direct consequence of colonial repressive policy of India. Today, Northeast is an occupied country under Indian's martial law and an undeclared war inside Northeast is running on. Anything may happen at any time inside this war theatre. Colonial India's this repressive policy compels to the freedom fighters of Northeast to take up arms for self defence. India's North-eastern region has never been out of news totally. Armed conflicts, problems of refugees from the neighbouring countries, the demand for separate States, fighting among tribal groups and guerrilla warfare with the Indian army etc. have claimed thousands of lives already.

### **RESOLVING IDENTITY CRISIS IN NORTHEAST INDIA**

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 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 hill and the plains. Apart from these, proper attention should be given for checking illegal migration which is the root cause of Identity Crisis.

### **CONCLUSION**

Identity crises have been experiencing by most of the communities around the globe. A number of researches have been done to find out solutions to resolve ethnic conflicts and the issue of identity crisis. However the problems still exist and people tend to face similar conflicts based on ethnic identity. In fact one of the common forms of conflict seen in developing and underdeveloped countries are on the basis of ethnicity. Ethnicity in itself is not something bad, because it unites people and gives them an identity and honour. However, ethnicity when taken to the other extreme can create identity crisis and become a source of conflict. One of the major reasons for ethnic conflicts based on identity crisis is the threat to the existence of the people with dignity. When people feel that their traditional habits, values and practices are obstructed, they begin to look at others with suspicion and do anything to preserve what is dear to them. People also begin to be tensed when they are not able to meet their daily requirements. Hence, it is important to provide and safeguard the basic needs of the people so as to make them content. In order to tackle these issues we need to take up developmental activities in the tribal areas and the co-operation from every corner of the society like the government, NGOs, community leaders, state actors, and the civil society are a requirement. Any developmental activities that are designed for the tribal areas should be implemented with persuasion and not with coercion.

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