

The Idea of “Northeast”: An Evaluation of Consequences

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ABSTRACT

The term “Northeast” represents different interpretations to scholars. Is this really a homogenous category or rather going to homogenize this region as Northeast India, or India’s northeast. There are no such region, which can be justified either by any affinity among its individual parts or by culture, political history, languages, social structure or economic ties. At present, there are seven contiguous states and one detached state comprising as a whole combination of eight states. There are different communities/tribes are living in these states. Their way of life, traditions and cultures are different from each other, which reflects their existence from the ancient period. They are not the newly established one, but in that period existential identity was not sharpened as in today’s context. The different incidents of different times have been continuously impacted on it. Hence, everyone has become conscious about their identity, culture, tradition etc. which they don’t want to compromise in any situation with others. Each of the region’s distinct parts requires for its problems and aspirations. In today’s context, concerning on developmental issues, administrative purpose, and northeast is referred as homogenized identity. Thus, the tendency of distinguishing one from others is also growing due to fear of loss of identity of particular communities for creation of a larger identity. The myth of creating “unity in diversity” has become very difficult in these days. Hence, this paper examines how the term has been evolved in different times and its consequences to the present context.

Key words: Northeast, political, administrative, homogenization, communities, identities, etc.

INTRODUCTION

At present, the Northeast is an officially recognized name of a region comprising seven contiguous states. Which includes Assam, Nagaland (1963), Meghalaya (1972), Tripura (1972), Manipur (1972), Mizoram (1987), Arunachal Pradesh (1987) and Sikkim is the last one to become the member of the North east after the formation of the North Eastern Council (NEC), 1971 with its headquartered at Shillong. The NEC was constituted in 1971 by an Act of the Parliament as the nodal agency for economic and social development of the northeastern region (Bhattacharjee, 2018). The term, 'Northeast' was formalized through the British colonial administration as a frontier region. It is linked with Indian heartland through the 21 km. wide Siliguri Corridor, which is commonly known as the chicken neck, created by the Radcliff line, the boundary drawn by the British colonial administration before they departed from India in 1947 (Kalita, 2011). It is referred that, the political process and 'administrative convenience' legitimized this region as India's northeast; in fact, the term is of recent origin. India's North-east is today commonly denoted as the 'periphery' or the margin of the Indian nation-state. This idea is clearly a post-independent concept which emerged from the sudden isolation of the North-eastern region from the rest of the country following Partition. During British rule, this region was closely connected with the rest of the Indian sub-continent and formed part of the continuous landmass which stretched from eastern Bengal and Bihar into the Brahmaputra valley of Assam (Mishra, 2005). The clumsily demarcated and albeit under-administered 'frontiers' of the early colonial times were gradually converted into neat and surgically precise territorial borders particularly since the beginning of the twentieth century. Subsequently, the newly emerged nation-states too realized the importance of drawing such borders as a means of 'containing' their sovereign power within their respective territorial jurisdictions (Das, 2010). Nation can be understood in various ways. Whereas the modern concept of nationalism is closely linked with the concept of nation-state, there have been attempts to understand nationalism in a framework outside of a nation-state. Scholars have described another prevailing notion of nationalism variously with expressions such as "cultural nationalism," "religious nationalism," and "ethnonationalism" (Baruah, 2010). As, ethnicity or ethnic identity and nationalism are not givens, but social and political constructions arise out of specific types of interaction between the leadership of centralizing state and elites from non dominant ethnic groups, especially in the

peripheries of those, of the modern centralizing state. (Brass, 1991). “Ethnonationalism” as a term which refers to a wide range of political phenomena including nationalism, separatism, secessionism, sub-nationalism, ethnic insurgency, ethnic militancy or sometimes simply regionalism, a heterogeneous set of “nation” oriented idioms, practices and possibilities that are continuously available or endemic in modern culture and political life (Baruah, 2010). The 'decolonisation struggle' in the north-eastern states has always been spearheaded by the neo-class, the ethno-class. The neo-class is clever enough to take the ethnic route of mobilisation of the people, cashing in on the collective mode of living of the people already in close proximity, while gradually distancing itself from their cultural roots (Roy, 2005). As B Pakem has written, ethnic movements in North-East India, started with, to assert the identity around certain social problems and the next step is to concretize the identity by forming an ethnic association and to claim for a separate administrative arrangement, so that the group concerned can preserve their cultural heritage, language etc. The final step is to demand a separate administrative unit comprising the areas where the ethno-cultural groups form a majority (Pakem, 1990).

BRIEF HISTORY

In the ancient period, a large part of the region and some neighbouring areas of Bengal were included in Pragjyotisa-Kamarupa which was the common denominator of a regional identity to the rest of the subcontinent. In the medieval period, the Ahom kingdom (or the kingdom of Assam) was confined within the Brahmaputra valley (Bhattacharjee, 2018). Before the British annexations, there were as many as six kingdoms, many chieftaincies and innumerable autonomous tribal formations in the Northeast, with no notion of a common political framework. Assam Proper which is the five districts of Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur, together comprising an area of about 20,000 sq. miles-came under British occupation in 1825. In the Pre-colonial period the archaic space of Northeast India was essentially clan or kinship space, far from clan based territoriality, widely varied from one clan to another and each occupied certain territorial space without as territorial category and their world was confined to their family, clans, and villages. Earlier, the Ahom tribal policy was not based on a rigid overlord-vassal relationship, not aim to extend its sovereignty over the hill areas,

but establishment of friendly relationship with them on the basis of mutual benefits and understandings (Baruah, 2015: 382). Before British colonialisation, the geographical and ethnic sub-regions within the present-day Northeast never experienced a common political authority. In this period, areas were different without any clear demarcation and people were not interested in creation of any kind of rigid distinction and political unification among themselves.

COLONIAL CONVERSION

The British colonists were the first to evolve the idea of a 'north-eastern frontier' after they colonized the Brahmaputra valley and surrounding hill areas on the Indo-Burma frontier. Before British colonialisation, the geographical and ethnic sub-regions within the present-day Northeast never experienced a common political authority. The British annexed Assam in 1826 and made it a division within the Bengal Presidency. It was after 1826 or during the following decade and a half, the kingdom of Jaintia, Cachar and Assam along with their dependencies, and all the petty, independent tribal states of the Khasi hills were annexed. In 1854, North Cachar Hills organized into a separate administrative unit and subjugated. Further annexation of the remaining hills was subsequently completed step by step in the face of stiff tribal resistance. Colonial administration, on a no of occasions, considered changing Assam's boundaries (Baruah, 1999). The hill areas and three districts from Bengal were added to the Brahmaputra valley districts or 'Assam proper' (as some modern historians such as S.K. Bhuyan and H.K. Barpujari prefer to call it) in 1874 when Assam was constituted as a province of British India. British rule thus provided a common political authority for the entire region: Assam was a British province proper; Manipur, Tripura and Cooch Behar were subordinate princely states, and the Khasi estates lay somewhere between British territory and princely states. The British territory was divided into General, Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas, as well as blocs and belts. The British, who occupied or subjugated the region in bits and pieces, referred to this part of the subcontinent as 'North-East Frontier of Bengal'. The British looked upon the region as a frontier of Bengal and formulated their policies accordingly. The North-East Frontier eventually shifted to the present-day Arunachal Pradesh (erstwhile North-East Frontier Agency or NEFA). Nevertheless, the British province that came to be known as Assam had more or less taken shape by 1873 and gradually transform local

traditional institutions to suit the colonial pattern of exploitation. Throughout the entire colonial period, British treated Assam as a land frontier of Bengal (Baruah, 1999). The British policy of minimal spending and intervention in the administration of the hills left the missionaries with “the burden” of bringing the tribal’s into the light of the modern world. Christianity in many respects prepares the people to face the impending modernity by helping to form a new identity (Pachau, 1997). It was after the acquisition of the Diwani of Bengal in 1765 that the East India Company came into direct contact with the medieval kingdoms of Manipur, Jaintia and Assam, as well as the tribal communities of the adjoining hills (Guha, 2006).). As Sharma writes, direct colonial administration was uniformly introduced and stabilized over the entire erstwhile Ahom kingdom after explorations of various economic potentials especially of tea, during the first decade of colonial occupation (Samah, 2016: 18).

Accordingly, in 1874, Assam proper together with Cachar, Goalpara, Garo Hills and the other hill districts was formed into Chief Commissioners Province on 6 February 1874. The term ‘Assam’ had originally stood for Assam proper that is, the erstwhile Ahom territory alone and later for the whole of the Brahmaputra Valley that was under common Commissionership, was now given a wider signification to denote the newly emerged composite province (Guha, 2006: 23). During the year 1874-1905, Assam had no legislature of its own, and the people there had no opportunity of participating in legislative activities of any kind. The idea of the Inner Line emerged in the North East Frontier out of the constraints upon the British Indian government to maintain its territorial boundaries, as the limits of the district were at first thrown very far forward, too far to exercise jurisdiction all the way to the hills; it therefore became necessary to draw a line up to which the colonial administration intended to work. This was the inner line, beyond the line, the tracts were left unadministered. The outer line was purposely left indefinite so that the inner line could be advanced and as and when necessary (Das, 2018). By 1942, North Cachar and all the hills except the Khasi, Garo and Mikir were encircled. The concept of political control on an ever expanding frontier through policy of exclusion and seclusion as museum specimens remained excluded from all constitutional reforms threatened British political relations with the hill tribes. British officials only allowed Christian missionaries even not Assam’s elected chief ministers to operate in those areas. The missionaries were immensely successful in colonial Assam (Barua, 1999). Until, the British advent; the notion of political

authority was unknown to the hills. Throughout the whole colonial period Britishers were successful to uniting the whole plain and adjoining areas for colonial economy. Their policies were only for creation of colonial economy, which rather helps to create differentiation amongst the people. Colonial categories were not only maintained by the colonial authorities, but by the colonised themselves in both forms of resistance to colonialism and in nation-building after colonialism. This was not just a historical situation but also the political climate. Contemporary Social and cultural history of North-East India and India's North-East (a coinage in terms of the peculiarity of the relationship between India and its North-East) has marked a tense and contested terrain of political claims and counterclaims with all its cultural overtones. Ethnic insurgencies respond to such colonial discourse by a complex reworking of the History of self-determination, which statist discourse cannot appropriate.

NORTHEAST AS A DISTINCT IDENTITY

The regional identity of the present-day Northeast seems to have emerged only during the last fifty years. For many years after independence, the Planning Commission and other central departments and agencies in their documents referred to this region as 'Assam and the neighboring states', 'Assam and the Hill Areas' etc. (Bhattacharjee, 2018). The year 1946 saw the formation of several district level tribal political organizations in the hills. Politics took a new orientation as a reaction to the alleged congress interference, initiated a hill union with members drawn from different hills.

The economic transformation of Assam during British rule and the attendant demographic changes because of immigration and the beginnings of Assamese sub-nationalism, with the newly emerging elite which had further brought the question of ethnic equation of new politics of breakup of Assam. The administration units, boundaries were demarcated arbitrarily when new areas were annexed in the aftermath of an armed expedition by the colonizers during the colonial expansion without factoring in ethnoscape, which resulted in the segmentation of ethnic community. Thus most of the ethnic mobilizations in Northeast India in the post colonial period are for re-unification of the territory inhabited by the ethnic communities, which were segmented by the colonizers to suit the interest of the imperial design (Piang, 2013).

The quests for identity began in the 1960s when Assam was in turmoil on the language issue, followed by hill state movements spearheaded first by the Eastern India Tribal Union and then by All Party Hill Leaders Conference as well as popular reaction against economic backwardness and the presumed indifference of the Central Government. Insurgency and militancy followed thereafter. After decolonization, the newly emerged political class was trying to solving the problems through colonial pattern of administration. This had gone wrong because people were already experienced and frustrated of it. There had been growing a different kind of diversity which does not allow them to bring unity instead of bargaining their shares in every dimension. The politics of bargaining had started from and which has now become an essential fundamental questions for the newly emerged geographically Unitarian Northeast.

PRESENT CONCIOUSNESS

The Northeast became a region (separated from the Eastern Region), and finally, there was established a separate ministry at the Centre (DONER) for the development of the region (Bhattacharjee, 2018). Northeast is undoubtedly a region today for the purpose of development initiatives, but the diversity within the region is pronounced and the single common factor is the economic and infrastructural backwardness of the seven northeastern states as compared to other regions of the country. Studying the social processes in the region may require a region-specific framework (Bhattacharjee, 2018). But region specific framework is only workable when regional concern is stable. First people have to work on the regional balance and stability to develop the whole northeast together.

The particular pattern of combining nationhood with exceptional autonomies and the creation of autonomous institution is significant which has been relocating conflict in northeast India. The northeastern states have had “tribal” communities as the majority but who are minorities in the rest of India. The autonomy paradigm Autonomous District in Assam was formed under the auspices of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution to protect autonomy and stipulates that no legislative act of the state shall be applicable to these areas without their consent. But the genesis of the Sixth Schedule is itself a question that needs special attention. The incorporation of the sixth schedule to the constitution of India with some statutory protection has led different

conflict and dissatisfaction to the people in various times. Many areas under the schedule started agitating for states within India and already some of them have got statehood but the application of sixth schedule fuelled demands for more autonomous regions within the states by the different communities. In recent times the region has experienced an upsurge of social movements based on ethnic politics and consolidation: the formation of ethnic based social and political organizations centered on autonomy. During the last two decades, the issue of autonomy for the plain tribes of Assam, particularly in the context of Bodo's has become an unresolved issue. From 1986, Karbi Anglong had witnessed the beginning of the autonomous state movement. For administrative convenience, the United Mikir and North Cachar Hill Districts was bifurcated in 1970, two districts came into being, namely North Cachar Hills (now Dima Hasao) and Mikir Hills. In 2012, two factions of the Dima Halom Daogah signed a tripartite agreement with the Central Government and State Government to bring to an end to violent movements. According to the MOS the North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council would be recognized to Dima Hasao Autonomous Territorial Council granting more financial and administrative powers to the council. Another type of demand for autonomy has risen from the 1993 post-BAC sequences in Assam which have culminated a series of political unrest and agitations conducted by the other plains tribes of the State. As a result of such wrath and discontentment among the plains tribes, the Assam government has signed the Mising, the Tiwa (Lalung) and the Rabha Accords in 1995 followed by state legislation for each of these tribes separately with the same pith and substance. The main objective of setting up of such administrative authorities is to provide maximum possible autonomy within the framework of the Constitution of India for the social, economical, educational, ethnic and cultural development of the plains tribals peoples of the State. In the second phase, Memorandum of Understandings (MoU) has been signed between the Assam government and the leading organisations of the movements of the Sonowal Kachari, the Deori and the Thengal Kachari during 2005. The similar patterns of state statutory laws were also enacted for those communities with a view to provide them satellite forms of autonomous councils. The politics of ethnic identity and the politics of development both have gained enough consciousness to foster the term northeast.

CONCLUSION

The transition from Pragjyotish-Kamrupa to Brahmaputra- Barak Valley and its adjoining areas to north east frontier and finally north east India has its long history of evolution to constitute the present. Yes, North East is a geographical category but rather considering this, people use the term northeast for political and administrative convenience. The North-East Democratic Alliance or NEDA is a political coalition that was formed on May 24, 2016, by Bharatiya Janata Party along with regional political parties of Northeast India like Naga People's Front, Sikkim Democratic Front, People's Party of Arunachal, Asom Gana Parishad and Bodoland People's Front in Northeast India. There has been seen that the concerning authority of every period has mismatch the term northeast. In one way they consider northeast is a one whole and in other term, for various concerns they have been engaging in dividing of it, from the independence through autonomy questions and for other concerns. In the recent context, it is seen that regarding the present Citizenship Amendment Bill, the concerning authority has announced that CAB is only for Assam, which does not includes the Autonomous areas. It seems like they are again trying to differentiate us, our unity through fragmentation, than why in some occasion it termed as northeast. Therefore, it is better to use the term northeast as for people's convenience not only for political, administrative and developmental convenience. If we are not able to create "unity in Diversity" than why engaging in creating "Diversity in Unity". Concerning this, J.B.Bhattacharjee argues it is, perhaps the time that, we should look behind any generality ascribed to the Northeast and treat its distinct parts as unique units on their own. This may be more respectful of the region's constituent parts, and contribute to a better understanding of the needs of each 'sub-region' (Bhattacharjee, 2018).

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