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## Ethnicity and Ethnic Conflict: A Search for Identity or an Identity Crisis? With Special Reference to Northeast India

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### **Abstract:**

*Ethnic conflicts based on identity formation and crises have been part of human civilization. On the one hand, ethnicity has helped the communities to be united, and on the other hand, it has led to confusion and conflict. There have been a number of ethnic movements in the northeast in order to preserve ones' ethnic identity. Therefore, there is a linkage between ethnic identity and ethnic conflict. Ethnic conflict mainly occurs when an ethnic group either looks for an identity or when they are in identity crisis. Identity is the birthright of an individual. Everyone is born into this world with an identity or with multiple identities. Identity is also formed in due course of time. Hence, identity is both inherited and acquired. Therefore, it is imperative to recognize people's identity and allow them to preserve their distinct ethnic identity. Thus, this paper would analyze some of the factors leading to identity crisis and propose suggestions to resolve identity crisis and ethnic conflicts.*

**Keywords:** Conflict, crisis, ethnicity, identity, movements

### **1. Introduction**

People come across a number of crises in their personal, professional, cultural, political, religious and social interaction. Therefore crisis is part of human civilization. The success depends on how well people are able to tackle these crises and live amicably. One of the major crisis a community experiences is, when their identity is questioned or at stake. The identity of a person or a community speaks what a person or a group is all about. When a group feels that they are deprived of something that they deserve, people begin to polarize and fight for their demands. Most of the major conflicts occurred in history is based on ethnicity. In ethnicity people are united and feel secured. Once this security is threatened, people feel insecure and begin to retaliate. People do feel that the best way of getting their demands done is to come together as a unified group and fight for their common cause.

Northeast India experienced a number of conflicts based on ethnicity. The main reason being that when a particular group attains its demand due to ethnic polarization and movements, other groups who are also in the similar situation get encouraged to follow the same means to attain their aspirations. The worst outcome of ethnic polarization is insurgency and its related activities. On the one hand, people of the region are not satisfied with the central government and its policies towards the northeast and on the other hand, there is tension among the tribes of the region in order to preserve their distinct identity. Today, most of the northeastern states do experience ethnic conflicts due to which the region has a bad reputation and this has also adversely affected the developmental activities of the region as well. One of the major reasons for this identity crisis is due to the huge influx of illegal immigration the region has been experiencing since independence from the neighbouring countries and from other states of the Indian Union. These immigrants who have settled for a long time in the region are also in search of an identity and want to establish themselves. This has created conflicts between the old settlers and the new settlers or between the insiders and outsiders.

### **2. The Concept of Ethnicity**

"The concept of Ethnicity refers to the identification and labeling of a group of people. The criteria may be linguistic, racial or cultural" (Jha, 1992: 84). Ethnicity is a term used by the people to identify themselves within a multicultural society. It may be defined as an organizing set of principles by a group of people in order to differentiate themselves from other groups in terms of race, kinship, language, the customary mode of livelihood, culture and religion. Thus, they claim to have a separate identity (Priyadarshini, 2006). The literature on ethnicity defines ethnic groups as people who see themselves or are seen by others as sharing a distinctive and enduring collective identity based on a common belief, a common origin, a common history, a common destiny and culturally specific practices. Physical appearance, language, and a shared territory may further contribute in varying degrees to ethnic identity (Borgohain, 2014). Ethnicity can be referred to a common tradition, a system of shared values and culture by a group of people within a cultural unit who identify themselves as a distinct entity different from other cultures (Pyal, 2006; Rizvi, 2006).

"The word 'ethnic' is now being increasingly used to identify groups of people who have evolved from their primitive stages of tribe and clan identity into a more cohesive group looking for a coherent political identity" (Mukhim, 2007: 97). Ethnic groups are differentiated from other groups as they identify themselves with some distinct characteristics and mode of living (Palanithurai, 1993). An ethnic group is a distinct category of the population in a larger society whose culture is usually different from that of others. The members of such group feel that they are bound together by common ties of race or nationality or culture (Morris, 1968).

Theoretical works on ethnicity have brought out clearly that ethnic identity struggles are waged not by isolated tribal communities, but by politicized cultural communities who want to enter into the threshold of modern way of life. Many times identity assertions and movements are neither for seeking restoration of their past, nor to preserve their unique cultural heritage. Nearly all of them are basically struggles of modernizing communities seeking autonomy and respectable accommodation in the nation state structures with a high political motive (Srikanth and Thianlalmuan, 2011). Many a times the leaders of the group manipulate the innocent civilians to fight for their common cause with their hidden agendas of gaining political power. "Constructivist elite theories of conflict argue that ethnic violence is a political strategy to create, increase or maintain group boundaries and political support" (Demmers, 2012: 29).

### 3. Identity Formation and Its Dynamics

Identity is one of the most popular catch words associated with ethnicity. People use it to differentiate the 'self' and the 'other'. It is good and advisable to have identity without which one is considered to be weak. We may also possess more than one identity like a national identity, religious identity, cultural identity, professional identity etc. However our identity based on gender, ethnic and national are more enduring than other identities like religious, professional etc (Demmers, 2012). Identity is a symbolic construction, an image of ourselves, which we build in a process of interaction with others. If we do not compare ourselves with others there is no need for an identity. It is therefore contextual and dynamic, developing through dialogue and through the different ways in which people interact with others in relation to their cultural environment and their relations (Mach, 2007).

Identity is the creation of oneself, not placed on someone by another person, organization, or society. Identity moves from the local to the transnational. Identity is situational. Individual possesses a core identity, but one's ethnic identity can shift depending on the environment and the relationships with others within a particular situation (Johnson, 2003). In his opinion Palanithurai (1993) says that ethnicity is not something that happens in an instant moment. Group identity is formed as the result of long deliberation and strategy. However according to Fenton (2003: 194), "ethnicities are grounded as well as constructed. Ethnic identities take shape around real shared material experience, shared social space, commonalities of socialization, and communities of language and culture".

It is to be believed that ethnic identity and its expression in terms of ethnicity is not pre-determined or given. It is socially constructed and therefore the identity and ethnicity are the products of modern society particularly endorsed by the middle class in the third world countries (Karna, 2008). In a democratic society, to be a good citizen, one should have a clear identity of one's own and that identity is being accepted by the group in which one belongs. Therefore to have a strong identity one must feel that the group that he/she belongs enjoys acceptance from the society (Isajiw, 2000). Even if a person has an identity which it is not acknowledged by the group or society, it has no value. In the same way if an ethnic identity is not accepted by the larger group or the nation as such, it ceases to exist. Therefore people always look for an identity that is acknowledged by others. Once that is hampered, identity crisis takes place and people begin to fight for safeguarding their identity.

Ethnic identity is central source in which most of the policies of North-East India revolve. Identity aspirations of the leaders of the group are capable of influencing, inspiring, mobilizing and manipulating the communities in pursuit of self-government, autonomy or independence. Northeast India provides instances of multiple forms of manifestations of ethnic identity and ethnic conflicts (Srikanth and Thianlalmuan, 2011). In northeast India, the movements of the various communities to assert and protect their 'ethnic' identity, is the most significant aspects of the contemporary socio-political crisis the region faces today. Many minor groups with somewhat a very dim cultural background are also now beginning to assert their identities in order to be heard and acknowledged. Some are even busy in inventing separate identities to make an impression of themselves (Prakash, 2011).

Most of the communities of northeast India were not conscious about their ethnic identities in the pre-colonial period. In fact they had little idea about what is happening in the world outside and their ethnic world view was confined to their families, clans and village. The advent of colonial administration made them to be aware of their ethno-cultural identity. This has helped them to ascertain their identity and began to improve their social, economic and cultural status. People began to take pride of their unique culture and tradition and did everything to preserve it even using violent means (Rizvi, 2006).

### 4. Ethnic Identity: Source of Strength or Source of Conflict?

Ethnicity and ethnic identity not only distinguishes one group from another but also it contributes to the sameness, unity and oneness among its members for identification (Pyal, 2006). It is a person's ethnic identity that gives him credibility as part of a group. We are all social beings who want to associate ourselves with a group for our identity and existence. It is this particular ethnic identity that protects a person from other external struggles. "Ethnic upsurge is not always bad - it gives hitherto unrepresented groups a chance to be heard and listened to" (Mahanta, 2007: 130). A similar opinion is being shared by Amartya Sen stating that the sense of identity can make an important contribution to the strength and the warmth of people's interaction with others, such as neighbours, or members of the same community, or fellow citizens, or followers of the same religion. Our focus on particular identities can enrich our bonds and make us do many things for each other and can help to take us beyond our self-centered lives (Sen, 2006). A similar opinion is expressed by Demmers (2012), stating that ethnicity is important in human relationships for its own sake. People can feel deeply

attached to their ethnic group; they love their ethno-nation and culture because there is a natural inclination towards one's own ethnic group.

Ethnicity can be considered as a double edged sword. It unites most communities for political demands from outsiders but fails to organize the communities within as a common entity (Zehol, 2008). In most cases many individuals carry an ethnic identity with them from birth to death and do take pride of it (Yinger 1997). Ethnicity, when negatives, is at the root of much of the contemporary social and political violence which in extreme cases turns even into ethnicide. But ethnicity can also become creative, constructive and a regenerative force which is a source of strength to build the human future (Kothari, 1989). Very often the conflicting groups share a unitary identity, and often fight over this unitary identity. One such is the ethnic group. Indeed, ethnicity is often seen as the main divide between the conflicting parties (Demmmers, 2012).

On the one hand, identity struggles and conflicts have the potential to undermine the dominant power struggles that cease to be democratic and responsive. But on the other hand, identity assertions can also end up in conflicts, leading to violence to genocide and mutual destruction (Srikanth and Thianlalmuan, 2011). Therefore ethnicity in itself or ethnic struggles is not bad in itself. This manifests the bond of unity among the group to stand united and fight for their rights. However this has to be achieved through democratic means like demonstration, dialogue and negotiation. When these movements take a reverse turn, instead of becoming a source of strength, it becomes a source of conflict.

### **5. Identity Crisis and Ethnic Conflicts**

Identity plays a vital role in social conflict, as it is fundamental to how individuals and collectivities see and understand themselves in conflict. Identities delineate who is 'us' and who is 'them', mobilizing individuals and collectives, and providing legitimacy and justification for individual and group aspirations. Identities are themselves created and transformed in processes of social change (Huffman, 2009). "Ethnic movements in North-East India involve the assertion of identity around certain social problems, historic-cultural legacies and political exigencies by way of organizing themselves into an ethnic body to concretize their identity" (Rizvi, 2006: 17). An ethnic conflict can be considered as mobilization as result of the threatened ethnic identity of a particular group or groups (Szykiewicz, 1998). "Ethnic conflict refers to situations where people mobilize against others on the basis of ethnic identity. The term identity conflict is also used as an alternative to ethnic conflict" (Odendaal, 1998, Para.2, as cited in Borgohain, 2014:13).

The Kuki-Paite conflict in the 1990s was mainly centered on the identity of the Thadou and the Kuki. It was the language of the Thadou that was used in the meetings. This has resulted in the dissatisfaction of numerically smaller communities that the Thadou were trying to dominate other tribes, which has the basis for the conflict (Zehol, 2008). The huge influx of immigrants from the neighbouring countries, especially from Bangladesh has caused fear psychoses among the locals. They fear that the demographic composition of the region is at stake. Therefore they demand not only the deportation of foreign national but also the people from other parts of the country. This has created tension between tribals and non-tribals, outsiders and insiders and even intra tribal conflicts a usual occurrence in the region (Karna, 2008).

"The tribals of northeast India like any other ethnic groups are also affected by identity crisis, in socio-cultural and political fields" (Pyal, 2006: 215). Lack of proper demarcation of boundaries between Assam and Nagaland is one of the causes of ethnic conflicts. A large number of Naga villages especially in sector B of Golaghat district in Assam, enjoy full support of the Nagaland government which makes basic requirements including school buildings available to them. However, the non-Nagas belonging to Assam are only used as vote banks by all the political parties. Therefore the new settlers feel that they are being used for cheap labour and vote bank and the privileges are denied to them, though they have been staying there for a long period. The feeling among the old settlers is that many recent immigrants are suspected Bangladeshi nationals due to which they might lose their land. Thus one can see among them anxiety over land ownership, occupation, and uncertainty about their future (Prakash, 2011).

Ethnic minorities having poor socio-economic development tend to suffer identity crisis more than the group that are economically sound. The desire for an independent ethnic identity might lead to the struggle for autonomy through ethnic struggles and movements (Garg, 2007). The average media report on ethnic violence and conflict speaks of the causes for these conflicts and wars as identifiable ethnic differences (Demmmers, 2012). Ethnic identities make sense only within the ethnic boundaries. Just as ethnic boundaries are subject to contestations and change, ethnic identities need not be permanent. It can change according to time and situation. There is every possibility of new ethnic identities emerging and the old ones disappearing. Hence ethnic identity is dynamic and not static. Further post colonial studies initiated by scholars like Partha Chatterjee have thrown light on how colonial and post colonial states through administrative interventions such as census studies, anthropological surveys, classification of people on the basis of cultural and racial differences, and official recognition of certain communities have facilitated the growth of ethnic identities (Srikanth and Thianlalmuan, 2011).

### **6. Causes for Identity Crisis**

Identity crisis can be caused by various factors such as discrimination, exploitation, alienation, and deprivation. When people feel that they are not acknowledged, accepted, appreciated and are deprived of something that they are entitled to, then the crisis emerges. Identity crisis can happen to both majority and minority communities. However, most of the times the crisis occurs among the minority communities for fear of losing something that they have been enjoying for quite some time. According to Garg (2007), every ethnic group has its own distinct culture, language, and traditional institutions. The fact of belonging to one group often gives rise to follow feelings and sentiments. The fear of being assimilated with the dominant culture and the apprehension of being exploited make

the minorities to fight for their common cause in preserving their identity. According to Bijukumar (2013), Social exclusion, in most cases leads to identity assertion which in turn causes conflict, and even violence.

In the case of northeast India, the people have got very many reasons to feel alienated and under crisis. The region is geographically isolated from the mainland and has more than hundred tribes and sub-tribes. The ethnic diversity, the dominance of one tribe over the other, intermingling of the indigenous people with the immigrants and the deprivation to the region by the centre cause a sense of dissatisfaction and identity crisis among the populace. Due to the large number of immigration the indigenous people lost their land, which is actually part of their culture and life. According to Barpujari (1998: 90), "a sense of neglect and deprivation had created a crisis of identity or identity consciousness amongst different ethnic groups of the Valley of the Brahmaputra". The broad racial, cultural and ethnic differences between mainland India and its northeast and the tenuous geographical link (the chicken neck Siluguri Corridor) contributed to a sense of alienation, deprivation and a feeling of 'otherness' that subsequently gave rise to a political culture of violent separatism(Koijam, 2010).

When people feel that they are a potential victim they retaliate. When people feel that others are a threat to their existence they fight for their survival even to the extent of ethnic cleansing. The anxiety behind is 'they will kill us if we do not kill them first' and thereby justify the act of protecting and saving themselves. Therefore a threat to group identities acted as a major cause for ethnic violence (Kreidie and Monroe, 2002). It is commonly believed that offence is the best defense. Conflict occurs when a group feels that they are vulnerable and if they do not act first, they will be at the receiving end. In most of the cases fear psychoses is the immediate cause of violence, though not the root cause.

### **7. Transforming Identity Crisis and Ethnic Conflicts**

Ethnic conflict resolution cannot be attained overnight. It requires great imagination, tolerance, collaboration and administrative and economic strategy. India has a great history of dealing with a number of diverse ethnic groups. However, in modern times the situation has changed and as a result the rights, justice and equality of the people have to be ensured. Minor ethnic groups and tribes were historically oppressed and deprived of justice and freedom. Education opens the door to enlightenment which in turn, will transform the people to be tolerant and accommodating. All steps should be taken to develop and preserve the rich and colourful culture of the nationalities and ethnic groups. Promotion of mass culture and traditional qualities of the indigenous people is an important means to resolve the ethnic conflicts and related issues. Ethnic conflicts arise out of socio-economic conditions within political, economic structure of the country. If land, labour, capital and religion are the major sources of conflict among the human race then liberty, equality, fraternity and economic development are the means of solving the conflict effectively (Banerjee, 2006).

Every tribe, every ethnic group is looking for a distinct identity and wants to preserve it at any cost. Conflict arises when there is a threat to one's individual identity or group identity. In order to resolve identity crises we need to address and transform the factors leading to identity crises. Every crisis has its origin in dissatisfaction and anxiety. Therefore people's satisfaction and happiness are the most important keys in overcoming identity crisis or rather not to put people under crisis. Hence, the following suggestions are made to resolve the identity crises and transform the ethnic conflicts. The suggestions are given under five heads:

#### *7.1. Preservation*

Tribals have inherited rich cultural heritage and traditions from their ancestors. Losing what they have been practicing and observing for long time can create a sense of apprehension and suspicion. Therefore it is imperative that people are helped in Preserving their language, art, culture, customs, traditions, land, and indigenous method of conflict resolution. This can facilitate in building confidence among the natives and overcome the identity crisis.

#### *7.2. Prevention*

Indigenous people are more troubled by the external threats than the internal. The very presence of outsiders is looked at as an existential threat for the locals. The natives feel that the outsiders have come to exploit them and take away their land, employment, economy and even political privileges. So, all possible steps are to be taken to prevent illegal immigration, and other administrative measures to safeguard the right and privileges of the indigenous people.

#### *7.3. Elimination*

When the basic needs of the people are not met, frustration and grievances sprout in the minds of the people. In fact, poverty is the root cause of many of the conflicts that happen among the poor people. Therefore removal of poverty and unemployment among the indigenous people is a requirement in resolving identity crisis. Apart from this it is also important that we protect them from being exploited by any internal or external elements.

#### *7.4. Distribution*

Most of the ethnic conflicts in the region had occurred on the basis of unequal distribution of resources and power. The dominance of the majority can create tension among the minorities that can add fuel to the conflict. Land and other natural resources are very dear to the indigenous people and the fear of losing something that they are eligible to enjoy can cause frustration and retaliation. It is also important to share the power in proportion to the population and territory. Under such circumstances, de-centralization of power can to a great extent resolve the identity crisis.

### 7.5. Exploration

It is important to explore possibilities for developmental activities that do not disturb the tribal cultural heritage. Importance is to be given for improving the health, education, road and communication sectors that can facilitate in building confidence among the tribals. Care also should be taken to improve the standard of living of the people to be at par with the people of the 'mainland'. Tribal people also should be given an opportunity to visit and mingle with people of other areas so as to widen the horizons of their knowledge. Organizing sports, art and cultural completions at the national level giving greater participation from the tribal belt can address this issue.

### 8. Conclusion

Ethnic conflicts arising out of identity crises have been experiencing by most of the communities around the globe. A number of researches have been done to find out solutions to resolve ethnic conflicts and the issue of identity crisis. However the problems still exist and people tend to face similar conflicts based on ethnicity. In fact one of the common forms of conflict seen in developing and underdeveloped countries are on the basis of ethnicity. Ethnicity in itself is not something bad, because it unites people and gives them an identity and honour. However, ethnicity when taken to the other extreme can create identity crisis and become a source of conflict. One of the major reasons for ethnic conflicts based on identity crisis is the threat to the existence of the people with dignity. When people feel that their traditional habits, values and practices are obstructed, they begin to look at others with suspicion and do anything to preserve what is dear to them. People also begin to be tensed when they are not able to meet their daily requirements. Hence, it is important to provide and safeguard the basic needs of the people so as to make them content. In order to tackle these issues we need to take up developmental activities in the tribal areas and the co-operation from every corner of the society like the government, NGOs, community leaders, state actors, and the civil society are a requirement. Any developmental activities that are designed for the tribal areas should be implemented with persuasion and not with coercion.

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