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THE CIRCULAR CAUSATION OF ETHNICITY AND DEVELOPMENT IN NORTH EAST INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between ethnicity and development needs to be scrutinized at this juncture when a number of rising demands come from a basis fully engraved of ethnic realities. This is more observed when there is an insertion of nation- state model of political institution to a society highly knit by primordial realities. The paper tries to look at the circular relationship between ethnicity and development in a specific context of multi ethnic society of north east India.

INTRODUCTION

Development, no doubt, is a term used in different paraphernalia in social science literature, yet the concept needs final undebated expression. Very often, development is understood as the means to end all kinds of problems emerging out of ethnicity. Quite in a similar parlance we find the existence of literature that depicts ethnicity as a factor that hinders development. But very few studies prevail that could see it in other way and could deal with the very dynamics of ethnicity and development. The paper hence tries to see how ethnicity and development are intricately related to each other in the context of Indian society with a special focus on its north eastern states.

What is ethnicity?

In recent times ethnicity is a very important social phenomenon that draws attention from all corners. A number of ethnic issues have become the content of media coverage. It becomes the basis of movements of a number of groups in the world. The simultaneous development is also observed in social science literature. The experts in this field come up with their own understanding on such phenomena. Now it needs to understand first what ethnicity is? In a way it can be said that ethnicity is a sense of belongingness to an ethnic or ethnic

group. The understanding of ethnicity again needs knowledge of ethnic category. In a simple way it can be said that when one group of people is differentiated on the basis of certain cultural features e.g., language, territory, religion, color, diet, dress etc. then that group can be considered as ethnic group. Thus we can have 'n' number of ethnic groups around us in our country, as well as in the world. For many social scientists ethnicity is a cultural universal where as few consider it as a product of inter group interactions, rather than an inherent quality of a human group. Thus ethnicity is approached from diverse perspectives. For essentialists (Smith: 1986) such identity is ontological and for constructivists (Gellner: 1997) this is the result of historical forces. Another quest to understand ethnicity is: whether ethnicity should be understood on the basis of primordialism or it should be addressed on the basis of instrumentalism? For primordialists, the participant of ethnic group perceives ethnic ties collectively as an externally given, even coercive, social bond (Geertz: 1967). Again instrumentalists (Cohen Abner: 1969) regard ethnicity as an element of political strategy used as an instrument by a group to achieve some goal. Thus the concept of ethnicity oscillates between these two poles, though a number of dimensions gradually got incorporated to understand the phenomenon of ethnicity

The Causality of Ethnicity and Development

There are ample evidences to the fact that ethnicity very often, if not causes underdevelopment, comes on the way of

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development. This is highly impinged in the premises of primordialists. To them primordial ties seem to be particularistic. These are perceived as potential road blocks in the process of national cohesion. They argue, since the ethnic attachments pertain to the 'non rational' domain of human personality they lead to social turbulence and violence and thereby tend to be dysfunctional in the development processes of the civil society. Not only the primordialists, the view of cultural pluralists also facilitates to make the view more pronounced. The emphasis on the dominant-subordinate patterns of interaction among the various ethnic groups helps to understand the very basis of ethnic problems. The dysfunctionality of ethnicity can be substantiated well from the study of Africa by Noyoo (Ndanga Noyoo: 2013) who showed how the issue of ethnicity needs to be addressed if the development of sub Saharan countries are sought for. Not only the literature of social sciences, the experiences of the late comers nation states mainly the south Asian countries, finds ethnicity as a challenge to the process of development. The governments of different countries even the international organizations like United Nations recognize it as a challenge to development and numerous efforts have been undertaken to remove ethnicity and ethnic problems to further development.

Thus it does not need further discussion on the issue that ethnicity hinders development. This can best be explained in the context of the situation of India's north eastern region, popularly perceived as ethnic hub of the people migrating from the diverse racial stocks of the neighbouring countries as well as neighbouring states of the region. The region consists of a number of tribes, to count the major tribes as Khasi, Naga, Garo, Kuki, Mizo, Bodo, Jaintia, Dimas, Karbi, Rieng Tipra, Adi, Mishng etc. Besides the region harbours a number of non tribal plain people as Assamese, Bengalese, Meitei etc, who also occupy significant part in the geography or political geography of the region. Most of these people are very loosely knitted to the political structure of the nation state having a distinct sense of ethnicity. Each group has a deep reverence for its beliefs, values and culture which bind each group in a sense of collective solidarity that makes the region a place of enclaves of culture.

Now an apt quoted question is that why there is an upsurge of ethnicity in the region? Every newspaper of each part of the region reports at least one news or more news of ethnic problems sometimes culminating in the form of insurgency, the violent manifestation of it. It is seen that these ethnic groups always develop a sense of rivalry towards another group or a hostile attitude towards the state. In a sense it can be said that the region has developed a culture of ethnicity in the form of ethnic clashes and in extreme case insurgency. Now the answer to such kind of rise of ethnicity can be sought in the view subscribed by T.K. Oommen, when he says ethnicity is created by a rupture between territory and other primordial attributes. As he says, there is a disjuncture that exists between society and polity in South East Asia (Oommen: 1990). Similar kind of view is also seen to be subscribed by D.L. Seth. He says, in their pursuit of finding an equivalence between ethnicity and nationhood and in the hope that they can find a cultural basis to their newly founded states after independence, those societies have launched an endless and turbulent process of ethnic strife (Seth, D.L.). Thus ethnicity is viewed as an end product of mismatch

between modern nation states and accommodation of primordial identities. This thesis brings forth the fact that ethnicity or a sense of ethnic identity in the South Asian countries emerged in the context of a situation when modern institution like nation-state having diverse historical background imposed to a society still structured on traditional or primordial basis. Though ethnic has all its basis to work on its own way, but the myriad occurrence of ethnic problems have a different causality now and this is the growing aspirations of a number of ethnic groups to have if not more, then at least equal share in the cake of development. Thus the primordialists go well in their perception when they see ethnicity is used as an instrument to achieve goal defined by the modern institution called nation state. Whether the ethnicity is well accommodated by the nation state is not the point of debate here, but non accommodation of ethnic can be said is a marker of development failure of the institution of state and thus ethnicity can also be viewed as a byproduct of the process of development initiated by the state in a multi ethnic society like India.

In the north east India, the rise of ethnic consciousness and ethnicity can be seen in the very process of nation building, preceded by the process of induction of colonialism in the undivided Assam. But the major manifestation of ethnicity in the region took place with the Naga nationalist movement. Taking cue from the Naga nationalists other ethnic groups also started to raise voice for the interest of their own community. This way there is the proliferation of Naga ethnicity, Bodo ethnicity, Assamese ethnicity, Khasi ethnicity, Garo ethnicity and so on. Hence if we see the genesis of all these kinds of ethnicity this can be highly attributed to the imposition of alien political framework on these people who used to have a very simple form of administration on the basis of kinship or gerentocracy. Thus not going to the matter further whether ethnicity is caused by lack of accommodation of ethnic politically, socially or economically, or because of an elite class emerging out as a representative of the ethnic who use ethnicity as an instrument, to rise in the development ladder, the discussion here turns towards the basic issue that how ethnicity is not only caused by development or lack of development but sometimes becomes the basis of development.

And here we can claim that there is a circular causation of ethnicity and development mainly in the context of a multi ethnic societies knitted by a nation state political framework. Here our emphasis is that, where ethnicity is caused by lack of development, when a group of people feel relatively deprived to avail the benefits of development, we find ethnicity also brings forth development. This can be well argued from the emphasis of Phadnis, when she maintained that if the ethnic turbulence is the manifestations of a protest or revolt against the structural inequalities then these should be viewed as efforts of mobilization on the part of such groups for distributive justice which depicts that these conflicts are functional for in the development process (Phadnis: 1989). Phadnis puts it more succinctly that the initial impulse for mobilizing the group may be primordialist. Yet, empirical evidence indicates that the demands and mechanisms of such mobilizations have not merely been primordial in a number of cases (Ibid). This is true particularly in case of the societies of north east India. North east India by virtue of its ethnic

distinctiveness has got an added advantage to avail special focus from the central government. No matter how many scholars consider the region as 'periphery of the periphery', no matter how many civil organizations of the region still give slogan of a step motherly attitude shown by the centre to the region, it can be proclaimed that the region gets a special attention now. The region with its hostile geo-environmental condition and strategic position is vulnerable to natural calamities vis-à-vis economic backwardness and political interferences by the neighbouring countries. Thanks to the ethnic consciousness that has led to the emergence of the concept of north east. The construction and reconstruction of the north east as a political, economic and social space is not simply the handiwork of the academicians, but also the handiwork of the people or groups who could create a consciousness of the people of the region as distinct category. Though this is partly the manifestation of the outside north east mainstream people's perception of the people of the region as foreigners or outsiders, or the shared geo-environmental problems of the region, a significant contribution comes from the elites of the region who helped to steer the growth of ethnic consciousness in the region.

Now this rise of ethnic consciousness though in one hand has brought a number of ethnic conflicts, the impact of ethnic mobilization has brought pronounced development in this region. The first sight of development can be observed in terms of the formulation of sixth schedule. The region has been brought under the sixth schedule of article 371. The formulation of sixth schedule is the result of the considerations of the distinctiveness of the tribal communities. The isolation policy of the Government of India kept the region away from the easy reach of the mainstream people for a long period of time. The institution of inner line regulation in 1873 regulation and the designation of the hill areas of Assam as Excluded Areas and Partially Excluded Areas under the Government of India Act reaffirm the policy of isolation and the respect for ethnic communities. But this concern can again not be considered to emerge from a mere sense of respect for tribal culture and their distinct life style but also caused by a continuous protests by the leaders of these tribal communities for self determination. It can be understood from the incidence of Garo agitation at the turn of the 20th century which in the language of Tiplut Nongbri can be regarded as one of the first major agitations against the reservation of forests in the district (Nongbri: 1999).

A.K. Thakur tries to consider the horrendous event of raids and plunders as indigenous protests against colonial penetration (Thakur: 2010). So the nationalization of the ethnic communities of the region never remained an easy going process. It was rather a process which always experience encounters and agitations by the *sons of the soil* (Weiner: 1978) in the name of deprivations which in turns says the language of democratization and nationalization. But the matter which strikes is that in the process they achieve development which they have hardly experienced before. The development comes to them in the form of education, infrastructure, roads, railways, airways, health facilities. Though there will be obvious disagreement to my view that the region experience development, if we take different parameters and extent of development into account and its reach to different communities *per se*, yet it can never be

negated that if the pre independent north east and north east of post independence period is compared. It can never be abandoned that north east India suffered from and has been suffering from backwardness, poverty and health problems. Highly terrained by hills, people of the region had a continuous absence of roads. Still there are areas in different states where people take three to four hours to walk to reach the nearest market place or township. So altogether there was a dismal picture of the development in the region. To combat this development Government of India is taking up different steps to integrate the region economically, socially, politically and culturally. But the peculiar demographic character of the region does not make this exercise a thoroughgoing one. Development here is questioned with reference to another group or ethnic which is always seen to have a better share in the developmental cake which makes other community to ask for a just share which is continuously exercised by the different ethnic of the region. This in one hand might have led to the occurrences of destruction of resources, but at the same time could bring resources to this periphery. There are continuous effort from the government of India to please these communities with a goal to keep the structure of nation unfractured.

That north east is receiving a significant attention now is reflected in Hussain's (Monirul Hussain, 2008) observations. He maintains that the region has started receiving significant attention of the Indian state. In this context he adds that the Government of India has pumped huge fund for the development of the region in recent times. He also highlights that the Government of India also awards a 'peace bonus' in monetary terms to individual states that is successful in maintaining peace. This 'peace bonus' which is spelt in vision 2020 (NER Vision 2020, Ministry of DONER, Government of India) officially, is not only seen presently this had a root in past too. The pouring of fund to rehabilitate surrendered insurgents also reflects this. There may arise divergent views that the fund flow to the region is caused by the strategic reasons, as North East lies between a number of south East Asian countries, but if someone goes deeper into the fact then ethnic factor comes to forefront. North East harbours a number of communities who have their brethren in neighbouring countries which also makes the region vulnerable to lose its chance of being a part of another sovereign nation or create another sovereign nation. The example of Naga movement can better tell the truth regarding this. Not only Naga, ULFA, Bodo and Mizo have created major havoc in the region.

Hence the Government realized that if peace is to be restored, the development is utmost necessity. All the states of the north eastern region are special category states whose development plans are centrally financed on the basis of 90 percent grant and 10 percent loan. Further the special category states are allowed to use up to 20percent of special assistance for non plan expenditure. India's north east now can boast of its road length of 1,39,845 km., rail network of 2,577.94 km. (Basic Statistics of North Eastern Region: 2002) including both Broad Gauge and Meter Gauge which are very crucial for development to be felt in real sense. All these are not the effort of one or two measures taken by the Government, but caused by decades of initiative, started with the formulation of sixth schedule to formation of Non Lapsable Central Pool of Resources and the institution of Ministry of development of

north Eastern region and the framing of the document Vision 2020 for development of North East India. The north eastern region has been brought under sixth schedule of article ---. as a result the tribes who are not facilitated with the sixth schedule provision are also clamouring for it because they are aware of the benefits of sixth schedule provision. As a matter of fact, tribals of the hill areas of Manipur, some tribes from Assam, Brus, Hmars, Paites and minority tribes of Uiphum mountain range of Lawngtlai district of Mizoram are still demanding the inclusion of their respective area in the sixth schedule provision.

The different councils functioning now in Mizoram, Meghalaya, Tripura, Assam may not be free from certain loopholes, however, these little developmental works which they perform in their respective areas may remain undone had the sixth schedule provision not been extended there. As the benefits of economic development have yet to steadily accrue to the region, efforts have been initiated in this direction in the recent past through various supportive measures. In October, 1996, the then Prime minister announced 'New Initiative for the north Eastern region' and stipulated that at least 10% of the budget of the central ministries or departments will be earmarked for the development of the North Eastern states. In the process a Non Lapsable Central Pool of Resources has been institutionalized. Again it is seen that in case of NLCPR Autonomous District Council is given priority. These facts naturally reinforces the statement that the ethnicity not only hinders development, but sometimes becomes the causes of development particularly in the context of a multi ethnic nation like India

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