

A Critical Analysis On Ethno Centrism in North Eastern India and The Idea of Nationalism

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Abstract: In order to respond to the emerging problems from the strengthening of ethnic identities– we need to look into the various factors which are responsible for the particular phenomenon. The state is an important player– which needs to be taken into account when we look into the emergence and strengthening of ethnic identities. And it is not easy to directly term this as something which is anti-developmental or which is dangerous for national integration (especially in regards to North East India). To understand the ethnic movements better we need to understand the external factors which are responsible for creating a sense of insecurity among different ethnic groups. The idea of development should be critically looked into– as the idea of development is always defined by the majority—Idea of development might differ among different ethnic groups. There should be some questions asked like– Are the ethnic movements a threat to national integration? And if it is– then how should we respond? What is development and how it effects different ethnic groups differently? And finally we should try to know that if a homogeneous society really desirable and will this help in sustaining peace? In answering these questions we need to look into nationalism and the various ways in which it shapes the ethnic movements. This paper captures the various dynamics which are responsible in shaping ethnic movements and the possible ways to answer these problems.

Keywords – ethno-centrism, phenomenon, dynamics, homogeneous

Introduction

The rise of ethno centrism in North eastern India can be attributed to many factors –it is very important to analyze these factors, without proper analysis we cannot term ethno centrism as a contributor of anti developmentalist ideas. The existing literature might suggest that the rise of ethno centrism in north eastern India is hampering development and progress of the region–and very often it is seen as a major problem for integration of north eastern India with rest of India. The idea of nationalism has made development the core idea of progress –but is this the only way of looking at progress ? Is development same for everyone and what do we mean by development? Finally – what are the problems of looking at the ethnic movements as being threatening to national integration. In this paper I would try to answer these questions and I will try to explain –how to respond to the ethnic movements in a proper manner so as to promote sustainable peace.

Developmental activities and the state

Very often it is found that we see the rise in ethnic movements –or mobilization in the name of ethnic identities as being detrimental to national security and national integration. Most of the times these movements are suppressed by heavy use of force by the state–the best example is of AFSPA—an act which has been used by the security forces to suppress various movements and commit heinous crimes. There has been a lot of protest against AFSPA –but the state is not responding –clearly suggesting that the state view the north

eastern India as being a troubled zone, but the irony is that the state itself is responsible for creating many of the troubles. The very idea of development represents the elitist mindset—it was a goal desirable to elite section of the society. It could be seen when Nehru called the dams as “temples of modern India” —this idea emerged from the bourgeoisie section of the society.

What we see in the contemporary period is that—the idea of development, that has originated and developed in a different context is being imposed on another context—which has resulted in— in-coherence. This process has accelerated in the recent times—due to the proliferation of the idea of nationalism —which has resulted in the aggressive developmentalist activities by the state. Any kind of resistance to these activities is being seen as a threat to national integration and for the progress of the nation—from here the problem emerges, the idea of development is based on heavy industrialization, better roads, building of dams, urbanization etc.—all of which affects the environment in some or the other way. The development activities has resulted in the degradation of the environment —we can see it from the rise in pollution of air and water resources in north eastern India. It is widely recognized —all over the world that— development activities should go together with the protection of the environment —but what we see in north eastern India is clearly the opposite. Development which destroys the ecology—is clearly not sustainable, unfortunately this hasn’t forced the state to rethink it’s developmentalist ideas.

Tribals and development

I am not suggesting that the state and the developmentalist activities being carried out by the state as being solely responsible for strengthening of ethnic identities —there are various intra and inter group conflicts due to fundamentalism and various other reasons , which is prevalent amongst all the ethnic groups in north eastern India. What I am trying to argue is that— the state itself has been responsible for alienating the north eastern people from the rest of India —and one of the major reasons for this alienation is the developmentalist activities being carried out by the state. It is important to understand that the tribals are the worst sufferers of development activities—they are the most important stakeholders, they are the most vulnerable section of the society. We know that the north eastern region of India except Assam—has a predominantly higher percentage of tribal population, due to higher concentration of tribals in north east India —the issue becomes more sensitive.

It is very important to understand these sensitivities —without which we will not be able to understand the dynamics of the separatist movements and the paradoxical situations—which shapes the ethnic movements. Also it is very important to know where to locate yourself —when one is trying to analyze these factors of ethnic movements —depending on which, the way of interpreting these movements can differ. One cannot deny that the lives of the tribals are directly linked with the natural resources —it may be forest, water bodies, land and other mineral resources. They are dependent on these natural resources —very often the state led developmentalist activities has resulted in turning of the tribal population into “ecological refugees”. The tribals are being seen as a hindrance for progress of the nation —their lands are being taken away with impunity by the means of legislation. The tribals are being increasingly subjugated to extreme forms of alienation, also there has been a considerable effort of mainstreaming the tribal population —which has been responsible for the emergence of the idea of “self determination” among the tribal population.

The sense of insecurity that is being created amongst the tribal population has forced them to reclaim their lost status—self assertion has become a common phenomenon. This can be seen in the separatist movements of the Nagas—led by NSCN (IM) and other extremist groups. The state has failed to identify the various problems being faced by the Nagas and it has responded to the separatist movements by use of brutal force—sometimes even targeting the civilians —the AFSPA has become one of the major reasons for the growing sense of separatism in north eastern India. The popular discontent of this act is mainly because of the atrocities committed by the Armed Forces on the civilians—the Armed Forces are protected from the law, and the people have no way of getting justice—a

clear example when justice and law doesn't go together. This law has been responsible for creating lots of unrest in north eastern India and it must be repelled immediately—the factors for ethnic mobilizations should be studied properly, and I am quite sure that there is a significant discontent with the state led development among the people of this region.

There is another aspect of the concept of development –we are basically asking a group of people to sacrifice their way of life for the larger good of the society. There is a serious problem with this logic of development, it is obvious that there will be resistance from the people who are likely to be affected –this resistance is very much natural, and to term this as a major threat to national integration is very wrong in many different ways. The best way to move forward is by identifying the vulnerabilities of the people who are likely to be affected by any kind of activities by the state—the priorities should be based on the needs of the people of the particular region. If development is carried out by keeping these in mind—then the people are more likely to cooperate, it doesn't mean that everyone would be willing to be part of the Indian state—it is very utopian to dream of it. The positives of such an approach is likely to pacify the people and the level of resistance will decrease –which might be helpful ,in the long run—for moving forward with dialogue with the extremist groups. Dialogue is the best way of responding to the ethnic mobilizations –rather than suppression by heavy use of force.

Historical factors

It is important to understand the historical dynamics of north eastern India –there has to be proper studies done on this region, but what I feel personally is that–north eastern India is still being neglected in the national curriculum, there is basically nothing about north east India in the CBSE school syllabus. These things also contribute to the growing sense of alienation among the people of this region. There has been many mistakes made by the state—the green revolution, which required intensive irrigation and water rich region to be successful—would have been best suited for north eastern India, unfortunately it was diverted to north western India. The people of this region didn't benefit from that revolution—the same model was not replicated in this region, but that event destroyed the agricultural sector in this region. Cheap rice began to be poured in from Punjab and Haryana—which was produced by heavy use of machinery and technology—the north eastern people who still depended on subsistence methods of agriculture—lost the incentive for growing rice. I have seen this transition very closely –these events didn't take shape in vacuum –but the state had an important role in this transition.

Agricultural development should have been the priority of the state—this would have given an economic boost to this region—we can link this to socio-economic development of the people of this region. The development model that the state followed was quite different—it went ahead with the exploitation of the natural resources, heavy industrialization, and it also came up with draconian laws—which alienated the tribal people from their way of life. The state became the owner of the natural resources, these kind of development that impacted the very existence of the people was never going to be successful. Even the recent development of the roads and infrastructure in north east should be looked critically—it can be attributed to the strategic dimension for containing China, rather than being directed toward the human resource development in north east. It is urgent for the state to change its attitude—rather than thinking north east as being strategically important, and acting with strategic policies—there should be a paradigm shift in the social policies. The policies needs to more oriented towards human development rather than infrastructure development. The strategic location of this place should have contributed to flourishing trade and commerce—mainly with the south Asian economies—but the “act east policy” of the government of India has failed in improving the way of life of the people.

Role of the media

The constant socio-economic deprivation of the people has led towards ethno centrism in many ways—they have been forced to take up arms against the state in order to raise their voices. It should be noted that in most of the ethnic movements or conflicts—one party remains constant—which is the state, the conflicts are between the state and the ethnic groups, if we set aside the intra group conflicts—which are lower in intensity. The ethnic mobilizations and movements are seen as a major threat to national integration—and the media plays an important role in this, the national media is biased towards north east India. Any kind of ethno centric movement is directly played by the media as an anti-national activity—and rarely the role of the state is questioned. The vast majority of the population of north India has developed a gruesome image of north east—which can be seen from the discriminatory practices that the north eastern students or people face in the rest of India. The national media has been largely responsible for shaping this kind of attitude, and the same media has an important role to play in this regard. It should strive to bring out the sensitivities of the people and question the state for carrying out activities which might become an important factor for ethnic mobilizations.

Conclusion

Finally, there is a need for a paradigm shift in the way of looking at the ethnic movements—these movements should not be seen as being anti-developmental or even as anti-national. The deployment of forces should be minimized—as it leads towards growing sense of insecurity among the people. The AFSPA must be repelled immediately—it doesn't mean stopping the ongoing operations, the socio-economic development of the people must become the priority of the state. Steps should be taken to ensure economic opportunities and for the development of trade. Decentralization is another way of giving the people more freedom—which is likely to reduce the separatism feelings and anger against the state. All these coupled with the change in attitude from the government of India—and giving the people control over the natural resources, might be some of the ways in which these ethno centric movements should be responded to. Force should be the last resort—but unfortunately it is being used as first. On a concluding note, in my opinion—every critical problem can be solved by peaceful means, and it depends on us—how far we can go for finding that peaceful way.

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