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PEACE AUDIT NORTHEAST

IMPLICATIONS OF ETHNIC REORGANIZATION

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PEACE AUDIT NORTHEAST

IMPLICATIONS OF ETHNIC REORGANIZATION

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Since the beginning of human existence people have moved in groups in search of food and also for ensuring security. Groups have expanded into ethnic communities with separate identities, then into races and ultimately into nations. People have come to distinguish themselves by the colour of their skins: into White, Black, Yellow and Brown. The more patent distinctions have been by the different languages they speak. Sometimes faith and religion became the basis of such groupings. As civilization advanced people became more attached to one community or another. Particular territories were carved out as the habitat of particular races or communities. Even within universal empires subdivisions became discernible. Sometimes racial conflicts arose. The imperial powers had to intervene and mediate in such disputes. (Kate Shantor and Liz Mekay, Atlas of World History, 2005).

It is not intended to go into such disputes, conflicts and even revolts. What is important is to realize that by the nineteenth century the trends crystallized into the concept of nation states. The universal empires started the long process of their decline and nation states first emerged in Europe. The process began with Germany and Italy becoming nation states in the middle of the nineteenth century through a process of consolidation. During the next hundred years this concept of nation state became a potent force. Many new countries made their appearance specially in the wake of the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian, the Ottoman and the British empires. In fact, the aspiration of self-determination of different nationalities was one of the main causes of the breakup of these universal empires. The latest instances of breakup of erstwhile composite countries are those of the Soviet Union and of Yugoslavia. This happened by the end of the twentieth century. During recent decades ethnic problems have again become prominent as evidenced by the several uprisings in Asia, Africa and Europe. Some of these have been patched up but others (Chechnya in Russia, for instance) have been causing much concern. (J.M. Roberts, History of the World, 1992).

In India, political divisions based on language and race have always been there side by side with universal empires which embraced many linguistic and racial communities. Waves of immigration from outside the sub-continental boundaries had added complexities to this problem. This led to a continuous change in the racial composition of different regions over the centuries. Such changes have been more prominent in the border areas of Punjab and in the North Eastern Region. (Majumder, RC, Raychaudhury, HC and Datta, Kalikinkar, McMillan India, 1978).

Soon after independence the States of India were re-organized mainly on the basis of language. Long agitations and particularly the demise of Potti Sriramulu who had undertaken a fast unto death demanding separation of Andhra Pradesh from the Madras Presidency prompted the Government of India (GOI) to set up a Commission and to reconstitute the States of India on the basis of language in 1956. Further sub-divisions took place during the past half a century. (Parcival Spear, The Oxford University Press, 1992). There are to-day as many as 28 States in India constituted mainly on the basis of ethnicity along with 6 Union Territories and the National Capital Territory of Delhi (NCT).

The North Eastern Region of India is inhabited by many tribal and linguistic groups. Some of these groups had independent existence in the pre-British period. During British times most of these areas were included in the province of Assam to which was tagged the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), which later became Arunachal Pradesh. Only Tripura and Manipur had separate existence as native States. These two States were ruled by native princes under British suzerainty. After independence Assam was sub-divided and four other States emerged in course of time. So the NE-Region now has a total of 7 States: Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Tripura and Manipur. The North East Council (NEC) was formed to ensure speedy development of these States and to achieve co-ordination among the States. Sikkim, which is geographically outside the NE Region, was admitted as a member of NEC because it has certain problems which are similar to those of the other 7 States. (Das, H.N, Manas Publications, New Delhi, 2011).

In rump-Assam ethnic problems seem to be inscrutable due to the existence of a large number of tribes, sub-tribes, linguistic and other groups. The problems are also varied and no "fit all" solutions are available. The framers of the Indian Constitution recognized some of these problems and made provisions for Autonomous District Councils, under the Sixth Schedule at the Sub-Federal level. Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao (formerly North Cachar) districts have such Councils. When Bodoland was constituted 4 separate administrative districts were formed - Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baska and Udalguri. However, only one Bodoland Autonomous District Council under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution was formed for all the four districts. Wide ranging powers have been conferred on all the Autonomous Councils. They also have legislative powers. (Das, H.N, Bhabani Offset Pvt. Ltd, Guwahati, 2012).

In addition to the 6 Autonomous Districts 18 Development Councils (non-Constitutional, non-Statutory) have been set up in Assam in order to satisfy a number of tribal and ethnic groups (Budget Speech, 2012-13). Most of these

are not confined to any definitely demarcated territorial area. Quite often the tribal or the ethnic group for whom the particular Council has been set up is not a majority within the jurisdiction of that Council. Again, all the people of the particular group do not reside within the area of a council even where the territories are demarcated. These phenomena are discernible in the case of the Bodos, the Rabhas, the Tiwas and others. This has given rise to various problems. In BTC areas, for example, non-Bodos and Bodos had several riots over land rights. The Koch-Rajbongshis of Lower Assam and the Bodos have been living in the same areas for centuries. The Koch-Rajbongshis have been demanding tribal status for quite some time. They had been given tribal status by GOI by an ordinance at one time. But the ordinance was never transformed into an Act. The ordinance was actually allowed to lapse. It has been reported recently that the Koch-Rajbongshi's demand for tribal status has been rejected by the Registrar-General of India. Similar demands of quite a few other ethnic groups have also been rejected.

It is necessary to enquire why such demands for tribal status had arisen and had proliferated in the NE Region. Scheduled Tribes in India have various preferential rights. The various tribes also feel that they are different from the Indo-Aryan people. They want to remain separate and to seek their socio-economic development in their own way. During the past five hundred years a quiet process of assimilation, started by Srimanta Sankardeva, had been working in the Brahmaputra valley. Known as "Sarana Pratha" this process had converted a large number of tribal people to Sankardeva's "Ek Sarania Naam Dharma". But in the early twentieth century this process was disrupted when influences of other religious sects swayed the people of the valley. One of the principal leaders of this new trend was Guru Kalicharan Brahma who inspired the Bodos to join the Brahmya Samaj movement of Bengal (Das, H.N, National Book Trust of India, New Delhi, 1967). A large number of Bodos and other tribes were proselytised by Christian missionaries also.

On the political arena the Nagas were the first to raise the standard of revolt. Ever since 1918 when the Naga Club came into existence the Nagas have been demanding independence. In 1929 they submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission pleading to the British Government "to leave us (Nagas) alone to determine for ourselves as in ancient times" (Kaka D. Iralu, Har Anand Publications, New Delhi, 1993). Just before India's independence they started a revolt under the leadership of A. Z. Phizo. This has not abated completely even after 65 years. Meanwhile, Nagaland was the first unit in NE to achieve Statehood outside Assam. The Nagas inspired the other tribes and similar political and socio-cultural movements were started in different parts of the Brahmaputra valley. The other States were created as a result of such movements.

In the past few centuries Assamese language was the cementing force which had been used as a lingua franca in the entire NE Region. In recent decades Assamese has lost its usefulness and importance mainly as a result of it being edged out by Hindi in the post-independence era. There was also some amount of resentment against the Assamese. In their perception the tribal people conceived the Assamese to be rather overbearing.

The British always tried to keep the hills and the plains people separated. After independence the then Prime Minister Jawarharlal Nehru followed a similar policy influenced by the Anthropologist Verrier Elwin (Verrier Elwin, Oxford University Press, 1989). This policy of isolating the hill tribals had its good points. The tribals were saved, to a great extent, from exploitation specially by up-country businessmen. More importantly, Bangladeshis and others were prevented from occupying land belonging to tribal people. Moreover, economic development programmes taken up exclusively in the tribal areas resulted in at least some improvement in the material conditions of some of the tribal people.

However, the realization that tribals are different and their urge for independence and self-rule gave rise to insurgency in many areas. In insurgency the Nagas were followed by the Mizos and the other tribes including the Bodos. Even the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) followed the Nagas and got their cadres trained by Naga insurgents. In both the hills and the plains of the NE Region almost every tribe spawned some kind of insurgent unit. A few of these became very violent. Even small tribes like the Dimasas, with a total population of less than 2 lakhs, gave birth to one of the most violent insurgent units called Dima Halong Daogah (DHD) or Black Widow which at one time kept an army, police and para-military force of more than 10,000 engaged in controlling insurgency in Dima Hasao district (Saikia, Jaideep, Pentagon Security International, New Delhi, 2012). It was, therefore, ethnicity which was generally responsible for insurgency in the NE Region.

In course of time these insurgencies degenerated and deteriorated. In place of ethnicity money become more important. In the case of ULFA, for example, they abandoned their opposition to Bangladeshi immigrants. Thus they lost their main objective. What is surprising is that ULFA took shelter in Bangladesh and aligned themselves with the Khaleda Zia Government. ULFA lost all ideology and virtually became a force for extortion through threats, kidnapping and murders. They adopted these methods to collect money for their normal expenses and for purchasing weapons. The other insurgency outfits adopted the same methods and tactics.

In order to ease the insurgency situation Government started taking a number of steps. Government diagnosed that ethnicity is the main source of insurgency. Therefore, they tried to control insurgency by tackling the problem ethnicity. As already mentioned in Assam, the Autonomous District Councils of Karbi Anglong, Dima Hasao and Bodoland have Constitutional status under the Sixth Schedule. Beside these, Government created 6 Autonomous Statutory Councils for the tribes of Rabha Hasongs, Misings, Tiwas, Sonowal-Kacharis, Thengal-Kacharis and Deoris and as many as 18 Development Councils in recent years for “socio-economic development of different communities in the state”. These various institutions have brought power to the middle-level leaders of the concerned communities. Beside power the political leaders now handle stupendous amounts of cash. They are therefore, busy with the affairs of their respective Councils and have no time for agitations and insurgency.

The formation of these various Councils have, however, left many problems unresolved. In Bodoland, for example, at least 50 percent of the people are non-

Bodos. These people cannot take equal part in the running of the administration as 30 out of 40 elected seats in BTC are reserved for tribals only. For how long such a skewed system can be allowed to remain is now being debated in all civil society meetings and seminars. This system is surely undemocratic. On many occasions the Bodos have attempted “ethnic cleansing” in the same pattern as in Bosnia and Kosovo. The objective is to drive out the non-Bodos. These attempts resulted in riots and displacement of Bangladeshis and many indigenous communities. Quite a number of the displaced people are still taking shelter in refugee camps and elsewhere.

People of Bangladeshi origin have suffered the most as a result of the Bodo initiative for ethnic cleansing. The Bangladeshis have now become violent. They are the ones who are creating trouble for the Bodo leaders (Saikia, Jaideep, Vision Books, New Delhi, 2004). In order to provide territorial link-up many non-Bodo villages were included in Bodoland. The non-Bodo residents of these areas are agitating to come out of Bodoland. It is mainly the Koch-Rajbangshis who demand that these non-Bodo villages should be taken out of Bodoland and included in their proposed State of Kamatapur embracing a huge area of Assam and North Bengal. Then there are a large number of Bodos outside Bodoland who do not get any share of the benefits provided to their compatriots in Bodoland. Some out of these Bodos who inhabit the hill districts are not even recognized as scheduled tribes. These problems and the issue of relationship with the Panchayati Raj Institutions are begging for solution.

Similar problems are discernible in the other areas also. While so many of the tribal and ethnic communities have been given special status and benefits there are many other communities who are also demanding such benefits for themselves. Their demands cannot be easily brushed aside. But if their demands are accommodated Assam will be further sub-divided. The middle level apparatchiks of the ruling party have monopolized the plum positions in these councils. Elections are still pending. Actually, elections are difficult to hold because territorial jurisdictions are yet to be settled. Since the habitats of many ethnic groups are not fixed nor homogenous definite boundaries are well nigh impossible to draw. But the opposition leaders are not satisfied. They demand elections to share in the loaves and fishes of office. These problems are almost inscrutable. Meanwhile, more and more communities are demanding tribal status. In the majority of these cases it is the middle level leaders of the political parties who have instigated the agitations. Their objectives are political power and financial advantages. That is why the Bodos are demanding Statehood, the tribal Councils are demanding Sixth Schedule status and the ethnic Councils are demanding Statutory status.

The financial advantages are quite substantial. Assam’s budget is full of divisions and sub-divisions showing financial allocations for different Constitutional, Statutory and Executive units. Beside the usual tribal sub-plan and the scheduled caste component plan special allocations are available for others also. In the Budget for 2012-13, for example, the annual plan size has been proposed at Rs. 314.66 crores for Karbi Anglong and at Rs. 143.03 crores for Dima Hasao districts. Added to these will be “administrative grants” of Rs. 12 crores for Karbi Anglong and Rs. 15 crores for Dima Hasao. In the case of Bodoland the plan

size proposed is Rs. 330.47 crores during 2012-13. In addition, an amount of Rs. 15 crores has been proposed as administrative grant. For the 6 Statutory Autonomous Councils, a total of Rs. 169.77 crores have been allocated with the following break-up: Rabha-Hasong Rs. 32.31 crores; Mising Rs. 45.90 crores; Tiwa Rs. 31.31 crores, Sonowal – Kachari Rs. 19.72 crores; Thengal-Kachari Rs. 19.70 crores and Deuri Rs. 20.83 crores. For the 18 Development Councils a lump sum amount of Rs. 40 crores has been proposed. These are very large amounts. Beside these there are separate allocations for STs, SCs, OBCs, Minorities and Tea tribes. In many cases these grants are overlapping. Again, GOI makes large grants for various special purposes. On many occasions special packages are also announced, when VVIPs visit the state.

In the budget for 2013-14 a sum of Rs. 180 crores have been provided for the 6 Autonomous Councils and another Rs. 49 crores have been provided for the 18 Development Councils under plan. Substantial amounts have been allocated to each of these Councils on the non-plan side. For the Bodoland Territorial Council a total of Rs. 344.75 crores have been provided. The break-ups have been given in a separate Budget document under the relevant heads, both on the plan side and on the non-plan side for each of the councils.

Media is full of allegations of misuse of political powers and financial allocations by the functionaries of the different tribal and ethnic Councils. Beside fraud, misappropriation and siphoning off of Government funds substantial amounts are believed to be transferred to insurgent outfits. Most such allegations go un-enquired. Even where enquiries are made prosecutions are not easy. Where prosecutions are ultimately launched obtaining conviction becomes a difficult task. It may be pointed out that the first two cases handed over by GOI to the National Investigation Agency were those of recovery of Rs. 1 crore while being handed over to DHD insurgents on behalf of the Chief Executive Member of the Dima Hasao Autonomous Council on June 1, 2009. These cases have not been settled as yet although about Rs. 14 crores more were recovered later from the concerned officials of the Council and some more properties were recovered in Nepal. The Chief of DHD, Jewel Garlossa, was arrested from his luxurious apartment in Bangalore.

What should worry all right thinking persons is the virtual disappearance of such huge amounts from the public coffers. The number of cases is baffling. The number of wrongdoers is equally large. Audits are pending for long periods. How and when these cases will be taken up is anyone's guess. It is time that civil society leaders wake up to the danger of allowing such cases to be ignored any further.

Similar situations can be observed in Russia, China, Indonesia, Vietnam and Myanmar. In Russia most of the ethnic minority areas were separated when the Soviet Union broke up and 17 independent countries emerged in the 1980s. Whatever areas remained behind were given some autonomy as in Chesnaya. Earstwhile Yugoslavia broke up in the same manner. But there were much violence and bloodshed in that process.

In China the communist party is following the age-old imperial policy of absorbing the minorities into the main-stream. Tibet is a glaring example. This policy has failed in China only in the Muslim dominated areas of the West. Vietnam follows China. There are 54 “fraternal ethnic groups in the community of Vietnamese nationalities” including the Tays, Haas, Hmongs, Muangs and Nungs. The Tays have a population of over one-and-a-half millions. There is a Department of the Communist Government looking after ethnic affairs. Since there is neither democracy nor autonomy these groups are not allowed to form or run any local government. There are museums and institutions which show-case the minority culture and languages. But no systematic efforts to preserve, protect and promote the ethnic and tribal people are discernible (Das, H.N, APPOCUS, 2011).

In Indonesia the 38,91,428 Hindus form a majority of 92.29 percent of the population of the Bali island, although the vast majority of (86.1 percent) the total population of 237,641,326 in the country are Muslims. Bali has some autonomy.

In Myanmar the problem seems to be more acute. The country is now run by the Bama community which has a majority embracing over 60 percent of the population. But there are other important ethnic groups such as Kachin, Karen, Kayah, Chin, Pa-O, Palaung, Mon, Rakhine, Shan and Naga. The interests of these minorities have been sought to be safeguarded at the federal level by formation of seven States while the majority community of Bamas are organized into seven Divisions. This has not, however, satisfied the different minority communities and demands for reorganisation at the sub-federal level have been raised. Another problem is the lack of homogeneity in any of the States. In the Shan State, for example, while the Shans are a majority there are significant numbers of people belonging to the other communities such as Kachin, Wa, Lahu, Palaung, Padaung, Pa-O, and many hill tribes.

The situation has been complicated by the presence of some of the above communities in other countries as well. The Nagas, for example, live not only in Myanmar but also in the Indian States of Nagaland, Assam, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh. They are demanding an independent ‘Nagalim’ covering all the Naga areas. The Shans, who have been fighting for independence since 1958, have large populations in China and Thailand beside Myanmar (Bertil Lintner, Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai, 2011. Maung Htin Aung, Columbia University Press, New York, 1967).

Meanwhile, a new development has been an important meeting of the 50 odd groups of “frontier people” or “ethnic minorities” of Myanmar held at a place called Laiza where they finalized an eleven point common charter of demands. These included formation of a federal army, withdrawal of the Central Government Armed Forces from the ethnic areas, equal rights for all and grant of autonomy. They put up this charter of demands at a meeting with the Central Government representatives in the Majoi Hall of Myitkyiana, capital of the Kachin State, on November 4 and 5, 2013. As against this the Central Government advanced a ten point proposal which included allegiance to the 2008 Constitution by all ethnic groups and holding of further political dialogues and

meetings. Representatives of the United Nations Secretary General and the Chinese Government attended this meeting as observers. But Indian representatives were absent probably due to ignorance of the developments, although vital interests of integrity and solidarity of the North Eastern Region were involved.

This long narrative will show that the problem is complex, that the Government of India are not aware of the developments and that many unscrupulous persons have made fiduciary gains out of public funds allocated to different Councils formed in Assam beside misuse of political powers. Formation of these Councils have no doubt curbed the intensity of insurgency based on ethnicity but have left many of the emerging problems unresolved. In their hurry to gather vote banks and to make political capital out of ethnicity the Indian political leaders have not been able to find the time to resolve the endemic issues and problems. That is why economic development has not achieved the momentum it should have commensurate with the large amounts of funds allocated to the Councils. Immediate steps must be taken to find lasting solutions (Das, H.N, APPOCUS, 2013). (The writer was Chief Secretary, Assam, during 1990-95).

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