

Ethnicity and Development – A Civil Society Perspective from North-East India

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Abstract

Over the past few decades, civil society has steadily developed in northeast India. In the buffer zone between political parties and rebel groups, it has been seen that civil society organizations, particularly student and youth groups, have flourished on the periphery of the Indian political system. It is important to note that the majority of these organizations in the northeast are founded on ethnic affiliations, and as a result, ethnicity permeates all civic spheres in which these organizations act. For this reason, some scholars refer to these organizations as "civic representatives" of ethnic groups and communities. In light of the foregoing, the proposed research article examines how certain significant student and youth organizations in the northeast Indian state of Meghalaya serve as advocates for the interests of their constituents. of the corresponding ethnic groups, they claim to speak for. The study also suggests focusing on the Indian State's developmental strategy and exploring the paradoxes and problems that have developed as a result of these civil society organizations' zealous pursuit of ethnic agendas. The following sections make up the framework of the essay. Student and youth organizations are viewed as significant parts of civil society in northeast India in the first section. Development barriers in northeast India have been highlighted in the second section. The contribution of several Meghalayan student and youth organizations in promoting ethnic interests is highlighted in the next section. The fourth section discusses a few current problems that are driving Meghalaya's development agenda and focuses on the opinions held by various organizations over the same. The paper's key findings are summed up in the final section, which looks at the tensions between ethnic sensibilities and Meghalaya's development objective.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Nationalism, Development, Civil Society, Student, Youth.

Introduction

The literature that is currently available on ethnicity and nationalism demonstrates that, while some scholars have viewed these phenomena as primordial identities and have even looked for historical evidence of their occurrence in earlier centuries, other scholars, like Paul Brass, view ethnicity as a contemporary phenomenon that results from the manipulation of culture by an elite. The latter concept asserts that a cultural group becomes evidently ethnic when it exploits diverse cultural traits including language, traditions, and cultural activities to set itself apart from other groups (Brass, 1991).

In the Indian setting, ethnic diversity has resulted from the coexistence of numerous linguistic and cultural groups, and each ethnic community has been articulating its interests in terms of the preservation of its unique identity. In the setting of northeast India, which is the motherland of numerous ethnic minorities, this phenomenon has taken on a great deal of significance.

The post-liberalization and post-globalization age has seen a further acceleration of India's capitalist route of growth. For the diverse ethnic groups of northeast India in particular, as well as the multi-ethnic society of India as a whole, this process has its own dynamics and compulsions. The interface between the multi-ethnic setting and the developmental agenda of

the Indian State brings into sharp focus the role of civil society as the champion of distinct ethnic interests.

Conceptual Framework

Given the foregoing, it is important to get a thorough grasp of civic society. The collective of non-governmental institutions and organizations that represent the interests and preferences of citizens is known as civil society. Early classical liberal writings by authors like Alex de Tocqueville served as the foundation for a body of literature on the interactions between civil society and democratic political society (Zaleski, 2008, p.50). Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, two 20th-century theorists, emphasized the importance of political culture in a democratic order (Almond & Verba, 1989). Robert Putnam has argued recently that even non-political civil society organizations are essential for democracy because they foster social capital, trust, and shared values (Putnam et al.,1994). Others, however, have questioned how democratic civil society actually is. For Marx, civil society was the 'base' where productive forces and social relations were taking place (Lenin, 2010).

Gramsci, departing from Marx, saw civil society as a tool of bourgeois hegemony and placed it inside the political superstructure. Gramsci saw civil society as the place where the issue would be solved, not as a problem (Ehrenberg, 1999). By misinterpreting Gramsci, the New Left gave civil society a crucial role in upholding the democratic will to influence the state and defending people from the state and the market (Ehrenberg, 1999, p.30). Neo-liberal thinkers view civil society as a venue for the struggle against authoritarian and communist regimes at the same time (Ehrenberg, 1999, p.33).

As a result, the word "civil society" plays a significant role in both the New Left and Neoliberal political discourses. The idea of civil society, which represents what Marx called "the conflicts and the ambitions of the age," has served as the cornerstone for the reconstruction of both liberal theory and left-leaning radical political theory. In the majority of these works, everything that is not the state is grouped together as civil society as a residual category. Neera Chandhoke argues against this view and suggests that the only way to understand the politics of the state is to compare them to those of civil society, and vice versa. States that it is necessary to sift through many historical layers of meaning that inform the concept and unearth the system of meaning which can stimulate the democratic imagination (Neera Chandhoke, 1995).

Over the past few decades, a civil society has steadily developed in northeast India. In the buffer zone between political parties and rebel groups, it has been seen that civil society organisations, particularly student and youth groups, have flourished on the periphery of the Indian political system. It is significant to note that the majority of these organisations in northeast India are founded on ethnic affiliations, and as a result, ethnicity infiltrates all civic spheres where these organisations act, leading some scholars to refer to these organisations as "civic representatives" of ethnic groups and communities (Das, 2007, p. 43).

In light of the foregoing, the study aims to investigate the function of certain significant Meghalayan student and youth organisations as protectors of the rights of the many

ethnic communities they purport to speak for. The report also explores the problems and inconsistencies brought on by these civil society organisations' zealous pursuit of ethnic agenda.

Development Constraints in North-East India

The northeastern region of India has its own opportunities, constraints, strengths, weaknesses, needs, and priorities, but development initiatives to date have followed the national perspectives of development, and the region still lags behind despite some specialized packages, programs, and institutions like North Eastern Council (NEC) and Development of the North Eastern Region (DONER). The development paradigm has changed in the age of globalization and liberalization, moving from a top-down to a bottom-up perspective, from development centered on people to development centered around people, from a focus on growth to one on sustainable development, and from centralized initiatives to democratic decentralization in economic decision-making.

Development activities in North East India are shifting as a result of this paradigm change (Behera (Ed). 2004). In this perspective, it should be noted that the North East has not yet experienced a significant increase in the presence of multinational corporations, a constant byproduct of the globalisation process, principally due to ethnic conflict and insurgency, which inhibit a conducive investment climate. Moreover, the North East has been deprived of commerce due to the challenging terrain and transportation bottlenecks. In order to counteract this drawback, the Indian government established the North East Industrial Policy (NEIP) in 1977. This policy offers tax holidays and a range of subsidies to companies setting up industries in the region. But in spite of such concessions, business tycoons still shy away from investing in the region. Companies like Tatas are yet to venture to the North East.

At the IIT Premises in Guwahati, only the company's infotech division, Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), has begun operations. While other North East states have not been as impulsive, Assam is displaying some openness to attract industry to the State. This is due to the fact that disputes over land still frequently arise, particularly in tribal areas where property is owned by both groups and private persons. The Land Transfer Act has made it difficult for enterprises to get started in states like Meghalaya and Nagaland. Many businesses that need land outside of industrial parks owned by the government have turned to benami transactions to get around this barrier and have purchased land in the names of tribal partners (Mukhim, 2008). Such clandestine acquisition of land by companies threatens to snowball into a major crisis like the Singur situation in West Bengal and is integral to the nationwide debate on the viability of Special Economic Zones (SEZ).

Role of the Civil Society in Meghalaya

The Khasis, Jaintias, and Garos are Meghalaya's three main ethnic groupings. Three well-known student organizations, the Khasi Students' Union (KSU), the Jaintia Students' Union (JSU), and the Garo Students' Union (GSU), assert that they are the only advocates for their ethnic groups' issues. In addition to these, a youth group known as the Federation of Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo People (FKJGP), an umbrella organization that represents all three ethnic communities, exists. While Meghalaya's regional political parties claim to work for the

"protection and preservation of tribal identity," in reality, it is student and youth organisations that have appropriated the regional parties' propaganda points on all crucial issues that have an impact on the interests of ethnic community groups. This is the reason why local scholars have argued that these organizations are taking the shape of pressure groups (Nongkhlaw, 2011).

Indeed, civil society organizations in Meghalaya have effectively pressurized and bargained with the Government of Meghalaya and have even clinched decisions in their favor on important issues affecting the interests of their respective ethnic groups. The issues taken up by these organizations include both political as well as socio-economic issues. For instance, the introduction of Innerline Regulations to check influx of outsiders in Meghalaya is a major political issue around which the KSU and other student and youth organizations have organized agitations and have mobilized public opinion to pressurize the Government. It is interesting to note that issues like price rise have never dominated the economic agenda of these organizations. However, regulation of trade by non-tribals in Meghalaya, issue of work permit for migrant laborers from outside the state, etc. have very often led to intervention by these organizations and have even triggered a confrontation with the state. This clearly reveals the ethnocentric nature of the demands raised by these organizations.

The goal of the essay is to look at the positions taken by Meghalaya's student and youth organizations on three crucial development-related issues: the construction of railroads, the development of large-scale enterprises, and uranium mining. In this regard, it should be emphasized that Meghalaya was formerly not connected to the national rail system. Railways were extended in 2015 all the way to Mendipathar in the Garo Hills. But in Meghalaya's Khasi and Jaintia Hills, railheads are conspicuously absent. The opposition to railways has been spearheaded by civil society organizations like the KSU. Even though all of Meghalaya's regional parties rejected railroads in their election platforms, student and youth organizations have been particularly vocal in their opposition to the move because they believe that the introduction of railways will aggravate the problem of influx into Meghalaya.

In fact, the Khasi Students' Union (KSU opposition)'s forced the 1988 cancellation of Byrnihat's first railway project, which was supposed to be Meghalaya's first. Later, it was discovered that the student body had acted on behalf of the truck owners' lobby, who were opposed to any competition for their line of work. As a result, after it is loaded onto railway carriages in that State, Meghalaya coal is now traded as Assam coal (The Shillong Times, August 22, 2008). This is a classic instance of a student body acting in a hegemonic capacity as fictitious representatives of the general populace, to the point where a government that was duly elected by the people has routinely caved into pressure from such exclusive groups, making a mockery of all democratic norms.

It's interesting to note that the KSU has been the group that has spoken out the loudest on this matter, and that Mr. Paul Lyngdoh, the fiery KSU leader, has always opposed railroads. However Mr. Lyngdoh later joined the United Democratic Party (UDP), a local party, and was appointed a minister in a coalition administration. It's interesting to note that recently, he has abandoned his opposition, likely as a result of coalition politics, and has embraced the construction of railways in the state.

There haven't been any significant industries established in Meghalaya since it was founded in

1972. There have been a few emerging small-scale agri-horticultural industries. Nonetheless, civil society organisations have steadfastly rejected any move towards industrialization on the grounds that doing so would draw migrant workers from outside the state and harm the employment prospects of native people. All regional parties have supported student and young organisations on this subject, making it difficult to distinguish between the civil and political cleavages in Meghalaya. It is vital to note that Meghalaya lacks significant revenue sources because there are no large-scale industries there. Unemployment is also quite rampant among the local youth. In view of this grim scenario, it is ironical that industrialization is being opposed by student and youth organizations.

These organizations have been arguing that there is a lack of trained manpower among the indigenous labor force and hence industries will have to recruit people from outside Meghalaya. Prominent civil society organizations are, therefore, demanding training facilities and employment guarantees for the local youth. This is a classic instance of contradiction between the goals of rapid economic growth and the concerns of small ethnic communities about the protection of their delicate demographic balance and preservation of traditional livelihood practices like jhum cultivation. The student and youth organizations have effectively articulated these community concerns and have even succeeded in stalling the establishment of any major industries so far.

Given the aforementioned, it could seem that Meghalaya has no aspirations for the world. Yet in truth, there is a discernible shift away from a protectionist mindset and towards one that favors an open economy. This was discussed at the "Business Practices in Meghalaya" seminar held in Mumbai on August 28, 2008, in an effort to promote the "Scotland of the East" as a desirable location for investors. A high-level delegation from the Meghalayan government, led by Chief Minister Dr. Donkumar Roy, invited investors from all across the nation and aggressively marketed the State's growth potential (The Shillong Times, August 29, 2008, p.1). A number of private companies showed interest to invest in Meghalaya in different Sectors starting from education to tourism during the day-long seminar. International Banks like ABN Amro and Deutsche were interested in micro-financing and skill development respectively.

The Government of Meghalaya appears to have selected the most promising sectors as those in tourism, information technology, education, health, mineral resources, horticulture, food processing, and floriculture and has offered incentives to investors in these sectors. The Chief Minister of Meghalaya urged the Government of India to support commerce with the neighboring Bangladesh through the State on a much larger scale for mutual benefits while speaking at the 4th North East Economic Conference in Guwahati. In this regard, it should be noted that the Minister for Development of North Eastern Region (DONER) sought to reassure the investors by stating that the investors' desire to invest in the region's vast supply of natural and mineral resources and infrastructure sectors shouldn't be hampered by security concerns, which is India's gateway to the prospering economies of South East Asia. In the Summit, the Chief Ministers of the North Eastern States demanded waiving of the Restricted Area Permit (RAP) and Protected Area Permit (PAP) System now in vogue in the region in case of foreign visitors, as these are major deterrents to the promotion of the most potential tourism Sector in the region (The Shillong Times, September 16, 2008, p.1).

Nonetheless, despite the region's State Government's efforts to promote investment proposals, local pressure organizations continue to exert pressure by calling for the provision of job guarantees for indigenous youth. Given the foregoing, prospective investors will be faced with the conundrum of meeting these expectations to some level even while trained personnel may not be locally accessible to meet the technical requirements of a complex business.

Therefore, it appears that the Government of Meghalaya has started taking steps to draw investment to the state, particularly in order to capitalise on the enormous tourism potential of the region. Yet, as far as Meghalaya's industrialisation is concerned, there hasn't been a significant development. As a result, when the Government of Meghalaya makes any significant policy decisions regarding the topic of industrialization, civil society organisations are a force to be reckoned with.

Uranium mining at Domisiat, in the West Khasi Hills of Meghalaya, is another significant development issue about which civil society organizations have expressed their worry. The Civil Nuclear Agreement between India and the United States has given the issue increased significance. The Union Government continued to push for the approval of the proposed uranium mining project at Mawthabah, West Khasi Hills, in light of the country's need for 20,000 MW of nuclear energy. The Union Government held a number of meetings with State political leaders and NGOs on the contentious issue. K. M. Chandra Shekhar, the Union Cabinet Secretary, met separately with the leaders of the Khasi Students' Federation of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo People (FKJGP), Garo Students' Union (GSU) and other local organizations admitted that a consensus was yet to evolve on the issue of uranium mining in the State (The Shillong Times, August 23, 2008, p.1).

While the KSU has been the most vocal in its opposition to the project, the FKJGP maintains that the issue of health hazard from uranium mining should be addressed properly before arriving at a final decision on the project. GSU and West Khasi Hills Students' Union seem to support the project provided it brings maximum benefits to people of Mawthabah and adjoining areas in terms of infrastructure and employment opportunities ('KSU sticks to stand,' The Shillong Times, August 23, 2008, p.1). It may be noted that no consensus has emerged on this issue even within the ruling coalition and two allies of the Meghalaya Progressive Alliance, viz., Hill State People's Democratic Party (HSPDP) and Khun Hynniewtrep National Awakening Movement (KHNAM) have continued to oppose the open- cast uranium mining (The Shillong Times, August 24, 2008, p.1). The Hill State People's Democratic Party (HSPDP) has been opposing uranium mining from the very outset. But the civil society organizations have come out more strongly against this move. The resistance is mainly centered on three grounds, viz. potential health hazards for the people located in and around the mining site, environmental concerns, and demand for employment opportunities for the local people. The protesting organizations have even deputed study groups to exist uranium-mining sites like Jadugoda to assess the impact of mining on the people of those areas. Meanwhile, to allay the apprehensions of the local people, public hearings have been organized by the Uranium Corporation of India Ltd (UCIL). Some developmental activities have also been undertaken by the UCIL such as the construction of roads etc. Such activities had important consequences on the resistance movement.

For instance, the KSU is persistently opposing the move, but the West Khasi Hills Students' Union (WKHSU) now supports it, indicating signs of polarization of opinion within the civil society on the mining issue. Interestingly, the debate on uranium mining has triggered some positive and enlightened thinking among a section of the educated elite of Meghalaya. One such view asserts that the presence of uranium provides Meghalaya with a unique bargaining power vis-à-vis the centre, in order to improve its backward infrastructure and emphasizes the need to infuse a healthy dose of inclusive progressive nationalism into the prevailing techno-centric, purely regional outlook, not only for the sake of energy security of the country, but also for the good of the local people (Shira, 2008, p.4).

As a result, the uranium mining debate highlights tensions between the Indian State's developmental goals and racial sensibilities. From a different angle, the problem has gained importance. The Meghalayan civil society's opposition to uranium mining is philosophically linked to the global struggle against nuclear proliferation and is a crucial part of the anti-state movement against the Indian State's overarching developmental objective.

Concluding Observations

In light of the arguments above, one could claim that Meghalaya's civil society organizations are ostensibly communicating the real worries, aspirations, and sensibilities of their respective ethnic communities. Their dissenting voice frequently questioned the government of India's development policy. Yet, a closer examination of the topic indicates that these organizations' inflexible ethnocentric viewpoint has occasionally served to undermine the very ethnic communities they purport to represent. In particular, given that they lack many alternative forms of income production, opposition to railways and the establishment of large businesses would be detrimental to the long-term interests of these communities. Indeed, some of the worries raised concerning uranium mining are valid and should be addressed by the relevant authorities before the mining activities are attempted. An investigation into these procedures is necessary to comprehend how ethnicity and development interact in Meghalaya from the viewpoint of civil society.

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