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Ethnic Assertion and Middle Class Hegemony in a Colonial Hinterland

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Abstract

Contemporary Northeast India is in the news for agitations, conflicts, violence and insurgencies. While some of these conflicts become violent and result in atrocities on ethnic minorities of the respective locales, others subjugate and oppress minorities depriving them of their basic rights, both in terms of citizenship rights and human rights. The conflicts of 'certain sections' of some of the smaller nationalities with the state of India manifested in the insurgent movements are often depicted as conflicts of those particular communities as wholes with the state of India, and are erroneously called ethnic conflicts. Major sections, not necessarily the majority, of those communities might often be against the ends and means of such insurgencies. The conflicts often are the result of middle class hegemony in a colonial hinterland.

Key words: Asomiya, Ethnicity, Hegemony, Middle Class

Contemporary Northeast India is in the news more for agitations, conflicts, violence and insurgencies than its remarkable bio and cultural diversities. Two most well known recent agitations of the area are the All Assam Students' Union and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad-led 'Assam Movement' of late 1970s and the early 1980s on the issue of illegal immigration from Bangladesh and Nepal, and the All Bodo Student Union-led agitation for a Bodo home land (George, 1994, pp. 878-892). While some of these conflicts become violent and result in atrocities on ethnic minorities of the respective locales, others subjugate and oppress minorities depriving them of their basic rights, both in terms of citizenship rights and human rights. The conflicts of 'certain sections' of some of the smaller nationalities with the state of India manifested in the insurgent movements are often depicted as conflicts of those particular communities as wholes with the state of India, and are erroneously called ethnic conflicts. For instance, we often refer to the insurgencies in Nagaland, Mizoram or Assam as the Naga, the Mizo and the *Asomiya*¹ insurgencies without taking into consideration that those communities in whose name such insurgencies are carried

on are not undifferentiated wholes. Major sections, not necessarily the majority, of those communities might often be against the ends and means of such insurgencies. We need to, therefore, be a little more discerning when we designate those insurgencies as the insurgencies of the communities concerned.

These agitations, conflicts and insurgencies are often sought to be dealt with as law and order problems. More understanding analyses look at them in terms of alienation resulting from a sense of deprivation which in turn is explained as the result of lack of development. However, without examining those in terms of ethnic and community identity assertion, no real understanding can be arrived at. These assertions of course are related to the emergence of new elite in an area that was largely semi-feudal and tribal till recently. There indeed is a strong feeling of being exploited in colonial lines. To understand contemporary Northeast India, it is necessary to understand the reasons behind this feeling of being colonially exploited and the social forces that mobilise their respective communities to assert their identity in a manner that leads to intercommunity conflicts.

In ethnically plural societies allowing free expression of political demands, ethnic conflicts are inevitable. Authoritarian political systems may not experience such conflicts for long periods giving the appearance of a well governed society, but a coercive containment of such conflict also runs the risk, though not the certainty, of an eventual outburst, particularly when such a system begins to liberalise or lose its legitimacy. Ethnic conflicts are a regular feature of ethnically plural democracies for if different ethnic groups exist, the freedom to organise on community lines would be available. However, the fact remains that inter community conflicts often called ethnic community conflicts are an important part of the societies and polities of Northeast India.

While dealing with the issues related to assertion of ethnic identities the importance given by scholars to cultural elements conceals the nature of socio-economic structures of the populations of those communities. In the context of American Indians, Eric Wolf argued 'the condition of the Indian does not consist in a discreet list of social traits; it lies in the quality of social relationships found among communities of a certain kind and in the self-image of the individuals who identify with those communities. The Indian condition is also a distinctive historical process, since these communities originate at a given moment, grow stronger, decline again, and maintain or lose stability in the face of attacks or pressures coming from the larger society'(Wolf, 1960).

We need to take notice of the fact that despite all the weaknesses and the faults of the state of India, this state has been able to create middle classes of considerable strength and co-opt them to its citizenship, virtually in all communities, including very small ones. These middle classes have been integrated to the forces that rule India and they have been able to persuade large sections of their own respective communities to accept the idea of Indian citizenship. In 2014 general elections in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura had polling percentages of 68.16%, 69.53%, 77.14%, 64.38%, 51.8%, 89.99%, 84.45%,² respectively which proves that there has been considerable influence of the state of India on these communities and that large majorities of people of these communities have come to accept the state of India and its citizenship.

Therefore, conflicts of this nature cannot be identified as ethnic conflicts because the ethnic conflicts are generally conflicts between ethnic identities and forces representing nation states. These are conflicts of certain political forces within those communities with the political forces representing the state of India in pursuance of their aspirations of attaining sovereign status for their particular communities. In this sense, those conflicts are political conflicts. There indeed are a large number of inter-community ethnic conflicts in this area. Among the most recent and infamous of ethnic conflicts have been the Bodo-Adivasi, Rabha-non Rabha, the Bodo-non Bodo, Karbi-non Karbi in Assam and the 'tribal'-non-tribal in Meghalaya³ and other hill tribal states of the area.

Even in states where there appear to be absence of such conflicts, the ethnic divide is rather obvious for a keen observer. Mizoram is a classic case. There have been no serious reports of ethnic conflicts in that state but the conflicts between the Mizos and the non-Mizos, particularly the non-tribals often referred to by Mizos as Bhais (or Vais), living in the state have been a major problem for democratic politics in Mizoram. The ethnic divide and the plight of the non-tribals become obvious only when we look closely at events like the 'non-tribal' curfew imposed by some Mizo youth organisations. During such programmes only non-Mizos, particularly non-tribals, are not allowed to come out. Such political actions reveal the fact that the non-tribals are second class citizens in Mizoram. But we need to take note that the mother of all ethnic conflicts in Northeast India is the conflict between the Asomiya and the Bengali residents of Assam that started during the thirties of nineteenth century over the issue of official language and the medium of instruction in British Assam. Most ethnic conflicts of Northeast have

been following the course that was actually set by the Asomiya-Bengali conflict and have become part of a politics of identity assertion.

Identity Politics as a Worldwide Phenomenon

Identity has become a widely used word in the study of societies. The currency this term has in contemporary social science literature is not only because in many parts of the world identity politics has been creating serious problems, but also because all over the world large groups of people have come to claim that their social existence is closely related to their identities. Identity formation is a chaotic process that can have no end. Cultural identity often becomes a premise of political action rather than a substitute for it (Gilroy, 1996, pp. 223-39). Assertions of new identity often contests the space, including public, private, political, social or such other spaces, occupied by powerful sections of some established communities and thus generates conflicts. Conflicts generated by such politics have become a worldwide phenomenon. Sandbrook points out that the most affected continent has been Africa. Between 1980 and 2000 more than half of Sub-Saharan Africa's forty eight countries have been buffeted by countrywide or regional civil wars or wars with neighbouring countries sparked off often by identity politics of one or the other kind. In West Africa, such conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, and Senegal had caused havoc⁴. The huge loss of life and property in areas like Bosnia-Herzegovina are well known⁵. In our own region too identity based conflicts have taken their toll. But it is not that identity politics only creates problem. At times such politics lead to increased participation in democratic politics. In many countries of Africa, democratic politics received a boost as a result of assertion of identities because such assertions inevitably motivated people to participate in politics and also because as a result of such assertions more and more of communities were getting organised to make themselves heard.

Identity as reflected in the dominant discourse, of our time, refers to both the identity of the individual and the collective. The individual context has been obvious in psychological literature⁶. In India, identity as a concept has not been discussed frequently and most Indian languages do not seem to have a term that expresses the sense in which this word is used in the western world (Jayaram, 2004, p. 134). Identity politics almost invariably develops a tendency to judge the cultures of other groups by standards defined by one's own culture. It prompts people to perceive one's own way of life as superior to others and, therefore,

develops a tendency of being contemptuous of other's cultures. Such an approach to politics may lead to ethnocentrism. Any attempt at understanding ethnocentrism requires a discussion of ethnicity itself. The term ethnic was used in English from the fourteenth century to mean only pagan. In that sense *ethnic* referred to people who were irreligious or hedonistic as distinct from groups organised on the basis of 'religion', focusing on spirituality⁷. From mid-nineteenth century it began to refer to racial characteristics and as a result even the concept of ethnicity began to acquire certain characteristics, which were closer to the idea of a race. Scholars have pointed out that distinction between race and ethnicity is problematic. Ethnicity has a political context and there is very little evidence to show that race has similar context. While discussing the question of political identities, Mahmood Mamdani has argued that the debate over the question whether race is a biological identity and ethnicity is a cultural identity 'focuses on whether one can indeed speak of races biologically and whether culture should be understood as primordial or as historically constructed' and goes on to discuss race and identity as political identities, imposed through the force of colonial law⁸. The term nation too has a complex relation with the term ethnic resulting in difficulties in distinguishing ethnicity from nationality. Nationalism stresses the cultural similarities of its adherents, and by implication it draws boundaries vis-à-vis others, who thereby become outsiders. 'Ethnic' can be defined only in terms of a cultural heritage. As the history of the peoples in the world shows, ethnocentrism and bellicose nationalism are often major consequences of such a perspective. With the emergence of the nation states as major political players in the world, national identity began to dominate the idea of identity. Huntington has said that debates over national identity are a pervasive characteristic of our time. He points out that almost everywhere people have questioned, reconsidered and redefined what they have in common and what distinguishes them from other people (Huntington, 2004, p. 12). Summarising the discourse of identity Huntington argues that in trying to understand identity five points need to be taken note of: 1) both individuals and groups have identity; 2) identities are overwhelmingly constructed under varying degrees of pressure, inducements, and freedom; 3) individuals and to a lesser degree groups have multiple identities; 4) identities are defined by self but they are the products of interaction between self and others; 5) the relative salience of alternative identities is situational (ibid. pp. 21-25). These five points, particularly the second and the fourth clearly indicate the instrumentality of identities. While explaining the second point Huntington writes, '*If the basis for the defining characteristic of a group disappears perhaps because it achieves the goal it was created to achieve,*

the existence of the group is threatened, unless it can find another cause to motivate its members' (ibid. p. 22). (Emphasis added).

The term ethnic is commonly used in Northeast India in the context of movements that refer to groups of people with distinct cultural characteristics as ethnic communities. The point that needs to be made here is that some of these ethnic movements are making separatist demands and others are articulating issues that are apparently cultural, but politically ticklish. Ethnic polarisation and attendant conflicts have become a world-wide phenomenon. Kenneth Christie has rightly observed that ethnic unrest and communal strife proved fairly resilient not only in the third world but also in developed societies during the twentieth century (Christie, 1998, p. 217). The American culture is generally believed to be a political and cultural identity emerging from common language, memories, intentions and above all new procedures and institution motivated mainly by the 'business of getting and spending, and also of governing and developing'. The mainstream Americans take pride in the 'achievement' of the melting pot. In a penetrating study of the Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians and Irish of the city, Glazier and Moynihan conclude that, 'ethnicity was more than an influence on events; it was commonly the source of events. Social and political institutions did not merely respond to ethnic interests; a great number of institutions existed for the specific purpose of serving ethnic interests. This in turn tended to perpetuate them. In many ways, the atmosphere of New York City was found hospitable to ethnic groupings: it recognised them, and to that extent encouraged them'⁹ (Glazier & Moynihan, 1976, p. 310). Articulation of grievances and mobilisation of peoples on ethnic lines have acquired such proportions that ethno nationalism has become almost an ideology.

In its contemporary sense ethnicity has come to acquire its current importance only in the context of the project of nation state building, which emphasizes the homogeneity of the politico cultural entity called nation. From early nineteenth century, this term began to be used to mean a whole people of a country¹⁰. When states came to be organised in national terms, the national communities were contrasted with other groups within the states, who had cultural traits that distinguished them from the mainstream. These cultural groups are often identified as ethnic communities or groups and their projects perceived as ethno-nationalist. The phenomenon of ethnicity can therefore be understood only in the context of the multi-cultural civic societies and the existence of small groups with, what Naroll calls, 'a predominantly archaic character' (Narol, 1964, as cited

by Phadnis, 1989, p. 13) within them. It is necessary that while we try to understand the identity discourse and the identity based movements in Northeast India we keep this aspect of identity politics in mind. This is because there is enough evidence to show that the elites of the many of the assertive communities are using the issue of identities to pursue their sectarian political goals, though they swear by community interest and desire to protect and promote their cultural traditions.

Identity and Communalism

For Indians, identity seems to refer more to community identity than identity in the individual context. Community identities motivate people to mobilise themselves on communal lines. While pursuing their stated identity based goals they often come into conflicts with other communities, particularly ones that seem to have interests conflicting with their own community. More important, ethnic conflict is no longer limited to armed groups. Not to speak of political parties and their organisations, even the non-party students and youth organisations of the region today are organised mainly on ethnic or ‘communal’ lines¹¹. Many movements launched by these organisations raise issues of identity. One of the most famous of such movement was the ‘Assam agitation’ of the late 1970s and early 1980s led by All Assam Students’ Union and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad that lasted for six long years and shook the government of India leading to an accord with its leaders. While the leaders of the movement tried to project their goal as protecting the Assamese community that was threatened by illegal immigration from Bangladesh, the history of the movement and the main concerns, as reflected in the ‘Assam accord’, show that the movement aimed at enabling the Asomiya middle class to establish its control over land, jobs and trade¹². Illegal immigration and influx are two issues repeatedly raised by organisations of different communities as part of their perception of threat to identity, which very often leads to hate campaigns, communal violence and hate crime¹³. Inter-community hatred, conflicts and violence in the region could be understood only if we understand the forces that generate such conflicts, the interests such forces pursue and also the social values they propagate. While identity politics appears to be a major problem in the context of Northeast India, identity discourses in India as a whole have certain commonalities.

Social science literature in India has been using the term community in a very loose manner referring to castes, religious and linguistic communities, tribes¹⁴ and

nationalities. K. S. Singh says, '[T]he communities generally identify themselves as such and are identified as such by others in terms of occupation, endogamy, identity etc' (Singh, 1992, p. 42). According to the estimates made by Singh, Northeast India, comprising the states of Assam, Manipur, Tripura, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, has 382 culturally and locationally distinct communities of various sizes and at various stages of development (ibid, p.44). A look at the movements launched by many of these communities shows that they also practice a communalism of dangerous kind, which is not an unfamiliar idea in social sciences, because in some countries such discriminations are referred to as communalism or racism (Guibemau & Rex, 1999, p. 35). But in any attempt at understanding this aspect of the issue, we need to understand the discourse of communalism in India.

The discourse of communalism in India is rather peculiar. Pramod Kumar argues, '(S)ocial Science literature in the global context attributes a positive meaning to the term communal. In India this term has been used to denote a negative phenomenon' (Kumar, 1992, p. 22). Despite mentioning caste and communities in the context of communalism, even Pramod Kumar has not been able to come out of the dominant Indian discourse on the phenomenon of communalism. This discourse seems to take cognisance only of religious communalism, often contextualised in terms of Hindu-Muslim conflicts in India. Bipan Chandra, one of the most prominent historians of India, identified communalism '... as the belief that because a group of people follow a particular religion they have, as a result, common social political and economic interests' (Chandra, 1984, p. 1). A close look at Bipan Chandra's idea of communalism indicates that it is not the belief of having common interests but rather the refusal or inability to recognise the differences of social, political and economic peculiarities of different categories of people within a particular community that signifies communalism. Indian social science literature and political activists have been using the term communalism in the context of religious communities only because communalism and secularism are generally juxtaposed in the socio-political discourse of identity politics in India, the former referring to religious intolerance and the latter to equal treatment of all religions. It is often forgotten that the belief that a community necessarily has common social, political, and economic interests, could be present in communities other than religious, be that linguistic, racial, cultural or ethnic. This discourse obviously has its implication for identity politics in Northeast India. Many 'insurgent' situations, separatist demands articulated in terms of autonomy, controversies over linguistic and religious issues are rooted in

failure of the state to fulfill aspirations of the competing ethnic communities¹⁵. The ethnic map of India is complex and the hackneyed phrase ‘unity in diversity’ does not really represent the ethnic heterogeneity of the country. The history of the Indian nation state is a history of integration of diverse ethnic groups through various methods of assimilation. The existence of various ethno-cultural geographical personalities in India is so prominent that it is rather difficult to think of India as a nation in the cultural sense, unless one is a mainstream Indian chauvinist. India has innumerable geo-cultural personalities¹⁶. Because of the fact that the mainstream Indian nationalists accept a state-centred definition of nationalism and conceptualises this nationalism in terms of a Hindi-Hindu Brahmanical tradition, the communities not belonging to this tradition fail to identify with the Indian state-centred nationalism. Some of these smaller communities are nationalities in their own rights and others are ethnic groups with nationality potentialities (Baruah, 1994, p. 247).

Paul Brass argues that nationality formation involves passing through three stages of ethnicity, community awareness and nationality formation. The first stage implies existence of cultural markers recognised easily but their political significance unnoticed. The second is about evolution of political consciousness based on cultural identity and the urge to employ it for furthering community interests. And the third involves right to self-determination. In this sense, many so-called ethnic groups of Northeast India have already crossed the stage of ethnicity and have entered the stage of community awareness and others have entered the stage of nationality formation. Peoples like the Asomiyas, the Bengalis, the Khasis, the Bodos, the Mizos, the Nagas, and recently even the Karbis appear to have become nationalities, demanding the political right to control their own affairs¹⁷. Only sections of the Nagas, the Mizos, and the Asomiyas are demanding secession from the state of India. Even among these communities large majorities exist which accept the reality of the Indian state and the benefits associated with this arrangement. The insurgent movements of the most advanced communities of the region can be called bargaining insurgencies because insurgent sections do talk of arriving at negotiated settlements.

In India’s Northeast when various ethnic groups raise the issues of identity say, Khasi identity, Naga identity or the Asomiya identity, and claim that such identities have common social, political and economic interests of their own, then they are adhering to the ideology that is strikingly close to the definition of communalism offered by Bipan Chandra. The leaders of such community

identities propagate values and interests that are claimed and made to appear to be universal to their respective communities. Then, the members of the respective communities begin an exclusivist and discriminatory politics against all those who in their perception are enemies of such interests. Such trends are clearly visible in case of the movements launched by organisations like the All Assam Students' Union (AASU), Khasi Students' Union (KSU), and Mizo Students' Union (MSU), etc¹⁸. There is evidence to show that even community based political parties, often called regional parties, pursue such communal politics¹⁹.

The movements launched by the Asomiyas, the Bengalis, the Nagas, the Kukis, the Khasis, the Garos, the Mizos the Bodos, the Karbis, etc. are now well known. Many smaller groups with somewhat blurred cultural markers are also now beginning to assert their identities; some are even busy inventing separate identities. For example, the Ahoms, Koch-Rajbangshis, Matakas, Rabhas and Tiwas of Assam for a long time have been a part of the Asomiya community that emerged during the six hundred years of Ahom rule in the Brahmaputra valley. The most striking of these efforts is the one made by the Ahoms. Under the rule of the Ahom kings that began with the coming of Sukapha into the Brahmaputra plains in the thirteenth century and ended only in 1826 when the British came to the country after the treaty of Yandaboo, the Asomiya emerged as a result of the integration of numerous small communities of the region. In fact, Sukapha is credited with the integration of twenty odd small chiefships to form his kingdom.

The Ahom kings conquered the small communities and brought those under one kingdom. It was under this kingdom and under the patronage of the Ahom kings that various dialects of the communities of the conquered principalities got assimilated and the Assamese language developed. Development of this language made the emergence of the Asomiya community possible. The Ahom kings patronised the new linguistic community and encouraged assimilation of all others into this larger identity. In fact, many scholars of the Ahom community assert that it is the Ahom rulers, who during their rule of six hundred years in the Brahmaputra valley brought the small communities of the area together and gave birth to a new 'jati' (nationality) (Buragohain, 1995, p. 153). In the process of playing the role of integrators the Ahoms themselves adopted the newly emerging Asomiya language and culture. Their original language, customs, religion and generally the way of life fell into disuse. One of the reasons for this, as was claimed by some historians of Assam, was that the Ahoms brought only a few women with them and began marrying women of local residents. The Ahom kings

eventually became Hindus and became Asomiya. Very small aspects of their cultural practices, particularly, those that did not conflict with the Asomiya culture still continue. For a long time now the mother tongue of the average Ahom has been Asomiya. Even the royal chronicles of the Ahoms gradually came to be written in Asomiya. Large numbers of the Ahoms have become followers of Shankardeva, the 15th-16th century Neo-vaishnavite saint of Assam who became one of the pillars of the Asomiya culture. The Bihu, the national festival of the Asomiya nationality, the celebration of which has come to be the most visible aspect of Asomiya cultural life are dominated in upper Assam by the Ahom singers, dancers and *dhulias* (drummers). Litterateurs of this community have been occupying important positions in the Assam Sahitya Sabha, the acknowledged guardian of Asomiya literary culture. Today some Ahom intellectuals are exhorting their community to revive its culture and to assert its identity distinct from the Asomiya. The community has formed distinct organisations of their own that raise issues and make demands that help articulate interests that suit the Tai identity that is sought to be revived. The role of the Ahom elite in this revival is very clear. Some Ahom scholars have now founded an Institute of Tai Studies that brings out the *Indian Journal of Tai Studies*. Ahoms and such other communities have formed their own student and youth organisations that have been playing important role in agitational politics in the civil society of Assam. Some of these organisations are now claiming that their communities be declared Scheduled Tribes under the Indian constitution.

It is not difficult to understand that the educated middle class, that stands to gain the most if the community is declared a Scheduled Tribe by exploiting the opportunities accompanying such a status, would try its best to mobilise support for such a demand. In various forms this process is evident in most of the cases of identity assertions in Northeast India. At times such assertions emerge as a result of political strategies for national and state level elections²⁰. In these communities nationality consciousness exists and their urge to self-determination is reflected in the articulation of demands which amount to demands for homelands, though within the state of India²¹. Others like the Misings, the Koches, various tribes in Tripura, Nagaland and many others are at the stage of community awareness. Some small tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, the Jaintia of Meghalaya and a whole range of small groups are today aware of their ethnic identities. Though all these identities are seen to be involved in ethnic or community conflicts, it is clear that the politics involved in this conflict vary from community to community according to the stage of development of the community concerned. Any attempts

at understanding this politics require going back to the politics of the administrative reorganisation of the area.

Some social scientists, journalists and political activists have often tried to explain the ethnic assertions, the attendant political turmoil and the consequent administrative reorganisations, often called the dismemberment of the composite state of Assam, in terms of the expansionist tendencies of the most advanced section of the populace of the region, the Asomiya middle class. The All Party Hill Leaders Conference, for instance, categorically stated that the Assam official Language Act was responsible for dismemberment of Assam (Sengupta, 1998). It is true that a section of the Asomiya middle class has been nurturing expansionist tendencies (Sharma, 1997). But to explain all ethnic conflicts of the region in terms of that expansionism is to ignore the fact that ethnic or community assertions manifest themselves only when social forces requiring such manifestations emerge or dominant sections come to acquire values conducive to such assertions. It is not difficult to see that even without the adoption of Assamese as the official language the geo-cultural personalities, which were not aware of their identities, would have asserted themselves when they arrived at the relevant stage of social development, particularly in a situation of underdevelopment and scarcity (Baruah, 1997, pp. 292-296) generated by internal colonial exploitation (Baruah, 1984, pp. 94-98).

The first stirrings of community and ethnic assertions in the region began in Assam when a section of the elites of the Ahoms organised the All Assam Ahom Association to fight against the 'injustices' done to the community by the British (Lahon, 1990, pp. 22-23) followed by other organisations articulating ethnic interests of various communities. The elites of the materially advanced communities often exercise or at least aspire to exercise hegemony in the entire region and, of course, within their own communities. In this connection, it is necessary to keep in mind that the concept of hegemony cannot be used to analyse the situation of these ethnic conflicts in the orthodox Gramscian sense. It needs to be modified to become a useful tool of analysis for the relevant social reality²², so as to reflect the process of organising intellectual and moral leadership, not in the sphere of body politic but in the sphere of community specific civil societies of Northeast India. Such an approach should be able to locate the sources of ethnic conflicts of the region and eventually enable us to arrive at long-term solutions (Baruah, 2000, pp. 32-56).

Ethnic movements are threatening to destabilise the existing social and political arrangements. Many of these are taking recourse to extra-constitutional methods and in certain well-known cases, like those of the Asomiya, the Naga, the Mizo, the Borok, the Khasi, the Garo, the Bodo and even the small communities like the Hmar, some sections are resorting to violent means. Previously unheard of ethnic identities are emerging in the region. Three Naga tribes – Chakrii, Keza and Sangtang – got together to form a new tribe called Chakesang²³. Relatively advanced sections of some backward communities at times create new ethnic identities, apparently articulating the interests of the community included in the new group, but actually furthering the interests of the relevant dominant elite.

The cases of tribal communities in Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh present us with a different picture. Initially more than one tribal community come together to ask for a political-administrative unit with the avowed objective of protecting the interests of the concerned communities but soon realise that they have conflicting interests. When Meghalaya was formed, it was expected that the new state would facilitate the fulfilment of the aspirations of the Khasi, the Garo and the Jaintia. But now after three decades of the existence of the state, a section of the Garo has started arguing that their interests can be protected only if they have a separate Garo state²⁴. The small tribes of what is now known as Arunachal Pradesh appear to have arrived at a holistic identity of the *Arunachali* in the state created out of the erstwhile Northeast Frontier Agency (NEFA). This was reflected in emergence of organisations like the All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union (AAPSU). But recently eighteen organisations of various tribal communities in the Tirap area had asked for an autonomous politico-administrative area for themselves²⁵. If the politics and society of Northeast India is to be understood then the phenomenon of community and ethnic assertions in the North-east, at times with extremist propensities, must be examined in its proper perspective and dealt with carefully.

Middle Class Hegemony and Identity Politics

In the absence of powerful feudal or bourgeois classes, the educated elites of the various communities in the Northeastern region have come to occupy hegemonic positions in their respective communities and have started competing with the relatively advanced sections of their nearest rival communities for material gains. And that in most cases the question of cultural identity has become a means of mass mobilisation for the dominant sections of the relatively backward

communities to pursue their sectarian interests (Baruah, 1988). In Meghalaya, since 1979 exactly seven years after the creation of the state for the Khasis, Jaintias and Garos, hate crimes became a part of the politics during agitations launched by ethnic organisation of the tribal communities demanding protective measures like Inner Line Permit (ILP)²⁶.

No effective resistance against such crime can be organised by the non-tribal residents because the political power is fully secured in the hands of the elites of the tribal communities. The complete disempowerment of the non-tribal population has been possible because under the provisions of the Sixth Schedule, the traditional political institutions and the Autonomous District Councils entrusted with the responsibility of protecting tribal traditions and interests have been able to establish effective control over land, trade and also job opportunities. In some cases, this control is breached by corrupt practice resorted to by some unscrupulous non-tribals with the aid and abetment of unscrupulous local tribals. However, such practices are not rampant. Traditional communities, in the tribal areas of Northeast India remain kinship based, kin protection remains a major value and therefore there is not much of outcry against the unscrupulous tribals facilitating anti-tribal practices. The newly emerging elites of the local communities of the urban areas campaign against the non-tribals. Such opportunism of the tribal elite is confined mostly to the urban areas where sizable non-tribal populations with considerable economic resources exist. The rural tribal masses do not seem to participate in the hate politics and the hate crimes are aimed mostly against the lower and middle rung of the non-tribal; population like the small property owners, petty traders and government employees and students and not against the non-tribals who are big business persons and big land owners. The fact remains that the hate crimes that take place and strident voices against the non-tribals threatening identity are urban phenomena. And the constant efforts at monopolising job opportunities and small trade is reflective of the fact that these movements carried on in the name of protection of identity are actually movements catering to the needs of the educated middle classes.

This competition acquires additional edge from the natural concern of the educated middle classes for protection and development of cultural identities. We have argued above that unlike the bourgeoisie the educated middle class does not have capital as base of its power. It also does not have the numerical strength of the proletariat or the peasantry. Therefore it has to use emotive issues to establish hegemony. The essential qualifications necessary for successful participation in

liberal democratic practices make the educated middle classes of the ethnic communities the obvious candidates for such hegemony. However, emergence and growth of working classes and generation of resources useful for fulfilling aspirations of educated elite might considerably improve the situation. It is, however, important to note that these competing middle classes aspire to exercise hegemony in their own areas and at the same time accept the reality of the Indian state. The most important student and youth organisations of the region like the All Assam Students' Union, the Khasi Students' Association, the Mizo Students' Union, which lead movements that often result in very serious ethnic conflicts in the region, have not been demanding secession. They have been asking for policies and decisions that could protect the interest of their respective communities.

A look at the movements and resulting conflicts should make it clear that emergence of inter-community conflicts is directly related to the emergence of educated middle classes in the various communities of the region because in most of these cases the identities of the communities concerned have been articulated either by students' organisations or by literary associations like the Asom Sahitya Sabha, Bodo Sahitya Sabha, etc.

Inter-community conflicts of the above kind have been bothering the students of Indian politics and society for quite some time²⁷ but the contemporary literature on the theme uses the term community intermittently with other terms like ethnic group²⁸, people²⁹ and nation/nationality³⁰. The issues raised in the liberal-communitarian controversy³¹, assertion of cultural or ethnic identities³² by a large number of communities with resultant social conflicts have contributed substantially to the importance acquired by communities and their politics.

The question that cannot be avoided is what kind of communities has gained importance? Citing works of authors like Michael Walzer and David Miller (Walzer, 1983; Miller, (1989), Partha Chatterjee argued that during the 1980s when the intense liberal-communitarian debate was carried on in social science literature of the Anglo- American world, the 'nation' in the political sense of the term³³, appeared to be the only form of community which received a large measure of approval (Chatterjee, 1998). Reflecting upon the ideas of community in the Western and the Eastern parts of the world, Chatterjee asserts that contemporary scholarship views community as the relic of the pre-modern and considers larger impersonal political identities as the hallmark of modernity (Ibid,

p. 278). But when we look at the situation in contemporary Northeast India it is not possible to hold that community is associated with 'premodern'. In fact, in the historical literature of the region there is enough evidence to show that the period referred to here as the beginning of modern history is often the period when consciousness about communities grew among peoples, leading to emergence of distinct community identities. These community identities do not have the nuances of the large identities of the liberal kind, particularly those of the nation. In fact, modern political consciousness in Northeast India seems to accompany community consciousness, or at least the social vehicles of 'modernity' seem to have been carriers of community identities and consciousness. The same social forces also have been active here in spreading the identities of what the western scholarship called the relics of the pre-modern, and also what it called the larger impersonal identities, the hallmark of modernity. In Assam, for instance, organisations like the Asomiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha, and Sarbojonik Sabha consolidated the Asomiya community and at the same time spread the values that facilitated spread of liberal democratic ideas³⁴. In view of this, it is important to examine the consequences of emergence of community politics for democracy in the region.

Ascendance of 'Community' in the realm of politics seemed to have affected democracy positively so far as the question of participation is concerned. The emergence and the proliferation of the community-based organisations and the popular movements generated by the issues raised by them, have been drawing large number of people of the relatively backward communities to active politics³⁵. The major movements led by these organisations have infused some life into the civil societies of the region. It is important to note that the organisations like All Assam Students' Union, All Bodo Students' Union, Khasi Students' Union and All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union have on many occasions been able to mobilise public opinion successfully to make the concerned state governments and the union government concede to demands generally perceived to be popular in their respective communities but ignored by powers that be.

For democratic politics, individual and his/her rights remain central, and, ideals of liberty and equality are interpreted as freedom to compete with others on equal terms in pursuit of one's private interests. The question – we need to examine in this context is – does community based politics facilitate the exercise of these rights and freedoms? Ascendance of community in the realm of politics seems to adversely affect this concept of freedom because the community in such case

acquires precedence over individuals and therefore interferes with the latter's rights in pursuit of its own goals and values. Contemporary politics of Northeast India is replete with such interference. The ethnocentrism of the organisations mobilising the communities, specially within the areas identified by such a community as their homeland, often makes it impossible for members of communities other than the most numerous and dominant ones in a particular area to freely participate in political activities. While evidence of such intolerance is available in the case of almost all communities of the Northeast, a recent controversy over bandh calls given by an organisation called the Non-tribal Youth Union in Meghalaya reflected this reality in a vivid way. Some young men of non-tribal population in Shillong formed an organisation of their own, called Non-Tribal Youth Union. In pursuance of some demands this organisation called for a bandh, which was opposed by the Khasi Students' Union. The latter claimed that non-Khasi communities had no right to carry on oppositional political activities in the Khasi Hills³⁶. In such situations the freedom of expression of an entire community is sought to be suppressed by the dominant sections of the indigenous communities in an organised and visible manner, and the rights of the individual members of the non-indigenous communities are violated with impunity. The treatment meted out to the non-Naga immigrant labourers in Nagaland by the Naga Students' Federation also reflects this trend. Other student bodies of the region organised on ethnic or community lines too show similar intolerance in their respective perceived homelands.

This should not lead us to the conclusion that the rights of only those viewed as others by a community are violated by community politics. In situations of inter-community conflicts, communities in their efforts at closing the ranks of their respective communities trample upon the individual rights of the members of their own communities. Critiquing or opposing activities of any of the organisations claiming to represent ethnic or community interests by a member of the community concerned is declared as an act of a renegade. Scanning the local newspapers of some of the states of the Northeast in British India would show that even while dealing with criminal activities most communities tend to display a parochial attitude, purely on communal considerations as kin protection remains an important characteristic of tribal societies. It is clear that under such circumstances some of the most important political values of constitutional democracy like the rule of law, equality before the eye of law, freedom of thought and expression with reasonable restrictions, etc. will be seriously undermined.

Attempts at strengthening democratic politics in the region therefore require a thorough critique of the contemporary conception of community in the region.

Most of these communities live in a situation of scarcity and socio-economic underdevelopment in the sense that there has been no scope for emergence of powerful social forces like feudal lords and bourgeoisie. Amalendu Guha had shown in *Planter Raj to Swaraj* (1977) that at the time of the advent of the British, in the second decade of the nineteenth century, even Assam proper, meaning the Ahom kingdom, was so underdeveloped that there was no monetisation, no significant generation of surplus and virtual absence of technology. The situation in the tribal societies of both hills and plains was worse than that. Many of those societies were pre-literate tribal chiefdoms with loose systems of self-governing arrangements. Those were egalitarian, unstratified communities in which land was communally held and shifting cultivation was the order of the day. Private property was almost unheard of. They were governed by traditions in which the community controlled the life of the individuals. The chiefs governed on the basis of legitimacy derived from rank. His words and decisions were the law though in certain situations efforts were made to arrive at a consensus among the villagers. The Khasi Dorbar was such an example³⁷. The ideas like individual freedom and rule of law, the essentials of the constitutional democracy were alien to those communities. Capital formation in this area has started only recently. The traditional tribal leadership of the chiefdoms have not been able to cope up with the changes brought about by British and post-British administration. A new educated middle class began emerging under the British rule as a result of the changes introduced by the colonial administration. Introduction of western education, liberal constitutional democracy and the capitalist path of development adopted by the state of India and imposed from above in Northeast India have created a situation in which the traditional elites lost power to this newly emerging western educated middle class. In today's Northeast India this class has established hegemony. There is no doubt this class has the intellectual and moral leadership. It is interesting that in most communities the organisation of this class, like the literary association and student organisation have come to occupy the most important position in the public space. This trend indicates the hegemony of the middle classes of various communities. Many of the movements led by the educated middle classes of various communities raise issues like reservation of jobs for the youth of the respective communities and the indigenous communities control over land and trade in their perceived home lands. This class whose roots can be traced to the British era had

only one means to pursue its interest - education. This class has neither the economic resources of the capitalist nor the numbers of the peasantry or the proletariat to be able to exercise political power. Bereft of other resources they employ the slogan of national or community identity to mobilise masses of the respective communities. The large masses accept their hegemony because the middle classes articulate some of the grievances of the lower classes within the compass of national identity³⁸. This is a common practice in the politics of ascendance to hegemony of the middle classes in Northeast India. For instance, when the AASU gave the slogan of 'Joi Aai Asom' (glory to mother Assam) and called people to chase away the foreigners in 1980s, the Asomiya peasantry seemed to believe that once the 'foreigners' were gone the land would be theirs. But as the Assam Accord and the consequences of the Assam movement showed that it was the Asomiya middle class that benefited from the movement. Ever since the advent of the British and till the 'Assam agitation' the skilled and unskilled jobs in Assam both in public and private sectors and also the trade and business were in the hands of non-Asomiya. It is true that because in the pre-British Assam there was hardly any formal schooling and also because the Bengalis, exposed to the western education, English language and the procedures of British administrations much before, had an advantage in many occupations that began in Assam with the introduction of the colonial administration. This led initially to a situation where the Bengalis came to dominate the bureaucracy and also the professions. When marketisation began under British, outsiders like the Marwaris, who had both the capital and the acumen, began to dominate trade and business. Despite some initiatives of the emerging Assamese elites of the time in tea industry and emergence of an organised voice of the newly educated middle class, the local population remained marginalised in British bureaucracy, professions and trade and business. When the local population began to develop competence through spread of education, they started competing in the area of professions and bureaucracy. The organised voices of the new Asomiya middle class expressed through organisations like the Jorhat Sarbajanic Sabha, Asom Chatra Sanmilani, Asom Sahitya Sabha and others, the doors of bureaucracy and professions began to open but very slowly. Because of lack of capital the new Asomiya middle class, which was the most influential class within the community, however failed to make a significant dent in trade and business. With small capital in hand they could not hope to seriously challenge the big business but the education and small capital in their possession created aspirations of becoming dominant in the non-capital intensive sector. This led to slogans of protecting language, culture, and land for the Asomiya, and the middle class

began organizing the community in the name of national culture. The clamour for Assamese as the official language and medium of instruction that began in 1873 and continued till 1972 when the goal was achieved was indeed an attempt at hegemonising Assam. This pattern is clearly visible in other communities of the region too. The agenda of the movements launched by the youth organisations, identity politics in this region and the issues raised by them show that the assertion of identity is as vehicle of middle class interests. These movements clearly are the result of competition for monopoly over land, jobs and trade among the educated middle classes of various communities. Unless enough opportunities for development are created to make serious cut throat competitions not compulsive, these forces will pursue aggressive identity politics and the conflicts will only worsen. However, there is no reason to believe that development will automatically bring an end to identity politics. Along with development, the raising of democratic consciousness in its true sense is necessary to build an atmosphere of tolerance and inclusive politics.

Notes:

¹ *Asomiya*, as distinguished from the Assamese meaning all those who reside permanently in Assam, is a nationality that considers the Assamese language and the culture that grew around it under the patronage of Ahom monarchy that ruled most parts of Brahmaputra valley from 1226 to 1826, as their own.

² Source, “*Voter Turnout Highlights of Lok Sabha Election 2014*“, Election Commission of India, http://eci.nic.in/eci_main1/SVEEP/VoterTurnoutHighlightsLokSabha2014.pdf accessed on 6.4.17

³ There is raging debate going on in *The Shillong Times* about the violence perpetrated on the non-tribal residents of Meghalaya, particularly in Shillong. A large number of local residents have condemned the ethnic divide and violence that have been accompanying the agitation carried on by some of the ethnic organisations of the Khasi-Jaintia and the Garo. The most prominent of the commentators are Patricia Mukhim, Toki Blah, H.H Mohrmen, and Jennifer Dkhar. There indeed are others who are participating in this debate. See, articles in *The Shillong Times* of October 2013 onwards.

⁴ For information of these and political issues related to such conflicts in Africa see, Sandbrook, (2000).

⁵ For a description, see Jones, (2006).

⁶ Manorama Sharma has shown this in a discussion of identity in the context of India’s Northeast. See, Phukan. & Dutta (Eds). (1995).

⁷ For a discussion of some of the issues see, Piper, (2011). See also, Fowden, (1988).

⁸ For some discussion see, Mamdani, (1996)

⁹ For a discussion see, Rossiter, (1973). See also, Mye & Morpurgo, (1964).

¹⁰ For various meanings and history of this term, see Williams, (1976), p. 178.

¹¹ For a detailed report and analysis of such organisations, see Baruah, (2000a). In the North Eastern Hill University, the oldest Central University, all major tribes and linguistic groups of the region have separate students associations. The University does not officially recognise these but the tacit consent of the authorities to functioning of these organisations is reflected by the fact that university officials grace the celebrations organised by such associations.

¹² Some of the best statements that documented the issues raised and the politics involved are to be found in Abbi (ed) (1984).

¹³ See Patricia Mukhim's writing on such problems in Meghalaya. She has been writing almost every Friday on these issues in the context of the Khasi community.

¹⁴ The term tribe has also acquired a peculiar meaning in India. For a discussion see, Pusa, (1996).

¹⁵ A good collection of article as on the problems related to such relation found in Basu & kohli (Eds.) (1998).

¹⁶ See, Khan, (1992). See, also Ray, (1973), pp.28-29.

¹⁷ For a discussion of some of the issues involved and a description of the emerging community and ethnic assertion see, Phukan & Dutta (Eds.) (1995), pp. 25-34.

¹⁸ For proof of this in the case of All Assam Students' Union, see Baruah, (1991) and for Khasi Students' Union see, Baruah (Ed.). (2002). Most other community based students and youth organisations of the region have been pursuing this line of politics.

¹⁹ Some evidence of this is available in the discussion of regional political parties of Meghalaya in Sengupta, (1998).

²⁰ For an analysis of election strategies of this sort in Assam see, Baruah, (1996).

²¹ For a discussion of the politics of the Asomiya militant outfit ULFA see Das (1994). Also see, 'ULFA National question in Assam', in *Symphony of Freedom, Papers on nationality question*, Hyderabad, India Peoples Resistance Forum, 1996.

²² For a detailed discussion, see, Sharma, (1990).

²³ See, Pusa, A. (1996).

²⁴ For over a decade now the Garo National Council has been demanding a separate state for the Garos.

²⁵ *Amar Asom*, April 24, 1998.

²⁶ See editorial in *The Shillong Times*, "Hate Crimes on the Rise" November 18, 2013. As the inner line permit issue has clearly demonstrated such demands are actually used by the educated middle classes to pursue other goals. The debate over the ILP agitation in Meghalaya carried out in the pages of *The Shillong Times* proves conclusively that though the pro ILP agitators are trying to claim that there is a threat to the identity of the indigenous tribes from infiltrators, implying that their target group is the illegal immigrants yet, they give away their real interest when the same group of activist begin attacking non-tribal labourers or give tacit support to policies advocated by some traditional leaders that non-tribals should not be allowed to rent houses. It is clear that ILP cannot prevent illegal immigrants because they do not seek permission to come to Meghalaya. ILP cannot stop illegal immigrants. Obviously ILP is aimed at restricting Indian citizens from settling in Meghalaya. It is of course well-known that most of the non-tribal settlers in Meghalaya, particularly in Shillong, which was the capital of British Assam, are

government employees, petty traders and professionals like Doctors, Lawyers and petty traders. There indeed are some big businesspersons and also small land owners. There were some labourers who came with the British but labourers continue to come even now because all developmental activities require them. There now a large number of Nepali and Bangladeshi labourers in the coal mines owned by Khasi-Jaintia mine owners. There are news reports of regular atrocities committed on them by local youth.

²⁷ For a major effort in understanding such conflicts see, Basu & Kohli (Eds.). (1998).

²⁸ Referring often to small groups with primordial loyalties.

²⁹ Referring to large communities with cultural, political, ethnographic or geographical distinctions.

³⁰ With strong actual or aspired right to self-determination.

³¹ For some of the issues raised in this controversy see, Avinery & de-Shalit (Eds.). (1992). Also see; Young (1993).

³² For a discussion on ethnicity see Phadnis, (1989).

³³ For a discussion on the two major approaches to the concept of nation and its application for Indian politics see, Baruah (1992).

³⁴ For a discussion on *Jorhat Sarbojonik Sabha*, see Goswami, (1985).

³⁵ For discussions on the issues raised by the major youth movements of the region, see articles included in Baruah (Ed.). (2002).

³⁶ See the debate carried out in the Letters to the Editor Column in *The Shillong Times* in August 1998.

³⁷ But it is not possible to ascertain as to how old this tradition was. For the Austric rooted Khasi language Dorbar appears to be a loan word. Therefore, whether it is a really traditional institution, claimed by many Khasi intellectuals as existing from 'time immemorial' is rather doubtful.

³⁸ Gramsci had explained that intellectual and moral leadership is often obtained by ruling or dominant classes by articulating the some of the interests of the classes below them.

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