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Culture and Autonomy: Issues of Conflict in Northeast India

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ABSTRACT

On the basis of culture communities in the region seek territorial autonomy. The paper argues that although the same territorial autonomy is provided by the Constitution in the form of Fifth and Sixth Schedules, there is no end to the conflicts in the region. Therefore, the answer to land, territoriality and conflict lies on mutual cognizance of values by the communities along with the values of democratic rights and equality. Mere provisions of autonomy will not resolve these issues unless communities realize that Northeast is a multicultural region.

Key Words : Culture, Territory, Autonomy, Recognition, Conflict

INTRODUCTION

Many scholars have talked about issues of ethnic movements and conflict between different communities across the globe. The idea pitched by Nancy Fraser that the "struggle for recognition" is fast becoming the paradigmatic form of political conflict since the later part of twentieth century carries significance in understanding the Northeast India[1]. Demands for "recognition of difference" fuel struggles of groups mobilized under the banners of nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, and sexuality. In what Fraser terms as "post-socialist" conflicts, group identity supplants class interest as the chief medium of political mobilization. Cultural domination and suppression replace class exploitation as the fundamental form of injustice. And cultural recognition displaces socio-economic redistribution as the remedy for injustice and the goal of political struggle. In the same way, ethnic groups in the region claim that they are culturally distinct and thus, demand for recognition of the same.

Cultural injustice and identity formation:

It is often said that cultural injustice is rooted in social patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication. Such injustice includes cultural domination (being subjected to patterns of interpretation and communication that are associated with another culture and are alien and/or hostile to one's own); non-recognition (being rendered invisible via the authoritative, representational, communicative, and interpretative practices of one's culture); and disrespect (being routinely maligned or disparaged in stereotypic public cultural representations and/ or in everyday life interactions). As Charles Taylor says "non-recognition or mis-recognition … can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, reduced mode of being. Beyond simple lack of respect, it can inflict a grievous wound, saddling people with crippling self-hatred. Due recognition is not just a courtesy but also a vital human need"[2].

Further there is another issue that can be discussed here. It is about the association of land and territory to the issue of cultural identity and domination. Time and again, communities demand exclusive accessibility to a particular piece of land or a politically demarcated territory in the name of cultural recognition. This is not surprising as its exclusive possession is thought to be vital for protecting one cultural community from being dominated by some "outsiders" as in the case of some communities in the Northeast India. In such cases, the land or the territory may not be directly connected to the culture or the identity of the specific community though it is vital for them to defend their cultural interests, their

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own survival. This can be one basis on which the demand for territorial autonomy is made. There is one more aspect of land *vis-à-vis* cultural identity of communities. In such case the land is part and parcel of the cultural identity of the particular community. The culture of Fijian collective ownership of land may well illustrate this case[3]. Notwithstanding the loss of traditional culture, it looks like the land is still critical for the existence of the native Fijian culture and self-understanding. The attachment to the land is not simply instrumental; it is constitutive of native Fijian identity. Subsequently, recognizing a particular cultural community may, at times, demand the delineation of territorial boundary on the basis of ethnic identity. The same is the story of communities in the Northeast. This is a major demand from many communities in the Northeast India also.

The question on territorial autonomy:

It will not be wrong to say that the demand for territorial autonomy has become a "self-determination mantra" in the Northeast India. Most of the communities demand this and this has been a crucial issue in the region. But there is a necessity to seriously discuss two apparently simple questions. First, is territorial autonomy the only reasonable choice considering the fact that there are many ethnic communities in the region? Secondly, if territorial autonomy are to be granted to an ethnic group, what would be the probable formula and basis of the territorial demarcation? Each state in the region has its own specific issue. And all the groups have distinctive claims and hopes. Let us deliberate on the viability of territorial autonomy *vis-à-vis* the demands of some major ethnic communities in the states of Manipur and Meghalaya. Though other states also present similar issues, because of the limitation of the space let me concentrate on these two states. Although the problems faced by these two states cannot represent the whole picture of the region, these two states are conceivably appropriate cases for discussing the question of demands for territorial autonomy.

There is a constructed tendency to perceive Manipur as inhabiting only three distinct communities, *viz.,* the Nagas, the Kukis and the Meeteis[4]. However, this is just a broad classification of the ethnic reality that is Manipur. A large number of other communities in the state cannot be subsumed in any of these three groups. The Muslims of Imphal valley, called "Pangals" or Meetei-Pangals, claim difference not only from the above three communities but also from other Muslim communities as they perceive themselves having a different antiquity and a inimitable process of ethnic evolution. They are naturalized people of Manipur following Islam[5]. Further, there are other tribal communities, which are to be seen as self-regulating ethnic units who endure outside of the larger tribal conglomerates. Some of these groups are not even included in the State Schedule Tribes list. For instance, among others mention may be made of the Mates, the Chongthus, the Kharams, the Taraos, the Inpuis etc.[6] Most of them speak different dialects. For instance, the Taraos use their own dialect known as Taraotrong with Roman Script[7]. These distinct groups also follow different cultural practices. Many of them have of late asserted their distinct ethnic identities and demand their inclusion in the state's Schedule Tribes list.

Again, the Kuki-Chin groups have a long historical association with Manipur. The nature of Kukis' rapport with the Meeiteis and the Nagas keep fluctuating depending on the ethnic and political atmosphere of the day. In spite of the attempt to bring many tribes under one Kuki umbrella, this group has seen schism since the foundation of Khulmi Union in 1947[8]. Colonial accounts suggest that most Kuki-Chin groups were travelling tribes. Suggestively, they arrived in Manipur at a time when land and citizenship issue was not as prominent as today. They were not settled through appropriate immigration law either. This group migrated to Manipur in different periods of history, and they had been given an exogenic identity called "Kuki"[9]. There are old Kukis and new Kukis categorized as per the timing of their arrival in the state[10]. As in the case of the Nagas, it will be wrong to claim that the Kukis are single cultural group. Yet, they claim for a common homeland where they can sustain their "self-government."

Thus, two vital points come up from this discussion. First, since one umbrella group is composed of diverse ethnic communities, it is difficult to identify them as single national ethnic groups for the purpose of granting group specific right particularly territorial right. If, at all, territorial autonomy is to be provided to these umbrella groups, one issue still remains unaddressed, *i.e.* will that territorial autonomy settle all the internal differences between them? Again, if we are to grant the territorial autonomy to all the distinct cultural groups (30 plus in actual number), do we have enough space for such territories? Suggestively, therefore, it is very hard to recognize minor groups whose population is too small as National Minority even though

they have some of the important characteristics of being a National Minority. Such recognition is likely to lead to unceasing and incontrollable fragmentation of the society.

Integrationism and groups in the region:

As far as the Nagas are concerned, the single most important claim made by their leadership is the integration of all Naga populated areas, or the creation of a greater Nagaland to be called "the Nagalim." This claim is largely grounded on the impression that the Nagas are a nation and justify to have a separate territory of its own. If we consider it not purely from administrative but from a multicultural academic standpoint, then the claim may find its own ambiguities. Multiculturalism, basically wants endurance of each diverse cultural group irrespective of its size or populations. As stated previously, the Nagas are a group of communities who actually are different from one another in terms of the dialects they use, and their cultures and mores. Their claim appears to be primarily founded on political agenda rather than societal and folk requirements.

When it comes to the Meetei, one may argue that visibly one of the central claims of the Meeteis is that the territorial integrity of Manipur should not be disturbed in any case. This demand appears to be constructed on one specific point that Manipur is a historically evolved and sovereign territory in which the Meeteis reigned with substantial local autonomy. Consequently, this territory is part of the Meetei identity formation. However, in a multiethnic state like Manipur, there are numerous other native indigenous communities. A sensible argument on why Manipur should hold its territorial integrity can be stressed from a different standpoint. That, dividing Manipur into small political units (as per each ethnic group's ambition for self-rule) will do further destruction than good. There can be two grounds for accepting demands of a separate territory. First, the original territory, from which a new territory is to be carved out, should be big enough so that after its separation, the territorial interest of other groups is not troubled. Secondly, the new state/ administrative establishment should be founded on endurance of each separate ethnic identity. Additional question that comes up is "whether a "conglomeration" (of various different groups) can be given group rights in the name of multicultural co-existence."

A conglomeration of groups is just like a state where different cultural communities exist. If the differences within the conglomeration remain unrecognized, the problems, of a "liberal state" in which a dominant community is placed at an advantaged, will come back again. Thus, it will be problematic to consider providing certain group rights for a conglomerate. Instead, we need to take into account the differences within such a conglomeration. Thus, the question of preserving and promoting different ethnic groups is more important than merely providing a single group right for "Nagas" or "Kukis" as a group. And there is no guarantee that after having a distinct and separate territory, the Nagas will preserve and promote the distinct ethnic cultures of its constituents. If they claim that they cannot live together with the Meeteis, or the Kukis or the Paites or the "Pangals" because their interest is different, the question is "how can they maintain their internal cultural differences?"

Are existing autonomy model enough:

The case of Meghalaya is fascinating when one discusses of territorial and cultural autonomy. This is a state where what is presently being sought by ethnic groups in the Northeast had been practiced over the years in both theory and practice. Notwithstanding the existing institutional mechanisms derived from a allegedly well-scrutinized grassroots phenomena, layers of tensions still exist. And these tensions cut across inter-ethnic, inter-tribal and have international ramifications. Some of these tensions might not be as clearly visible like the Naga - Kuki clash in the 1990s or the Chakma question.

Meghalaya was shaped out of Assam to satisfy the claims of three major hill tribes, *viz.* the Khasis, the Jaintias and the Garos. In the past the biggest cause of such tension was the anxiety of the indigenous tribes of being swamped demographically, culturally as well as economically by the non-tribes who can be roughly characterized into (i) *external*: influx of oversea nationals or economic and political refugees from Nepal and Bangladesh, and (ii) *internal*: influx of economic migrants from other states within India.

In this state many institutional measures have been established for easing ethnic strains. It consist of three Districts Councils shaped for each main tribes with the objective of enabling them to control and manage over tribal lands and forests, and to act as protective agency for customary laws and practices[11]. Moreover, there is the Meghalaya Transfer of Land (Regulation) Act that specifies that no land in Meghalaya shall be transferred by a tribal to a non-tribal or by a non-tribal to another

non-tribal except with the prior permission of the competent authority. The Meghalaya Maintenance of Public Order (Amendment) Act (1979) facilitates the state government to differentiate between a permanent non-tribal resident and one who settled in the state of late. And there are numerous other Bills and Acts.

These measures were generally steered by three major thoughts. First, the inevitability to sustain the distinct customs, socio-economic and political culture of the tribal people of the region and to make sure autonomy and identity of the tribal people are protected. Second, the prerequisite to stop their economic and social exploitation by the more advanced neighboring people of the plains. Third, to authorize the tribal people to develop and manage themselves in terms of their own genius[12].

In the investigation of the institutional arrangement in the Northeast in general and in Meghalaya in particular, the analysis of the institution of Sixth Schedule holds a very vital place. The original enterprise of introducing Sixth Schedule was an groundbreaking concept. Since the tribal people share a particular territorial boundary with "other" people (non-tribal) who are more or less progressive in terms of socio-politico and economy, they required certain apparatuses to defend and promote their cultural identity and also to safeguard themselves from being oppressed economically by the bigger and more progressive group. It was presumed that they could make their own advancement through the exercise of their customary way of life. It is, in one sense, to give their own space of development through socially recognized patterns of administration. And in another sense, it is a means to generate a more equitable society in which communities with distinct ways of life are given due recognition to their cultural need.

Thus, the recognition was granted (at least in principle) to the cultural values of some of the larger ethnic communities in the region through the constitutional provisions of the Sixth Schedule. Now there are some issues that required to be taken seriously. First, how do these institutions, Autonomous District Councils (ADCs), function? Second, when some of the ethnic communities were already enjoying political and cultural autonomy within the framework of ADCs, why do these communities demand formation of full-fledged states? Third, what is the idea behind the continuation of the ADCs even after the creation of so called "tribal states?" And finally, why some of the groups who came together for a separate hill state are craving for (further) separate states in the name of "survival of their culture?"

These questions can best be answered from two different viewpoints. First, *meeting the terms of cultural needs of the community*, whether it is the failure of a prospective institutional arrangement due to which cultural necessity of ethnic communities are not given recognition to the satisfaction of these ethnic groups and therefore persisting ethnic conflicts in the region and ethnic communities demanding a more secure institutional arrangement like the formation of a separate state. Second, *struggle for leadership*; that, whether the system of "ethnic administration" has produced new elites and the conflict we understand today in the Northeast is more of a fight for leadership by these elites who are willing partners in playing the ethnic card.

Even District Councils are demanding more power, and at the same time there are arguments against any move to increase the power of the ADCs. It claims that additional power to the ADCs means attrition of prevailing power of the state government (which itself is a tribal state). ADCs, so far, have not been trying to make any efforts to encourage arts and culture, sports and games activities and other socio-economic improvement of the people. They have practically wholly rushed themselves into the labyrinth of politics, into selfish and mischievous gains. Power-feuds have been the order of the day.

Another face of conflict in the region:

Another characteristic of ethnic relations in the state is the conflict amongst the local tribal communities and the migrant communities. Even though the migrants might not have come in groups, they established themselves around in certain locality in groups for their own safety, thus, occupying marked or unmarked territory. Over a period of time, these migrant communities develop a certain kind of culture that might not at times be antagonistic to the already prevalent culture. These communities follow their rituals and cultural practice in public through works such as building temples, mosques, celebrating festivals, etc. One can observe many temples of Hindus, gurdwaras of Sikhs and mosques of the migrant Muslims dotting the landscape. While trying to defend their own cultural distinctiveness, some of these communities enter the political space.

An instance from Rynza in East Khasi Hill will exemplify how migrant inhabitants, refugees from former East Bengal[13] find a place in local body politics of Meghalaya. The Rynza locality has a substantial number

of Bengalis (8000 in number according to a leader of Rynza Refugee Association), who are being called foreigners by the locals. Though the area is locally called Rynza before the arrival of this migrant community, the residents now wants to change the name of the place to RR Colony (Relief and Rehabilitation Colony). The idea of altering the appellation has more to do with civil and political ambitions than just cultural objective. Now, would this ambition run in contradiction to the dominant politics of the majority Khasis in Shillong? Shillong was established by the British Administration, made the summer capital of Eastern Bengal and Assam comprising most part of the territory presently called Northeast India in 1860s. Ethnic and social formation of the capital city Shillong in the post-colonial era was "cosmopolitan" – many communities from the plains of Assam and East Bengal migrated to this city notwithstanding restrictions on possessing land. By 1980s, the strain between "outsiders" (non-Khasis or non-tribal communities) and Khasis became shriller and there were examples of open conflict. The Khasi Students Union (KSU) led the anti-outsiders drive that principally targeted non-tribals and Nepali migrant immigrants. The KSU became a power centre and had even articulated their dislike at the formation of non-Khasi or non-tribal organizations in Khasi Hills[14].

Meghalaya is to some extent burdened with ethnic issues of various hues. On the one hand, it is facing the tension between the tribals and the non-tribals, and on the other, there is the inter-tribal perennial fissure. demand for a separate state for the Garos by separating Khasi Hills from Garo Hills has become a prickly issue. So is with the Jaintias. There have been claims and counter claims on separate considerations in job, education and other matters. So have been the outsiders demanding separate group rights. These are issues that need to be really answered. We need to think if further territorial demarcation of these states will lead to peace in the region.

Examining other models:

If this is the case what is the way ahead? There are two options before us. First, the Western model of multination federation and secondly, a form of consociational democracy. A multi-level federalism adopts a system of government that awards substantial territorial autonomy to numerous national minorities. This kind of territorial autonomy is unsustainable in the context of the Northeast because of the multi-layered dimensions mentioned earlier. While speaking of autonomy of the ethnic communities, the first thing that should ideally strike one and all should be cultural autonomy. This should allow them to establish and manage their own publicly funded schools in their own mother tongue, to launch newspapers and media, to address the organs of government, etc. It may be in the form of Otto Buer's non-territorial autonomy in the old Habsburg Empire[15]. The Habsburg Empire in Europe (from the late Middle Ages until World War I) was governed by the Austrian royal family, the Habsburgs, with its capital at Vienna. The Habsburg Empire comprised Hungary, the Czech lands, Slovakia, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and important parts of Italy, Poland, and Romania. Contrasting most self acclaimed modern "secular states," the Habsburg Empire offered protection to many small national groups and kept them from being absorbed by other cultures.

Again, we may consider the consociational form of democracy. Arend Lejphart claims how consociational democracy elucidates the political stability of Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. In his classic study, he identified the critical elements of the consociational experiments: (a) Government by a grand coalition of all significant segments; (b) A mutual veto or "concurrent majority" voting rule for some or all issues. (c) Proportionality as the principle for allocating political representation, public funds, and civil service positions; and (d) Considerable amount of autonomy for various segments of the society to govern their internal affair[16].

Such consociational democracy *i.e.* the form of government of a grand coalition of all important sections with shared veto powers is conceivable and maybe fruitful in the countries where there are few (not many) ethnic groups of more or less equal size. However, it will be hard to think of a such form of democracy in a state, which is divided into too many small ethnic groups. Particularly the provision of veto powers will not work here. Because, if each of the groups has veto power, it will be difficult to take decision on any matter. So the best possible option is to have certain kind of arrangements or mechanism to develop consensus among these various groups. It should also be reminded that one of the most important values of multiculturalism is equality among various groups.

Multicultural necessity:

Evolving a multicultural society grounded on equal

respect and concern is not an easy job, yet it is the need of the hour. The claims and counter-claims of several ethnic groups in Northeast India not only generate tension but also demonstration an unequal relationship among various ethnic groups. This phenomenon has caused innumerable ethnic tensions and clashes. All of these are not because of diversity but inequality with regard to rights, respect and concern.

A multicultural policy should promote three important values, *viz.,* value of cultural communities, value of individual democratic rights, and value of equality. All human beings are culturally embedded in the way they grow up and live within a culturally structured world and organize their lives and social relations in terms of a culturally derived system of meaning and significance[17]. Thus, the value of cultural community is one which multiculturalism needs to recognize and promote. However, there are conflicts that emerge because of the desire of the dominant communities to expand and dominate over the smaller one. So, along with acknowledging the value of community we need to find a mechanism to promote equality among various cultural communities so that the ultimate goal of peaceful co-existence is realized. We need to promote the value of individual liberty. There are times when individual rights and liberty are undermined in the name of community values. Individuals need their own space for the development of their own personality. All the three values need to be equally promoted.

Concluding remark:

A mere separation or division of a small territory will not yield the desired outcome without solving internal differences among the groups. The dominant communities should realize that Northeast is a multicultural region. The attractiveness of this multiculturalism can be well-maintained only when each group respects the other with regard to their ways of life, language and cultural practices. The fate and destiny of the Northeast has to be decided by its constituent communities. The major players in these states have to shed the streak of dominating majoritarian stance[18]. The majority culture and nationhood should be made accommodative of other cultures and ethnic identities. Likewise all the communities, small or big, should sense the necessity of existing together on the basis of equality. Harping on exclusive territoriality does not seem to provide the answer.

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