A GEOGRAPHICAL FERMENT OF CONFLICTS IN NORTH EAST INDIA

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ABSTRACT

India's Northeast has been considered as one of the most conflict-ridden regions of India and South Asia. In 1947, the de-colonization of the Indian subcontinent and partition made this region entirely landlocked, intensifying the isolation and hence promoting socio and politico unrest throughout the region. Since its formation, the region has been a standing witness to almost all varieties of conflict - including interethnic conflicts, conflict over natural resources, the native-migrant conflicts and border conflicts between the states of the region so and so forth - substantially overlapping into each other. The problem has become more complex, as the region is inhabited by people belonging to different racial stock, speak different languages and have varied socio-cultural tradition. These people are now fighting for the same geographical space to protect and preserve their identity, resource and culture. Illegal immigration from neighbouring countries, especially from Bangladesh has aggravated the problem as it has reduced the number of indigenous people to minority in some parts of the region. As such this paper seeks to examine the geographical factors that have acted as the underlying causes of such conflicts in the region.

Introduction

Violence and conflict have been a traditional theme within political geography and geographers have been consistently arguing that violence and conflict, including insurgencies, are inherently geographic as they occur in particular place and across geographical territory. Territories in Northeast India are demarcated by contradictory superimposed boundaries—modern state boundaries over traditional boundaries. (Lohman,2010).

Northeast India comprises of eight states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim. 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 their departure from India in 1947. The corridor is bordered by Bhutan, Bangladesh and Nepal, and the whole of Northeast is surrounded by four countries, namely, China and Bhutan on its North; Myanmar on its East; and Bangladesh on its South and West. It has an area of 2.6 lakh sq. km. (7.6% of India's land area) while its population is 39 million plus (3.6% of India's population). It has more than 475 ethnic groups and more than 400 languages/dialects are spoken here. (Deka,2013).

The North East Region of India has been diagnosed by an unending cycle of conflicts for more than half a century. A series of conflicts have beset the region, between insurgents and the state on one hand and between/among different communities on the other hand. There have also been conflicts between insurgents and the society to which belong and many a times the insurgent groups have trained their guns on each other. (Hussain, Monirul,2005)

Objective

The main objective of this paper is to examine the roots of conflicts in North East region with reference to its geographical underpinnings.

Methodology

The information pertaining to conflicts of North East India will be collected from The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) Geo-referenced Event Dataset (GED), gazetteers and relevant published work on specific conflicts in the NE Region in books, newspapers, government reports, police sources and papers in journals.

Results and Findings

The outbreak of conflicts in North-East India are a reflection of its geographical settings which intertwined with its history, the socio-

economic development, politico-economic conditions, its socio-cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity as well as the claims and counter-claims over resources particularly land.

Geography and Conflicts in North East India

North- East India is essentially the creation of the British. Before 1947, the whole of North-East India, excluding Manipur and Tripura was Assam. However, immediately after independence fissiparous forces lead to the dismemberment of greater Assam resulting in the formation of seven North- Eastern sisters, namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura have been dealt with. Geographically, this region is almost isolated from the rest of India. North- East is strategically important and is girdled by Tibet, Bhutan, China, Myanmar (formerly Burma) and Bangladesh. It is linked to the rest of the country by a narrow corridor in West Bengal (Verinder Grover and Ranjan Arora, 1996).

The historical connectedness of the region was systematically undermined by the colonial policies of progressive segregation. Between 1874 and 1934 the tribal populations in the region were administered under a succession of extraordinary provisions that segregated them into categories called "non-regulated", "back-ward" or "excluded" areas. The Inner Line Regulation of 1873 prohibited access to these areas to all "outsiders" except those who obtained special permission from the government. This regulation was extended to most of the hill areas and thus created "a frontier within a frontier", accentuating the political and cultural schism between the tribal areas and the plains. The overall effect of these factors was that the tribal areas were excluded from the pattern of administration that prevailed in the rest of the country. Continuing this policy, the Government of India Act 1935 made most of the hill areas in the region "excluded areas", outside the jurisdiction of provincial legislature. The overriding effects of the policy were twofold. First, the possibility of a process of integration of the communities and tribes, which could have been initiated by a common alien administration, was lost. Second, most of the tribal communities in the

region remained alien to the national process being isolated from the social and political developments taking place elsewhere in the region [Bezbaruah 1996].

India's north-east is where south and south-east Asia meet. The region is placed between what is now Bangladesh, Tibet, Myanmar and Bhutan with a thin land corridor linking it with the rest of India - the Siliguri Corridor which is an area of 12,203 square kilometres connecting mainland India with the outlying border states of the north-east.1 Ninety-eight per cent of the borders of north-east India are international borders. Only 2 per cent of the region is connected to India, pointing to the north-east's tenuous geographical and political connectivity to the Indian mainland. There are altogether seven states in the region, which is why they are often referred to as the "seven sisters". These are Assam - the biggest state - Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Tripura and Manipur. The combined area of the region comprises 7.7 per cent of the country's territory (about 2, 55,088 sq km) and, according to the 2001 Census of India; the region is inhabited by 3.75 per cent of the national population. Characterised by extraordinary ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic diversity, the region is inhabited by three distinct groups of people - the hill tribes, the plain tribes and the non-tribal population of the plains [Verghese 1997].

According to Bijukumar (2013), social exclusion, in most cases leads to identity assertion which in tum causes conflict, and even violence. In the case of NER, the people have got very many reasons to feel alienated and under crisis. The region is geographically isolated from the mainland and has more than hundred tribes and sub-tribes. The ethnic diversity, the dominance of one tribe over the other, intermingling of the indigenous people with the immigrants and the deprivation to the region by the Centre cause a sense of dissatisfaction and identity crisis among the populace. Due to the large number of immigration, the indigenous people lost their land, which is actually part of their culture and life. According to Barpujari (1998: 90), "a sense of neglect and deprivation had created a crisis of identity or identity consciousness amongst different ethnic groups of the Valley

of the Brahmaputra". The broad racial, cultural and ethnic differences between mainland India and its North-East and the tenuous geographical link (the 'chicken neck' Siliguri Corridor) contributed to a sense of alienation, deprivation and a feeling of 'otherness' that subsequently gave rise to violent separatism (Koijam, 2010). When people feet that they are a potential victim they retaliate. When people feel that others are a threat to their existence they fight for their survival even to the extent of ethnic cleansing. The anxiety behind is 'they will kill us if we do not kill them first'. Therefore, a threat to group identities acted as a major cause for ethnic violence (Kreidie and Monroe, 2002). It is commonly believed that offence is the best defense. Conflict occurs when a group feels that they are vulnerable and if they do not act first, they will be at the receiving end. In most of the cases, fear psychosis is the immediate cause of violence, though not the root cause.

According to Rizvi, (2006) most of the tribes living on international border shared more ethnic and cultural affinities with the people living across the frontiers, than with India. Any development across the borders influenced the situation in NEI and could lead to tribal movement and create tension in the region. Goswami, (2014) is of the opinion that the diverse customs, cultures and practices make this region vulnerable to conflicts.

The total population of the Northeast is around 38 million, about three per cent of the national figure. While there is enormous diversity in the region in terms of people, it creates many problems too as each community tries to maximise its own self-interest. The Indian constitution has special laws and provisions such as the Sixth Schedule and Article 371A, which aim at protecting the traditions, lands and rights of various hill communities. In many of the North-eastern states, no land can be bought by a non-tribal, even if he or she lives there. (Hazarika,2011)

In the context of NER, tribes have lost their land to the immigrants and to the commercial forces. The loss of these resources affects their culture, economy and identity that are built around them. That explains why most ethnic conflicts have been for scarce resources, especially land. It is the case with the Naga-Kuki conflict in Manipur (Fernandes and Bharali, 2002:52-55), the Mizo-Bru conflict in Mizoram (Lianzela 2002: 243-44), the Bodo-Santhal (Roy 1995: 94-95) and Dimasa-Hmar tension in Assam, and the Tripura tribal demand for a homeland from the 1970s.

A section of the ethnic groups in north-east India, is up against the Indian state in their quest for free political space. Ethnic groups, such as Naga, Ahom, Mizo, Bodo, Khasi or Kuki, are out to construct new narratives of their nations while challenging the state-constructed definition of a nation. Within the academia, inside or outside India, a dominant section looks at the ethnic movements in north-east India in a supportive way. This supportive ideology finds expression in theoretical constructs like 'nations from below', 'internal colonisation', and 'freedom movement' and is justified in the name of defence of identity, ethnic and cultural rights, and only achievable by actualising the right to self-determination. The 'nation' here is defined in ethnic terms and legitimised in the name of having heritage, language, culture, classlessness, enemy and similar conditions of subjugation. In this narration, the relationship between the region and the state is perceived as that between the colonised and the coloniser and the anti-state ethnic/nation- a list movements are legitimised in the name of the 'right to self- determination'. (Bhagat,2003)

Geography has also affected the pattern of development in the North East and the Partition caused havoc both in the geography and the economy of the North East. To begin with, the entire land mass of the North East is now connected to the rest of India by a tenuous 22 kilometre link along the Siliguri Corridor; more than 99 per cent of the borders of the North East abut other countries: China, Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangladesh. Some of these countries have not been too friendly and, across a porous international border, have been only too willing to assist militant activity in India. Others, while not anti-India in their approach, have not been in a position to prevent anti-Indian activity from their soil. (Sinha, 2002)

The politics of northeast India has been marked by ethnicity and extremism for decades. The assertion of various ethnic identities and the

policies of the Indian state in containing ethnic extremism make the region distinct from the rest of the country. The root cause of ethnic assertion can be found in the identity crisis of various tribal communities. Most of the ethnic assertions are due to ethnic groups" veiled attempts to protect their identity, culture and language. In fact, ethnicity is a sense of ethnic awareness. Ethnic mobilization is conditioned by the overall political and economic environment. As the state operates under the laws of market economy within the broad politico economic environment giving birth to uneven economic development, it widens the gaps among ethnic groups. Therefore, ethnicity is the outward reaction of various socio-cultural groups against the existing politico-economic system wherein either inequality or competition acts as catalyst in mobilizing people on the basis of ethnicity (Phukon, 2003: 15). In other words, the basis of ethnic assertion can be seen in two contexts. Firstly, the tribal communities" subjective consciousness of being excluded oppressed and marginalized. Secondly, the process of development failed to address the legitimate concerns of the people. Though after independence, the Indian state tried to integrate and assimilate various ethnic communities in the mainstream national identity, the development process generated a feeling of alienation among them. Moreover, development led to the unequal distribution of resources across the communities and regions. Thus, both non-economic (subjective consciousness) and economic (material) factors created a sense of exclusion among some ethnic communities (Bijukumar, 2013: 19-3)

NER is endowed with many natural resources, but the endowments have not translated into economic growth and development. There exists a wide gap between the expectation and achievement among its predominantly Mongoloid ethnicities, and the alienation of the fringe from the core has intensified.

In an article *"Horizontal Inequalities: A Neglected Dimension of Development"*, Steward (2001: 2) argues that conflicts which look like clashes between different cultures very often have their origin in "severe inequalities between culturally defined groups". Steward calls them horizontal inequalities. She predicts that given "inequalities in resource access and outcomes, coinciding with cultural differences, culture can become a powerful mobilising agent that can lead to a range of political disturbances". This could be applicable in the context of ethnic tension and conflicts in NER (Zehol, 2008: 64)

Conclusion

In independent India, the eastern Himalaya and Brahmaputra valley of the Indo-Myanmar frontier comprising the states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, Nagaland, Sikkim and Meghalaya which forms as a single geographic unit and socio-economic identity and popularly known as the "North East Region" is known in the rest of India mainly for its conflicts. One cannot deny that this home of many ethnic groups and tribes has for five decades witnessed armed conflicts that are integral to its people's search for a new identity amid the economic and cultural crises they face. Though conflicts and contestations are common in an immensely diverse country like India, North East Region stands out for conflicts from its geographical underpinnings such as the geographical isolation of the region, the immense ethnic diversity and thus diversity of claims to territories and resources, the colonial history that treated the region as a resource frontier only and the growing political fragmentation and social 'atomisation', especially into recent decades that threaten any rational, national or regional coherence which is absolutely significant from the perspective of its socio-economic progress.

Acknowledgement

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