

# Conflict over Power: Changing Dimensions of Ethnic Identity Politics in India's North- East

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## Abstract

*Over the past 30 years, the dimensions of ethnic identity politics in North-East India has been changing. And due to ethnolinguistic, socio-economic and geographic diversity, the region has its own features in identity politics which are not similar to the other parts of the country. Since independence, the region has witnessed ethnic identity and insurgency movement challenging the integrity and sovereignty of the country. The present paper is an attempt to evaluate how the ethnic identity politics has been changing from 'group identity' movement to 'individual identity' construction and how it creates a complex situation among the ethnic groups and in the whole region.*

**Keywords:** - Conflict, Power, Changing Dimensions, Ethnic Identity Politics, India's North-East

## 1. Introduction

India's north-eastern frontier is one of South Asia's hottest trouble spots. With as many as 30 armed insurgent organizations currently operating there and pushing demands ranging from secession to autonomy and the right of self-determination, and a plethora of ethnic groups clamoring for their rights and distinct identity. This region spreading over 263,000 square kilometers shares a highly porous and sensitive frontier with China to the north, Myanmar to the east, Bangladesh to the southwest and Bhutan to the northwest [6], whereas the region is connected to the mainland India with only 20-kilometer total land commonly known as the 'Chicken's Neck'. The region has its own socio-cultural, geographical, political, linguistic, and economic uniqueness which is not similar to the other parts of the country. The region is comprised of the states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Sikkim. Since the independence of the country, the region witnessed several ethnic identity movement and identity politics challenging the integrity and sovereignty of the country. The region is also known as the 'hotspot' of human rights violation, ethnic conflict, and insurgency movement.

Deaths, injuries, and humiliations resulting from 'insurgencies' and 'counter-insurgency operations', as well as the hidden hurt that citizens quietly endure have become a part of the texture of everyday life in the region. [1] In North East India most of the insurgent groups were emerge on the basis of their ethnic lines namely United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN), Karbi National Volunteers, Tiwa National Revolutionary Force, Kuki National Front, Hmar Revolutionary Front or Zomi Revolutionary Volunteers, All Tripura Tigers Force, Revolutionary Army of Arunachal Pradesh. Though the demand and formation of each insurgency groups were different, the prime motive of the insurgency groups was the same i.e., security and development of their own ethnic group.

## 2. Articulation of Ethnic Identity in North-East India

In the case of articulation of ethnic identity in North-East India, we must look at the T. K. Oommen's, six reasons of ethnification. First, a nation may continue to be in its ancestral or adopted homeland and yet it may be ethnified by the colonizing or native dominant collectivity. Second, the denial of full-fledged participation in the economy and polity to an immigrant collectivity which had adopted a new land as its homeland. Thirdly, the tendency on the part of a settler collectivity to identify with its ancestral homeland even after several decades, sometimes even after centuries, of immigration. Fourthly, ethnification also occurs when a state attempts to 'integrate' and homogenize the different nations in its territory into a common people. Fifthly, if those who migrate to alien lands are denied basic human and citizenship rights even when they become eligible for them, they are ethnified in that they are treated as strangers and outsiders. And sixth is even when immigrants are accepted as co-nationals by the host society, the former may not want that identity and might wish to return to their homeland. [8] Further, Oommen identified three major agents of change among the tribes of North- East India- the state, the civil society (of which the Church is the

major elements) and the market forces. [7] However, in North-East India most of the violence and conflictual situations emerge from ethnic movement or assertion. Saikia has opined that the root cause of ethnic assertion can be found in the identity crisis of various tribal communities who extend over the territorial boundaries drawn by the Indian nation-state. Most of the ethnic assertion is due to ethnic groups' desperate attempts to protect their identity, culture and language, [9] e.g., the Assam Movement of 1979-84 was emerged for the protection of Assamese identity from illegal migration, similarly Naga movement was come out to protect their indigenous identity, and Mizo movement were come due to the negligence of both state and central government. Bijukumar, on the other hand, stated that the basis of ethnic assertion can be seen in two contexts. First, 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. [2]

After independence education emerges as the significant factor of ethnic identity assertion in North-East India as the sense of social exclusion in the North-East was articulated with the emergence of new social forces i.e., educated middle-class elite, students, and youth groups. The new social forces help to creates awareness among their own community and mobilized their community to their ethnic line. Later on, the displacement of tribal people from their own land emerges as the major cause of articulation of ethnic identity that creates some pathetic situations among the tribal people of this region. Moreover, the dominance of Assamese language over the minorities also the cause of articulation of ethnic identity in this region. The Assam Official Language Act 1960, had its repercussion on the Mizos, Khasis, Garos, and Bodos, and it further rekindled the regional consciousness among the divergent ethnic groups in the United Assam. For instance, the people of Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills, and the Garo Hills, under the leadership of the All Party Hills Leaders Conference demanded a separate state. [2] And immediately in 1963 Nagaland was separated from greater Assam, Meghalaya in 1972, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram in 1987. However, the process of separation is still continuing particularly in Assam. For instance, in 1979 the Karbi Anglong People's Conference (KAPC) also declared the need for a separate state for the hilly population of Assam. But KAPC sometimes supported the issue of separate state and sometimes opposed and thus the demand for a separate state became diluted. However, a political consensus again began to prevail among

most of the Karbis in favor of an autonomous state from 1990 onwards. [10]

### **3. Conflict Over Power: Changing Dimensions of Ethnic Identity Politics in India's North- East**

Over the past 30 years, the dimensions of ethnic identity politics in India's North East has been changing. Earlier it was based on ethnic 'group' identity questions where ethnic groups are organized to protect their indigenous group identity. But nowadays it turns into 'individual identity' construction where the educated elite middle class is trying to mobilize their group or community for making their own identity or profit. Brass correctly stated that "the cultural norms, values, and practices of ethnic groups become political resources for elites in competition for political power and economic advantage. [3] And in the case of North- East India, this whole process is initiated by the educated middle class and they are basically the promoter of ethnic-based movement in this region. Since independence education helps in the process of the formation of the educated middle class, whose always aim is to use resources for their own interest. Nowadays in North East India educated middle class to become more powerful as they form their own political parties. And in Weber's words, 'parties' are groups which are specifically concerned with influencing policies and making a decision in the interest of their membership and are concerned with the acquisition of social "power". [5]

Bijukumar stated that the demand of smaller territorial units acceding to the demands of the dominant ethnic community in a region often threatens the existence and survival of numerically less ethnic communities as the positions and jobs and resources were monopolized the dominant ethnic group. The Hmar problem in Mizoram and Garos disadvantageous positions in accessing resources and positions in Meghalaya are such examples forcing them to arouse ethnic feeling and violent mobilization. [2] The instrumentalist studies on the ethnicity of this kind emphasize on how the emerging classes and elites within the traditional communities' form organizations, invent traditions, articulate ethnic differences and practice ethnic politics to achieve the materialist goals that have been set. [4]

Emerging market forces, on the other hand, give another level of identity politics in underdeveloped regions like North- East India. Because the new market forces created by the liberalization and globalization have given birth to rich peasants with settle cultivation, indigenous

business entrepreneur, real state owners etc. Though it helps in the development of the region simultaneously it creates landless peasants through the process of displacement of tribal people from their own homeland. And it is important to note here is that the political parties belong to their own community even involved in the process of displacement of their own community. For the better understanding of the problem, we must look at C. Wright Mill's theory of 'the power elite', where he identifies three key instruments: the major corporations, the military, and the federal government. He believes that the interests and activities of the elites are sufficiently similar and connected to form a single ruling minority which Mills terms "the power elite". [5] In the present day, the power elites create a kind of holocaust among the uneducated tribal people and exploits in many aspects. The corporations' exploits the people through expanding their economic activities over the indigenous economy, the military violates the human rights (e.g., Armed Conflict Special Power Act) supported by the government.

Baruah has opined that the emerging pattern of class differentiation taking place within the framework of the protective discrimination regime of these transitional economies is complex. While some settlers exploit indigenous tribal, other occupy the most marginal of economic niches. [1] Due to this reason there emerge more than one identity within their own community.

#### 4. Conclusion

From the above evidence, it is clear that the changing dimensions of ethnic identity politics create a complex situation among the ethnic groups as well as in the whole region. Interestingly nowadays many unemployed youths' in this region take insurgency movement as their profession and in this case, the unemployed youths are utilized by the extremist organizations and sometimes by politicians. However, emerging power centric identity politics had a negative impact on the group solidarity and group identity as well.

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