Unravelling Ethnic Tensions: Colonialism, Post-Colonialism and the Question of Identity in Assam

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Abstract

Contemporary nations are often viewed as beset by ethnic tensions. It has been widely argued that in recent times there has been an increase in intensity of ethnic conflict: that nearly half the independent countries of the world have been troubled by some degree of ethnically inspired dissonance. The word “ethnicity” is however only of recent origin. It was initially used to denote a minority group but now used to describe several wide-ranging affiliations—race, language, religion, kinship, sect, caste etc. The recent increase of use of the word “ethnicity” and the expansion of affiliations encompassed by the term “ethnic group” has come along with a rapid rise in “ethnic tensions”. These developments necessitate a nuanced understanding of (a) whether the contemporary conditions have fostered a rise in ethnic tensions or b) whether the term itself has been used to explain various tensions as ethnic tensions.

The objective of the present thesis is to examine why tensions of the recent times often take on an ethnic dimension. It seeks to open out what underpins contemporary tensions as “ethnic” tensions. The thesis locates its study on the ethnic situation in one of the Indian states—Assam. It proposes a need to probe beyond simplistic labeling of tensions and to interrogate why the question of ethnicity has become apparently irrevocable in the case of Assam. It argues that
an overwhelming ethnic discourse exists in Assam, and that this discourse renders the imagination and expression of this region as fundamentally fragmented—ethnically.

In order to explore the discourse, it studies three recent conflicts that have been named ethnic conflicts—the Assam Movement (1979-1985), the United Liberation Front of Assam or ULFA (1979-present) and the Bodo Movement (1987-present). All three movements had diversity: in participants, operational modality and goal. The Assam movement was an indigenous people’s revolt against unchecked immigrants, the Bodo movement was a tribal uprising demanding autonomy, and the ULFA upsurge was an extremist movement aimed at secession. None of them were initiated as ethnic dissidence per se, and the content of ethnicity never remained the same. Examining why and how in the three instances the attempts to constitute broader identities failed and identities were reduced to specific ethnic units, the thesis forefronts the following argument: that while the presence and acknowledgment of diversity cannot be negated since earlier times, categorization of identities in Assam as essentially ethnic emerged at a specific junction—the British colonial period. Colonialism brought in a new dimension to the existing diversity; one of naturalizing the region as ethnically fragmented.

For the study, the thesis delves into the archival material and locates the processes that crystallized the identities of the people in ethnic terms. The thesis uses Foucault’s framework of discourse analysis to propose that colonial knowledge through various discursive strategies produced its subject. In the present study, the micro discourse of the macro British colonial knowledge is—the idea of ethnicity. It is my argument that colonial rule through the techniques of questioning and documenting every aspect of the life of the colonized masses naturalized the society of Assam in terms of ethnicity. The ethnic categories crystallized by the colonial ethnic discourse colours the imagination of the region, obstructing other modes of expression
(indigenous people’s identity attempted in the Assam movement, tribal identity attempted in the Bodo movement and dwellers of Assam identity attempted by the ULFA). The thesis claims that in this particular context ethnic expression arise from the nation’s inability to emerge from the discordant colonial ethnic discourse about the region and the recurring ethnic tension is a corollary of the nation’s inability to integrate all the sections of its people.

The thesis finally proposes that the tensions of the contemporary times need to be studied in their specific context—with respect to the dynamics that propel them to assume ethnic dimensions, in contrast to the existing parlance of unreflectively proclaiming the tensions as inherently ethnic malady.

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