CHAPTER -II

GROWING ETHNICITY IN NORTH EAST INDIA

We have already observed that the Northeastern region of India covers an area of approximately 7.9% of the country’s territory. Every state in this region, barring Sikkim, is affected by insurgent activities, each differing from the other only in matters of degree and intensity. Strategically located, 99% of the borders of the Northeastern region are international—with China to the North; Bangladesh to the South and West; Bhutan to the North West and Myanmar to the East. The region has witnessed several tumultuous years of ethnic clashes and secessionist movements.

Being home to hundreds of ethnic communities—big and small, this region can best be described as a cauldron of ethnicities—each making an attempt to carve a niche for itself. With the advent of globalization and the subsequent pressures on land, coupled with the depletion of natural resources, ethnic communities have been placed at loggerheads with one another while competing over scarce resources. When discontentment is linked with an assertion of one’s collective identity and identified with ethnicity per se, ethnic consciousness can mutate into ethno nationalism. This can be seen in many parts of the region.

Ethno-political movements in North-East India

Ethnicity in the contemporary world has emerged as a phenomenon with a capacity for social mobilization. It has certain psychological properties which can contribute towards potential volatility in the society. Although ethnicity and nationalism are two overlapping albeit distinct terms, yet often, over time ethnic consciousness may assume the form of ethno-nationalism. ¹

Ethnicity is a dynamic and evolutionary notion and ethnicity *per se* is not problematic. It is the manifestations of ethnicity, the potential with which it can displace all other loyalties to emerge as the central basis of identity that requires immediate attention. Ethnicity, like several other social phenomena is socially constructed. This assumes significance in the light of the rigid ‘Us-Them’ divide that can emerge during interactions with members of other ethnic communities. Such a scenario is particularly evident when people are emotionally charged. During such times, they are easily swayed by ethnic sentiments, thus blurring the line between reality -as-it-exists and reality-as-it-is-made out to be, by vested interests. By providing a sense of belongingness, ethnicity is a significant tool in early socialization allowing individuals the cognitive capacity to recognize differences and to derive expectations of nurture from ‘we’ or danger from ‘they’.  

Identity theorists have proposed three main approaches to Ethnicity: the Primordialist approach, the Instrumentalist approach and Constructivist approach. The *Primordialist approach* takes ethnicity as a fixed characteristic of individuals and communities (Issacs 1975, Smith 1986, Kaplan 1993, Connor 1994). The Primordial theorists stress on the uniqueness and significance of ethnic identity and see conflict as a derivative of ethnic differences. Critics of this theory argue about its lack of explanation regarding the emergence of new or transformed identities as well as relatively peaceful relationships shared by inherently different ethnicities. The *Instrumentalist approach* sees ethnicity as a tool used by individuals, groups and elites to obtain an end (Glazer and Moynihan 1975, Steinberg 1981, Brass 1985, Rothchild 1986b). According to the Instrumentalist theorists, ethnicity is taken as a label or a set of symbolic ties that is used by political entrepreneurs for a political end. Critics of this theory argue that ethnicity is embedded in the societal framework and therefore cannot be acted upon by individuals. The *Constructivist theory* views ethnicity as a product of social processes. It emphasizes the social origins and nature of ethnicity. According to these theorists, ethnicity is not an individual attribute but a

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social phenomenon. They believe that social interactions shape the conceptions of ethnicity. As John Chipman states, “One of the great cruelties of ethnic conflict is that everyone is automatically labeled a combatant—by the identity they possess—even if they are not. Thus ethnic conflicts in their extreme can become total conflicts (1993, 240).”³

A common phenomenon discernible in the Northeastern region of India is the overwhelming existence of grand narratives of ethnic strife (comprising of individual incidents), by invoking the concept of a mythical homeland and memories of the glorious past.

According to Chaudhary et al (2005),

Homeland is defined as the space that the members of an ethnic community or more aptly, the organizations claiming to act on their behalf, imagine as their own and hence is entitled to some form of autonomy. Homeland, in other words, is a powerful imaginary that inspires and shapes many an autonomy practice of these organizations. Homeland turns out to be a messy political problem when the claim is couched in exclusivist terms and rules out others’ claims to the same space whether through genocide and ethnic cleansing or through a denial of their democratic rights particularly representation. ⁴

Ethnic Conflict

Ethnic conflict is caused by the collective fears of insecurity (social, political and economic) of the future. Ethnic activists and political entrepreneurs, operating within groups, reinforce these kinds of fears thereby creating fractures in the society. The

³ Lake, D.A & Rothchild, D Ethnic Fears and Global Engagement: The International Spread and Management of Conflict. Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation. University of California, Multi-Campus Research Unit, 1996,pp.6-8
⁴ Basu Ray Chaudhary, Sabyasachi, Das, Samir Kumar & Samaddar , Ranabir (Eds.) Indian Autonomies: Keywords and Key Texts, Sampark in management with Calcutta Research Group,2005, p. 21
most significant fear of any ethnic group in conflict, is the fear of loss of identity—the very core of an individual’s being. The fears of being assimilated into the dominant culture weigh heavily in the minds and hearts of the people. In such scenarios, Chosen traumas and Past glories are often successful in invoking feelings of suspicions and misgivings amongst members of an ethnic community, fuelling hatred towards one another.

According to Lake and Rothchild, the causes of conflict may differ for Inter and Intra group conflicts. For the former, information failures, problems of credible commitment, and incentives to use force preemptively—also known as the security dilemma, can lead to the conflict. Manipulation and blatant ethnic appeals of ethnic activists and political entrepreneurs can cause intra-group conflict.  

Ethnic Groups have certain common characteristics. Each ethnic group has a collective proper name, a myth of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more differentiating elements of common culture, association with a specific homeland, and a sense of solidarity with significant sectors of the population.

Ethnic Identity can be politicized and be given a political hue. Many of the ethnic conflicts revolve around the political rights of a people over a contested territory. The territory possesses certain inherent characteristics such that it often emerges as a symbol of individual and collective identity and has a significant value as a source of control and influence.

According to Ted Gurr, four factors can influence the evolution of minority discontentment into a separatist movement. They are—first, the degree of social, economic and political disparities between groups; secondly, the perception of a common purpose; thirdly, a strong leadership and fourthly, an organizational capacity. According to Roy et al (2007), the context has to be fertile for ethnic conflicts to emerge. Elaborating on it further, they state,

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5 Ibid, pg.8
7 Gurr cited in Roy, Ramashray, Sujata Miri and Sandhya Goswami Northeast India—Development, Communalism and Insurgency, Anshah Publishing House, Delhi, 2007, p.15
Ethnic conflicts acquire their salience only when a particular set of socio political situations become operative in a particular climate of motivations and behavior. … When a particular group finds itself in a situation where it feels that it has been denied its rightful access to such social resources, such as wealth, power and prestige, it takes steps to correct this situation.8

Territorial claims can be secessionist, irredentist and /or autonomist in their nature. The North Eastern region of India is a microcosm of diverse ethnicities. If one studies the socio-political landscape of this region, one finds that the different ethnic groups present have made secessionist, irredentist and autonomist territorial claims at different points of time in history.

Stefan Wolff has defined secessionism, irredentism and autonomy in the following manner, “Secessionism is a political movement of a specified population group that drives a process at the end of which it hopes to have succeeded in detaching itself and its territory from its host-state and to have established an independent state of its own.”9 Irredentism, on the other hand can be defined as a “state-based, but not necessarily government-backed, movement that seeks to retrieve an external minority, together with the territory from its host state it inhabits across an existing border, i.e., to add territory as well as population to an existing state.”10 Territorial Autonomism, on the other hand has been defined as the “desire of the resident population (or a part thereof) in a particular territory to gain a measure of self rule within this territory without seceding from its host-state” 11

In North East India, the states of Nagaland as well as Assam have witnessed separatist organizations waging a struggle for secessionism from the Indian nation for several decades now. In Nagaland, the struggle for secessionism has been spearheaded by the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), by both the Muivah and Khaplang factions, whereas, in Assam, the separatist movement has been spearheaded by the

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8 Roy, Ramashray, Sujata Miri and Sandhya Goswami Northeast India—Development, Communalism and Insurgency, Anshah Publishing House, Delhi, 2007, p.16
10 Ibid
11 Ibid
United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA). Besides this movement for secessionism, Assam also has several movements led by the various ethnic groups for territorial autonomism and irredentism. The Dimasa, an ethnic group in Assam is spearheading a movement for the establishment of an autonomous state for Dimasas, called “Dimaraji” within Assam. This movement like many others in the North Eastern region of India contains strains of both autonomism as well as irredentism. This is because the conceptualization of the proposed state of Dimaraji would include all the Dimasa inhabited regions in the North East of India, implying that it would not only include the external minority i.e. the Dimasas but also the territory which they inhabit in a host state, across the border.

**Nation: Social Memories and Quest for Identity**

Myth, symbolism and memory are essential elements of a nation. The past is alive in the present, in the creation of a nation. According to Anthony D. Smith, “There can be no identity without memory (albeit selective), no collective purpose without myth, and identity and purpose or destiny are necessary elements of the very concept of a nation.” 12 “A nation is therefore a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and those that one is prepared to make in the future. It presupposes a past; it is summarized, however in the present by a tangible fact, namely, consent, the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life.” 13

The Indian Union has not completely devolved its powers to the full extent, with the result that the Central Government still exercises great power and is in fact the main decision making body in the Indian polity. In a diverse country such as India, there are numerous ethnic groups. Whenever, integration has failed or has not been very successful, the Indian nation state has adopted the Accomodationist approach to appease to the sentiments and ‘manage’ ethnicity. 14 Hence, there are several states within India that have been formed on the linguistic basis. The Accomodationist

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approach also has the potential of creating more harm than good. Creation of more political units on the basis of language gives ample scope to smaller ethnic groups to vie for their space in the political set up. Driven by the fear of loss of identity, smaller ethnic groups initiate movements against the politics of homogenization (whether it is linguistic/ethnic or cultural). Images of mythical homelands and the golden past are invoked and this often translates into social movements demanding greater power, autonomy, statehood or even secessionism. The popular invocation of the ancient homeland (that was never conquered and where justice prevailed) is then projected as the ideal to be worked towards—as the future of the people. The entire approach tends to trigger off a vicious cycle, whereby more and more ethnic minorities emerge. The interplay between contested spaces, narratives, social memories and the marginalized comes to the fore. The mechanism through which the State aims to ‘manage’ the festering discontents is essentially flawed. When territories are carved out for one group, the rights of another group often get clamped. This in turn fuels a different kind of politics of recognition. With every new creation of a territorialized identity, new marginals emerge and this generates a never – ending cycle.

Benedict Anderson defined a nation as an “imagined political community (that is) imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign”. As Anderson puts it, a nation “is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know their fellow members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each, lives the image of the communion.” According to his theory of imagined communities, the main causes of the nationalism are the declining importance of privileged access to particular script languages because of mass vernacular literacy; the movement to abolish the ideas of rule by divine right and hereditary monarchs; and the emergence of printing press capitalism—all phenomenon occurring with the start of the Industrial Revolution.15

15 The article ‘Imagined Communities’ accessed on May 12, 2009 from the website http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imagined_communities
Constitutional Provisions and the Question of Autonomy

Most of the movements for autonomy in the region are demanding the establishment of an autonomous unit of administration. The struggles are played out between dominant majorities and minorities. The minorities perceiving ill-treatment from the dominant other, come to believe that the State does not represent their interests properly, and therefore they must control their “own affairs” via a devolved autonomous political structure within the state.

The recommendations of the Bordoloi Committee made provisions for Regional Councils for tribes other than the main tribe, in the North Eastern region. The scheme sought to build up autonomous administration (District Councils and the Regional Councils) in the hill areas of Assam (United Khasi-Jaintia Hills District, Garo Hills District, Lushai Hills District, Naga Hills District, N.C.Hills District and Mikir Hills District) so that the tribal people could preserve their traditional way of life, and safeguard their customs and cultures. The provision for a District Council was incorporated into the Article 244 (2) of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution on accepting the recommendations of the Bordoloi Committee.16 The Language Act of 1960 hastened the formation of the All People Hill Leader’s Conference (APHLC) which submitted a memorandum to the President on August 21, 1960 urging him therein for the separation of hill districts from Assam. A delegation led by Williamson Sangma, met the Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in November 1960 and pressed for the creation of an Eastern Frontier State to satisfy the legitimate aspirations of the tribal people.17

The Constitution of India has incorporated several special provisions to preserve the ethnic, cultural and religious identity of the people and to maintain the demographic uniqueness of the Northeastern region:

16 Prasad, Dr.R.N. ‘Dialogue’, Astha Bharati, October-December, Volume 6, No. 2, New Delhi ,2004, p.1
• Article 371-A—Special provision with respect to the State of Nagaland.
• Article 371-B—Special provision with respect to the State of Assam.
• Article 371-C—Special provision with respect to the State of Manipur.
• Article 371-G—Special provision with respect to the State of Mizoram.
• Article 371-H—Special provision with respect to the State of Arunachal.
• Article 244(2) and 275(1)—Sixth Schedule—Provisions for administration of Tribal Areas in the States of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Mizoram and Manipur.

The Sixth Schedule to the Constitution empowers the Governor of a State with several far reaching powers such as:

- To determine the administrative areas of the Councils.
- To create a new autonomous district, increase or diminish the area of any existing district, and increase or diminish the area of any District Councils.
- To unite two or more autonomous districts or parts thereof so as to form one autonomous district, define the boundaries of any district and alter the name of any autonomous district.

The Sixth Schedule thus makes the Governor the head of the Autonomous District Council. 18

The Autonomous Councils were formed on the lines of Consociationalism, a group building-block approach that relies on accommodation by ethnic group leaders at the political centre and guarantees of group autonomy and minority rights. It encourages collaborative decision-making by parties in conflict. The key institutions are:

- Federalism and the devolution of power to ethnic groups in the territory that they control.
- Minority vetoes on issues of importance to them.
- Grand coalition cabinets in a parliamentary framework.
- Proportionality in all spheres of public life (for example, budgeting and civil service appointments).” 19

18 Prasad, Dr.R.N. ‘Dialogue’, Astha Bharati, October-December, Volume 6, No. 2 ,New Delhi, 2004 , p.2
Yet the existing political structures provided within the ambit of the provisions of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution have not been able to do justice. The purpose with which the Council was formed has not been realized over these years. Although transfer of finances from both the Central as well as the State Government has been steadily increasing over the years, development at the grassroots has not been forthcoming. Creation of smaller units of administration in the region might have been a political strategy for the central government, but in the long run how viable they would be financially was perhaps not taken into account. This shortsightedness has created its own vicious cycle. Huge sums of money are pumped into these administrative set ups in the form of grants-in-aid, but very little is being done by these units to become self-generating revenue earners. The seven states of the Northeast have been recognized as Special Category States and this entitles them to get 90 percent of Central Assistance as a grant and just 10 percent as loan.

The policy of providing subsidies has made inroads into the very depths of the societal framework in the region. Initially though the policy was introduced as a humanitarian gesture to alleviate the imbalance in the economy, over the years, it has spread its tentacles to such an extent that instead of smoothening out the imbalances, it has been successful in de-motivating the people in the region to a large extent. This is especially true because a steady inflow of funds “creates its own network of beneficiaries and any change in the existing set of rules evokes strong resistance.”

And this inevitably leads to situations of conflict.

**Conflict: Nature and Types**

Conflict may be defined as a struggle or contest between people with opposing needs, ideas, beliefs, values or goals. According to Edward Azar (1990), conflict “arises


from mutually incompatible goals between two or more parties where an effective coordinating or mediating mechanism does not exist”.

The Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict conducted a three-year study, the results of which reveal a vast number of factors that are instrumental in making societies prone to warfare. They are as follows:

1) Weak, corrupt, or collapsed states.
2) Illegitimate or repressive regimes.
3) Acute discrimination against ethnic or other social groups.
4) Poorly managed religious, cultural or ethnic differences.
5) Politically active religious communities that promote hostile and divisive messages.
6) Political and economic legacies of colonialism or the Cold War.
7) Sudden economic and political shifts.
8) Widespread illiteracy, disease and disability.
9) Lack of resources such as water and arable land.
10) Large stores of weapons and ammunition.
11) Threatening regional relationships.

The report also states “When long-standing grievances are exploited by political demagogues, the scene is set for violence.”

Noted conflict theorist, Johan Galtung proposed an influential model of conflict in the late 1960s. The model encompasses both symmetric and asymmetric conflicts. He suggested that conflict could be viewed as a triangle with contradiction (C), attitude (A) and Behaviour (B) at its vertices. According to him, contradiction refers to the underlying conflict situation, which include the actual or perceived ‘incompatibility of goals’ between the conflict parties. Attitudes include the parties’ perceptions and misperceptions of each other and themselves and it includes the elements of emotion (feeling), cognition (belief) and conation (will). The third component, Behaviour,
includes cooperative as well as coercive gestures, which signify either reconciliation or antagonism.  

**Types of Conflict:**
The nature of conflict varies according to the context of the situation as well as the actors engaged in it. Conflicts can be of ethnic, political, social, economic and psychological in nature.

The complexity of the phenomenon of conflict is visible in its various manifestations. There are various types of conflicts and varying levels in which they can be played out. There are Intra-personal conflicts (conflicts within an individual regarding various values and choices), Inter-personal conflicts (conflicts between individuals), Inter-group (conflicts between groups), Intra-group (conflicts within a group). The Power dynamics operating between the contesting parties in conflict, shape the nature of the conflict.

According to Sanam Naraghi Anderlini, conflict can be of several types, namely:

- Resource based conflicts: Economic power access/ control over resources.
- Conflicts over governance and authority: political power, participation, control.
- Ideological Conflicts: Rival ideologies and values.
- Identity conflicts: Ethnic, religious, communal identity- rivalry over access to resources, territory, political/military power, social justice. 

The socio-political landscape of the world today is marked by several enduring, long-term conflicts between diverse ethnicities and identity groups. In multi-ethnic societies, this problem has become more evident in recent years. As communities become more aware of their political rights and social history, their demands also increase. When one group begins to dominate over the others, neglecting their needs of political, social and economic security, hostilities begin to emerge to the surface, bringing conflicting interests to the forefront.

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Protracted Social Conflict

Some conflicts emerge out of long-term antagonistic relationships shared amongst members of different identity groups. Such a scenario is particularly seen in communities that are multi-ethnic and where one identity group is dominant over the others. Such situations give rise to Protracted Social Conflicts. According to Edward Azar (1990), “Protracted Social Conflicts are based in deep seated racial, ethnic, and religious tensions that combine with structural divisions within societies and political oppression to result in the victimization of one or more group”.

According to Azar, “grievances resulting from need deprivation are usually expressed collectively. Failure to redress these grievances by the authority cultivates a niche for a protracted social conflict”. He cites security needs, development needs, political access needs, and identity needs (cultural and religious expression) as the basis of such conflicts. Azar believes that Protracted Social Conflicts tend to be concentrated in developing countries which are typically characterized by a ‘rapid population growth and limited resource base’ and also have restricted ‘political capacity’ often linked to a colonial legacy of weak participatory institutions, a hierarchical tradition of imposed bureaucratic rule from metropolitan centres, and inherited instruments of political repression. Many a time, these Protracted Social Conflicts evolve into long drawn Low Intensity Conflicts, wreaking havoc on the social, psychological and economic resources of a community.

Although the North-Eastern region of India has been bearing the brunt of several armed conflicts waged by the various ethnic elements in the region, the conflicts have never developed into full fledged wars. The nature of these conflicts has been that of Low Intensity Conflicts. The term Low Intensity Conflicts (LIC) has been variously defined. One such definition of LIC is “political or military confrontation between contending states or groups, below conventional war and above the routine peaceful competition among states. It frequently involves protracted struggles of competing

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26 Miall, H, Ramsbotham, O and Woodhouse, T, Contemporary Conflict Resolution, Polity Press, UK and Blackwell Publishers, USA, 1999, pp.73-74
27 Ibid
principles and ideologies. LIC are often localized, generally in the Third World but contain certain regional and global security implications”.\textsuperscript{28}

\textbf{Armed Conflict}

An armed conflict is a contested incompatibility, which concerns government and /or territory and which involves the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, and results in at least 25 battle-related deaths.

The separate elements of the definition can be operationalized as follows:

1) **Use of armed force**: Use of arms in order to promote the parties’ general position in the conflict, resulting in deaths.
   \textbf{Arms}: Any material means, e.g., manufactured weapons but also sticks, stones, fire, water etc.

2) **25 deaths**: A minimum of 25 battle-related deaths per year and per incompatibility.

3) **Party**: A government of a state or any opposition organization or alliance of opposition.

   3.1) Government: The party controlling the capital of the state.

   3.2) Opposition organization: Any Non-Governmental group of people having announced a name for their group and using armed force.

4) **State**: A state is

   4.1) An internationally recognized sovereign government controlling a specified territory, or

\textsuperscript{28}The website \url{www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/policy/army/fm/100-20/10020gl.htm} cited in Goswami, T \textit{Role of Women as Peace Builders with Special Reference to Nagaland}. Peace Studies, Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development (OKDISCD), Guwahati, Assam, 2006, p.24.
4.2) An internationally unrecognized government controlling a specified territory whose sovereignty is not disputed by another internationally recognized sovereign government previously controlling the same territory.

5) **Incompatibility** concerning government and/or territory the incompatibility, as stated by the parties, must concern government and/or territory.

5.1) **Incompatibility**: The stated generally incompatible positions.

5.2) **Incompatibility concerning government**: Incompatibility concerning type of political system, the replacement of the central government or the change of its political composition.

5.3) **Incompatibility concerning territory**: Incompatibility concerning status of territory, e.g., the change of the state in control of a certain territory (interstate conflict), secession or autonomy (interstate conflict).

Such a definition, apart from providing a comprehensive account of what an armed conflict is, debases the very essence of humanity – by reducing the loss of life to a mere statistic. Secondly, by stating that “at least 25 battle related deaths should take place for a conflict to merit the label of an armed conflict”, it demeans human existence per se. The definition seems to imply that the deaths of one or two people are of no consequence, there has to be at least 25 deaths for someone to take notice of it.

The rich and diverse history notwithstanding, the political scenario in the Northeastern region has been mired in complexities. According to noted journalist, Pradip Phanjoubam, “insurgencies result because of the non-compatibility of the identities of the ethnic groups, with that of the larger national identity. That is when

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the sub-nationalities or ethnic groups begin to see the larger national identity as anathema to their own.”

Thus we see that the fear of being overwhelmed by the other in these contested spaces, has forced many an identity group in the North Eastern region to re-conceptualize who they are and to consolidate their position in the ever changing society. An attempt to re-define one’s socio-cultural identity has also led to socio-political uprisings. Over time, these conflicts have transformed themselves into armed insurgencies leading to innumerable loss of lives, property and creation of fissures in the communities.

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30 Phanjoubam cited in Roy, Ramashray, Sujata Miri and Sandhya Goswami *Northeast India—Development, Communalism and Insurgency*, Anshah Publishing House, Delhi, 2007 p.28