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Conflicting Nations in North-East India

Ethnic groups in India's north-east, while challenging the state constructed definition of a nation, are seeking to construct new narratives to define their own nationhood. This paper sets out to deconstruct the idea of the 'nation from below' and examines strategies and tactics such movements resort to in the process of decolonisation. At the same time, it appears that in their quest for freedom, such ethno-national movements, while dealing with other subordinate nationalisms living in worse socio-economic and political conditions, adopt a similar path of colonisation and subjugation as their erstwhile rulers.

SANJAY K ROY

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/nationalist movements are legitimised in the name of the 'right to self-determination'.¹

The present paper sets out to deconstruct the idea of the 'nations from below' and examines the strategies and tactics which 'nations from below' resort to in the so-called decolonisation movements. It explores how the freedom-seeking nations take recourse to a similar path of colonisation and subjugation of other minor nations that live in worse socio-economic and political space. Statist construct of nations, and state-strategies for integration have been examined in a dialectical and evolving relationship along with responses from below. The horizontal proliferation of conflict among nations in the region and its fallout, however, provide illustrations of the present critique of the 'nations from below'. The present paper is more in the line of a methodological exercise than a vivid narrative on the different nations or ethnic conflicts in the region.

Nation from Below

As a method to establish colonial hegemony, the British mastered the craft of dividing communities and legitimising them for negotiation. In case of north-east India, the creation of Excluded Areas and Partially Excluded Areas and system of voting based on religion, etc, were mooted by the colonial power to reinforce the already existing primordial boundaries between communities. As part of colonisation, the strategy the British followed in the region was to allow the missionaries to build their religious and

educational institutions and use them as agencies of integrating the tribal folk with the west.

In partially modifying the colonial approach, the Indian National Congress tried to devise a strategy of bringing together religious minorities, tribes and dominant Hindu caste groups within its fold as well as design principles that would take care of the interests of each of these blocs. The ideology of Indian nationalism and modernism (industrialism/rationalism) were worked out to integrate communities in the struggle against colonialism. The cultural policy of the nationalist forces, flowing from their political compulsions, turned out to be internally self-subversive and conflicting. The nationalist desire to make various communities and blocs an integral part of the wider system of governance was overarching in character and was opposed by those who could read the hegemonic mechanism. According to Biswas, the elite nationalist project of integrating the smaller communities under a greater structure of the state became an "elitist agenda that left out the possibility of affirming distinctive cultural claims on the part of the constituents of the nationalist whole".²

The integration package, put into operation in free India, and in the north-east in particular, contained not only cultural and political strategies; it also had an economic strategy. Such strategies, however, were interpreted as the strategies of domination and subordination in the dominant 'folk perception' and as a consequence, the targeted level of integration in the statist nationalism remained elusive. As a means to maintain its hegemony, the ruling forces in the modern power arrangement resorted to the rules of the shepherd-folk game, the city citizen game, and the rules of bio-politics.³ In the north-east, all such strategies and tactics have been put into practice in the pretext of nation building and national integration of diverse populations and cultures. The developments in the region are indicative of the 'demonic character' (to use the Foucauldian phrase) of the bourgeois-liberal state. The much desired integration of state-sponsored nationalism and citizenship has not been attained.

Formation of a rebel consciousness in the ethnic formation is an obvious corollary of this hegemonic goal of the Indian state. The 'rebel consciousness' has found articulation in the formation of 'nations from below', which, by nature, contests the state-centric Indian nation.

Nations from below are those identities that reinforce their collective and community values by way of a 'looped counterclaim

to the dominant identity that includes it from a distance and from a position of strength. These identities from below attain their autonomous position by way of inverting the claims of dominant nation that is by *claiming sovereignty, territory and institutional authority for itself*. This means a *disorientation of the dominant state* by launching struggle against the machinery of the state that inducts smaller identities within its fold. 'Nations from below' do not make a claim of Statehood, as the 'nation from above' does by establishing the primacy of the state in asserting its authenticity. The authenticity of the 'nation from below' lies in its parallel counterclaim based on its own *cultural distinctness not based on the power of the state*.⁴

'Nations from below' in the north-east are formed on ethnic lines (mostly a tribe in a geographical area, with one name, common heritage, common language, common culture and therefore one identity); an identity formed in countering other identities and expressed in democratic movements, in anti-state armed struggle, in ethnic cleansing and similar actions. The expression that a nation from below does not make a claim for statehood cannot be substantiated by the nature of ethnic movements in the north-east, since the central demand of most of the movements is either to acquire constitutional power over a territory or to create a sovereign state outside India.

In the states in the north-east, which were mostly independent before British annexation in early 19th century or even before India earned its independence in 1947, the idea of 'internal colonisation', popularised by the 'neo-class', is still widely shared in folk perception. The indigenous communities controlled the land and forest and had a long established method of governance through customary laws. As a result of imposition of foreign rule or integration into the Indian Union, these communities gradually lost control over land and resources and constitutional laws replaced their customary laws. The freedom-loving communities were never comfortable with their merger with Indian union. Freedom of India in 1947 meant 'continued colonisation' for them. The oil and timber-rich states also understood the strategic importance of the region because of its proximity with China, Myanmar, Bhutan and Bangladesh. Rather than creating an active citizenship, the Sixth Schedule, the package of economic aid and development in the post-independence period resulted in internal class difference and a 'neo-class' to corner the fruits of such measures. The structural constraints of the bourgeois-liberal democracy (that India is) prevented the operationalisation of the rules of bio-politics to their full effect to realise the integration of the common people with the nation. The ethnic communities continued to nurse their feeling of difference, their own cultural identities and did not respond to the call of national integration.

The 'decolonisation struggle' in the north-eastern states has always been spearheaded by the neo-class, the ethno-class.⁵ The issue of class deprivation is often seen as being integrated with issues of sustaining indigenous culture and right to self-determination of the ethnic communities. The movements often get derailed from the class issue and cease to be movements against the state alone; they take the ethnic route and often kill and displace the innocent people of other communities, categorised as 'the other'. 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.

The state response to the challenge posed by the nations from below has been in the form of (a) granting statehood or regional autonomy by signing special Acts and Agreements,⁶ (b) devolution of power through the institutions of local self-governments (panchayats and municipalities),⁷ (c) development (economic) initiatives through people's participation, (d) campaign for cultural and ideological integration into Indian nationalism, and (e) resorting to coercion as a measure of suppression of 'rebel' voice. The national political parties, the education system and the mass media, which share the ideology of one nation, strengthen the integration package offered by the state. The democratic system, democratic participation, recognition of rights and institutions are various means to integrate the dissenting voices. The arrangement continually adjusts itself with new packages of concession and thus renews its integrative power. Gramsci's idea of hegemonic state and Althusser's formulation of an 'ideological state apparatus' are very much in operation in the national integration mission of the Indian state in NE.

In order to subvert the state narration of integrated nation, the 'nations from below' call for boycotting Republic Day and Independence Day celebrations. They bring out slogans such as 'we were never a part of India', 'we want sovereignty' to project the image of the nation as 'other'. They call for a boycott of the electronic media, Hindi cinema and Hindi TV programmes to express their rejection of the process of homogenisation and dominance of the advanced communities. The protests aim at disrupting the social and cultural bases of the hegemony of the Indian state.

The nations from below often challenge the state-drawn political boundaries and their national boundary spreads along the ethnic boundary. The construction of identities like the Zo people spreading beyond Indo-Myanmar borders, the greater Naga homeland including Myanmar Naga, or even the construction of Tai-Ahom nation appropriate territoriality, history and sovereignty in a way different from the accepted boundaries drawn out by the state. This perception of national boundary travels down the kinship and cultural route. The claim of sovereignty of ethno-nations is based upon their distinct cultural ethos, which has never been a part of the mainstream Indian culture in civilisational terms. This mode of positioning of an ethnic community is a symbolic negation of the superiority and primacy of Indian nationhood, which positions the state above all claims of sovereignty and independence [Biswas 2002:144]. The burgeoning anti-integration movement in Manipur demanding pre-merger status exhibits a move beyond the limits of statist-nationalism.⁸

The accords signed by the Indian State during the 1980s with AASU, TNV, MNF, or the Bodoland Agreement of 2003 were intended to strike reconciliation with conflicting identities in order to subsume them under the state. This objective of the state presents a figure of dominance through its game of power that seeks to normalise the cultural politics of identities from below. The normalisation takes place by co-option of the neo-class of the dissenting community. The state thus succeeds in dividing the nation from below into integrative and disintegrative blocs. This democratic arrangement of reconciliation cannot provide a permanent solution to the problem because the aspiration for independence and a sovereign status of the identity remain unfulfilled. While one bloc accepts the integration package and

tries to use it to its advantage, the other bloc gradually shifts towards a demand for secession from the Indian State. The city-citizen game is put into operation in full with the finest form of craftsmanship by agents of the hegemonic state. The hegemonic tactics of the state never succeed in checking the structural dialectics. The Mizo freedom movement spearheaded by the Mizo National Front (1966-86), the ongoing NSCN (I-M) struggle for sovereignty, the ULFA demand for independent Assam, the National Democratic Front of Bodoland's fight for sovereign Bodoland are some of the manifestations of reaction to the statist approach to the nationality question.

The liberal democratic federal political arrangement bears the seeds of ethnic conflict in the north-east. Freedom of movement and free competition, which constitutes the fundamental principles of the political arrangement, evokes uneven competition and promotes economic and social inequality and therefore a sense of deprivation in the weaker partner in the competition. This results in a backlash by the local communities against the migrant settlers. The tribal attack on the Bengali settlers in Tripura is a case in point. The uneven economic prosperity of different groups of people is bound to happen following the laws of market society. It is also obvious that the groups that have greater initial control of human and other resources will reap the benefits of market competition. Moreover, in our democratic arrangement the numerically dominant communities will, in most cases, control power. The principles of 'protective discrimination', total or partial seclusion and granting of autonomy have not proved to be enough in arresting the negative fallout of market competition, because of a wide gap among the competing groups on the control of resources.

It is a matter of folk-perception in the north-east that the local population, speaking the local regional language, should have a prior claim to employment, housing, and educational facilities in their land. The recent Ahom attacks on the Behari settlers in Assam (November 2003) claimed at least 50 innocent lives and made several thousand homeless. The root of the ethnic backlash was the apprehension that 'outsiders' would grab the employment opportunities locally available.⁹ The expression of such feelings and the resultant action is termed 'nativism' by Weiner. He defines nativism as that form of ethnic identity that seeks to exclude those who are not members of the local or indigenous ethnic group from residing and/or working in a territory because they are not native to the country or region.¹⁰ This kind of anti-migrant or nativist movements is different from other forms of ethnic movements. The nativist movement is essentially anti-migrant in character, but the ethnic movement need not be so. What is common, in both ethnic and nativist movements, is the competition between linguistic, regional or social groups. The nativist reaction in India is not necessarily against the migrants from another country (as is the case in Malaysia or Nigeria), but often against so-called 'foreigners' from other cultures within the country.

The nativist movement contradicts the spirit of constitutional provisions. The Indian Constitution guarantees all citizens the right to move freely throughout the territory of India and to reside and settle in any state and to receive the same rights, protection, and benefits as those born in the state to which they move, because the Constitution propounds a single citizenship. Article 16 asserts, "There shall be equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment or opportunity to any office under the

state. No citizen shall, on ground only of religion, race, caste, sex, descent, place of birth, residence or any of them, be ineligible for or discriminated against in respect of any of them, be ineligible for or discriminated against in respect of any employment or office under the state." The preferential policies in favour of 'sons of the soil' have thus eroded the concept of single citizenship and the spirit of modernism.

The rise of nativist sentiments among the local people is understood to be the fallout of the pursuance of the ethnic line of mobilisation by political parties, both at the central and state levels. The leaders of both the ruling and opposition groups in a state regard protection of the interests of their own people against the outsiders as one of their primary responsibilities. The state governments too give priority to local claims against migrants. The central government, though it is supposed to represent the interests of all citizens of the country, also does not like to risk its electoral fortunes in the state by not accommodating the local ethnic sentiments in its policies and programmes.

The 'national' identities shaped around the struggle for greater political space in the shape of ethnic movements, in course, turn out to be hegemonic over the minority communities. Thus, when the minority communities mature as a political self and challenge the hegemonic regional nation, fields of ethnic conflict proliferate in the region. The Naga and Kuki in Manipur churn their memory in order to situate the events of brutalities and without being able to find reconciliation they fall into the trap of violence-counter-violence. Other communities of Manipur contested the tacit support by the Indian state for the demand of carving Naga dominated areas from Manipur to create greater Nagaland on the grounds of the perceived threat of vivisection of Manipur and subsequent dominance by the Nagas. Here the resistance is directed against the creation of Naga dominance and interestingly, the Zeliangrong Naga had for the same reason opposed the move to separate Naga dominated areas [Biswas 2002:145].

The Bodo nationalism¹¹ in Assam emerges through a multi-faceted contestation: against the Indian State, against the dominance of Assamese nation and a clash with other peripheral and dominant identities such as adivasi, Bengali, and Koch. While the Bodo upsurge resists the appropriation by the dominant, it attacks other non-dominant identities. Biswas blames this 'cultivated politics of difference' on the hegemonic state, which aims at suppressing this contestation from below. The clash between Bodo and adivasi strengthens the 'cultivated politics of difference', an expression of refusal to appropriate each other's cultural and political positions. There is no contest over jobs, property, land, etc. but a question of settling 'who is first' which is a relapse into a primordialist position. Such clashes therefore produce losses on both sides of Bodos and adivasi without a contest over definite 'areas of interest'. Further, absence of cultural appropriation between Bodos and adivasi spill over onto issues of ethnic, racial and religious differences creating fixations of a paranoid kind, an ethno-pathology [Biswas 2002:147].

The cases of the Nellie massacre¹² in Assam, or Bilonia in Tripura¹³ illustrate the misplaced anger of ethnic communities on minorities, who are neither properly protected by the state nor are they secure in their socio-economic position. Such ethno-pathology, which expresses itself in incoherent actions of the nations from below, is considered the direct fallout of the failure of statist politics of culture. Ethno-pathology is that state of response in which others in the neighbourhood are perceived to

be the source of sufferings of one's own community, against which an 'emergence' becomes necessary. The definition of 'immigrant Bengali Muslims' who were perceived as a potent unbalancing factor of demography, land and community resources and a discourse of exclusion emanates from such an imposing definition. An ethno-pathological sensitivity perceives the other in fearful terms that analogises immigrant Muslim community as the source of all trouble. The ethno-pathological construction of an enemy assumes a position of dominance and the victim turns into a subaltern from its excluded position. The resistance of victimised communities like Adivasi, Bengali, Koch against such exclusion by the Bodo again goes into redefining themselves as legitimate settlers of the place. The wrath of Bodo against them as a majority community fixes them as subalterns, as they are treated as outsiders in the Bodo areas [Biswas 2002:148].

Not all the communities in the region are organised and articulate. An inarticulate community, excluded from/by dominant identity, is largely known by specific community markers abstracted from the life-world of the community. For example, the immigrant Bengali Muslim, Santhal and other smaller tribal communities like Mishing, Moran, etc, are defined as 'immigrant', 'tribal' or 'labourers' indicative of 'lower' social positions, thus encoded with an element of stigma or othering. Thus, the liberating identities at one level turn out to be a hegemonic identity. The unorganised and voiceless Bengali Muslims are easily branded as 'foreigners' and the source of 'terrorism' and thus made out to be the subjects to be driven out or liquidated. An exclusion of Hmar, Bru or Chakma from the articulated cultural and political space of Mizo or an exclusion of Muslims and smaller tribal communities from an articulated space of Assamese identity simultaneously represents their exclusion from the dominant and their appropriation within the dominant [Biswas 2002:149]. The exclusion signifies the strategy of the dominant to discipline the smaller communities and thus prepares the ground for the emergence of smaller identities as distinct narratives of nations from below.

Critique of the 'Nation from Below'

As we have seen above, the 'nation from below' expresses itself not through the state apparatus but by striking against an established harmony by resorting to extreme means. While the anti-state dimension of the ethnic movements is rather easy to comprehend, the 'misplaced or displaced anger' against the neighbouring ethnic communities is difficult to explain. As a strategy it is inhuman in its atrocities and negates class alliance, and is therefore counterproductive in a sense that the movements find it difficult to earn national and international support. The statist nation looks at ethnic movements as the biggest perpetrators of human rights violation on innocent people. The state and its ally, the dominant section of society, harden its anti-ethnic stand, and reacts with 'extreme measures', the strategies of shepherd-folk game. The counter-insurgency operations results in a loss of innocent lives, displacement of members of the ethnic communities, suspension of human rights and other forms of dislocation. The counter-insurgency operations in Mizoram, for example, saw the extinction of one generation of young Mizos between 1966 and 1986. The mindless killing and displacement of innocent people by extremist groups ensure that the dominant psyche in the state supports counter-insurgency operations. The

centrality of violence therefore could be explained by the fact that the 'misplaced anger' is actually a deliberate ploy to make the movement visible. The 'misplaced anger' is, in actuality, an expression of 'deliberate anger'. The inhuman acts of violence by insurgent groups are an essential strategy to sustain the movement since the politics of extortion is not possible but an atmosphere of threat is. It is also a deliberate strategy to sustain the 'us' and 'they' divide, which is necessary to arouse ethnic passion in order to organise the community into a political community. The ethnic construction of the 'outsider' has much to do with the reproduction of deliberate anger. The subjects of such displaced anger are the 'new subalterns'¹⁴ who do not even have a language to articulate their pain. The noteworthy presence of the 'outsider' in the homeland, which is considered by the native as its exclusive right, is also blamed on upon the state, as it is linked to the citizenship and foreigner issue. The mindless ethnic cleansing operations often undertaken by the so-called 'nations from below', therefore, cannot be allowed to be expressed simply as an incoherent behaviour or an expression of a counter-hegemonic strategy (constructed as ethno-pathology by Biswas).

The fight of the 'nation from below' against the coloniser state apparently has as its objectives, 'political liberation of the nation', prosperity of the people, and defence of ethnic culture. However, a close examination of the end-results of the movements so far leads us to the conclusion that the movements fail on all main missions. The smaller states or autonomous district councils created on ethnic lines (and according to the Constitutional provisions) so far have not addressed the issues on which the movements were launched. The post-conflict arrangements have failed to arrest the ethnic cleavages, the ever-increasing class differences within the community, or to protect the cultural rights of the tribal groups.

The Naga, Mizo or the Bodo movement began as freedom movements but ended with a 'cohabitation arrangement' with state, and the forces of liberation ended up being 'agents of integration' of the liberal democratic ('colonising') state. The reconciliatory political arrangements following an autonomy or statehood movement have helped the economic, political and social position of the neo-class. Functioning as agents of state apparatus, the neo-class has used the liberal democratic means for seeking integration of the common people. A complete turnaround on the part of the leaders of 'liberation movements' in the north-east from a position of rebellion to a law-abiding integrative agent could be noticed in case of Laldenga in Mizoram, Bijoy Hrankhwal in Tripura or very recently the leaders of the now disbanded Bodo Liberation Tigers. The leaders of the BLT seem happy accepting positions such as the chief executive member and deputy chief executive member of the interim council of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC).

The erstwhile leaders of the liberation movement soon break up into leaders of multiple political factions and parties, learn the manipulative tactics of electoral politics in no time and even prepare to be 'sold' in the race for power in the state. The drama of degenerating electoral politics leaves the ordinary members of the 'nation from below' bewildered as they were once motivated to be a part of the 'liberation' struggle and accept the sufferings at the hands of the oppressive state. The regional political parties of 'nations from below' often change political camps when there is an opportunity to make easy money or to grab a share of power.

Compromising on their ethnic character, the regional parties are often seen merging with the national mainstream parties such as BJP or Indian National Congress, which are known for their integrationist positions. Therefore, the 'nation from below' in the north-east in real terms is fragmented from within and the factions work at cross purposes.

Loss of Credibility

The loss of credibility of the political elite in the north-east has contributed to the erosion of the integrative power of the political and economic institutions. A powerful section of the neo-elite, which believes in political chauvinism, resorts to corrupt means to earn a fortune at the cost of the common people and the wretched. This class cannot win over the confidence of the people in support of the system, because of its eroded acceptability among the public. It is a matter of common knowledge that while the central government keeps up uninterrupted the supply of funds, much of the money is eaten up by the ruling forces and their agents while the needy continue to suffer. The erosion of the pro-system force thus adds strength to the voice of dissent. The general perception in academic circles is that the shadow of militancy helps the people in power misappropriate the abundant flow of money (from the central government) without being answerable. The money pumped into the region is part of the centre's integration strategy for the region uniformly pursued in the post-independence era.

The 'nations from below' are no longer classless societies, as they used to be in the pre-independence days. In fear of losing unity, the neo-class leadership hardly ever raises the class question or the question of equality either in course of the movement or after the 'constitutional settlement'. The movements are often run on the 'identity' issue without ever defining it or with a vague understanding of identity only in cultural and political terms (divorcing it from the issue of economic liberation). The movements neither work out a critique of the inequality-breeding liberal economic arrangement nor put into effect a strategy to minimise inequality and class exploitation after establishing their hold on some kind of power arrangement. The states run by the 'nations from below' are, in no way, different from the Indian state in their neglect of the fundamental question of class-inequality. The plight of the wretched continues even after statehood, as the neo-class corner the benefits of the new political arrangements by manipulating the development initiatives in its favour.

The issue of preservation of indigenous culture remains un-addressed even after the statehood or autonomy is granted. The 'nations from below' fail to work out an effective strategy on preserving their culture, to confront the onslaught of the 'bigger' national and international cultural forms. A hue and cry is often raised by 'nations from the below' for political use of the 'culture issue' but the pragmatic elite finds a way to be a part of the 'bigger culture' and thus distances themselves from the indigenous culture silently. Manipulative planning and weak state intervention cannot preserve or change the existing cultural forms, unless the issues relating to reproduction of elements of ethno-culture are addressed and unless the realities of everyday life are altered. The people always take a pragmatic position about accepting positions relating to dress code, language, and form of education and even a change of religion as a strategy to better living. This precisely

explains why people of ethnic groups in the north-east abandon their traditional language and pick up English and Hindi, give up the religion of their ancestors and embrace Christianity, get out of authoritarian clans and mix with outsiders and give up the traditional dress codes to accept one that would help easy intercommunity mixing. The cultural forms are competing in the culture market where the Darwinian principles hold good. The indigenous culture presents itself to its people in an undefined form. Opportunities too are different for the people with diverse social and economic standing. Different classes of people, presented with different kinds of life opportunities, look at cultural referents with their own pragmatic angles. The unified response of the 'nation from below' to its own culture is far from reality.

The contradictory stances on the issue of indigenous culture dilutes the question of identity on which the movements are fought. The 'culture of insurgency' establishes a naturalised affinity of the mass with those media images that present a triumph of masculine and macho forces over systemic and governmental agencies. "It induces a regime of supermen, gangsters, terrorists, spy and spy catcher flowing from the Americanised industries of film and media."¹⁵ In order to streamline ethnic culture, militant groups issue diktats on dress codes, enforce a boycott of Hindi films and Hindi TV channels, Independence Day and Republic Day celebrations, and so on and bank on the overwhelming threat atmosphere for success. The common people, however, look at such calls with scepticism while the ethnic intellectuals criticise such moves. The rational mind from within thus questions the militant groups' attempts towards ethnicisation of cultural field, when the world is changing towards more openness. Educated people with a pragmatic approach to life would always show cultural flexibility in order to survive in the competitive market of a liberal economy. In order to arrest the cultural marginalisation of indigenous people the neo-class leadership imposes diktats of traditional culture codes but the leadership gradually (cleverly) distances itself from its ethno-culture, from its roots, and embraces new cultural forms. Acceptance of Christianity, English, western education and western lifestyle speak aloud for the cultural rootlessness of the ethnic leadership of the neo-class.

Divided Nations

The 'nations from below' are the 'divided nations from below' as there is always a considerable, if not the majority, force among the ethnic communities, cutting across classes, even during the heyday of an ethnic movement, that oppose both the ideology and method of the movement. Mass killings, abductions of the innocent, forceful disruption of normal life through prolonged bandhs, misappropriation of extortion funds, sacrifices of budding lives, cultural diktats on dress code, banning Hindi films, etc. always result in alienating a large section of their own people. The common people, fed up with prolonged disruptions of normal life, distance themselves because the militant activities always have a direct bearing on their daily life. The poorest of the poor suffer the most when normal life is disrupted. In the words of Sanjoy Hazarika, "in the past decades there has been no greater opponents of morality than those who use the gun and the power of fear to disrupt society and kill, kidnap, arrest, detain, harass, and intimidate without compunction".¹⁶ The multiplication

of ethnic political parties with contrasting pro-state and anti-state ideologies and programmes only speak for the 'divided nations from below'. The political forces that work as agents of integration are constantly reinforced with all the armatures of 'bio-power' and 'pastoral power'. The governments in all seven north-east states rely on the issues like security, development and cooperation for mobilising people in favour of the integration agenda.

The rupture between the militants and the common people is widening in recent months as is reflected in open defiance of the diktats of the former by the latter. The organisations spearheading the movements often take their fellow community people for granted and impose programmes or undertake acts that alienate them. The conflict over the past decades in the north-east has created differing powerful systems, which seek to condition minds, to shape the way people act and the way they live. The bandh culture resorted to often by the militant outfits in Assam has disrupted transportation on the only functional highway that crosses the state. Such examples are repeated ad nauseum in other parts of the state, as well as in Nagaland, Manipur and Meghalaya in particular. The attempt to ban Hindi films is an extension of the bandhs called on Independence Day and Republic Day. Such a ban has existed in Manipur for years, but that does not make it right nor does it have the sanction of public acceptance.

The underground armed groups have never bothered to go through even the facade of a democratic exercise to ascertain what people want and the public hardly speak out in the face of an open or unspoken threat. People do react spontaneously when their patience is stressed too far. In the second week of September 2003, the common people in Mokokchung assaulted the NSCN (Khaplang), the representatives of the influential Ao Naga group, and declared that they will not pay any 'tax' to the group. The public burst out in anger when NSCN cadres shot at a student and two others. The homes and vehicles of top leaders were torched and the group ordered its men to hold their fire, worried that the situation would worsen. Kiovi Zhimoni, the 'prime minister' of the group moved to Zuneboto along with the faction leaders and their family members. Not only this, the Ao Senden of Council, comprising 82 village representatives and other local organisations declared that they would not pay any taxes to the faction and demanded an apology for the incident. In Assam, several ULFA leaders have also been lynched in the past couple of years.¹⁷ The public is finally expressing its anger at being pushed around and held to ransom for far too long. It is not the political objectives that they are opposing – it is the arrogance and insensitivity of those who claim to fight for major goals without consulting the public or taking their concerns into consideration. The politics of extortion is politically suicidal as the militant groups are gradually alienated even from members of their own communities.

The rage against Brus or Chakmas is also a product of the supposedly incommensurable presence of these communities in someone else's home. The case of expatriation of a large number of Brus from Mizoram or Paites from Manipur presents a picture of an increasingly hostile inter-ethnic coexistence. The ongoing Kuki-Karbi conflict is another example of inter-ethnic conflict.¹⁸ There are incidents of Karbi-Khasi clashes in Karbi Anglong district of Assam and in Shillong.¹⁹ Since there has been a significant intermixing of ethnic populations in the north-east

the conflicts are bound to arouse ethnic passion and conflicts would proliferate across the region.

Conclusion

The twin objectives of the present paper have been: (a) to unravel the growing crisis of the state-defined nation and the failure of its integrative package in north-east India, and (b) to shed light on the 'unconscious model' (to borrow from Levi-Strauss) of the nations from below, which emerges by challenging the hegemonic nation defined and imposed by the state, and on how such ethnic movements put into effect the strategies and tactics of the hegemonic state on the relatively voiceless, unorganised nations living in the region. The present exercise also brings to light the contradictory responses of the nations from below to the hegemonic strategies of the state: a section finds for itself an accommodative space in the existing social, economic and political arrangement offered by the state and thus functions as an 'agent of integration', while the other section, not willing to be integrated into the present arrangement, turns rebellious, in the cause of an autonomous or independent political space. The arguments in the 'critique of the nations from below' have been arranged to dispel the notion that such rebellions are aimed at earning freedom for the ethnic population. The interpretation of facts relating to ethnic movements in the north-east, as has been done in this paper, clearly suggests that such movements suit the interests of the emerging neo-class in the ethnic communities as they often encroach upon the life and liberty of the 'othered communities', and thus turn out to be demonic and suicidal in the final analysis. The nations from below cannot be termed authentic narrations of cultural traditions, based on the history and power of enduring traditions; the cultural essentialism is more a constructed ideology, a strategy for a new political space. Therefore, the justification for nations in terms of cultural communities (cultural nation) cannot be upheld as the nations from below sustain themselves as temporal political communities (political nation, or nation looking for new political space). Further, because of their attack on class alliance the ethno-nations in the region lose sight of the liberating elements in their movements. The so-called nations from below exist only in the form of divided nations, which are constructed and reconstructed with conflicting objectives, constantly swinging between rebellious and integrative positions; the end result being the loss of life and rights of the ethnic populations in the cause of finding a suitable political home for the neo-class in the ethnic communities. [27]

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Notes

- 1 Bhagat Oinam in an article 'Said, the State and Manipur' (*The Statesman*, December 13, 2003) writes, "Imperialism operates in India as well, in varied forms and perhaps with differing degrees of intensity. It operates much in the line of Gramscian "hegemony". How does one look at Jharkhand and the North East? Or Bastar and Telangana. The causes of unrest are deep-rooted, much more than economic. The history of past 50 years shows that constitutional packages like the Sixth Schedule and statehood have not served the main purpose, at least not for the north-east."
- 2 Prasenjit Biswas, 'Nations from the Below and Rebel Consciousness: The 'New Subaltern' Emergence of North East India' in R R Dhamala

and Sukalpa Bhattacharjee (eds), *Human Rights and Insurgency: The North-East India*, Shipra, New Delhi, 2002, p 142.

- 3 Michel Foucault interprets the essence of "shepherd-folk game" as the application of brute force for disciplining the rebel forces. The creation of a supportive citizenship and exclusion of the non-citizens have been the key features of the city-citizen game and the moot point of "bio-power" has been to govern by managing the concerns of life and death, or the everyday life concerns of people and by generating a sense of security as is done in modern liberal states. For details see Michel Foucault, 'The Subject and Power' in Kete Nash (ed), *Readings in Contemporary Political Sociology*, Blackwell, UK, 2000, pp 8-26; also, the final chapter of *The Will to Knowledge*, Allen Lane, London, 1979.
- 4 Emphasis added. This is how Prasenjit Biswas articulates the definition of 'nations from below' in his article "Nations from the Below and Rebel Consciousness: The 'New Subaltern' Emergence of North East India" in R R Dhamala and Sukalpa Bhattacharjee (eds), *Human Rights and Insurgency: The North-East India*, Shipra, New Delhi, 2002, p 140.
- 5 The development initiatives in independent India have succeeded in widening the class inequality and in developing a neo-class in each ethnic community; a class, which is educated, urban-based, engaged in white-collar occupations, and nurses high political ambitions in the democratic power arrangement. This class could be better phrased as an *ethno-class*, a class with parochial ethnic consciousness. The economic social and political marginalisation of the downtrodden is in-built in the liberal social formation. In the federal economic structure, the states nurse a strong grudge against the centre on the question of distribution of resources.
- 6 Assam has been partitioned several times to create the states of Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland. Autonomous district councils have been created in Mizoram, Tripura and Assam. All these political and administrative arrangements have been made by the Indian state, following the provisions of Indian Constitution, in order to tone down and fragment the 'nations from below' fighting for a political identity.
- 7 Arrangements have made for grassroots devolution of power particularly after the 73rd Constitution Amendment in 1992.
- 8 Manipur was merged to India in 1949.
- 9 Proliferation of hatred is an obvious fallout of intercommunity clashes. Thus if there are attacks on Biharis in Assam the former would retaliate in Bihar and if the Khasi are driven out of Karbi Anglong district of Assam the Karbis would be attacked in Shilong, as has happened on November 17, 2003. Mobs and the resurgent ULFA massacred 25 Hindi-speaking people, including six women and a two-year-old girl, in various places in Assam on the night of November 18, 2003. Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, New Bongaigaon, Dhubri, Nalbari and Golaghat were the most affected districts. The attackers also burnt down over a hundred houses in the wave of revenge-killings in retaliation to the attacks on rail passengers from north-east in Bihar in the last week of November 2003. The Biharis affected were mostly the working class people who had migrated to Assam in search of a living. More people died in subsequent attacks on the Biharis.
- 10 Myron Weiner, *Sons of the Soil: Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1978:296.
- 11 The ethnic riots of 1996 in Kokrajhar district of Assam between the Bodo and the adivasi left about 400 hundred Santhals dead and over 1,50,000 homeless. The one-sided acts of ethnic cleansing by the dominant Bodo continued in late 1990s and in the initial years of the current decade. The refugees had to flee for safety to relief camps where, even after four years, they languish without rations, medical care and education. The appalling condition of the displaced persons in the camps are evident in the death of 40 persons of gastroenteritis in four relief camps in Deoshree, Shantipur Bhorpar and Galajhar under Basugaon police station in 2000. Ingti Kathar, the deputy commissioner who visited the camps admitted, "The deaths had occurred mainly due to unhygienic conditions in the camps and contaminated fish eaten by the victims". The refugees are reluctant to return home because that would mean fresh threat to their life and property. The administration was finding it difficult to resettle them elsewhere as there was little spare government land available in the district.
The tension between the Bodo and the adivasi continues in Assam. In an incident (on July 24, 2003), seven adivasis were killed and four critically injured when security forces fired on a mob that attacked them in Darrang district. According to a report, a group of adivasis tried to close shops at Kashibeel, under Panery police station, to enforce statewide strike called by All Assam Adivasi Students' Association. Some members of the All Bodo Students' Union resisted the move and violence ensued. Police and Central Reserve Police Force were sent to quell the mob. A mob of 3,000 adivasis, armed with bows and arrows, reached the spot, attacked the security forces and tried to snatch away rifles, prompting the police to open fire. The adivasi then went to local ABSU office and ransacked it.
- 12 In February 1983, about 2,000 Bengali-Muslims were massacred in Nellie (Assam) in one night.
- 13 The underground National Liberation Front of Tripura and All Tripura Tiger Force militants, in an attempt to cleanse Tripura of Bengalis, have been engineering mass killings and mass exodus of non-tribal population. The biggest human tragedy in Tripura was caused by the riot in June 1980 when tribal extremists killed more than 1,000 Bengalis. The tribe-non-tribal conflicts affected more than 2,27,000 (total population 20,53,000) non-tribal and 1,44,000 (out of 5,84,000) tribal population. The Dinesh Singh Committee Report (1980) reveals that nearly 35,000 non-tribal houses and 11,000 tribal houses were gutted in the conflicts. The tribals lost property worth Rs 44 million and the non-tribals lost four times more. As a result of the riots, nearly 1,90,000 people were displaced (1/5th of which were tribal) and 141 relief camps were set up for the non-tribal and 45 relief camps were set up for the displaced belonging to tribal communities.
- 14 The term 'new subaltern' as different from 'subaltern' not only refers to identities produced from their dominated positions but is a description of even graver feature when expressions of pain are numbed by way of complete and rapacious violence on subordinate communities. This also gives birth to 'rebel consciousness'. This term has been discussed extensively by Gayatri Spivak at the Vth Subaltern Studies Conference in 1998, referred to in Biswas, 2002, p 161.
- 15 P Biswas, 2002, p 150. Various pulp fictions written in vernacular such as Mizo, Khasi, etc, are already available along with high demand for various films and images from the west.
- 16 Sanjoy Hazarika, "CMs and the Media: Stand Up, Speak Out", *The Statesman*, September 16, 2003, <http://www.thestatesman.net/page.news.php?clid=14&these=&usrss=1&id=22790>.
- 17 *The Statesman*, September 17, 2003, <http://www.thestatesman.net/page.news.php?clid=14&these=&usrss=1&id=22789>.
- 18 Nine bodies were recovered from two places in the Singhason Hills in Karbi Anglong district; seven from Ganjan and two from Dihanglang. A faction of the United People's Democratic Solidarity, a Karbi militant outfit, is suspected to be behind the killings. According to the DSP, Karbi Anglong, killings at Ganjan took place on November 14 and the killings at Dihanglang were carried out on November 16, 2003 (*The Statesman*, November 17, 2003).
- 19 A Karbi youth was set on fire by a mob in Shillong in an apparent retaliation to Khasis being driven out from the Karbi Anglong district.

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