

Socio-Political Dimensions of Ethnicity

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Abstract

Most insurgencies in North East have ethnic backgrounds, it is important to understand ethnicity. Ethnicity is a sense of identity or a feeling of belonging to a particular ethnic group. In Latin (ethnics) and Greek (ethnikas), ethnicity means nation. Ethnic and ethos taken together can mean a band of people (nation) living together who share knowledge and acknowledge common customs. Generally, ethnic identity is most often considered synonymous with race or racial identity and hence with ethnicity. Ethnicity also involves a claim to status or recognition either as a superior group or as a group at least equal to other groups, in addition to subjective self-consciousness. In anthropology, the term 'ethnic' is used to describe a social group, the members of which share some aspects of a common and distinctive culture, religion, language, and belief in a common ancestry. To these may be added another factor i.e inhabiting the common territory. As per Ashley Crossman, ethnicity is a concept referring to a shared culture and way of life. This can be reflected in language, religion, material culture such as clothing and food, and cultural products such as music and art. Ethnicity is often a major source of social cohesion and social conflict. Ethnicity is the term for the culture of people in a given geographic region, including their language, heritage, religion, and customs. To be a member of an ethnic group is to conform to some or all of those practices. Ethnicity has both positive and negative fallouts. An appreciation of one's own social roots in a community without disparaging other groups is a positive aspect, whereas instability in multi-ethnic society is a negative aspect.

Keywords

Ethnicity, Insurgency, Ethnics, Ethnikas, Conflict, Racial identity, Ethnic identity

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Ethnicity

Insurgency can be defined as a rising against established authority or lawfully elected government. Since most insurgencies in North East have ethnic backgrounds, it is important to understand ethnicity. Also, one of the objectives of the research is to develop an understanding of the dynamics of ethnicity in Assam, Nagaland, and Manipur, hence this chapter dwells on the aspect of ethnicity.

The word 'ethnic' or 'ethnicity' has been a very recent phenomenon in terms of usage, which is derived from the Greek word 'ethnos' meaning a race or large groups of people having common traits and customs.¹ Ethnicity is a sense of identity or a feeling of belonging to a particular ethnic group. In Latin (*ethnics*) and Greek (*ethnikas*), ethnicity means nation. 'Ethnikas' and 'ethos' taken together can mean a band of people (nation) living together, who share knowledge and acknowledge common customs.² Generally, ethnic identity is most often considered synonymous with race or racial identity and hence with ethnicity.³ Ethnicity also involves a claim to status or recognition either as a superior group or as a group at least equal to other groups, in addition to subjective self-consciousness.⁴ In anthropology, the term 'ethnic' is used to describe a social group, the members of which share some aspects of a common and distinctive culture, religion, language, and belief in a common ancestry. To these may be added another factor i.e inhabiting the common territory. As per Ashley Crossman, ethnicity is a concept referring to a shared culture and way of life.⁵ This can be reflected in language, religion, material culture such as clothing and food, and cultural products such as music and art.

The term ethnic or ethnicity were defined probably for the first time and became part of the colloquial social sciences dictionary somewhere in the early 1960s.⁶ As per social scientist T.H Erikson, the concepts such as 'ethnic group', 'ethnicity' and 'ethnic conflict' belong together with 'nationality' and 'cultural identity', however, others believed 'tribal communities' as synonymous with ethnic groups and used it as a substitute.⁷ Ethnicity is often a major source of social cohesion and social conflict. The conflict wherein group interests of any community divided on race, culture, religion, language, or even geography are tempered with, can be subtitled as ethnic conflict, especially when it appears between two groups.⁸ Another school of thought defines an ethnic group as a historically formed aggregate of people having a real or imaginary association with a territory, a shared cluster of beliefs and values connecting its distinctiveness in relation to similar groups and recognized as such by others.⁹

Few scholars also believe that ethnic communities existed from time immemorial and are not a recent phenomenon, however, there have been changes in

their character as part of evolution. There have been cases wherein ethnic groups have shown flexibility and allowed new groups to coexist within the same geographical boundaries, even when there are marked differences in certain tenets of ethnicity such as language, social customs, and even racial differences.¹⁰ A case in point is the Naga tribes.

Some social scientists have viewed that ‘ethnicity’ has a co-relation with ‘national’ and ‘cultural identity. Erkki Servanan has opined that cultural identity is a much wider concept than ethnic and national identity. He wrote:

*“Cultural identity is a wider phenomenon than ethnic and national identity, which are subspecies of it. The concept of ethnicity usually refers to a group or community whose members believe that they descend from the same common origin. This type of belief is not necessarily based on facts, with consequences that it is often difficult to prove it. Nevertheless, it can provide members of an ethnic community with a firm collective identity, their own ethnic identity. National identity, in turn, can be based on ethnic bonds”.*¹¹

A new class is often formed when ethnicity is linked with other aspects of identity formation. Some of which are as under¹²: -

- (a) Ethno-linguistic, emphasizing shared language/dialect for example:
Chakmas, Garos, Bodos.
- (b) Ethno-national, emphasizing a shared polity or sense of national identity for example: Bangladesh.
- (c) Ethno-racial with similar physical appearance – example: Mongoloid stock.
Or Ethno-cultural since Race is associated with biology, whereas ethnicity is associated with culture.
- (d) Ethno-regional having a sense of belonging to a particular geographic region – example: North Easterners. While in mainland India most people of the region claim to be from North East India, whereas once across Brahmaputra River they tend to relate to respective States viz Manipur, Nagaland, etc.
- (e) Ethno-religious, having affiliation with a particular religion or sect – example: Sikhs.
- (f) Ethno-political, identification of politically active ethnic entities based on two criteria; one, people are subjected to discriminatory treatment because of cultural, ethnic, or religious reasons, and two, people are politically mobilized to promote or defend their common interests.¹³

Ethnicity is the term for the culture of people in a given geographic region,

including their language, heritage, religion, and customs. To be a member of an ethnic group is to conform to some or all of those practices. Ethnicity has both positive and negative fallouts. An appreciation of one's own social roots in a community without disparaging other groups is a positive aspect, whereas instability in multi-ethnic society is a negative aspect.¹⁴

Ethnic Identity

A different concept of 'constructivism' holds the view that ethnicity was always created or constructed and hence not necessarily always organically evolved, which implies that both ethnicity and identity were by-products of extraneous and political considerations to derive personal or political mileage whenever the situation demands.¹⁵ Such manipulations allowed a group at times to perpetuate or legitimize its hold over a large number of people in a defined space and alternatively, a weaker ethnic group may decide to merge with powerful or larger group.¹⁶ It has been observed that a group has an inclination to change its ethnic identity when there is profit or a social gain whether tangible or intangible, immediate or futuristic.¹⁷ Constructivism departs from the existing concepts of ethnic identity formation and expounds on the theory that ethnic identity can be altered either by a process of engineered formulation or by a personal sense of affinity.¹⁸

As per Falguni Rajkumar, the ethnic identity formation is both 'contextual' and 'situational'. It is contextual because it is organically endowed determined by blood relations and dictated by circumstances of the events in history. It is situational because a dominant group can impose its will on the weaker group and thus deliberately manipulate the formation of identity.¹⁹ A fundamental distinction between **racial identity** and **ethnic identity** is the existence of blood or biological connections for racial similarity, whereas in the case of ethnicity other factors like physical types or customs, history, shared memories, etc are imperative.

The process of identity formation which is consolidation of people into ethnicities without the need for its organic prerequisites also means that ethnic identities are political constructs subject to manipulations. In North-East India, demand for defined territories and physical space exclusively by an ethnic group have been witnessed in the past and it has often been marked with intense animosity, violence, dividing and polarizing societies or communities. The region also shows close linkages between ethnicity and violence. Ethnic violence can be broadly conceptualized as a phenomenon wherein violent attacks are perpetrated along ethnic lines, in which at least one party is not a state.²⁰ Such acts are motivated by animosity towards hostile groups and the victims are chosen by ethnic criteria.²¹ Claims of nationhood (sovereignty, territory, and institutional authority) in the region orbit mainly around

ethnic lines and have been expressed primarily in violent forms, though few instances of non-violent form also exist.

Ethnicities in the Region

Anthropologically, the pattern of migration of various ethnic groups into the region is closely associated with geography and topography. Many of the ethnic groups of Northeast India are not of Indo-Aryan origin, instead trace their origin to Mongoloid regions. These groups have migrated centuries ago from Mongolia, Tibet, China, Thailand, Burma (rechristened as Myanmar), and other southeast Asian countries. Peter Kunstadter has underlined the fact that, 'Assam has a large population of tribal and minority peoples whose languages are more closely related to the languages of South East Asia than to those of the Indian subcontinent. Their cultures too resemble the cultures of their neighbors in South East Asia.' The ethnic group of Tai Ahoms in Assam has their counterparts in South East Asia who are called Shan in Myanmar, Thai in Thailand, Lao in Laos, Dai and Zhuang in China, and Tay-Thai in Vietnam.²² The Ahoms in Assam is one of the most prominent ethnic groups who came to the region in the 13th Century AD under their leader Sukhapa from Burma and established their kingdom at Charaideo. The Naga tribes living in the North-East states of Manipur, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh have a close connection with the Nagas residing in the Kachin State and Sagaing Region of Myanmar. The Mizos live in Mizoram as also in the Chin State of Myanmar. The Kuki tribe residing in Manipur has linkages with the Tamu area of the Sagaing Region. The Paite live in the Mizoram-Chin State-Manipur border areas.²³ The ethnic connection between India's North East and Myanmar can be seen from Table 3.1 as shown below. The cultural connectedness between India's Northeast and Southeast Asian countries reflects the tremendous scope for cooperation between India and Southeast Asia.

Table 1.1²⁴

Ethnic Connection Between India's North East and Myanmar

| State | Tribes in North East India | Tribes in Myanmar |
|-------------------|--|---|
| Arunachal Pradesh | Konyak, Nocte, Tangsang, Wangcha | Konyak, Nocte, Thangshang, Wangchoo |
| Manipur | Kuki near Moreh; Paite in Churhandpur district, Tangkhul in Ukhrul, district | Kuki-Thadou at Tamu, Paite near Churhandpur, Tangkhul near Ukhrul |
| Mizoram | Mizo, Paite, 70,000 Chin | Around 30 Chin tribes |
| Nagaland | Chakesang, Sangtam, Khyaniungam, Konvak | Konyak and other Naga tribes inhabiting four townships |

Political-Ethno Conflicts

As per Ekkart Zimmerman, it is the mobilization of differences that causes ethnic conflict and not due to cultural identities. He opines that ethnic mobilization encompasses the concentration of resources such as people, skills, money, belief system, commitment and time, media (local, national or international) access in favor of an ethnic group.²⁵ According to Zimmerman, ethnic mobilization leads to ethnic conflict and these are likely to occur under the following circumstances²⁶: -

- (a) If the population undergoing modernization is heterogeneous.
- (b) If ethnic competition is involved.
- (c) If an ideological apparatus of interpretation has been developed for these 'imagined' communities.
- (d) If the world market tolerates running one's own policy.

The mobilization of ethnic groups for greater participation in the political, economic process of the nation and to have a greater say in national decision making in their favor can thus be easily politicized, creating an acute problem for the multi-racial-cultural society. Ethnicity has emerged as a powerful and resilient force, which when mobilized politically becomes formidable. The failure of communist regimes to subordinate ethnicity to clan identities is a manifestation of the endurance of ethnicity.²⁷ In other words, it can be said that ethnic conflict is a natural outcome of interactions and related dynamics in any heterogeneous and multi-cultural society but then there would be innumerable cases of conflict in these societies which have not occurred.²⁸ Thus, the identity formation appears to be flexible and ethnic boundaries are malleable.

The identification of politically active ethnic entities known as 'ethnopolitical groups are based on two criteria; firstly, people who are subjected to discriminatory treatment because of any reason be it cultural, ethnic, or religious and; secondly, when people or ethnic groups are politically mobilized to promote or defend their common interests.²⁹

The dynamics of ethnopolitical conflicts have been varied in terms of their manifestation. All over the world, the spectrum of armed conflict has been wide, with tactics adopted by them varying depending on weapons, training, terrain, population support, external help, and the response of the government.³⁰

Characterized by unparalleled ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity, the region is inhabited by three distinct groups of people; the **hill tribes**, the **Plains tribes**, and the **non-tribal** population of the plains. It is the interplay of interests of these three groups which is fundamental root cause of conflicts in the region. Conflicts in the region may be broadly categorized as under³¹: -

(a) **Tribal Groups versus State:** These conflicts are mainly triggered by a concept of distinct and separate nationhood, aimed at negotiating and readjusting relationships with the Indian Union. Example- Naga problem.

(b) **Tribal versus Tribal:** These conflicts mainly emerge out of the resistance of numerically smaller and less dominant cultural and political groups, living in a shared space, to the homogenizing pressures of dominant groups. Identity assertion of the smaller groups results in violent conflicts. Example- Naga versus Kukis in Manipur.

(c) **Tribal versus Non-Tribal:** Movements such as these mainly revolve around sub-national aspirations and are mostly directed against the Union Government, which has the constitutional authority to accommodate such aspirations through necessary amendments. The brunt of such uprisings is mainly borne by the State Government. Example- Naga/Kukis versus Meiteis in Manipur or Bodos versus others in Assam.

Insurgency and Ethnicity

Ethnicity has been one of the main factors in North East which contributed to the perpetuation of insurgencies in the region and its impact has been as under³²:-

(a) Most ethnic groups resented federal control or domination by bigger ethnic groups.

(b) The preservation and assertion of ethnic identity through aggressive means is seen as the key to winning a share of power and resources.

(c) Most ethnic groups in the region do not have the numbers to make an impact through the legitimate political system, hence the tendency to use armed guerrilla warfare as a force multiplier.

(d) The cross-border support has sustained the insurgencies in the region, and India's response in terms of negotiations with insurgent groups to meet their ethnic aspirations has in turn encouraged groups to proliferate.

Ethno-political conflicts have often resulted in insurgencies in various parts of the world. In the spectrum of armed conflicts, insurgencies form part of Low-Intensity Conflicts or Sub Conventional War, which is below the threshold of conventional war and above the level of peaceful coexistence. Insurgencies can be defined as an extreme form of civil strife or a revolt against perceived disparities in the country that may be fuelled by outside support. Its basic causes are always internal and mainly created and sustained by the existing politico-administrative environment.³³

It has been observed that insurgency is an ongoing low-cost option to wage a war by the motivated ethnopolitical groups against the established government or the state.³⁴

Conclusion

North East is home to large number of tribes or ethnic groups of which some are large and spread over wide areas, whereas some are small and concentrated in smaller territories. Spatially many of these tribes are spread over boundaries of two or more states. The reorganization of territories in North East India was affected to enable the diverse ethnic and linguistic groups who inhabit the area to shape their own destinies without any interference and to remove the feeling that they were being exploited by others.³⁵In fact, ethnicity was the basis in the emergence of number of states in the North East. However, the experiment did not yield the desired results as other minor ethnic groups continued to demand separate homelands. Large number of armed insurgent groups in the region are based on ethnic lines and it has been instrumental in the emergence and sustenance of these groups over the years. Identity crises have also been one of the factors for insurgencies in the states of Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland. Hence, ethnicity is an important factor that needs to be understood in order to stabilize the region and evolve a conflict resolution strategy.

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