

CONFLICTS IN NORTHEAST INDIA: INTRA-STATE CONFLICTS WITH REFERENCE TO ASSAM

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Abstract

Conflict in Northeast India has a brand entity that entrenched country's name in the world affairs for decades. In this paper, an attempt was made to study the genesis of conflicts in Northeast India with special emphasis on the intra-state conflicts in Assam. Attempts were also made to highlight reasons why Northeast India has remained to be a highly conflict ridden area comparing to other parts of India. The findings revealed that the state has continued to be a hub for several intra-state conflicts – as some particular groups raised demand for a sovereign state, while some others are betrothed in demanding for a separate state or homeland. There exists a strong nexus between historical circumstances and their intertwined influence on the contemporary conflict situations in the State. For these deep-rooted influences, critical suggestions are incorporated in order to deal with the conflicts and to bring sustainable and long-lasting peace in the State.

Keywords:

Conflict;

Sovereignty;

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Indian State

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1. Introduction

The term “Northeast” is a colonial product and is recent in origin. British used the term to define a geographically demarcated territory of eastern corner of Indian subcontinent. However, after the separation of Burma (1937) and the partition of India (1947) the concept of Northeast became clear. At present, the region is composed of eight sister states including Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim. It is also a home of different multi-ethnic tribes and it is estimated that the region has 70 ethnic groups and 272 tribes who have their own traditions and way of living. [1] As Northeast is very diverse and heterogeneous, assimilations of different identities always led to the conflict situation. The conflict in the region is a ubiquitous phenomenon that has been gnawing the fabrics of Indian democracy for a long time.[2] The region has produced every bit of turmoil starting from demand for sovereign state to demand for autonomy within states, from structured terrorism to serious ethnic disputes within the periphery. The paper thus focused on highlighting the genesis of conflicts in Northeast India by focusing mainly on the intra-state conflict over territory. A special emphasis on Assam was given because the state is a center of Northeast politics since colonial time and the conflicts in the state has a significant influence on the other states of Northeast India.

Intra-state conflict over territory is a kind of conflict where feud is between two actors- state actor and non-state actor, where the former wants to uphold the integrity of the state and the latter wants to break away a particular piece of territory from the existing state using different types of propaganda such as separatism, secessionism, restoration, reunification and liberation.[3] The combination of all the above features is highly visible in most of the states in Northeast India.

While analyzing the above dimensions of conflicts, the most crucial question that comes to our mind is that why is Northeast India more conflict ridden comparing to other states of India? Firstly, the geographical distinctiveness of Northeast India is one of the significant factors in raising conflict situation. A society is usually keen to keep their identities stingily and separately. So when the issue of integration comes, it automatically leads to conflicts.

Secondly, the isolation of Northeast India from the mainland India continues to be another contributing factor. The Northeast India is connected with the rest of the nation with a small corridor known as chicken neck. Consequently, people and groups from this region identify themselves as ones who are alienated from the mainland India and this alienation is perceived as one which has also brought in the economic and political deprivation of the region. Here, the concept of relative deprivation best suits the situation of Northeast India as identified by Ted Gurr. He revealed that relative deprivation is a psychological frustration and aggression that is felt by a group of people strongly for a long period of time, which often lead to violence. [4]

Thirdly, the geo-strategic location of Northeast India that stretches along 4500 Km [5] of international border stands as another influential factor. That is, it is susceptible for links with international armed groups that also opens up for a sustainable link for arms trade. Many of the time, International and national media reports that the bases for most of the armed groups in the Northeast India are located in neighboring foreign countries. The reports often mention countries like China, Myanmar and Bangladesh as strong support base for armed group and also destinations for training cadres and transferring weapons into the region.

Fourthly, there is a shared claim of the Northeastern people that Northeastern region of India has never been parts of the Indian Territory. They claim that Northeast India is a post-colonial product [6] that is created by the Indian State and thereby does not wish to stay within India. On the other hand, their claims continue to be disregarded as it is considered to be a conflict against India.

So, the existence of conflicts in the region is interwoven with the factors that have transformed the region into one of the most conflictual zones in the nation. But, the number of conflicts in the region comparatively was very less in number during the British period comparing to Post-British period. During colonial time, conflict was directed towards the removal of British colonial rule. Though there were small confrontations among different ethnic groups, they were not lasted for long as the contemporary ones. The nature of most conflicts in the post-colonial period gained an everlasting character. Today almost all intra-state conflicts continue to recur as they already have spanned through many decades. However, before proceeding to the situation

of intra-state conflicts in Assam, it was found necessary to have a thorough understanding on the roots of conflicts in the region as presented in the following sub-section.

2. In search for the genesis of conflicts in Northeast India

As it has already been mentioned above, the creation of 'Northeast' is a British craft which has no reference in the early stage of historiography literature. To administer the whole region under one fold formula, the British popularized the concept 'Northeast Frontier' that wasn't a subject that was familiar to the Northeastern people. The frontier was administered more as territorial appendage for economic benefit and strategic policy perspective than an integral administrative unit. Though the region was loosely administered, the paradox of colonial hegemony was expressed through different medium. For example, the introduction of 'excluded' and 'partially excluded areas' and 'choice based voting system' in the name of religion and caste to reinforce the boundary demarcation within different communities was one of the prominent. [7] Moreover, the British policy of providing autonomous provincial system for the freedom loving Hill people was also another diplomatic strategy administered by British throughout the entire region.

Though the British created the above avenues with the intention to have a greater administrative efficiency, yet it later played a major role in creating the seeds of conflicts in Northeast India. The British policy of dividing the communities who peacefully co-existed within the region can be labeled as one of the roots of conflicts in Northeast India. In pre-British period many indigenous communities had maintained their own way of life and had no sense of rejuvenating their identities. But during the colonial regime, different tribes were transferred into pan-tribal identities [8] giving them artificial names such as "Nagas", "Kukis" etc. When these new ethnic identities were tried to imply in post-independence period as part of colonial legacy made the ethnic tribes more concern about their identities and later it led to the growth of demanding separate territories for their respective homeland.

Moreover, the people of Northeast had never come to an attachment with the mainland Indian people rather they were close to East Asian people as historically it is conjoining many East Asian countries border. It is always been a claim of Northeastern people that it is Indian state who had subjugated the land of Northeast under Indian domain. What is more important was that

the British rule has kept the Northeastern people aloof from the main administrative center of the country and established Inner Line Regulation in 1873 to bring about differentiation between hill tribes and plain tribes. In addition to this, during the British rule, Manipur and Tripura were independent and British administered these regions under a discrete treaty relationship where prince acted as a nominal head. On the other side, Assam province was a distinct unit as it was directly administered by the Governor General. Hill people had their own autonomous provincial system with a little control from the above. But after the British departure, the process of partition gave Northeast India a distinct identity. Just after the partition, people of hills were uncertain about their future and there were no options for them to accept. The separation of Burma from British India in 1937 already made them anxious and weak as it divided the hill communities into two parts. Yet again, partition in 1947 split the hill tribes who were living on the border side of East Pakistan. On the other side, the princely states of Manipur and Tripura acceded to India as centrally administered territories, Khasi states and Cooch Behar were melted into Assam and Bengal respectively. [9] So within a short period of time the whole setup of Northeast changed either by coercion or by employing tactics. Thereby different parts of Northeastern region who were earlier independent wanted to be separate from each other.

Furthermore, the policy of integration adopted by Indian state to bring Northeastern areas into the newly independent India also had significant influences on the numerous present-day conflicts in Northeast India. This is actually one of the most difficult task that every newly independent nation state face while integrating vast number of people after the end of colonial rule or independence. As Leonard Binder pointed out, the crisis of political development in new nation states will be to build a nation out of a collection of tribes or of isolated communities. [10] This was a similar challenging case that was faced by the Indian state after independence. It was observed that voices of separation became active soon after independence when the Indian state tried to integrate all parts of Northeast Frontier into one political unit. Concomitantly, the Northeast region experienced the first bloodiest armed conflict from Naga tribe. Following Nagas, Meetei's from Manipur also raised their voice against the domination of Indian state which they referred to as "*illegal merger of the state*" without the consent of the Manipuri people. Similarly, in the 1960's Mizo's movement gained a serious attention from the Centre and

a decade later, Assam also witnessed a sovereign state demands under the harmonized efforts of United Liberation Front of Assam.

However, the demand for sovereign independent state didn't remain as the single strong demand, rather demands continued to grow and be complex, and even some tribes from Northeast region have demanded to carve out some territories from their own existing land. The State of Assam is also acquainted with similar forms of demands that have kept the region vulnerable and more sensitive to demands leading to conflicts and violence. Concomitantly, due to complexities and the interweaved nature of conflicts, this article was directed to have a specific aim of assessing a particular state from Northeast India - Assam - and thereby bringing an understanding of a specific form of conflict, i.e., intra-state conflict that exist in the region.

3. The Case of Assam

Assam is a land of different ethnic communities and a centre to dominant Northeast politics since colonial time. Tracing the roots of intra-state conflicts in Assam from the post-colonial period, the State has been heavily agitated by the large scale migration from East-Bengal and from the neighboring country Nepal. In the post-1947 era sentiments of the Assamese people against the issue of immigration started to have a more crystalized form after the noticeable presence of Bangladeshi immigrants in some districts of Assam. Moreover, the policies of homogenization designed by the post-colonial state to integrate different ethnic categories into the fold of Assamese identity also fueled the birth of strong sub-nationalism within different tribes leading to the formation of various armed groups which later warranting the “*durability of disorder*” in the region. [11]

Nonetheless, the origin of intra-state conflict in Assam moved to a full swing with the emergence of the ‘United Liberation Front of Assam’ (ULFA). The feeling of isolation from the Indian mainstream and the exploitation over natural resources was the main point for which ULFA started the liberation movement against India. United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) was established on April 7, 1979 at Ranghar, in Sibsagar District of Assam – a place that is known as the kingdom of Ahom rule. In the initial phase, the Organisation was keen on building strong

solidarity that stride against the neo-colonialism of New Delhi, [12] but soon after a decade, it emerged as a violent insurgent group in Assam and became influential and powerful.

It was in 1980-1990's period, where almost all the newspapers of Assam were busy in publishing ULFA's illegal activities and their cultivated links with foreign countries. The easy money generating activities like bank robbery, demand of crores of rupees from multinational companies including foreign tea companies and collection of taxes from non-Assamese businessman were some of the prominent ones. However, the money they had collected from Assam by illegal means was transformed into a sustainable income source, opening poultry farming, hotels, private clinic etc. in neighboring countries. Subsequently, ULFA leaders had established connections with Kachin Independent Army of Myanmar, ISI of Pakistan and Mujahideen of Afghanistan. In 1988, one ULFA leader Munim Nobiz went to Pakistan via Bangladesh to ask the ISI to facilitate a meeting with Afghan Mjahideen and accordingly ISI arranged it for five ULFA leaders. [13]

So all these introspective activities and their move from liberation to warlordism enforced the government to declare counter-operations against ULFA. Within a short period of time off from 1990 -1991, the Government of India (GOI) launched two counter-operation strategies called 'Operation Bajrang' and 'Operation Rhino'. However, 'Operation Flash Out' of 2003 was most successive joint operation of GOI with Royal Bhutanese Army which literally dismissed the ULFA's strength. It is known that, in the name of counter-operation, government forces were indulged in brutal killings, disturbed lives of innocent village people in search of ULFA cadres and arrested some of the relatives of ULFA cadres. As pointed by Sanjib Baruah, in the name of counter-operations, authoritarian method have been introduced into the fabric of everyday life, especially in those parts of Assam that are seen as ULFA strongholds. [14]

However, due to efforts of different civil society organizations, ULFA showed interest for peace talks and accordingly ULFA appointed People's Consultative Group (PCG) under the leadership of Mamoni Roysom Goswami to carry out the demands of ULFA in front of the GOI. The PCG started the initiatives, although broke in the middle, yet again in the initiative of Assam Jatiya Mahasabha led by Prof. Hiren Gohain, ULFA- GOI peace parleys revived and since

thenumerious rounds of peace talks and developments have occurred. But the astonishing news of Citizenship Amendment Bill in 2016 has brought a serious challenge in both parties peace talks as ULFA leaders has threatended the BJP government to move out from peace talks if the government passes the Citizenship Amendment Bill. Nonetheless, it is a million dollar question of every Assamese that without Paresh Baruah even if the pro-talks groups comes to an end, will it bring a permanent peace in Assam. Anyways, people of Assam are really hoping for the long lasting solution of four decades of INDO-ULFA conflict.

Another form of intra-state conflict that was experienced in the State occurred in the mid 1980's from Bodo tribe, which is the largest community in Assam. Bodo's consists of 5.1% of the Assam's population and claim to be the son of the soil who dwells in the plains between the Brahmaputra River and the Himalayan foothills of Bhutan. [15] The Bodos who had started their demand for greater political autonomy later transformed their demand into a full-fledged state in order to protect their identity. The Bodo movement gained a momentum under the leadership of 'All Bodo Students Union'(ABSU) along with 'Bodo People's Action Committee'(BPAC) with their strong campaign '*Divide Assam 50-50.*' The Bodo identity movement was marked by a long term conflict that resulted in extensive violation of human rights and loss of innocent peoples' lives. Subsequently, during leaders of ABSU and BPAC came to an agreement with the Indian Government (with the then Union Minister of State for Home Affairs and the then Chief Minister of Assam) in 1993, the problem of Bodos seemed to come into a settlement with the signing of the Bodo Accord. The Accord led to the formation of an autonomous council known as Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) that gave the authority to make laws, rules and pass orders within their territorial jurisdiction and on the 38 subjects of cottage, forests, irrigation and etc. [16]

However, the unclear boundary demarcation given to BAC brought a different type of hassle for the new council as a result of which a section of Bodos who were not satisfied with the formation of BAC, gave birth to an armed organization namely Bodoland Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF) to sphere head the movement that aimed to create a separate State of Bodoland. In the course of time, BLT became the guardian of the Bodo movement and their movement has also led to recurring violent activities such as killings, extortion, bombings and other similar incidents in

different parts of Assam. As a result, the government was forced to negotiate with BLT and in 1999, the BLT appealed for a unilateral ceasefire with the Government of India. In 2001, the BLT gave up the demand of a separate state and in response the Government agreed to create a territorial council under the Sixth Schedule for the area demarcated in consultation with the representatives of Bodo groups and the Government of Assam. [17]

The decision of the central government came to light in 2003 after the Government of Assam and the BLT leaders signed the New Bodo Accord which paved the way for the creation of the Bodoland Territorial Council under the provision of Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution. The Accord granted administrative, legislative, executive and financial powers to the BTC within its jurisdiction. The strength of the Council is fixed to 46 (40 Elected Members and 6 Nominated Members), out of which 30 to be from scheduled tribes, 5 from non-tribal, 5 from other groups and 6 to be nominated by the Governor from underrepresented sections. Moreover, BTC is specified to include 3,082 villages with a vast population of 23 Lakhs. [18]

Though the new changes under the Bodo Accord brought significant adjustments for Bodo people, it could not bring everlasting peace in the region because the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) labeled the Bodo Accord as an “Insult to the Bodo nation” and a “faulty pack that had the backing of a handful of opportunist Bodo people with leaning towards Delhi.” [19] Moreover, other claims over a period of time started surfacing that though BTC has the extensive power yet it failed to meet the needs of the Bodo people. Therefore, ABSU revived its campaign from time to time for a separate Bodo homeland that can fulfill the aspirations of Bodo people.

On the other side, the Southern part of Assam is also witnessing the same problem of separate homeland demand since the last two decades. The demand for two separate states started in the mid of 1980's from Karbi and Dimasa tribes respectively. Both of these hilly tribes who were once united in 1951 under the unified North Cachar Hills and Mikir Hills later detached from each other and started their agitation against the state. The movement for separate Karbi state was driven by their armed organization namely United Peoples' Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) whose proposed state demand includes areas of KarbiAnlong, North Cachar Hills, present karbi

dominated areas of Nagaon district, Kamrup districts of Assam and Ri-Bhoi district of Meghalaya. On the other, distinct Dimasa ethnic state 'Dimaraji' was carried by Dima Haram Daogah (DHD), an armed organization of the Dimasas whose proposed state would cover the areas of Karbi Anlong, North Cachar Hills, some parts of Nagaon district and parts of Dimapur district of Nagaland.

Though, both the armed groups have already joined the negotiation processes with the Government of India, yet, the anti-talk factions of the two armed groups are still continuing their violent activities. Consequently, considering the weave of the conflicts in recent decades, it won't be difficult to say that the future of the State is at a great stake. In concomitant to this, the conditions of the conflicts will continue to be unpredictable unless the government can manage to respond the demands of identity formation movements of ethnic tribes in Assam.

4. Concluding Remarks

The recent prevalence of conflicts in the Northeast India is for the most part a result of a steady accumulation of protracted conflicts rather than just a sudden change associated with the new governing structures or systems in the region. Considering the nexuses of all the problems together, the region has remained vulnerable to conflicts and violence that has been difficult to manage due to the changing nature of conflicts. Just even in a single State like, for instance in case of Assam, the contexts of conflicts are different in nature. For example, the context of Indo-ULFA conflict was on the basis of illegal migration issue, while the Bodo's context is to save their identity by creating a separate State of Bodoland.

In such types of context-specific issues, it is challenging to manage as the conflicts carry plausible moral motives, emotions, strong sentiments and expectation of different tribes. As a measure what Indian government can do is to understand the root causes of conflicts as well as to prioritize their demands. A healthy environment is always the first requirement before any action can come into effect. Taking the instance of militarization in Northeast region, demilitarization can perhaps be taken as necessary steps to pave a way for building trust and to abolish sentiments of threats. Second, creating platforms and opportunities to make Northeast India as one of the potential hubs for greater economic and political prospects can help to put an end to

the feeling of isolation of the people in the region. Moreover, it is necessary that the government must create a positive attitude to respond to the issues and in taking a leading role in solving and bringing peace in the state.

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