Ethnic Issues Secularism and Conflict Resolution in North East India

Edited by **Bimal J. Deb**

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Published for
NORTH-EAST INDIA COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH,
SHILLONG

By
CONCEPT PUBLISHING COMPANY, NEW DELHI-110 059

PREFACE

In the recent decades ethnicity occupies a space of importance in civil society discourse in the North-East Region of India. There was a time when ethnic issues and aspirations were brushed aside as law and order questions and were never understood in correct perspective. The change of scenario is characterised by positive postures by those in the corridors of power in responding to the demands of ethnic-territorial mobilizations. No doubt, protection of cultural identities is clearly entrenched in any effort at conflict resolution, although fulfilment of economic and political goals is more often than not, hedged by considerations of State dominance and its centripetal nature. At the same time, ethnic diversities of north-eastern region and elite manipulation of cultural sentiments and symbols also find expressions in extra-constitutional demands. Such mobilization arising out of economic deprivation, uneven development, internal colonialism etc. have often had the effect of strengthening group identity and cultural exclusivism. However, revivalistic tendencies and cultural intolerance arising out of ethno-cultural paranoia produced alarming outbursts of Naga-Kuki clashes of 1994 in Manipur and Dimasa-Hmar killings of 2003 in Assam. Ethnic issues also form the core of secessionist demands in certain parts of North-East India. It is against this background that the contributors have looked at ways and means of resolving ethnic issues within the framework of secular polity.

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ETHNO-NATIONALISM AND SELF-DETERMINATION

BIMAL J. DEB

The engima of nationalism admittedly defies any cut and dried approach for unravelling its mystery and charm. Nevertheless no one can dispute the fact that the force of nationalism is most compelling and pervasive. Undoubtedly, membership in a nation provides "a powerful means of defining and locating individual selves in the world through the prism of collective personality and its distinctive culture". At the same time popular mobilization is ignited and set in motion by the driving force of nationalism. Over the years it has been rather evident that the crystallization of national identity on ethnic lines eventually fosters collective identity often decisively and in a manner inconceivable by either religion or class. The fact, therefore, remains ethnic national identity is relatively more meaningful and promising than other identities more because it fulfils the test of stability.

Various scholars attribute the force of ethnic nationalism to the perception of the nation as a community of shared fate. One may not agree with Gellner who has opined that nationalism "invents nations where they do not exist" on the ground that there would be an element of fabrication in the process primarily because the elite in all cases construct social reality in terms of "cultural artifacts" and expressed through imagination which undoubtedly includes ethnic distinctiveness. There is no disputing the fact that the notion of the nation needs to be imagined. It is worth quoting Anderson who made theoretical formulation succinctly clear by stating that "members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members – yet in the mind of each lives the images of their community". Ethnic communities are, therefore, not necessarily historically precise and

consistent reality. The fact however remains that ethnic nationalism is a 'powerful drive that induces millions across the globe to nurture the vision of better political existence'. In the construction of an ethnic community's image and also in the evolution of the entity several attributes matter such as culture, language and above all national consciousness. Indeed, the common denominator of all ethnic communities is national consciousness, which fosters, by all means, a feeling of belongingness and fraternity.

Of the various typologies of national movements, ethnic nationalism stands out to be the most significant because of its volatile nature, although examples of ethnic secession are very few indeed. The end of cold war, dissolution of the USSR and loosening of authoritarian shackles have no doubt seen the emergence of a number of ethnically defined states in the past one decade, the demonstration effect of which looms large in a number of other cases.

The gravitational pull of ethnic nationalism can be traced to certain basic urges. It goes without saying that membership in a nation promotes a sense of identification, which in turn instils a sense of pride in the tradition and institutions. Tradition remains the sheet anchor of ethnic identity and mobilization. Persistence of tradition has been found to be both socially and practically acceptable as a means of strengthening ethnic bond and overcoming anonymity. The result is anything but spectacular so much so that individuals consciously or unconsciously submerge themselves in the vortex of ethnic pride and prejudice to kindle the hope of governance in tune with some sense of equality. The inroads of modernization loom large in their lifestyle but tradition holds the sway, for it is at once uniting and rewarding. Evidently, ethnic aspirations get directed towards identity formation and consolidation. Over the years several ethnic categories have transformed themselves into ethnic communities.

Significantly, the crystallization process of ethnic community does not however take place at a rapid pace and at the same time no uniform pattern is discernible either. The properties of ethnic nationalism explain the explosive power rooted in the myth of a common ancestry and homeland. It is well acknowledged that prevalence of a common culture too facilitates the emergence of a collective personality. Above all, language and religion add to a sense of solidarity and are considered to be the important resources of ethnic community.

Over the past two decades ethnic nationalism has taken deep root in several parts of North-East India projecting the need for collective destiny. Side by side the idea of self-determination ignites and motivates individual members to take recourse to agitational path and often political extremism. The movement is not self-propelled because intelligentsia and political elite play the vital role of educating and mobilizing the masses along the path of ethnic separateness. Over and above, the rationale of the move as interpreted by the elite holds sway in the society. Generally speaking political autonomy and statehood are projected as the ultimate prize of ethnic nationalism. Elsewhere in the world stateless ethnic communities clamour the same sentiments even though the right of self-determination is no more than a political fiction.

The dissolution of the USSR led to the emergence of a number of new states and this development in its wake virtually reopened debate about the ethnic components of national identity along with the right of self-determination. However the guiding principles as enunciated by the former UN Secretary-General Boutros Ghali in Agenda for Peace have been by and large found to be acceptable to the members of the world community. It was held that if every ethnic, religious or linguistic group claimed statehood, there would be no limit to fragmentation and peace, security and economic wellbeing for all will become ever more difficult to achieve. In his prescription, all rival claims of sovereignty and self-determination could be resolved through respect for human rights particularly the rights of minorities on the one hand and democratization on the other.

Despite ethnic movements and upsurge, the conventional interpretation of self-determination as de-colonization remains largely intact at the beginning of a new century. However, the advocates of ethno-nationalism harp on the secessionist element of the right of self-determination, which in their view is a fundamental human right. Even the African Union held that only the ex-colonies could claim statehood. The emergence of Bangladesh was no doubt a triumph of ethnic nationalism but it was largely facilitated by external intervention. Again the emergence of post-Soviet States on ethnic line is considered to be a reiteration of the conventional interpretation of self-determination as new entities emerged after the collapse of an empire. Further, the Eritrean independence from Ethiopia and the recent success of

nationalist movement in East Timor too remain within the ambit of this understanding. It is not out of place to mention that the Canadian Supreme Court in 1996 ruled out Quebec's secession stating 'outside the colonial context, there is no recognition to a right to secession whether or not such population has any distinctive cultural identity.

Against this background the emphasis remains on democratic government, human rights and political autonomy within the existing borders. The legitimacy of state remains undiluted. Nevertheless, politicization of ethnicity and ethnic militancy continue to pose challenge to the power and stability of the state and competing theories may be cited to explain the clamour for political bargaining. Michael Hechter has argued that relatively most backward region of country will exhibit the strongest desire for ethnic autonomy. On the other hand, Innamuel Wallerstein argues that the richest ethnic group living on the geographic periphery will express the strongest desire for sovereignty. In another explanation Rothschild holds that ethnicity can be seen as a highly conscious political and new mode of interest articulation. The fact however remains undisputed that politicization of ethnicity on the plank of socio-economic demands is a legitimate instrument in the pursuit of political power.

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Ph. : 25351460, 25351794 Fax : +91-11-25357103
Cable: CONPUBCO Email: publishing@conceptpub.com

Showroom: Building No. 4788-90, Street No. 23,
Ansari Road, Darya Ganj, New Delhi-110 002
Ph. 23272187

ISBN 81-8069-134-9
9 788180 691348

Rs. 500