

# **ETHNIC CONFLICT IN NORTH EAST INDIA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Northeast India is adwelling of various ethnic groups and therefore, one can see the numerous incidences of ethnic conflicts in this region. Conflict is a disintegrative social procedure and is the contradictory of cooperation. Conflict is a type of social interface involving two or more individuals, groups or communities intentionally trying to oppose, defeat, injure or even finish the rival. Conflict has become part and parcel of human existence in this world and, as such, permanent solution to this problem seems to be almost an impossible task. Conflict is a universally acclaimed phenomenon that poses threat to human existence in almost every part of the world. India, especially its Northeastern region is not an exemption to this reality. India is the residence of diverse cultures, ethnicity, religion, castes and creeds and its Northeastern region is a multi-ethnic world that offers home to various tribes, communities, religious and linguistic groups. Therefore, this region is highly vulnerable to ethnic unrest. These socio-political realities throw challenges to the modern nation states with multiple ethnic identities within to develop satisfactory terms of negotiations between various groups. It is with this objective in mind this paper being planned to systematically analyze and observe the unique nature and cause of ethnic conflict in Northeast India.

**Keywords-** *Ethnic, Conflict, Identity*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The issue of ethnic conflict is quite universal in the sense that there is barely any country in the world that does not face the challenge of ethnic conflict. The kind and nature of conflict may vary from country to country or region to region. Nevertheless almost all the multi-ethnic states in globe cannot escape from the problems of ethnic conflict. Ethnic conflict between two or more groups of people is an old occurrence. In the recent world situation, socio-cultural hegemony, inter-ethnic antagonism, fragmentation, constriction of identity, intense regionalism, has frequently lead to the evolution of ethnic violence or conflict that have taken a heavy toll on human life and belongings. Ethnicity simply put refers to ideas pertaining to the word ethnic. Though the sense of kingship, group solidarity and common culture to which it refers is as old as the historical record, the term 'ethnicity' is first appeared in the 1950s in English language; recorded in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1953. A variety of dictionary quotations follow this, dating from the latter period (in 1960s and 1970s). Theoretically, though it is difficult to unearth a universally acceptable definition of the term 'ethnic', it generally refers to a group of people with a common, distinctive racial, national, religious, linguistic or cultural heritage. It is also used to describe a culture that is diverse from the dominant culture, in terms of language, race, religion, national origin and various combinations of these elements.

Ethnicity is a collection of individuals having certain common characteristics. However, the concept of ethnicity has been explained by De Vos in the sense of ethnic identity which contains of the subjective, symbolic or emblematic used by a group of individuals of any aspect of culture, in order to differentiate themselves from other group. Thus, Antony Gidden remarks "Ethnicity refers to the cultural practices and outlooks of a given community of people that set them apart from others. Members of ethnic group see themselves as culturally distinct from other groups in a society and seen by those other groups to be so in return".

It is not easy to explain the term 'conflict' as it indicates a variety of meanings. According to Advance English Dictionary, conflict means a situation in which there are opposite ideas, opinions, approaches, feelings or wishes. It also indicates a situation in which people or groups or countries contributed in a serious disagreements or arguments. It is also declared to a contestation between the two or more conflicting ethnic groups. Sometimes, it involves more united violent action of an ethnic group against some other ethnic groups to focus its dissatisfaction. Therefore, ethnic conflict signifies dispute between contending groups who recognize themselves primarily on the basis of their collective rights.

Ethnic conflict is a repetitive phenomenon. Historically ethnic conflict between two or more groups of people is an old phenomenon. It would perhaps be not incorrect to say that ethnic conflict originated with the emergence of human civilization (when people started to live in groups) and still exists. Conflict has become part and parcel of

human existence in this world and, as such, endless solution to this problem seems to be almost a dreadful task. Conflict is a universally commended phenomenon that carries threat to human survival in almost every part of the world.

In India too, there are states frightened by the ghost of ethnic conflict. In the Indian Political parlance, decorating as the Hindu-Muslim conflict in the northwest and southwest, the very term 'Northeast' came to signify a region characterized by such ethnic conflicts. Northeastern region is not an exception to this reality. India is the place of diverse cultures, ethnicity, religion, castes and creeds and its Northeastern region is a multi-ethnic world that offers home to various tribes, communities, religious and linguistic groups. Since the arrival and extension of colonial rule in the region, the region has been undergoing political, social and economic upheaval. After independence, the region has barely experienced a single decade of peaceful political atmosphere. As an alternative, each decade observed new movements for political and social recognition, some of which have often turned violent. One must not make a practical argument to show that these movements have their origin in the ethno-national understanding of ethnic identities. We have seen the ethnic conflict over the entire region e.g. between the Naga and the Mizo and Riang in Mizoram, between the Arunachali and Chakma in Arunachal Pradesh etc. Insurgency, which can be taken as extreme form of political enlargement, has shaken almost all the states of North-East at one time or another. Armed insurgencies have their roots in Nagaland and Manipur in between the 1950s and 1960s. The armed movements strengthened in Mizoram in the sixties, in Tripura in the seventies, while in the case of Assam, it was in the eighties. Militancy also affected Arunachal Pradesh if not as menacingly as the other neighboring states. Thus, the major challenge to us is to reveal the objective or subjective rationale behind ethnic conflicts in the region so as to catch out possible remedial interventions.

In the Northeast, the whole problem of ethnicity has become quite a complex issue. Though there are circumstantial differences in terms of the nature of conflicts, there is no state amongst the seven sisters that does not face the complications of ethnic conflict. This region has frequently been labeled as a boiling cauldron by many academicians and journalists because of various problems perpetrated in the region. There is more than one aspect that led to such a phenomenon. However, the factors responsible for ethnic conflict are yet to be explained adequately. Apart from the issues of cultural discriminations meted out to the minority communities, ethnicity is also being used instrumentally by political elites. The leadership organizes groups by the selective use of ethnic symbols for their politico-economic purpose is best suitable for self-consciousness and exact political gain in the region.

There are numerous aspects responsible for ethnic conflict. Ownership Tendency over resources including Land, Forest and Mineral is responsible for ethnic conflict. To begin with, human beings cannot survive without resources. Because of such significance, resources are an essential condition that shapes socio-economic and politico-cultural status of communities, groups, and nations. Most of the conflicts hang around the fights for resources. It is already suggested that in recent times the people mostly tribal communities feel unconfident that they may lose their religion, culture, language, identity, employment etc. Originally 'land and territoriality' was not considered as essential elements in ethnic politics. However, later when number of communities starts opting for insurgency particularly among tribal communities, the concept of land and territoriality including natural resources becomes a vital element of politics of ethnicity. It is said that the natural resources are very significant for not only because it is the only earnings for the survival of people as modern jobs (white collar) are not adequately created especially for people of this hilly state. At the same time, the ethnic insurgencies are also essential resources for existence and running of the groups. All insurgent groups collect financial funds and other supports from the people who are settling inside their claimed areas.

There are other aspects of conflict between various groups in the state. One such issue is the issue of conflict between outsiders who have come from other states and insiders who are the original settlers of the state. This conflict is seen mostly in the field of economy, trade and commerce. It has been claimed that outsiders control the markets and exploit the state's resources especially the forest wealth. The people's determination to resist outsiders control has expressed in the struggles to preserve and protect their nationality, identity and ethnicity. Therefore 'Border Trade' is not merely considered as way of life but a cause of the struggle for territorial control. For example, the insurgent groups attempt to control the border trade (lucrative smuggling, small arms and drug traffic) along the Indo-Myanmar international border is not only for land control but also for security strategic. The Naga Kuki conflict of 1992 that took place in the Moreh-Tamu area is a manifestation of control land and security reason.

There are numerous issues surrounding ethnic conflicts persisting anywhere in the world. One such element that enormously contributes in the ensuing ethnic conflict in the state is the prevailing system of political representation, and the attentions and political standpoints taken by the representatives. In fact, in countries like India, there are groups and communities demanding political representations of various kinds as part of their larger campaign for safeguarding their identities, cultural values and ethos. The success or failure of a democracy is a lot depend on the capability of the representative system and the way the representatives assume their responsibilities. It is a fact that

couple with existing leading approach of the bigger community within the ethnic umbrellas, government's disappointment in administration and carelessness of community contribute in miseries of smaller groups. The intermediate tribes, therefore, have to look out for other options that can take them in the Centre stage of politics. Therefore, one of the easy ways in such a situation is believed to be the armed struggle as the last resort to solve their problems.

However objective for ethnic conflict is not limited to plea for self-determination. Issues of migration also generate ethnic conflict in the contemporary times. Several tribal communities are very small in term of their population. When tribal group comes into interaction with these migrants, they converted into a minority in all respect. Therefore they are losers in any kind of competition – jobs, livelihood, etc. in their own motherland. The result is that the migrants have the upper hand in all respect. Sociologically, existence of the ethnic groups means the interaction of the members among themselves and behaving in the arrangements prescribed by the rules of the culture. When one is interacting and behaving in some other patterns that is given by the culture of another rather than one's own, that actuality does not make any meaning.

Thus, the ethnic conflict in the state cannot be recognized to a single factor. It is also the consequence of various issues occurred in the contemporary times. It is obvious that not only historical roots but also contemporary issues- land and resource ownership tendency, border trade, political representative and their political stand points, political violence of the State, counter insurgency, the issue of merger agreement and impacts of the migration etc. are largely responsible. All these contribute to the pressures and competition amongst ethnic groups.

Finally, the entire study on ethnic conflict can be determined by saying that various factors are responsible for the creation of present ethnic conflicts. It is not only the contemporary issues that carried about conflict condition amongst various communities. There are historical elements that immensely contributed in the making of 'conflict situation'. Especially the colonial administration and ethnography deconstructed the once united tribal identities. This deconstruction of tribal identities led to misinterpretation as well as competition between various groups which in the long run lead to conflict between them. Thus, the conflict has passed through three stages; namely, difference, discontentment and conflict. Socio-cultural dissimilarities created the senses of otherness. Due to the structural differences and some critical historical happening dissatisfaction developed between them. Identity differences and displeasure prepared a battle ground for the outburst of the conflict. Finally, the conflict broke out through the spread of a rumour, taking a violent form. Therefore, there is a necessity for continual engagement of diverse identity groups in North-East India in some common, constructive activities and to uphold unification of different people at broader level and sense of citizenship in place of the ever hardening identities.

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