Debating the indigenous and the alien:*A glimpse from northeast India*

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Abstract:

How differentiated set of entitlements and privileges meant to counter political and cultural exclusion and marginalisation by "recognising and accommodating the distinctive identities and needs of ethnocultural groups"[i]; in many multicultural states has only served to intensify the depth of the ethnocultural fractures. By taking a glimpse at Northeast India, this paper argues that "external protections" granted to groups to nurture and protect a 'distinct society' has engendered marginalisation and segregation of groups not 'recognised', creating a perception of injustice and group domination.

Key words: Differentiated rights, ethnocultural groups, northeast, ethnic groups, culture, rights.

In most countries of the world we encounter a growing dissonance between groups that attempt to [re]claim their "individual collective futures"[ii] by challenging membership of a national community, and nation-states which attempt to forge a political community without placing any independent emphasis on principles of shared nationality, language, identity, culture, religion, history or way of life[iii]. As such the political identity that nation-states conventionally sought to fashion was to be equal in terms of "choice, claims and opportunities" mediated through the criteria of common citizenship[iv]; norms that would impact upon the notion of a shared political subjectivity. There was, therefore, not to be any "personal, moral or political segregation or prioritization" amongst members of this political community.

Yet, the growing contest from ethnocultural and religious groups, besides others, has been that the manner in which the defining boundaries of such a political community or shared subjectivity was constructed and legitimated forced the marginalisation ofcertain "identities and interests" defined by their "*difference*"[v]. These groups propose to construct and legitimise a counter 'community' that accords priority to a notion of identity based on an essentialist particularism—"the core of which [apparently] 'stays the same"[vi]. This intrinsic essence that describes and defines their difference ostensibly remains unaffected by the consequential influence of the globalisation of modernity that pervades the contemporary world. For it is well argued that the global spread of modernity has effected a standardisation and "homogenisation of cultural identities" and as such identities especially of the ethnic and religious variety, under conditions of modernity is primarily a "*description of* cultural identity"[vii] rather than a lived essential.

While the essential justification for insisting on such differentiated set of entitlements and privileges is to counter political and cultural exclusion and marginalisation by "recognising and accommodating the distinctive identities and needs of ethnocultural groups"[viii]; in many multicultural states; the operational upshot of such "procedural and institutional shift" has only served to intensify the depth of the ethnocultural fractures. This has occurred since in many cases the "external protections" granted to groups to nurture and protect a 'distinct society' has engendered marginalisation and segregation of groups not 'recognised', creating a perception of injustice and group domination.

India's northeast initially comprised of seven sister states, later due to development compulsions, joined by an eighth; is one such social theatre where ethnocultural groups are engaged in competitive bids to secure such "external protections" in the form of institutional and procedural mechanisms that recognise their distinctiveness. Therefore, the varieties of constitutional autonomy extended to '*recognised*' groups in this region include the autonomous councils under the sixth schedules, special constitutional provisions like article 371A, territorial councils under the sixth schedule and self-governing federal states. Under all these institutions,

the dominant 'recognised' ethnic groups command political control and majority representative voice. These institutional and procedural mechanisms that accord special recognition to certain vulnerable ethnic groups were meant to not only provide a compensatory format for alleged "historical disadvantages"[ix] but also widen the democratic space for representation and political voice of such disadvantaged groups, with the eventual objective, however, being the integration of these groups into the larger national imagination. Yet the tradeoffs has not been commensurate to the intentions of the policy framers, since they have also served to develop hierarchies not only between 'recognised' and 'non-recognised' groups but also internally between 'recognised groups'[x] sharing territorial spaces. In contemporary times under conditions of increasing politicisation of identities it has served to polarise ethnic groups and initiate a form of "status inequality" that breeds discontent and distrust among ethnocultural groups.

The "northeast" has been portrayed often in an essentialised sense, as either a "paradise unexplored" or more commonly as "conflict-ridden". In both these categorisations there is an implicit suggestion of an essential "core" that the "region" commonly possesses and reflects. The implicit assumption in both the categories is that there is an innate, natural, uncontested and fixed content through which the "region" can be represented and also reproduced. While in the sense of the former categorisation it evokes an 'exoticised'[xi] mystery that is arcane; in the latter categorisation this incomprehensible mystery evokes a political suspicion that becomes the dominant rhetorical trope for justifying "normalising" efforts by the Indian state. Both these essentialised notions are nonetheless linked by a common idiom that assists reinforcing the dominant frames of perceiving the region as well as the "normalising" efforts through which we gasp to make sense of "northeast" both in terms of normative framings as well as procedural applications. Both these categorisations, therefore, authenticate and justify "incremental policy making"[xii], pursued by a state that still grapples to accommodate these disputed areas into its "national imagination" and in so doing achieve a modicum of political subversion of such contests. Contesting groups of the region wedged in these "discursive regimes" also reflect a parallel hesitancy regarding an innate and uncontested essence and a group's ability to negotiate

the broadening and contraction of group margins. The controversy regarding who constitutes "indigenous"[xiii] in the state of Assam is a case in point.

The region called "northeast", a designative euphemism, is evidently allied by a "*durable disorder*"[xiv] that 220 ethnic groups in varied stages of historical and political evolution collectively share in their attempts at locating their social and political relevance within a shared national self-consciousness. This 'disorder' is often reflected in the ambiguities and anxieties that ethnocultural groups engaged in asserting and recovering their collective selfhood, confront in the process of their negotiations with the Indian state or with proximate ethnocultural groups. Manifestation of such 'disorder' is reflected in the armed political opposition, which for lack of a more plausible term is referred to as 'ethnic insurgency', as also in quotidian social interactions that groups inhabiting proximate spaces engage in. both these processes are dictated by the logic of attaining an authentic selfhood recoverable only in an ethnic homeland. Yet despite the common predicament of 'collective disorder', it would be unwise not to appreciate the bewildering heterogeneity of ethnocultural identities as well as variations in presentation of identity schemes in the region.

A ubiquitous and patently persistent condition of the region is thus furnishing of historical proposals for the creation of exclusive homelands by ethnocultural groups, often buttressed and sustained through support from indigenous ethnic insurgencies. As a result the region is overwhelmed by escalating '*communal*'[xv]conflicts and indeterminacies produced by "the jargon of authenticity"[xvi] where the casualty is Human Rights of groups and individuals. This violation of human rights follows from the actions of state and non-state actors engaged in the conflicts. Most of these armed contests are not only between the state and the myriad politicised ethnic groups but also between the various ethnic groups themselves who simultaneously counter not only the efforts of the state to contain their armed resistance but also armed ethnic groups whose ethnonational claims often contradict and contest theirs[xvii]. The bewildering outcome is the contests, which are usually armed, between *Karbis* and *Dimasas*, *Dimasas* and *Hmars*, *Hmars* and *Kukis*, the *Khasi-Pnars* and the *Karbis*, the *Bodos* and the

Santhals in Assam; between the *Nagas* and the *Kukis*, *Kukis* and the *Paites*, *Meiteis* and *Nagas* in Manipur; between the *Twipras* and settler Bengalis in Tripura; the list is incessant.[xviii]

The state in its efforts to restrain and contain political violence released by the activities of the armed ethnonational groups recurrently violate democratic rights and imposes limitations on civil and political liberties. The enforcement of undemocratic and repressive legislations like The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act 1958 in declared "disturbed areas"[xix], allows security forces engaged in active insurgency operations to violate civil and political liberties of individuals and groups with impunity. Besides, extrajudicial killings, faked encounter killings various forms of torture and gendered violence by state actors present a dismal picture of human rights conditions in most parts of the region.

These violations of human rights by the state are being complemented by the activities of ethnonational groups who in their quest for attaining and entrenching exclusive models of autonomy and ethnic homelands systematically violate civil and political rights and liberties of groups they consider 'others'. These 'others' who share little congruence among themselves and often exhibit cross-cutting differences in terms of social and cultural history are more often than not collectively designated as 'others/aliens/outsiders' by assertive ethnocultural groups who seek to achieve a "'trump card' salience for a categorical [ethnic] identity"[xx] based on historical blueprints of indigenity within a defined territorial and institutional domain. This presence of the ethnic others or "aliens/outsiders" within a state is considered a cause for the degeneration of the moral and ethical allegiance of the host ethnic group[xxi]. As an instance in Meghalaya indigenous scholars and social commentators are concerned that the social interactions between the youths from the *Naga*, *Mizo* and '*Manipuri'* communities with the 'local Khasi' youths would impair the social and cultural fabric. As a result in most of these states 'insider/outsider' images are so exclusively weaved in the socio-cultural discourse that images of 'otherness' is effected as a part of the cultural lore and repertoire[xxii] where 'social closure' between ethnic groups becomes contingent to ethnic identity assertion. Cognitive prejudices about the out-groups expressed through rhetorical generalisations like, "…I don't want this land raped, [by outsiders]" or "non-

tribal dogs get lost" or "…indigenous people there are being completely swamped by migrants… [because settlers are], highly procreative…"[xxiii], perpetually reproduces social images of 'others' as a collective threat.

While the quest for the recognition of ethnocultural difference need not necessarily be perceived as "surrender to relativism", and can rather be considered a justification for ensuring 'group equality' in a multicultural democracy, the fact that ethnonational quests in the region wittingly manifests an exclusivist "myopic romanticism"[xxiv] regarding tradition and ethnocultural 'difference' often releases "relativistic fragmentation" and increased group confrontations in this multicultural social theatre. Therefore, while group confrontations with the state and with proximate ethnic groups are justified and legitimated by evoking a concern for the preservation of human rights of victimized 'national' groups; recognised ethnocultural groups deny similar recognition claims to proximate and 'subordinate' ethnic groups on an analogous plea often adopted by the state to deny such recognition.

While the logic and justification of such 'recognition' strategies is obtained in opposition to the alleged "neutrality" of liberal citizenship claims that fails to acknowledge specificities of embedded ethnicities; "differentiated citizenship" and "segmental autonomy" adopted to surmount such 'failings' merely serves to exacerbate ethnic fragmentation as it emphasises and politicises differences among citizens[xxv] by substituting the 'civic principle' with the 'ethnic principle' for constituting a political community. The unintended consequence of this substitution is not only the erasing of a shared "civic life"[xxvi] but also creation of social and institutional conditions where genuine citizens, yet who are perceived as 'others', are marginalised in the region in such a manner that they fail to effectively enjoy basic civil and political rights. Such an outcome would exacerbate fractures in pluralistic and multiethnic societies and predatory assertion of ethnic claimsin the region.

i   *ibid*. p. 335

ii   Michael Murphy. "Understanding Indigenous Nationalism" in Michel Seymour (ed.) *The Fate of the Nation State.* McGill-Queen's University Press. Canada. 2004. p.272

iii   Will Kymlicka. *Contemporary Political Philosophy. An Introduction*. Oxford University Press. N.Delhi. 2002. p. 208

iv   This notion of citizenship was effectively Marshallian, where social and cultural plurality was not accorded any autonomous recognition and the idea was generally to promote the growth of a national community.

v   Kymlicka. *op.cit*. 2002. p 329

vi   Used here with a slightly different twist than used in the original argument by Slavoj Zizek. "Identity and its Vicissitudes: Hegel's 'Logic of Essence' as a Theory of Ideology" in Ernesto Laclau (Ed.) *The Making of Political Identities*. Verso. London. 1994. p.44

vii   John Tomlinson. "Globalisation and Cultural Identity" http://www.polity.co.uk/global/pdf/GTReader2eTomlinson.pdf . Italics mine.

viii   *ibid*. p. 335

ix   Sanjib Baruah. *Durable Disorder*. Oxford University Press. N.Delhi. 2005. p. 183

x   A case in point is the conflict between the Garos and the Khasis or between Khasis and Pnars in the state of Meghalaya. See. "Letters to the Editor. Threat to the city" *The Shillong Times*. Shillong. May 11 & May 17, 2006

xi   A very negative experience of this 'exocitisation' of the northeast and its people can be experienced in the increasing vulnerability of women of the northeast in metro cities like Delhi, where their exotic features often conjures images of desirability and explains the rising crime graph against them in these places.

xii   Sanjib Baruah. 2005. *op.cit*. p. 184

xiii   See M.H.Rahman "AASU's Demand Communally Motivated". http://www.milligazette.com/Archives/15-8-2000/Art5.htm

xiv   *ibid*.

xv   I use the term 'communal' here to describe ethnonational conflicts, following Louis Kriesberg, for an important reason. Conceptually its insertion in the discourse allows us, in India, to understand the fact that such conflicts are no different than those inter-religious conflicts enacted in different parts of the country and terming them as 'ethnonational' does not make them belong to a separate genre of conflicts. These conflicts also exhibit similar underlying pathologies and logic that "communal conflicts" are considered to reveal. See Louis Kriesberg, "The Phases of Destructive Conflicts" in David Carment & Patrick James (Eds.) *Peace in the Midst of Wars: Preventing & Managing International Ethnic Conflicts*. University of South Carolina Press. Columbia. 1998. pp. 33-60

xvi   Theodor W. Adorno. *The Jargon of Authenticity*. Northwestern University Press. Evanston. 1973. This jargon of authenticity is produced by embedded groups seeking to retrieve and reinforce their authentic identities amidst baffling contestations.

xvii   Instances of the Nagas contesting the Kukis; Kukis contesting the Paites; Karbis contesting the Kukis; the Hmars contesting the Dimasas provide us with a glimpse of such knotted contests in the region. For details see Girin Phukan. *Inter-ethnic Conflicts in Northeast India*. P.2. South Asian Publishers. N.Delhi. 2005

xviii   *ibid*.

xix   See Kuldip Nayar on Human Rights Violations in Northeast India. *The Hindu*. May 22, 1997 Chennai.

xx   Craig Calhoun. *Critical Social Theory: Culture, History and the Challenge of Difference*. Blackwell. pp. 221.

xxi   A reputed columnist argues that the social and cultural behaviour of Shillong is undergoing degradation due to the presence of students from the Naga, Mizo and Manipuri communities in the city. See Patricia Mukhim, The Shillong Times, May 5, 2000. This negative image is so powerful that local organisations like the FKJGP issues restrictions on the movement of individuals from such communities. Also See "FKJGP to restrict Movement of Students in Laithumkhrah" *The Shillong Times*, January 29, 2003.

xxii   Dev. *op.cit*. 2004.

xxiii   Quoted by Nigel Jenkins. *Through the Green Door. Travels among the Khasis*. Penguin. N.Delhi. 2001. p. 109

xxiv   Jack Donnelly, "Human Rights and Asian Values: A Defence of "Western" Universalism" in Joanne R. Bauer & Daniel A. Bell (eds.) The East Asian Challenge for Human Rights. Cambridge University Press. U.K. 1999. p.80

xxv   Avigail Eisenberg. "Pluralism, Consociationalism, Group Differentiated Citizenship and the Problem of Social Cohesion" http://www2.arts.ubc.ca/cresp/plurpap.pdf

xxvi   Ashutosh Varshney. *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life. Hindus and Muslims in India*. Oxford University Press. N.Delhi. 2002. pp. 39-42