



State, conflict and India's North East

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Abstract

The paper starts with a core hypothesis which is Diagnostic in nature. The diagnostic perspective has identified the existence of Internal Colonialism in respect to the policy approach of the Indian state towards the North Eastern part of it. Despite being rich in natural resources with fertile land, rich forests and mineral deposits, the development of the region is largely skewed due to policy deficiencies in the colonial and post colonial period. One would certainly like to point out that India's North East has witnessed an increasing frequency of the movements of identity assertions on the part of diverse ethnic groups in the region. These communities had been pressing for different demands like Independent territorial space, within and sometimes outside, special constitutional or political safeguards for their respective identities. Nobody would deny the fact that the trend of ethnic assertions is itself a healthy indication of a developing democracy where more and more people are being recruited into their political process. But the State response to the entire issue of ethnic assertions in the North East is so insensitive that it has converted many a democratic movements of the region into a violent conversation between the State and the society. The situation depicts a syndrome that needs to be addressed with careful handling on the part of a sensitive State. The second hypothesis in the paper is prescriptive one. It is a kind of survival strategy for the Indian State to maintain its sovereignty and integrity.

Keywords : Conflict resolution, diagnostic perspective, survival strategy.

1. Introduction

The North East is a landmass of 2, 62,500-sq.km. in the easternmost corner of the Indian Republic. After the reorganization of the composite state of Assam, the seven different states namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram and Tripura are collectively referred to as the North East. Sikkim has been added to the list of seven states in so far as the North eastern Council (NEC) is concerned. The NEC is a statutory planning body for the North Eastern Region. It is responsible for taking initiative for the social and economic development of the region. Accordingly, a generic entity namely the North East has emerged in the political and geographical terms although each of

the state presents diverse cultural personality of their own.

The Indian territorial space, more particularly in the era of Nehruvian guardianship had embarked upon a mission of coercive nationalization in total disregard of differentiation that exist among the people more particularly in India's Northeast. In the post-colonial space, collective public memory has been built on a continuously violent conversation between the statist and the exponents of the 'imagined nations' in India's North East. The imagined nation or nationhood speaks of the socio-cultural and political expectations on the part of various ethnic communities like the Nagas, Mizos, Asomiyas, Bodos etc to the formation of their independent

geographical territories leading to the formation of the nations. In the social and political space it is a situation of the state vs. 'the imagined nations'. The state in India with its super structural attributes has manifested its inability to garner superlative sensitivity which is necessary to deal with the struggle for imagined nations. There has been a school of thought which believes that the state in the post-colonial space is nothing but a continuation of its colonial format. In spite of the repeated claims of the statist that a sovereign democratic republic has been proclaimed in India, with a fundamental thrust on the welfare of the people, the colonial state, in actual practice, reincarnated itself in the post-colonial era. In the process the space and the structure inherently remained the same and the changes occurred only in reference to time. The colonial state was devoid of the imagination to deal with issues that it termed as peripheral and it was nothing but a brutal mechanism of exploiting resources and earning profit through trade. India's Northeast is an imperial construct that emerged in the colonial discourse as a frontier region. The term frontier, although opened to diverse interpretations, the mountains, forests, rivers and the rough terrain in between the British ruled Bengal and the western borders of the kingdom of Ava secured the connotation of frontier in colonial jargon. When Mackenzie, the man in charge of political correspondence in British Bengal, in 1871, wrote a report of this space at the request of the colonial government, he called it, *Memorandum on the Northeastern Frontier of Bengal*. Thus the space with nature and resources and vast tracts of non governable territories with no direct contribution to the colonial coffer, gradually secured the administrative and political legitimacy of a Frontier.

In the post colonial space too the continuation of identical colonial policies has initiated a new debate in the political domain and the theoretical explanation in the form of the syndrome of internal colonialism is very much gaining ground.

2. Methodology

While explaining the study we have adopted the following methods—

- An attempt has been made to procure substantial information relating to the hypothesis on the basis of observation and collection of data. Being a student in the discipline of Political Science, observation has always been a part of our scientific endeavour. It has been observed that from the very dawn of independence, the problem of ethnicity has always been a source of conflict in the entire region. Accordingly the developments relating to Naga and Mizo insurgency have provided substantial information relevant for the purpose of the study. It was widely reported that the Government of India had adopted a purely military and security oriented approach to deal with the problem of Naga and Mizo insurgency. During the course of the study we have collected extensive information as to the behavior of the State and the non state actors involved in the problem. In the contemporary period as well observation and extensive data collection techniques have helped us to procure research data relating to the activities of United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) in the Brahmaputra valley, United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) in Karbi Anglong district of Assam, Dima Halo Daoga (DHD) in North Kachar Hill District of Assam etc, that have also been the source of contemporary information regarding ethnic conflict in the region.
- For the purpose of the study we have also adopted the historical approach so as to procure the background information of various social conflicts relating to ethnic assertions in the North East. It is through the historical approach that substantial information have been collected relating to the Naga and Mizo insurgency as part of the background information of the study. At the same time

the historical has also been used to understand the continuity of the society and politics of the region starting from the pre colonial to the colonial as well as contemporary period. While studying the continuity of the movements relating to ethnic assertions have also been taken into account

- For the purpose of the study, the interdisciplinary method has been exclusively used. It may be noted that mere political approach is not sufficient to gain a comprehensive understanding of the nature of the conflict that have taken place in the area under consideration. that is why the interdisciplinary approach comprising political, economic, cultural, religious and a comprehensive social approach have been taken into account for the purpose of collecting and interpreting data
- For the purpose of study the comparative approach has also been adopted to explain and interpret the data in a comparative context of other region in the world. The comparative approach has been of great value for projecting the nature of conflict which is of different kind in India's North East. It also projects the trend of what it has been described as *internal colonialism*.

3. Hypothesis

While explaining the syndrome of *internal colonialism*, a word about the parent formulation of disintegration is necessary. The *disintegration theory*, frankly speaking is yet unstructured and is difficult to be put into a definite structure of a theoretical formulation. It is more particularly because once a phenomenon appears in a territorial space; it does not have the same structural formations and accordingly cannot be put into one and only one proposition of the theory of disintegration. The *theory of disintegration* should be able to explain as to when and why separate groups emerge in the polity and try to secure to

find a space in the socio political milieu. The *theory of disintegration* should also take into account the conditions that promote a process of disintegration and the role of the system in the entire exercise. These are all politically salient questions and are relevant for studying the contemporary reality of North East Politics. The theory of *Internal colonialism* that has been sought to be put forward as an explanation of the post-colonial reality in North East India basically presumes the presence of a political arrangement with emphasis on sovereignty, rights and justice for the people, however superficial it may be. The territory is independent and the people have been subjected to a system of constitutional democracy with all the parameters of a liberal democratic state. We concentrate on liberal democracy because if it is Saddam Hussein's Iraq or Gaddafi's Libya, policies of the totalitarian regime are least expected to promote the welfare of the people. In totalitarianism be it apparent and hidden, both the agendas of the regime ultimately focus at the promotion of the interest of the ruling elite whether it is military junta, ideological dictator or fundamentalist's regimes. In a democratic polity where the state is expected to provide the pitch for development of the people with adequate presence of rights and liberty that are constitutionally guaranteed, states formulated policies that largely conform to colonial policies of the past in terms of mobilization and drain of wealth. The present policy of the government of India to construct 168 mega dams over the rivers of India's North East do remind us of the similar colonial policy of extracting wealth from the resourceful areas. In response to the so called developmental policies to make the North East a surplus region in terms of generation of electricity, this policy may be a recipe for further conflict and underdevelopment of the whole region. We may identify a series of issues like displacement, alienation, demographic change, rights violation regarding development and agriculture that may in all likelihood suffer in the long run. There has been tremendous public

mobilization on the issue of construction of big dams and there are multiple layers of resistance to the proposed policy of the government. Popular opposition to large dams in upstream areas in the flood plains of Assam has already taken a critical turn. Apart from the small and localized movements initiated by the local NGO's, the organizations like AASU and Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti(KMSS) have started state wise agitation in particular opposition to the mega dams on the river lower Subansiri. Many of the NGO's and social organizations have even carried out studies to assess the ecological and the social impact of the dams. The civil society has taken initiative to form expert committees with internationally reputed technical personalities of Guwahati and Dibrugarh University and IIT Guwahati have reported the vulnerability of the downstream areas that have further mobilized public opinion in favour of stopping the mega dams in the region. But in spite of such mobilizations the State in India has not taken any appropriate step for this ecologically fragile and politically sensitive region to ward off popular apprehensions. The policies of the colonial period were sought to be incorporated in post colonial governance in the form of a number of instruments like Inner Line permit. There were constituent assembly sub committees which were set up to report on the future administration of the excluded areas. The report of the sub committees further carved a territory of alienation of the people of the region from the rest of the country. *Internal colonialism* has the tendency of initiating the process of *demassification* which negates the very premise of liberal democracy incorporated in the constitutional polity of the country. After the inauguration of the sovereign democratic republic in India, attempts were made to redraw the geographical boundaries in the North East. It is quite interesting to see that the policy planners in the process of such reorganization were highly influenced by anti-insurgency considerations and the imagination in terms of flexibility of policies expected from a liberal democratic regime was

painfully missing. In other words the military security paradigms had primarily motivated the policy planners to start the exercise of redrawing of the boundaries. The first step in the reorganization of the boundaries of composite Assam was the separation of the Naga areas and the eventual separation of Nagaland. It was a kind of political strategy to ward off insurgencies in the Naga areas. In 1966 the Mizo National Front (MNF) launched insurgency in the then Lushai Hills District of Assam. The MNF was in favour of a sovereign Mizo state and resorted to massive violence for the realization of their demands. The grouping of villages started by the government in the then Lushai District of composite Assam to identify the insurgents saw large scale burning of crops as well as massive killing of civilians by the security forces, almost unheard of in the history of post colonial India. There have also been demands by United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) for *Swadhin Axom*, National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) demanding a sovereign Bodoland, United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) in Karbi Anglong district of Assam and Dima Halo Duga(DHD) demanding *Dimaraji* in Dima Hasao district of Assam. There were also occasions when militant organizations like the Bodoland Liberation Tiger (BLT), entered into talks with the state since March 2000 with a view to fulfill the aspirations of the Bodo people relating to their cultural identity and economic development. The militant outfits in Manipur have also demanded a sovereign status for Manipur. As for Nagaland, there are various fractions of Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland that stand for a sovereign country-a united Nagaland that includes all the Naga inhabited areas of Indo-Burma region. There are also demands for 'greater Nagalim' including contiguous Naga-inhabited areas of Assam, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and even Myanmar. The assertion on the part of the ethnic communities is supposed to be a positive syndrome of a growing democracy like India. But the utter absence of imagination, sensitivity and flexibility

of the state machinery has converted the democratic manifestations on the part of the marginalized tribes into a kind of violent confrontation between the state and the supporters of the imagined nations. It has not only widened the dimensions of conflict but has also resulted in a syndrome known as *demassification*. It indicates a deficiency syndrome of the state in India that has *demassified* the people while democracy worth the name suggests the widening political participation of the masses i.e. *massification*. In theoretical terms, demassification has another connotation namely alienation. Increased alienation has been caused due to a variety of factors of state violence, unabated continuance of engineered violence in areas peopled by different ethnic communities, politicking by the administration, continued imposition of the black laws like the Arm Forces Special Power Act 1958, perceived identity crisis due to unabated migration of foreign nationals and economic backwardness. Representative democracy is nothing but the population dynamics and the sheer number game. It does not permit the Northeastern voice to enter the chambers of the policy makers and that distant voice is rarely counted in the national corridors of power. It has already been seen that the excesses committed by the security forces at times gave rise to situations of guerilla warfare, individual or group acts of terrorism, violence at the instance of a number of militant outfits and retaliatory violence also contributed to making the situation extremely unbearable. It shows that the other dimensions of differentiation or disintegration i.e., ethnicity is in crisis and *internal colonialism* is in its full manifestation in the North East region of the country. The deficiency syndrome is partly the result of a continuity of colonial tribal policies in the post-colonial period. In the colonial policy framework the tribal regions were portrayed as primitive and backward and to bring them into the so called mainstream discourse, the post-colonial policy makers insisted on the adoption of the integrationist model. In fact the framers of the

constitutional order and the policy makers had demonstrated their lack of sufficient understanding of the grass root reality of the region and accordingly carried forward the fundamental policy of the colonial regime into a post-colonial legitimacy through so called democratic mandate. *It was the much emphasized melting-pot which wanted to marginalize the separate identity of the communities in the frontier.* While discarding the so called integrationist approach of the national policy framers who are oblivious of the cultural dimensions of the political aspirations of the communities in the North East, differentiation itself may be promoted as an adhesive for national unity. In fact ethnic consideration, frictions and antipathies lay dormant for a long time on global scale under the stress of East- West ideological conflict. The post cold war era gave rise to new crisis, conflicts and one could point out even to the ethnic cleansing operations in former Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, in some parts of Africa apart from the Neo Fascists resurgence in some European countries. In India in the era of independence, there have been innumerable instances of ethnic assertions following the granting of autonomous status to states and regions thereof. The extension of the scheduled tribe status in plain areas to the Bodos under the sixth schedule to the constitution, several communities like Koch Rajbongshis, Tai Ahoms, Morans, Motoks, Chutias and the Adivasis have also demanded ST status to their communities.

4. Findings

Taking into consideration the core hypothesis, the paper has sought to address the problems in the form of findings of the research endeavour. It is in this context that it has been suggested that the state must develop the sensitivity without which the problem of internal colonialism cannot be properly addressed. It is within the philosophical format of this approach that the ethnic communities in particular reference to North East will be able to ensure a separate identity and at the same time would have a

respectable social existence in relation to other communities. This is a kind of survival strategy for the Indian state that is expected to counter the deficiency syndrome. The contemporary identity theory that has been developed from the structuralist, symbolic interaction theories are highly differentiated yet organized system of interaction and relationship. Under the differentiated approach it could be stated that it would neutralize the integrationist approach of the national policy framers who are oblivious to the trend of ethnic aspirations on the part of the ethnic communities in India's North East. It may be noted that ethnic considerations, frictions and antipathies lay dormant for a long time on global scale under the stress of East-West ideological conflicts during the cold war era and even before that. The post cold war era gave rise to new crises, conflict and even after. One could point out to the ethnic cleansing operations in the former USSR, in the former Yugoslavia, in some parts of Africa apart from the neo-fascist resurgence in some European countries. Africa and some parts thereof witnessed a number of ethnic conflicts. In India, in the era of independence there have been innumerable instances of ethnic assertiveness whether centering round the issue of identity crisis or calling for granting of autonomous status to states or regions thereof. Further to that following the extension of Scheduled Tribe status in plain areas to the Bodos under the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution several communities like Koch-Rajbongshis, Tai-Ahoms, Morans, Matak, Chutiyas and tea garden communities of tribal origin i.e. the Adivasis have also demanded ST status to their communities. It is in this

backdrop of a new identity proposition that the Divided We Stand approach has been formulated to resolve conflicts within the social and political system. In other words it is the recognition of the differentiated existence of the ethnic communities that would make federalism at the grassroots a realistic proposition. It is true that the question of autonomy had also bothered the leadership in the days of the struggle for freedom. The national movement leadership had adopted the Quit India Resolution and the Objective Resolution of the Constituent Assembly to address the problem. But these approaches have been conveniently forgotten by the framers of the constitution as a result of which problems arose in the process of nation building. In our study the second hypothesis contains an important component in the form of the incorporation of the Quit India Resolution in the constitution so as to neutralize the deficiency syndrome in the system through genuine decentralization.

The Quit India Resolution of 1942 may provide a guiding philosophy for reorientation of our debate on the control over the resources with active participation of the people in the development process. While it is true that there is no readymade solution for the problems discussed in the essay development strategy with wider flexibility in a corrected federal order. We also would like to initiate that there could at least be a positive beginning in the development philosophy so that the future generation can never have the occasion to say that the Indian republic has been built with the destruction of the green earth and the innocent tribes who have been living there for centuries.

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