

Tribal Ethnic Nationalism in Assam and the Emerging Challenges

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ABSTRACT: North East India is regarded as the hotspot of Tibeto-Burman tribal ethnic groups. Today this region has witnessed the growth of strong ethno-centric tribal national resurgence. After Independence, the leaders of new India adopted a federal polity reflecting the diversity of Indian Nation. The Northeast India was constituted as one federating unit i.e. Assam with diverse tribal ethnic groups. Significantly, some tribal ethnic groups were provided with political- administrative autonomy within the framework of new constitution to preserve, protect their uniqueness. But in the post independence period, these tribal ethnic groups have raised the demands for separate administrative homeland for themselves with greater degrees of self-rule. This emerging tribal ethnic nationalism has significantly influenced the political development of this region subsequently. Even Assam was reorganized on several occasions owing to such demands by the tribal ethnic groups. Even today, in Assam, the tribal ethnic groups inhabiting in the state are continuing with various political demands. In this paper, an attempt will be made to make an empirical analysis of the growth of Tribal ethnic nationalism among various tribal ethnic groups in Assam.

KEY WORDS: Hotspot, Resurgence, Diversity, Self-rule, Homeland, Nationalism

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I. INTRODUCTION

The growth of tribal ethnic nationalism is a very complex issue for Assam which leads to the emergence of many tribal movements since independence. During the time of independence of India, our national leaders have decided to keep the large variety of ethnic groups of North Eastern region into one federal unit, the state of Assam. However, in the new constitution of post Independent India, under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, provisions were made for autonomous administration for some of the tribal communities (Hill Tribes) to preserve protect their identity, culture and to ensure development through self-rule. But such arrangements could not contain the ethnic aspirations of the Tribal communities in Assam (North East India) and a strong sentiment of tribal nationalism based on their ethnic identity has emerged. This tribal ethnic nationalism has been asserted by the respective tribal groups by raising various demands i. e. demand for autonomous district councils, separate statehood and even independent sovereign state. Eventually these developments have led to the emergence of many issues, even lead to the re-organization of the State on several occasions. The present North Eastern States like Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram etc. were created as a process of re-organisation of Assam after a long history of Tribal Movements. Even during recent times some tribal ethnic groups i.e. Bodos, Rabhas, Tiwas, Mishings etc. have raised various demands for self-rule and thereby to protect their ethnic identity.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER ARE

- a) To find out the causes of the tribal ethnic upsurge in Assam.
- b) To assess the government response towards the demands of the tribals.
- c) To look at the future consequences of the development

III. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The paper is descriptive and analytical one, primarily based on secondary data. The Secondary data are consulted from the published materials in the form of books, research journal papers and the materials available in the internet. The details of the books, journals and other materials are given in the reference part.

IV. CONCEPTUAL STATEMENT OF THE TERMS NATIONALISM, ETHNIC NATIONALISM:

Theoretically nationalism is a sentiment promoting the interest of a nation linked with the desire of self-governance or sovereignty. It is further stands for developing and maintaining a national identity based on

shared values, cultures, language, race, religion, political goals and aspirations. Nationalism represents a sense of pride for the nation-hood. It is a sentiment that binds the people of a particular nation. Nationalism means the devotion for the nation. Ernest Gellner is regarded as the most important theorists in the study of nationalism; viewed nationalism is the imposition of a high culture on society replacing local, low cultures and most multiculturalism (Nations and Nationalism, 1983). Throughout the history of modern states nationalism serves as the basis of modern nation-state systems. It is the highest ideology which unites the nations.

In simple sense nationalism refers to a sense of belonging to a community of nation. This sense of belonging may be engineered by different factors like common civic and political values, ethnicity etc. Ethnic nationalism may be defined where this sense of belonging to the greater nationhood is engineered by the ethnic identity of the community. Now a day, most of the nation-states are multicultural and multi-communal where the emergence of ethnic nationalism is a common phenomenon in these states. The ethnic nationalism has emerged among the ethnic groups as a consequence of their group identity. In the North Eastern states of India, the tribal communities have raised various political demands reflecting the emergence of ethnic nationalism in these ethnic groups.

V. A BRIEF HISTORY OF POLITICAL ADMINISTRATIVE ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE TRIBAL ETHNIC GROUPS IN ASSAM:

The Tribals in Assam are called as the 'sons of the soil' of this land. They are living in this part of the territory with their own system of rules and traditions unique to the others. The colonial rulers established the Assam province on 6th February 1874 by separating it from the management of the Lt. Governor of Bengal, placed under the direct control of a Chief Commissioner. At the same time the Colonial masters have introduced the Scheduled District Act 1874, by which it is decided to remove the remote or backward tracts (North Eastern Region) of British India from the operation of General Acts and Regulations. This was the beginning of the separation of tribal communities from the mainstream of Assam which is followed more vigorously in subsequent policies of the colonial rulers especially under the Government of India Act 1919 and the Government of India Act, 1935. As per the Government of India (Excluded and Partially Excluded areas) Order, 1936 the Backward Tract areas under the Government of India Act 1919 were regrouped as : *Excluded Areas*: 1) North East Frontier (Sadiya, Balipara and Lakhimpur) Tract 2) The Naga Hills Districts 3) The Lushai Hills Districts 4) The North Cachar Hills Sub-division of Cachar District; *Partially Excluded Areas*: 1) The Garo Hills District 2) The Mikir Hills in Nowgong and Sibsagar Districts and 3) The British portion of Khasi and Jaintia Hills Districts (other than Shillong Municipality and Cantonment). As per the rule, in the governance of these areas, the powers of the provincial legislature were not extended to these areas. Thus, the Colonial Rulers had adopted a different policy for the governance of the tribal areas in North East India, devoid of the general administration of mainland Assam which had infused a sentiment of differentness of those peoples from the rest. . Scholars have alleged that this policy of the Colonial masters had largely contributed to the growth of an identity centric distinctive ethnic national sentiment against the mainstream Assamese nationalism among the tribal groups in North East India.

Since the colonial rule, a newly emerged 'middle class' in the tribal societies of North East India had articulated the sense of identity consciousness in their respective societies. During the Colonial rule, though the colonial administration was never expected to provide a people oriented education system, yet with the introduction of modern education the number of literate and educated people started increasing not only in the relatively advanced core Assamese society but also in the non-Assamese indigenous societies of Assam. Along with education, the spread of Christianity helps in emergence of a middle-class in the indigenous tribal societies. This very class of people played a pioneering role in unfolding, consolidating and then spreading an identity consciousness among the members of their society. Consequently a clash of interest and contradiction between the 'middle class' elements of core Assamese and peripheral Assamese (tribal) societies has emerged. Moreover the alleged social discriminations, superiority complex of the caste-Hindu Assamese peoples and the caste-based social stratifications gradually started to push the tribal peoples away from the proximity with the core-Assamese society. Such an atmosphere of neglect and indifference provided the fertile ground for the competitive 'middle class' in the tribal societies to politically mobilize the tribal communities on the issue of ethnic identity. The hurt-sentiments of the tribal 'middle class' realized that without political power, no malady could be remedied and as a result bargaining for political power had started. They never take into confidence the governing caste-Hindu Assamese elite who refuse to share the political power. This stubborn situation provided motivation to the tribal elites to start thinking in terms of their own political boundary. They tried to arouse the latent identity-consciousness among their own people and direct it towards self-determination aspiration. During the time of Independence Gopinath Bordoloi, then premier of Assam persuaded the Hill tribe leaders to accept the accession to the Union of India. However in order to satisfy the demands of the Hill leaders of North East India the Constituent Assembly of independent India appointed a committee called 'North East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas' under the chairmanship of Gopinath Bordoloi. The recommendations of

the Bordoloi committee were incorporated in the Sixth Schedule to the constitution of India. According to Section-20 of the 6th Schedule of the Constitution the 'tribal areas' of Assam were specified in Part -A and B of a corresponding table. Part-A included- 1) the United Khasi and Jaintia Hills 2) the Garo Hills 3) the Lushai Hills 4) the Naga Hills 5) the North Cachar Hills and 6) the Mikir Hills. Part-B included- 1) North East Frontier Tract including Balipara Frontier Tract, Abor Hills and Misimi Hills Districts and 2) the Naga Tribal Areas. According to the Section-19 of the 6th Schedule of the Constitution, the Governor was to ensure constitution of an Autonomous District Council for each of these above areas. Speaking in favour of the Sixth schedule of the Indian Constitution, Pndt. Gopinath Bordoloi in the constituent assembly debate explained in clear terms that the Tribal peoples of North Eastern India must be allowed to develop themselves in their own way.

However, the political autonomy provided under the 6th Schedule of the Indian Constitution could not fully contain the political aspirations of the Hills tribes of North East India. In fact, soon after independence a rift was emerged between the leaders of the Hill Tribes and the Assam Pradesh Congress party. In 1960, the All Party Hill Leaders Conference, a common platform of hill tribes leaders was formed which stood for creation of an 'Eastern Frontier State' comprising all hill districts of Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura. However in later stage, separate demand for statehood was raised by the leaders from the regions of Mizoram, Nagaland, Mikir Hills and North Cachar Hills and Meghalaya. Subsequently, the State of Assam was reorganised, on 21st January 1972 Mizoram was declared Union Territory and became Indian State in 1987. Meghalaya was carved out of Assam on 21st February 1970 and become a State. The state of Nagaland thus came into being by the 13th Constitution amendment on 1st December, 1963. Two Hill Districts under the Sixth Schedule Autonomy of the Indian Constitution namely Karbi Anglong Autonomous Hill District and the North Cachar Hill District (presently Dima Haso) remain with the re-organized Assam.

But in Assam, besides the Hill Tribes, there are some other tribal ethnic groups living in the Plains areas of Assam known as Plain Tribes. These tribal groups have enormously contributed to the growth of Assamese nationality by adopting the culture and traditions of the caste Hindu Assamese society. Unlike the Hill Tribes, in the post independence period, these tribal groups were never enjoyed any special constitutional privileges either under the 5th Schedule or under the 6th schedule of the Indian Constitution. Gradually, a feeling of deprivation and identity centric new awakening was emerged among these tribal communities. In 1967, these Plain Tribals of Assam were united politically and formed an organization in the name of the Plain Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA). The PTCA, submitted a memorandum to the President of India on 20th May, 1967 demanding autonomy in the predominantly Plain Tribal areas of northern tracts of Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Lakhimpur and Sibsagar Districts including all the tribal belts and blocks of those areas. In 1973 the PTCA revised its demand for "the Udayachal" a Union Territory. But the PTCA movement for autonomy or self rule suffered a very strong set back when All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) articulate a demand for full-fledged statehood and give nomenclature "Bodoland" in its 20th Annual Conference at Bashbari in Dhubri held from 19 to 22 December 1988. The Bodos under the leadership of ABSU ushered a very strong movement for "Bodoland". After a long agitation by the Bodos, the Bodo Accord was signed on 20th February 1993 by the representatives of central government, state government as well as ABSU. Under the Accord the Bodo Autonomous Council was constituted to give political autonomy to the Bodos in Assam. But the Bodo Accord of 1993 could not resolve the political aspirations of the Bodo leaders. In the post Accord era, a very strong violent movement for securing Bodoland state was started. After a prolonged violence committed by some Bodo militant organizations i.e. National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), Bodoland Liberation Tiger (BLT), another memorandum of settlement was signed on 10th February 2003. Through this settlement it has been decided to constitute the Bodoland Territorial Administrative District (BTAD) under the 6th Schedule of the Indian constitution by a constitutional amendment. Accordingly the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) was formed on 7th December 2003 under the leadership of Hagrama Mahilary comprising the districts of Kokrajhar, Baksa, Chirang and Udalguri. However, some organizations in Bodoland, including ABSU still raised the demand for a full-fledged state of Bodoland for which they carried out a strong agitation in Assam.

Taking the instance of the Bodo movement and its consequent political success, some smaller tribal ethnic groups particularly the Tiwas, the Mishings and the Rabhas have asserted their political aspirations for autonomy during 1990's. Subsequently the Government of Assam concluded three Accords in 1995 with three Plain Tribes' communities i.e. the Tiwas, the Rabhas and the Mishings and accordingly three Autonomous Councils are constituted by the Assam Government. But in the post accord era, these Plain Tribes groups i.e. the Rabhas, the Tiwas and the Mishings continuing various political demands in Assam.

VI. FACTORS FOR TRIBAL ETHNIC NATIONALISM AND GROWTH OF DEMAND FOR ETHNIC HOMELAND:

The different tribal ethnic groups of Assam have their own separate political social issues in the growth of their respective ethno-national sentiments. The sentiments and the issues of the Hill tribes are not similar with

the tribal peoples living in the Plain areas of Assam. Yet, we, in this paper trying to highlight some common issues which are equally important to consider in the analysis of the growth of Tribal ethnic-sentiments.

A) Identity crisis and growth of Ethnic nationalism:

The scholars have viewed the emergence of tribal ethnic nationalism as the resurgence of their lost identity due to erosion of language and traditions etc. Most of these tribal communities have been assimilating with the greater Assamese nationality. They adopted Assamese language to read and write and in their day to day life even have identified themselves as Assamese through a process of assimilation (to Baisnavite Culture). But after few decades of independence a section of tribal leaders became conscious about the rejuvenation of their ethnic identity. The intelligentsia of Assam has tried to explain this situation as a failure of the Caste Hindu Assamese elites in the post-independence era. Dr Prafulla Mahanta (2014), is of the opinion that the hegemonic character of the Aryanised Assamese society is the factor for the emergence of ethnic assertion of the Tribes in Assam. He states, “..after the reorganization of the States in the Independent India, the Assamese Nation had achieved all possible privileges within the framework of the Indian Constitution. The Assamese language was constitutionally recognized. In this situation, the dominant caste Hindu Assamese middle-class elites who conquered the ruling power of the State were supposed to concentrate on over all development of the region and to help the other smaller communities to develop their language and culture. Contrary to that they started to establish Aryanised Assamese Socio-Cultural and linguistic hegemony. For that they started Language Movement (during 1960’s), the Assam Movement.” (Mahanta Prafulla, 2014)

Apart from this the settlement of the immigrants in the open and forest lands traditionally owned by the tribals have aggravated the sentiments of the tribal communities to think for a protected homeland. Though the Tribal Belts and Blocks have been created by the Government of Assam after the independence for the protection of the Tribal Lands yet, the lands in these areas have been encroached by the non-tribals which created a challenge for the tribals to protect their land right. Even this encroachment of the non tribals and the settlements of the immigrants in the Tribal areas have led to the emergence of ethnic clash in different areas of Assam. The Neli incident in 1983 during the Assam Movement (clash between the Muslims and the Tiwa Tribe where more than 3000 Muslim of Bengali origin was killed), ethnic cleansing in the BTAD areas are the example of this fact.

B) Socio-economic factors:

The social and economic backwardness is an important factor behind the emergence of the tribal ethnic nationalism in Assam. The problems of poverty, unemployment, illiteracy are acute among these peoples which led to the degradation of the overall living standard of these communities. As per the census report of 2011 the literacy rate among the Schedule Tribe peoples are only 61.8% as against the general literacy rate of 72.19% in the State. Moreover, as per the Census Report 2011, there is only 43.9% working population among the Schedule Tribe peoples of the State. The Non Working peoples percentage is 56% among the Schedule Tribe peoples (Source: Office of the Directorate of Census, Guwahati, Assam).

Thus, the Census data of 2011 clearly shows the socio-economic backwardness of the Tribal peoples in Assam. Unemployment is a major problem which led to poverty and indebtedness and overall deterioration of living standard. The Ministry of Welfare of Plain Tribes and Backward Classes Department, Assam reveals in the Assam State Legislative Assembly in the month of September, 2017 that there are total 10,813 S.T. and S.C. backlog vacancy in 44 State Government Departments out of which 8803 are S.T. posts (The Sentinel, Guwahati, 8th September, 2017). One major cause of the poverty and unemployment in the tribal society is the problem of land alienation. For most of the Tribal people in Assam, agriculture is the main source of livelihood. But due to various reasons they are losing their land holdings. Apart from large scale encroachment by the immigrants, business communities for the purpose of industrial establishment, there are some local practices like Sukti, Bandhoki, Paiks etc. through which the ownership of the land is being transferred to the well to do classes in the village areas. Due to poverty they have to sale their land through these systems to meet the needs of money.

VII. AN ASSESSMENT OF THE GOVERNMENT POLICY

The Government of India as well as Assam has responded from time to time to the demands raised by the tribal ethnic communities in Assam. To begin with the constitutional autonomy under the Sixth schedule of the constitutions to the Hill tribes at the early stage of independence, reorganization of Assam on the ethnic community basis subsequently, again inclusion of the Bodos within the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution and constitution of BTAD area, formation of statutory Autonomous Councils for the Tiwas, Rabhas, Mishings, Deoris, Sonowal Kacharis and Thengal Kacharis etc. But these policy measures could not yield the enduring results to the tribal problems in the states. A handful of leaders only are getting the benefits of this transfer of powers. These policies of the Government have encouraged the tribal elites to raise new movements for more

powers after achieving one stages of power. Moreover, due to this aspiration of power of the tribal leaders, the unity and integrity of the state has been shaken. For securing their hegemony over the land they considered the non tribals as others in their respective areas. This has threatened the unity and integrity of the Assamese nationality.

VIII. SOME SUGGESTIONS

a) Protection of identity is a legitimate right of any ethnic group. In a heterogeneous society, protection of diversity is a necessity through which unity can be achieved. In Assam, the Tribal ethnic groups have enormously contributed to the growth of Assamese Nationality. Therefore, it is necessary to protect and nourish the cultural and ethnic identity of these small Tribal Communities. The protection of language, institutions and customs are very important in this regard. They should be allowed to practice their customary laws and social institutions in their society. In Assam, the emergence of Tribal sub-national assertions should not be treated as antagonistic to the greater Assamese nationality. The Assamese socio-cultural organizations representing the Assamese nationality should accept, recognize these Tribal sub-nationality to accommodate them within the broader national identity. All the organizations (socio-political) in Assam should practice mutual tolerance and accept the multi-culturalism. This will strengthen the unity and integrity of the State.

b) Development of the Tribal communities should be given top most priority by the Government in the State. Every Government undertakes various development schemes for the development of the tribal peoples. But due to misuse of funds, corruption and lack of awareness among the Tribal peoples hinders the development process. Moreover the Autonomous administrative systems are also fails to bring the expected change in the Tribal communities. Considering all these, sincere effort of the Government is needed through effective monitoring and implementation of the schemes for achieving the goal of development of the Tribal communities.

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