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Ethnic Communities and Conflicts in North East India: Building up a Frame work for Conflict Resolution

Abstract

In the last few decades, most of the states in the north-eastern part of India have been experiencing difficult times because of the ethnic conflicts, violence and antagonism among several of the tribes there. No other issue has assumed so serious a concern, in the minds of the intellectuals than the ongoing and seemingly intractable tragedy of ethnic conflicts leading to a high degree of extremist activities and multiplicity of extremist groups. On the one hand, the different ethnic insurgent groups, active here, claim that they are engaged in a fight for recognition, political and economic rights and even for independence sometimes.

On the other hand, others maintain that ongoing insurgent / terrorist activities have continuously challenged the writ of the state and control over its existing territory, governance structures, and the ruling political class. It has been pointed out by various analysts that ethnic unrest can be traced back to its beginnings during the period of colonial rule, in the post-independence era, when governments built the institutions of government control and consolidated power and with the more recent emphasis on greater democratic governance in the region.

As any plural society including India is characterized by some or the other form of tensions, between ethnic groups, cooperative behaviours and consensus decision making perhaps can hold the key to the much desired stability and will prevent any difference from turning into great conflict.

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Introduction

The anti-colonial struggle spearheaded by the Indian National Congress aimed at gaining independence, i.e., *Poorna Swaraj* and self-rule, energized several social forces. These were otherwise latent in the Indian society, which remained subjected to the cruel practices in the form of various forms of social discrimination, viz., untouchability, other practices exploiting people belonging to the weaker sections of society, ethnic minorities, women and children alike. Over these long years of the struggle, a passionate urge toward equality and social justice, both in the context of society and polity assumed importance. There was now an increased realization amongst the concerned westernized social thinkers that the New India that was soon to be realized after being granted independence from the stifling hold of colonial rule, must appear to be strikingly different from the old Indian society, bereft of the deeply backward and social practices which had held the people backward and poor.

Hence, for the abolition of political, economic and social discrimination at home, the demand for equality with other nations and races, within our own society and polity powered by the indomitable willpower and courage was deeply felt. These concerns had also been enshrined in our own constitution by our constitution makers and these figures prominently inter alia in the Preamble to the Constitution of India. With the attainment of independence, as every community felt determined to drive maximum gains by their participation in the electoral politics, the divisions within our society came to the fore and these, unfortunately posed serious challenges to the stability and democratic process of the governance in our country.

Social Forces and Ethnic Conflicts

Democracy, much to the contrary of widely held beliefs, instead of uniting the various communities, rather, widened the divide amongst people as the space was already very limited for their zealous participation or for enhancement of their socio economic status and subsequent empowerment. In order to promote their respective community interests, people not only fell upon all the narrow and divisive factors which came handy to them in their quick rush to be the first to derive benefits of the newly launched development schemes but also to keep others out of reach of this so-called development process. The facade of unity witnessed during the Freedom Struggle, gave way to disunity whereby ethnicity amongst others was accorded prominence for strengthening one's claims to a most favourable treatment and was easily highlighted. But, the unfamiliarity

with the European concept of statehood and often ignorance about it, (as this North Eastern Region was governed by Excluded Areas Act and partially Excluded Areas Act) had halted the penetration of British rule into these tribal societies and left them to be governed by their own traditional political institutions under the influence of traditional factors like kinship, etc.

The critical sources of identity and obligation mediated and perfected through the predominance of kinship within the ethnic communities posed serious dilemma for them to accept the statehood in their areas as they discovered their social values were vastly different and hence difficult to reconcile with the level of regimentation that the idea of statehood required. As such the statehood appeared to be not only a recent but an external imposition and was found to be incompatible with the demands of effective governance. Especially for these people, the state as an organization has remained historically alien and to whom personal ties had been all important, the requisite levels of institutional behaviour and the long-term generalized reciprocities that state maintenance required proved to be very farfetched.

However the idea of statehood cherished by the indigenous elites who were waiting to take over from the British colonial rules, their claims and qualifications to rule, the goals that they had set for themselves to achieve and the ideology of anti colonial nationalism that these elites espoused as was seen in the Naga and other tribal communities resistance to British Colonial rule, were certainly bound up with the continuance of the state in the societies. The hurriedness and the sense of eagerness, with which these elites embraced the state, obscured many of the genuine concerns of the greater mass of people in these societies.

The danger that the state might operate disproportionately to the benefit of particular ethnic groups within its territory came to be perceived with the apprehension of a high degree of ethnic conflict for control over the state under the situations of weak social structures and inadequate values. Neopatrimonialism, the maintenance of reciprocal relationships which is typically and essentially of a personal kind between the leaders and the followers within the overall hierarchical structure of the state has been readily adapted to bridge the existing gap in terms of social values by use of short term and individual reciprocities to compensate for the absence of general and long term visions.

Further, this very ideology of state power that these post-colonial rulers the indigenous elites adopted, increased demands on the state and widened the existing gap between promise and performance. The huge wastage of already scarce social and economic capital by misconceived and poorly implemented, ambitious schemes of state-led, nation-building and socio-economic

development schemes forced the deprived and marginalized communities for a rethink. In the last few decades, most of the states in the north-eastern part of India have been experiencing difficult times because of the ethnic conflicts, violence and antagonism among several of the tribes there.

No other issue has assumed so serious a concern, in the minds of the intellectuals than the ongoing and seemingly intractable tragedy of ethnic conflicts leading to a high degree of extremist activities and multiplicity of extremist groups. On the one hand, the different ethnic insurgent groups, active here, claim that they are engaged in a fight for recognition, political and economic rights and even for independence sometimes. On the other hand, others maintain that ongoing insurgent terrorist activities have continuously challenged the writ of the state and control over its existing territory, governance structures, and the ruling political class. It has been rightly pointed out by various analysts, that ethnic unrest can be traced back to its beginnings during the period of colonial rule, in the post-independence era, when governments built the institutions of government control and consolidated power and with the more recent emphasis on greater democratic governance in the region. Further, during the colonial rule, the colonial administration systems, arbitrary delimitation and partitioning of the areas inhabited by different tribes as a result of imperialism and colonial policies adopted by the British surely aggravated the feelings of ethnicity and set off the ethnic conflicts in the region.

Post-Independence Period

In post-independent India, the failure of the state to properly accommodate the competing interests present among the diverse ethnic groups, persistence of low levels of development in the region and the success of previous insurgent movements in creating new Indian states are believed to be amongst the main trigger factors for the appeal of ethnic insurgent movements. The violence involved in these conflicts continues to destabilize entire regions, besides hampering social and economic development and causing unimaginable human suffering. As these conflicts remain unresolved, the search for newer ways of conflict management through negotiation and mediation, for conflict resolution and establishment of a political environment for rapid economic development, in order to seriously engage the various ethnic groups seething with discontent, is insisted to be the most essential item on the agenda. In short, the underlying socio-economic and political dynamics fuel the ethnic conflicts. The ethnic conflicts as such appear to be almost a regular feature of ethnically plural democracies, due to the fact that such different ethnic groups exist and that too, they have the freedom to organize themselves as per the Constitution.

Framework of Consociational Democracy (Power Sharing)

Ethnic identities, such as tribal ethnicities, per se, may not actually be the cause of violence; in fact, they may even co-exist with peace. It is sometimes argued that if ethnic identities could only give way to some other form of less hardening identities, then ethnic conflicts would be less violent. The identities though, are indivisible, yet the fight over resource is markedly seen in case of functional democracies, and is certainly amenable to flexible sharing. In a region which is home to numerous tribes, a suitable deal can be worked out, laying down a plausible formula such as, for example, a 60-40 or 55-45 arrangement, in keeping with the existing percentage of population, for a peaceful resolution of a conflict. It can be felt to be possible. Such bargaining, however to be successful, requires institutional measures, particularly as, this involves sections of different ethnicities. This arrangement also requires a kind of framework agreement amongst the tribes as it has been often said, clashes based on ethnic identities can be said to resist compromise, contributes to arousal of passion, overlooking any reason, and easily generating violence. As such, ethnic peace for all practical purposes will have been conceptualized as an institutionalized channelling and so, a resolution of ethnic conflicts. If the ethnic and national conflicts are eliminated from our midst, a post-ethnic, post-national era can reflect the picture of prosperity in keeping with people's expectations.

Ethnic Conflicts as Intra-State Affairs

In the words of John Paul Lederach, "Most conflicts are intra state affairs."¹ According to Arend Lijphar, in order to be successful and pre-empt ethnic conflict, such pluralist divided societies require elite compromise. "A plural society is defined as one in which the various ethnic groups are segmented and have little criss-crossing."² Such elite compromise can best be assured by a political system that works on intergroup consensus, and not intergroup competition. A consensual democracy of this kind can be called Consociational.³ It is in the manner of a grand coalition of ethnic leaders in leadership positions, a mutual veto given to each group proportionately in decision-making, positions, and segmental autonomy with respect to matters such as education, language and personal laws.⁴ Austria, Holland, Belgium and Switzerland have been heralded as success.

As any plural society including India is characterized by some or the other form of tensions, between ethnic groups, cooperative behaviours and consensus decision making perhaps can hold the key to the much desired stability and will prevent any difference from turning into great conflict. The feeling of mutual security can then generate trust in each other and boost mutual cooperation, albeit through elites rather than reduce it to ethnic democracies.

Notes

1. John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*, Washington, D. C., USIP, 1997.
2. Arend Lijphart, “Consociational Democracy”, *World Politics*, vol. 21, no. 2, 1969, pp. 207-225.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.