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## **Northeast India's Multi-Ethnicities: Dominant Issues and Problems**

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### **Abstract**

*Northeast India is considered to be one of the most diverse, culturally rich and environmentally rich regions of the country. It is a land where multiple ethnicities reside; every ethnic community has a history and shares a cultural memory. There exist tensions among these communities and the conflict of space and identity is further intensified by immigrant forces and acculturation. The region is diseased with separatist and militant issues worsened by nationalist-nativist conflicts. Often considered far away from the mainland India, the Northeast region faces the dilemma of being ignored and isolated. The paper raises the dominant issues regarding the perception and representation of the multi-ethnicities of northeast and the narrative underlying it. The paper also analyses two case studies which echo the dilemma of the people of the region and attempts to outline dominant perspectives in which Northeast is perceived.*

***Key Words: Northeast, Ethnicity, Identity, Cultural Memory.***

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**1. Introduction:** The Northeast India is the eastern most region of the country which comprises of the eight sister states- Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Tripura, Mizoram, Nagaland and the newly recognized northeast state Sikkim.

Every state in the northeast India shares international border; Arunachal Pradesh shares border with Bhutan, China and Myanmar; Assam with Bhutan and Bangladesh; Manipur and Nagaland with Myanmar; Meghalaya and Tripura with Bangladesh; Mizoram with Bangladesh and Myanmar; and Sikkim with Bhutan, Nepal and China.

Every state of Northeast India is itself an abode of multiple ethnicities with a bulk of people converted to Christianity by the European Christian Missionaries. There are around 220 ethnic communities in the Northeast India alone and more than 220 dialects. The hills states in the region like Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland are predominantly inhabited by native ethnic communities with a degree of diversity even within the ethnic groups. The region's population results from ancient and continuous flows of migrations from Tibet, Indo-Gangetic India, the Himalayas, present Bangladesh and Myanmar. Adivasi, Assamese, Bhutia, Bishnupriya Manipuri, Biate, Bodo, Chakma,

Chhetri, Dimasa, Garo, Gurung, Hajong, Hmar, Hrankhwil, Jamatia, Karbi, Khasi, Khampti, Koch, Kom, Kuki, Paite, Vaiphei, Zou, Teddim, Simte, Gangte Lepcha, Lushai, Meitei, Mishng, Mizo, Poumai, Mao, Maram, Tangkhul, Anal, Monsang, Naga, Nepali, Noatia, Paite, Pnar, Purvottar maithili, Rabha, Reang, Rongmei, Singpho, Sylheti, various Tibetan tribes, Tamang, Tiwa, Tripuri, Zeme Naga, Chorei and Limbu are different ethnic groups inhabiting the region.

Besides the diverse native population, the region has been witnessing huge immigration from before independence. There is internal immigration from the states; again, there is external immigration from the neighboring nations. Naturally, there are inter-ethnic conflicts. The ethnic demand for homeland created a number of smaller states in the northeast. For instance, the greater Assam was broken down into Nagaland (1963), Meghalaya (1972), Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram (1987) to meet the demands of these ethnic groups. And, there are further new state demands, 7 months back, the ethnic party; Tipra State party had demanded a separate state called Tipra Land as their community is on the verge of extinction. Besides this, there are multi-ethnicities which are external ethnicities which suffer intercultural clashes due to diversity.

The present paper highlights the basic issues relating to diversity among the native communities which has been further intensified by heavy immigration happening since the time of the colonizers. Immigration leads to economic, spatial and psychological crisis which in turn becomes the cause for insurgency and violence in the region. The paper raises questions and the problems of ethnification, nativism, nationalism, individual vis-à-vis national freedom in the Northeast Indian context. It attempts to study the context in the light of insider-outsider model, consumerist perspectives and oriental model. To understand the dilemma of the people of this region, two interviews have been incorporated as case studies.

**2. Ethnicity and Multi-Ethnicity:** Ethnicity is often identified with the ideas of primordialism based on descent, race, kinship, territory, language, history, etc. It is also related to the concept of nativism which seeks a revival, preservation and protection of native culture. Ethnicity is defined as “the sense of collective belonging to a named community of common myths or origin and shared memories, associated with an historic homeland” (Smith, 1999:262). Ethnicity also refers to some form of group identity related to a group of persons who accept and define themselves by a consciousness of common descent or origin, shared historical memories and connections (Chazan, Mortimer, Ravenhall and Rothchild, 1988: 35). Multi-ethnicity occurs when members of a variety of ethnic groups interact within a particular forum. Northeast India is a land where many ethnicities have been residing and there have been clashes among them. There is the need to assert one's ethnicity only when there is threat to its existence and Northeast India has shared a long history of immigration and acculturation.

T.K. Oommen identifies six reasons for the process of ethnification. First, a nation may continue to be in its ancestral or adopted homeland and yet it may be ethnified by the colonizing or native dominant collectivity. That is, the link between territory and culture

should not be viewed merely as a physical phenomenon. Second is the denial of full-fledged participation in the economy and polity to an immigrant collectivity which had adopted a new land as its homeland. Thirdly, the tendency on the part of a settler collectivity to identify with its ancestral homeland even after several decades, sometimes even after centuries, of immigration. Fourthly, ethnification also occurs when a state attempts to 'integrate' and homogenize the different nations in its territory into a common people. Fifthly, if those who migrate to alien lands are denied basic human and citizenship rights even when they become eligible for them, they are ethnified in that they are treated as strangers and outsiders. Finally, even when immigrants are accepted as co-nationals by the host society, the former may not want that identity and might wish to return to their homeland (1997: 13-15).

The northeast India reflects all the above reasons for being ethnified. It is ethnified and recognized primarily by the native collectivity. The link between their territory and culture is not merely a physical phenomenon but a psychological attachment to homeland. There have often been instances where the immigrant collectivity has been denied acceptance in the larger milieu. In 2007, 98 non natives, most of whom were Hindi speaking, were killed by the natives. In 2009, another 9 were killed. In 2010, 21 Bengali, Hindi and Nepali immigrants were killed. These are only few cases; there have many such incidents.

These immigrants who have been staying here for more than a century still tend to miss their ancestral homeland and show signs of psychological displacement. The dilemma of being rootless, the problem of finding an origin in the native land is what often an immigrant faces. This dilemma is further worsened when the immigrant after years of habitation in the alien land cannot accommodate himself back in his ancestral homeland due to the gap which is not only temporal and spatial but also psychological. The tragedy of homelessness and the crisis of identity in both the homeland and the alien land lead to a process of ethnification. The tragedy of partition, the inclusion of districts, Karimganj and Cachar in Assam from Sylhet (present Bangladesh) has produced generations which are still today psychologically displaced. The northeast region has witnessed a large number of immigrants from Rajasthan, who came and settled here for trade; from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, who came here for employment. Their kids and grand kids are perhaps born here and practically are the natives of this alien land. But the treatment meted out to them is that of alienation and they end up being the minority often. These people are the worst victims as they can never have attachment with their ancestral homeland as they were not born there, and their birthplace is not their ancestral homeland and they are outsiders. They are here, just here but nowhere. This was regarding immigration from one state to another in the same nation. But this region witnessed immigration from across border which has further intensified the problems of ethnification. People from Bangladesh, Tibet, Myanmar, Bhutan and China have also acculturated in the region.

Ethnification in this region is also the effect of the Centre's tendency to homogenize the multicultural block into a single entity. They are recognized into the national sphere not as themselves but in the way, the nation wants to see them.

Northeast India is a land of multiple ethnic cultures living simultaneously together. And all the ethnic cultures are different from one another. The Bodos are different from Khasis; some communities are matriarchal while others are not and so on. Subsequently, some communities are more dominant than others. So, there are clashes among the native communities in respect of identity, existence and sustenance. At the second level, there are immigrants who further diminish the resources for the natives and aggravate their problems. These immigrants have their own culture which again clashes with the diverse culture of the natives. At the third level, these immigrants and these natives are often homogenized in the national culture. The national culture dominates on these diverse native ethnicities and immigrant ethnicities. At the fourth level, let us consider the growth of information and communication technology and the soft world politics. Here, a growing trend of the spread of a mono-cultural society is observed. The native ethnic culture of the northeast India and the dominant national ethnicity both are equally affected and effected by cultural products like pizza, angry birds and so on. These international strategy to globalize, glocalize and homogenize the culture of the whole world in the western line of culture has the potential to alter gradually the folk narratives. The displacement of culture can lead to a displacement to history and there might be a day when Superman will erase the existence of Shaktiman forever. And media has a big role to play in the creation of such a mono-cultural space in the multicultural world.

**2.1 From Ethnicity to Politics:** The ethnic demand for homeland created a number of smaller states in the northeast. For instance, the greater Assam was balkanized into Nagaland (1963), Meghalaya (1972), Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram (1987) to meet the demands of these ethnic groups. However, mere making of territorial boundary did not solve the problem; on the contrary, it further aggregated it. The denial of basic goods to various communities can be seen in the larger contest of denial of social justice for the communities. In the context of India, Ambrose Pinto states that “the competition for power among different social and ethnic groups was legitimized on the premise that all social and ethnic groups will have equal space and opportunities. However, with the majority groups or the dominant social group gradually aspiring for power; the attempt was to create a national culture. In the process the ethnic groups have felt marginalized and rejected. The culture of ethnic groups remains restricted to private expression within the group with no attempts to include it, in spite of the constitutional slogan of ‘unity in diversity’” (2000: 189). Moreover, it is viewed that, “when the state fails as the principal agent of socio-economic transformation and cannot ensure distributive justice to its citizens, it tends to become increasingly coercive” (Misra, 2002: 3784). Further, the creation of smaller territorial units acceding to the demands of the dominant ethnic community in a region often threaten the existence and survival of numerically less ethnic communities as the positions and jobs and resources were monopolized the dominant ethnic group. The Hmar problem in Mizoram and the Garos disadvantageous positions in accessing resources and positions in Meghalaya are such examples forcing them to arouse ethnic feeling and violent mobilization. While the making of territorial boundary satisfied the dominant ethnic

community, it created despair for the minority ethnic economic communities. As a result, the level of extremist activities percolated from one level to another. The ethnic mobilization assumes an extremist posture when various ethnic movement arousing emotive issues to expand its mass base among the society. The Mizo National Famine Front formed under the leadership of Laldenga used the famine situation of 1959 to arouse ethnic consciousness and later turned it into an underground movement. The Assam Language Movement (1960-70) raised the issue of making the Assamiya language as the medium of instruction upto graduation level in addition to existing English language.

Another kind of social exclusion evident is in the area of language. The introduction of alien language over local language also created ethnic mobilization. The early movements in Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland is due to the domination of Assamese. The Assam Official Language Act 1960, had its repercussion on the Mizos, Khasis, Garos and Bodos, and it further rekindled the regional consciousness among the divergent ethnic groups in the United Assam. For instance, the people of Khasis Hills, Jaintia Hills and the Garo Hills under the leadership of the All Party Hill Leaders Conference demanded separate state. There are criticisms against popularizing Hindi in Arunachal Pradesh.

The existing exclusionary tendencies show that most of the institutional means of accommodation such as granting autonomy to particular ethnic groups in a particular region and even the formation of separate state for some communities would not bring fruits. The exclusionary tendencies created by both the state and the dominant community lead to the ethnic assertion of specific ethnic communities.

**3. Nativism and Nationalism:** Nativism is a policy, an attitude, a revolution aimed at reviving, preserving and practicing an indigenous culture. According to the great anthropologist Ralph Linton, nativism is the result of culture contact. He has proved on the basis of his studies of Native American communities, that whenever a culture is under threat from another more aggressive culture, weaker one's awareness of its native values is expressed in many ways. Nationalism, on the other hand is a political ideology which binds the nation together. Where the native is tied to his space by the love for his land and culture, the nationalist is tied by politics with culture at the backdrop.

In the context of Northeast India, the ethnic communities who have been staying here acknowledge themselves as the natives of the place and adhere to the love of the land. Their nativity reflects their love for a simple life as contrasting the modern lifestyle. These communities have flourished in the lap of nature and the dense foliage of the valley. With immigration and increase in population, the forests have reduced considerably and hence the habitation of such ethnic communities has been perturbed. What happened centuries back in the case of America is reflected in the northeast Indian situation. The manner in which the European turned Americans went on pushing the natives towards the frontiers till there was no more land for them; the immigrants in the northeast India also pushed the natives to reside finally in dense forests as there was no more land for them.

In the national sphere both the natives Americans and the Northeast Indian native communities have been declined a say. With the immigration came a sense of alienation due to a vast gap in the culture of the immigrants. The immigrants were more involved in the social sphere and dominated the socio-economic processes. The ethnic communities faced intense crisis and as a result, found themselves distanced from the national social sphere. The spirit of nationalism calls for love for the nation but these communities have love for land and the nation has alienated them leaving in them a sense of annoyance for the nation. The native Americans have been extremely repressed, marginalized and subdued whereas the Americans are the richest, most popular and wealthiest people; both inhabiting the same zone. Similarly, in the same nation, some ethnicities are popular while the native communities are ignored in India. The question here is not just of ethnic identity but the importance of national freedom over individual freedom. Before being a representative of a particular cultural group, every person is an individual; then is individual freedom retained in a nationally sovereign nation? Is national recognition dependent on being 'like' the other ethnic communities in the mainland nation? In a nation like India which is enormously diverse, there seems to a tendency of homogenizing the diversity on the name of unity among the diversity. And again, there are some communities which are more equal, important than others. The multi-ethnicities in northeast India are represented as such there is an element of weirdness and strangeness in them which would evoke a sense of attraction among the outsiders for the region.

**3.1 Insider-Outsider Model:** In some parts of the northeast, the issue of ethnic identity assertion is related to migration that resulted in a sense of exclusion. This region since Independence witnessed migration of Bangladeshis, Nepalese; migrant workers from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, people from Rajasthan and other parts that came for business. The 'insider' and 'outsider' syndrome crippled the social, political, economic and cultural life of the native communities. In Tripura, the indigenous population became landless and land alienation led to Bengali migration. The native community was reduced to minority and the migrant Bengalis emerged as the dominant force. The threat to their survival due to illegal migration created further social exclusion. Apart from creating a feeling of 'us' and 'them', it led to the alienation of natural resources and cultural specificities of ethnic groups leading to identity crisis. The material existence of tribal communities was threatened by the influx of migration, occupation of key government jobs by non-natives leading to their further exclusion. The phenomenon of ethnic extremism is further activated by declining jobs opportunities in the government sector. Ethnic communities feel in terms of "us" and "them" in the process of generating ethnic consciousness. This feeling emerges out of one group or community realizes its relative deprivation in comparison with others. The frustration of the unemployed youth was utilized by the extremist organizations to serve their interests. The demands of the extremist groups are varying from autonomy to secessionism. They often challenge the sovereignty and integrity of the nation-state. The assertion of ethnic identity and the accompanying extremist tendencies are related to the feeling of losing one's own identity, marginalization and exploitation by others. This

situation marks a sharp parallel with what happened in America with the Native Americans. They were pushed towards the frontiers until there was no space more and were finally dispossessed of their land by the outsider European who claimed to be American in the true sense of the term.

There is another perspective in which the insider-outsider model can be viewed in Northeast India: the etic-emic approach. The terms were coined by linguist Kenneth Pike in 1954 from terms phonemic and phonetic arguing that the phonemic sounds voice the insider while phonetic voice the outsider objective tones. The emic approach studies what an insider thinks about his/her culture, it takes into account the perception of culture from within. It analyses the discourse that arouses from within by the natives. This perception is often one-sided and pro-cultural as the subject is involved and cannot be objective or neutral. The etic approach studies how the outsider looks at the insider from outside.

In the mainland India, the people of northeast are referred to as “dog-eaters”, “tribals”, “chinkys”, and other such derogatory terms. The people are not just humiliated but tortured, attacked and killed also. As per the reports published by the Home Ministry, the crime on the northeastern people outside Northeast has increased by 270% in the last three years.

**4. The Orient Northeast:** In case of the Northeast India, the ethnic identities are a result of differences among the multi-ethnicities on the lines of language, culture and recognition. These differences take the turn of violent conflicts when the governance is not as per expectation. The attitude of the govt. since independence has neglected and ignored the needs and existence of these communities. Furthermore, they have tried to include them in the national identity without protecting their individual ethnic interests. Here comes, the problem of homogenization of the multi-ethnicities into a single block. The term “Northeast” conjures an image of a regional ethnic identity, a unification of shared identity. But in reality, every single state of northeast is in itself multi-ethnic and diverse. The block representation of the region not only induces a sense of separatism and alienation among the Northeasterners, it also distances the region from the mainland nation.

North East India is strategically important. It has natural frontiers on three sides and a political boundary on the fourth. It has common frontiers with four political communities, China in the North, Bhutan in the West, Bangladesh in the East and Myanmar (formerly Burma) in the South. There is huge geo-economic potential in the region as it is the gateway to east and South-east Asia. The entire land mass of the North East is now connected to the rest of India by a 22 kilometer link along the Siliguri Corridor; more than 99 per cent of the borders of the North East abut other countries.

No other part of India occupies such a strategic position as the North East. The region is conceived of as an unexplored block and is posted across the world and its immediate neighbors as an unexplored paradise. With respect to the Look East policy, the Northeast India is not only homogenized to mix it with the national cultural milieu but represented as a package with consumerist policies. The block representation not only suppresses the individualism, the uniqueness of every part, in an attempt of homogenization, it induces the

fear of marginalization and identity crisis in minds of the native communities. The representation echoes the once orientalized India. The Orient today is the Northeast represented in ethnic colors which symbolize mysticism and exotism to attract the world. This isolated geopolitical space is again gendered and termed as the Northeast "Sisters"- a direct parallel to the Mother India. The terms like 'unexplored northeast', 'slice of paradise' and like designate the region. This region has a long history and a cultural memory of its natives; secondly this region has a long past of immigrants who now have a legacy here, the coming generations of these immigrants have the feeling of nativity towards their land; thirdly this region has so many ethnicities when all the states combined that it itself is a multicultural and diverse space. The issue is that with such a diverse milieu, how can the valley be termed as unexplored? Again, posted as a tourist destination, the representations are always of a so perfect nature and the region is appended as a beautiful part of India. Are the natives and the multi-ethnicities of the region given place in the larger mainland? Are the Northeastern people treated equal to the other Indians? The multi-ethnicities are all classified as one in most representations and the block is homogenized. For the people of the mainland, the Assamese, Bengali, Bodo, Khasi all are "chinkis". In this respect again, there are two perspectives: the etic and the emic. The etic perceives the land from outside as an outsider; the emic perceives it from within as an insider. In a multiethnic space, the emic also looks at the other ethnic community as an outsider. Where the world is on its way to forming a global culture, a mono-cultural situation, India tags herself with "unity in diversity" and attempts to homogenize all the multi-ethnicities. In this task, some people become more equal than others and the differences among the ethnicities intensify due to discrimination. In a nation where there are 1652 languages and infinite number of ethnicities and communities surviving together, is it justified to ask for the religious scripture like the Geeta of a particular community to be made a compulsory subject in schools? The epics Ramayana and Mahabharata are not just legends but are Indian tradition and they have as many versions as many communities are there. So, is it justified to prioritize any one version and impose it on all?

Very recently, the tourism department of India, with respect to the Act East Policy, has proposed to make the Bollywood actors, Priyanka Chopra and John Abraham brand ambassadors of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh resp. the focus has now shifted from merely "looking" to "acting" and hence, actors are employed for the cause of promotion. The question is if the region is a commodity put forward for sale with the aid of celebrity. While the promotion has potential to bring the region in highlights, the obvious thought is what such treatment aims at. Does it intensify the crisis of population and environment while serving the profit motive and consumerist policies of the tourism department?

## **5. Interview 1**

An interview with a 22 year old girl from Assam, studying in Delhi

"I am a Bengali from Assam and I have been studying here from the last two years. In the initial days, my classmates used to refer to me as chinky. I was not even aware of what chinky meant. Then one day I asked my roommate and she said me that northeasterners are

referred to as Chinky due to their differentiated features. It hurt me, and I also realized that for the entire India every northeasterner seems to belong to the same community.”

The girl interviewed hails from a small district of Assam, Karimganj where the dominant population is Bengalis and Muslims. Therefore, she was not that aware of the fact the native ethnicities of this block are humiliated outside as they do not share common features.

She has been a victim of humiliation as well as homogenization. Such situations can lead to intense psychological crisis in the minds of the students who leave their homes to study outside. She has been treated as an outsider and her very identity has been altered by the outsiders.

## **5.1 Interview 2**

An interview with a 29 year old Manipuri boy who works in a MNC in Mumbai:

“I had always heard comments and threats from some boys in my locality who were not happy with me because I was not one of them, but I ignored their attitude. But the limits were crossed on the night when Cricket Team India was out of the ICC World Cup, 2016 after losing the semifinals against Australia. I woke up the next morning to find my motor bike badly damaged in the garage of the building I stay. Apparently, 3 boys had tampered with my bike and their shoe marks were visible on my bike seat. The bumper was badly damaged and lights broken. I just felt lost and could not understand anything. I went to police but police came to no conclusion. Following the reaction of those guys the next days, I could comprehend that they did the thing out of anger as Team India did not reach the Finals in a state of alcoholic sub consciousness.”

From the incident, many issues are raised.

First, the northeastern people are considered as outsiders;

Next, they are ill-treated and thought of as enemies to nationalism;

Third, they are hated and denied space everywhere;

Fourth, they are even harmed and are at risk of their lives every time.

Northeast India hardly finds space in the national media and if it finds at all, the representations are so stereotypical and homogeneous that the gap between the two sides deepens.

## **6. Conclusion:**

**6.1 Homogenization of Diversity:** There is diversity among the natives. There is again diversity among the immigrants. The situation is not simply multiethnic but multicultural as well. Now, there is unequal representation of native ethnicities which leads to crisis among the natives.

Again, there are huge immigrants who have better access to socio-economic variables. But these immigrants are also not represented in the larger sphere. Rather the ethnic communities and the immigrants are homogenized into a collective entity referred to as the northeast with “unity in diversity”. Due to such misrepresentation, under-representation and

unequal representation of multi-ethnicities, there sparks a sense of identity crisis which results in the demands for new state by ethnic identities.

The northeastern people are viewed as “chinky” irrespective of their particular ethnic origin. They are humiliated, isolated, ignored and even threatened in many cases.

**6.2. Isolation of the homogenized block:** The diverse block is reduced as homogeneous and is further reduced and differentiated in the mainland India. Due to differentiated racial features, the people from this region are not assimilated but isolated and alienated. They are scorned and as they share inter-national features, they are taken to be unpatriotic. This is what happens with J. Laishram in Mumbai and is harmed and attacked for being an outsider.

**6.3 Northeast as the third world of India:** The treatment meted out to this region echoes the treatment which India faced by the Europeans in the global arena. Referred to as uncivilized, underdeveloped, erotic, mystic, and oriental; India has always been sidelined and referred to as the third-world. Similarly, the Indian population, media and politics under-rates, marginalizes and treats the region as the third-world of the country. The representations of this region in the media and the assumptions about the valley are stereotypical and consistent from ages.

**6.4. The virgin Northeast:** Often depicted as the unexplored paradise, the region echoes the negation of Native Americans in the history of America which was referred to as the virgin land. Like the natives of America, the natives of Northeast have also been pushed to the frontiers and extremely marginalized. If there are natives and there is diversity of ethnicities, how can the land be termed as “unexplored paradise”?

**6.5 The Brand Northeast:** With the initiation of the Act East Policy, the region is treated almost as a commodity packed in vibrant colors, posted far and wide as attractive and accompanied by Bollywood celebrities to sensitize the promotion. The region has been reduced to a brand which has potential to earn huge revenue for the govt. and simultaneously boost tourism.

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