

Ethnicity and Ethnic Phenomena in North East India.

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Abstract

The North-Eastern area of India is home to a diverse range of ethnic communities, with over 75 main groups and subgroups speaking over 4000 languages and dialects. This diversity poses challenges for nation-building and country integration. Ethnicity is defined as an individual's identification with a specific social group and its associated cultural practices. Factors such as language, race, religion, and shared history contribute to the formation of ethnic groups. The region of North East India is characterized by a variety of ethnic groups, each with their own unique cultural traditions and practices. The contemporary era has witnessed an increase in the salience of ethnicity within the socio-political domain of the region. Ethnic movements in the region have the potential to disrupt established social and political structures, leading to inter-community conflicts. The historical trajectory of ethnic assertion in the region is closely linked to the evolution of political systems, administrative frameworks, and societal forces. The emergence of new elite strata within ethnic groups has played a significant role in advocating for the aspirations and needs of their respective communities.

Keywords: *North East India, Ethnicity, Ethnic movements, Elite class*

Introduction

The North-Eastern area of India is known as the homeland of multi-ethnic people. The area is home to a variety of distinct ethnic communities. These days, it's not uncommon to see protests in the area that call for a stronger sense of personal identity. The presence of 75 main groups and sub-groups speaking over 4000 languages and dialects constantly presents the subject of worry for the smooth implementation of the project of nation-building and country integration. North East India is home to a large and varied ethnic population, making it difficult to categorize. To fully grasp the ethnic phenomena of Northeast India, one needs to have a firm grasp of the idea of ethnicity and its practical implications. This study examines the meaning of "ethnicity" and attempts to deconstruct ethnic occurrences in North East India.

Objectives of the Study

The present study is based on two important objectives These are,

- 1) To explain the concept of ethnicity.
- 2) To examine the ethnic phenomena in North East India.

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Methodology

The research conducted in this study exclusively relies on secondary sources. In order to facilitate the study, data is acquired from a diverse range of secondary sources, encompassing books, journals, newspaper reports, government websites, and government records. The research methodology employed in this study is a descriptive method of analysis, which has been chosen to effectively address the research objectives.

Ethnicity

Ethnicity can be defined as an individual's subjective identification with a specific social group and its associated cultural practices and traditions. An ethnic group, also referred to as an ethnicity, is a social construct that encompasses individuals who share a collective identification based on various factors, including but not limited to shared ancestry, language, societal norms, cultural practices, or national affiliation.³ Based on shared language, culture, country, and society, this definition of ethnicity highlights the significance of an individual's psychological perceptions while identifying with a certain ethnic group.

According to James People and Garrick Bailey, the concept of ethnicity and ethnic group can be understood as a designated social classification of individuals that is primarily determined by the perception of shared social experiences or the experiences of one's ancestors. Individuals belonging to the aforementioned ethnic group perceive themselves as participants in a collective identity characterized by the sharing of cultural customs and historical narratives, which serve to differentiate them from other social groups. The concept of ethnic group identity encompasses a profound psychological and emotional dimension, which serves to delineate individuals across the globe into distinct categories of 'us' and 'them' (People and Bailey, 2014). The distinctiveness of culture, historical trajectory, and socio-political development of a specific group establishes the demarcation between said group and other groups. The manifestation of categorizing individuals into distinct groups, namely 'us' and 'them,' becomes readily apparent in the attitudes exhibited by individuals belonging to a specific ethnic group towards members of other ethnic groups.

The compositional aspects of ethnicity can be classified into two distinct categories: objective markers and subjective feelings. Edwards' elucidation of ethnic identity places significant emphasis on the interplay between objective markers and subjective comprehension. According to his argument, ethnic identity can be defined as an individual's allegiance to a group, regardless of its size or social status, that shares ancestral connections with the individual in question. The perpetuation of identical socialization or cultural patterns across successive generations is not an obligatory requirement; however, the preservation of a certain degree of group delineation remains essential. The sustainability of a group can be attributed to either shared objective characteristics, such as language and religion, or to more subjective factors that contribute to a sense of group identity. In some cases, a combination of both objective and subjective elements may play a role in sustaining the group (Edwards, 2012a) (Edwards, 2012b). The current definition brings forth a notable emphasis on the significance and function of objective markers and subjective comprehension in the process of ethnic identity formation. Objective markers refer to physical attributes or characteristics that serve to distinguish between individuals or groups, specifically highlighting the contrast between "us" and "them". The utilization of objective markers serves to foster a sense of affiliation within a specific collective among individuals who possess these shared markers. Ethnicity can

³ "ETHNICITY | English Meaning - Cambridge Dictionary."

be objectively delineated through various markers, including but not limited to cultures, customs, traditions, languages, and physical appearances. In contrast, subjective feelings can be considered as a psychological component. The experience of subjective feelings is contingent upon an individual's cognitive and emotional orientation towards group identification. When deciding whether or not to include someone in a group's specific identity, acknowledgment by the group is equally crucial.

Other Definitions of Ethnic groups or Identity: Different scholars forwarded different definitions of ethnic group. Some of the most widely accepted definitions are mentioned below:

- According to Max Weber “(E)thnic groups are those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization or migration; this belief must be important for the propagation of group formation; conversely, it does not matter whether or not an objective blood relationship exists.” (Hutchinson, 2000)
- According to Donald Horowitz: “Ethnicity is based on a myth of collective ancestry, which usually carries with it traits believed to be innate. Some notion of ascription, however diluted, and affinity deriving from it are inseparable from the concept of ethnicity.” (Horowitz, 2000)
- According to Fearon and Laitin, an ethnic group is “a group larger than a family for which membership is reckoned primarily by descent, is conceptually autonomous, and has a conventionally recognized “natural history” as a group.” (Fearon and Laitin, 2000)
- In a subsequent refinement, Fearon defines a “prototypical” ethnic group as one that has several of the following features as possible: (1) Membership is reckoned primarily by descent (2) Members are conscious of group membership (3) Members share distinguishing cultural features (4) These cultural features are valued by a majority of members (5) The group has or remembers a homeland (6) The group has a shared history as a group that is “not wholly manufactured but has some basis in fact.” (Fearon, 2003a)
- According to Anthony Smith, an ethnic group is, “a named human population with myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more elements of a common culture, a link with a homeland and a sense of solidarity.”

Basic Sources of Ethnic Group

The fundamental determinant of a group's identity lies in the recruitment source from which its members are derived. The following sources of ethnic groups are discussed based on the aforementioned definitions:

The role of language in the development and consolidation of an ethnic group is widely recognized as a significant factor. The presence of a common language within a specific group of individuals serves to foster a sense of cohesion and establish a distinct collective identity among its members. When an ethnic group's criteria for membership are solely determined by language and dialect, it can be classified as an ethno-linguistic group.

The shared racial identity and physical resemblance among individuals contribute to a heightened sense of group affiliation and belongingness. The role of race is also significant in the development of an individual's sense of distinct identity. It is important to note that race and ethnicity are distinct concepts. The concept of race has traditionally been understood as a fixed and unchanging characteristic of individuals, with inherent biological and genetic

components. However, alternative perspectives, such as the constructivist and instrumentalist schools of thought, challenge this notion by positing that ethnicity can be socially constructed and is not inherently permanent. These perspectives suggest that ethnic identities are shaped by social, cultural, and historical factors, and can therefore evolve and change over time. By emphasizing the role of societal influences and the malleability of ethnic categorizations, constructivist and instrumentalist approaches provide a nuanced understanding of the dynamic nature of ethnicity.

The presence of religion serves as a significant catalyst for the formation and preservation of ethnic groups. The formation of ethnic groups is significantly influenced by its role. Religion serves as a means for individuals to cultivate a profound sense of belongingness within a specific social or cultural group. The concept of an ethno-religious group pertains to the formation of social groups comprising individuals who identify with a specific ethnic background, while concurrently emphasizing their shared affiliation with a particular religion, denomination, or sect.

The historical and geographical aspects that are commonly observed in this context are of significant interest and relevance. The shared history and process of evolution contribute to the establishment of psychological unity among individuals. As a result of these factors, individuals develop a collective awareness pertaining to their personal identities, societal concerns, needs, and challenges. The process of socialization, including political socialization, exhibits a remarkable degree of similarity among individuals who share a common history and geographical context. The phenomenon under consideration facilitates individuals in forming cohesive bonds and establishing a collective identity, thereby fostering a profound sense of affiliation and inclusion within a specific social group. The influence of geographical factors on the development of ethnic identity is a significant aspect to consider. The formation of ethno-regional groups can be attributed to the pronounced sense of local belonging that arises from the relative geographic isolation experienced by these communities.

Various methodologies exist for investigating the complex nature of ethnicity. The field of sociology has delineated two primary approaches when it comes to the categorization of ethnicity within theoretical frameworks. The primordial approach posits that the ethnic identity of an individual or a collective is inherently innate and unchangeable. The proponent of this perspective asserts that ethnicity is an inherent characteristic assigned to an individual prior to their birth, and it persists unchanged throughout their lifespan. The primordial theories place significant emphasis on the construction of identity through the establishment and maintenance of affective ties (Scott, 1990). The instrumentalist or circumstantial perspective posits that ethnicity is not an inherent characteristic, but rather a construct developed by interest groups to serve secondary objectives, such as the pursuit of wealth, power, or social status. Circumstantial theories place significant emphasis on the instrumental foundation of ethnicity, with particular attention to the role of self-interested rational behavior (Scott, 1990). In addition to the aforementioned two prominent methodologies, it is worth noting the existence of a novel approach towards investigating the intricate subject of ethnicity. The existing theories, namely the primordial and circumstantial theories, have been deemed insufficient in providing a comprehensive understanding of the complexities surrounding ethnic boundaries (Chai, 2005). Consequently, scholars and researchers have undertaken endeavors in recent years to develop a novel approach that integrates elements from both the primordial and circumstantial perspectives. The novel methodology, referred to as the 'constructionist' perspective, posits that ethnicity is a multifaceted concept that is simultaneously inherent and socially constructed. This particular theoretical framework acknowledges the significance of affective attachments

based on ascriptive characteristics in shaping the boundaries of ethnic groups. However, it also explores the process through which these attachments are actively negotiated and utilized in response to political and economic motivations, highlighting their dynamic nature (Nagel, 1994). The aforementioned approach posits that ethnicity is a socially constructed concept, and during its construction, certain objective markers, whether inherent or created, play a significant role in fostering a sense of distinctiveness and group identity among its members.

The term "ethnicity" is frequently employed interchangeably with terms that possess a certain level of ambiguity, such as "nation," "nationalism," and "nationality." Nationalism, akin to ethnicity, can be understood as a fundamental expression of collective identity. The distinction between the two lies in the fact that nationalism encompasses not only the ethnic component of believing in common features but also the desire for political autonomy and self-government (Leoussi, 2018). According to Paul Brass, it is argued that ethnicity and nationalism should not be regarded as inherent or fixed characteristics, but rather as products of social and political processes. The formation of a particular concept within a community is significantly influenced by the active involvement of the elite society, who draw upon specific cultural elements from the group they aim to represent (Levinson and Ember, 1996). According to Brass, the elites are responsible for the creation of cultural representations, wherein they selectively utilize, manipulate, and occasionally invent elements from the cultural heritage of specific groups. This practice serves to safeguard their own interests, ensure the survival of their respective groups, and attain political and economic benefits for both their communities and themselves. The explanation of Brass entails the examination of the influential role played by the elite stratum of a given community in the development of this concept, through the utilization of specific cultural elements associated with the group they seek to portray. According to the esteemed scholar Benedict Anderson, it is argued that a nation can be understood as a construct of the human imagination. Anderson emphasizes that nations are not solely the result of predetermined sociological factors such as language, race, or religion, but rather they have been brought into existence through acts of collective imagination (Anderson, 2020). Ernest Gellner, a prominent scholar in the field, acknowledges the artificial nature of nationalism, considering it to be a constructed phenomenon. The primary focus is placed on the constructive aspect of ethnicity (Sharma, 2005). Currently, the constructivist paradigm pertaining to the conceptualization of ethnicity enjoys widespread acceptance within the scholarly community.

In the realm of scholarly inquiry, researchers undertake a critical examination of the multifaceted role played by the contemporary centralizing state. They delve into the intricacies of the power structure inherent in the prevailing political system, while also scrutinizing the dynamics of interaction among the elite class within specific communities. This scrutiny is particularly focused on understanding how these factors contribute to the construction of ethnicity or nationalism. According to Brass, it is argued that ethnicity and nationalism are contemporary phenomena that are closely intertwined with the actions of the modern centralizing state. Brass states " (E)thnic identity and modern nationalism arise out of specific types of interactions between the leadership of the centralizing state and elite from non-dominant ethnic groups, especially but not exclusively on the peripheries of those states.." (Levinson and Ember, 1996). The growing influence of the state and the power structure exerts a profound influence on the genesis and development of ethnicity. The emergence of ethnic identity can be attributed to the growing influence of the state, as it intersects with the aspirations of the elite class to secure advantageous positions within the power structure.

In contemporary times, the endeavors of modern nation-states to expand their sphere of influence and exert control over societal consciousness and behavior have fostered a significant

interplay between ethnic consciousness and state activities. According to David Brown, the concept of ethnicity is understood in this context as an ideology that individuals utilize in order to address the uncertainties that arise from the prevailing power dynamics within their specific societal framework (Brown, 1989). In order to comprehensively elucidate the intricacies of ethnic politics, it is imperative to initiate the analysis by closely scrutinizing the impact exerted by the state on the prevailing power dynamics.

Ethnic phenomena in North-East India

The region of North East India is characterized by a variety of ethnic groups, each with their own unique cultural traditions and practices. The contemporary era has witnessed a notable increase in the salience of ethnicity within the socio-political domain of the region. According to the esteemed social scientist Apurba Kumar Baruah, the phenomenon of ethnic movement in the North East India region is characterized by an exceptionally swift and uninterrupted proliferation, making it a unique occurrence in the course of human history. The aforementioned movements possess the potential to disrupt established social and political structures, thereby engendering significant inter-community conflicts. According to Baruah, the historical trajectory of ethnic assertion in the region commonly referred to as North East India has exhibited a strong interdependence with the evolution of political systems, the establishment and reorganization of administrative frameworks, and the emergence of novel societal forces. The contemporary landscape is marked by the emergence of novel social dynamics, wherein new elite strata have arisen across various ethnic groups (Baruah, 2005). These elites have assumed leadership roles in articulating and advocating for the aspirations and needs of their respective ethnic communities.

Baruah highlights the significant contribution of the educated elite class in shaping and consolidating ethnic identity within the region. According to Baruah, it can be observed that in the absence of dominant feudal or bourgeois classes, the educated elites from different communities have assumed positions of hegemony within their respective communities. Consequently, they have begun engaging in competition with the comparatively advanced segments of neighboring communities in pursuit of material benefits. The author additionally posits that the educated elite strategically employ emotive issues as a means to establish and maintain their hegemonic power (Baruah, 2005). Within the context of various ethnic movements in the region, it is observed that emotive slogans are employed as a means to evoke and harness the sentiments of the general populace in support of the respective movement. The ethnically driven movement elicits emotions of exploitation and neglect, as well as prompts an identity crisis among individuals who identify themselves as members of the specific group.

In the realm of ethnic assertion within the North East region of India, Chandan Kr. Sharma simply describes his observations by categorizing the underlying explanations into three distinct types. Firstly, it is important to consider the geopolitical and cultural historical differences that distinguish this region from the rest of India. These disparities have shaped the region's distinct identity and have had a significant impact on its development trajectory. Secondly, the lack of socio-economic development in the region is a crucial aspect that warrants attention. Various socio-economic indicators highlight the disparities and challenges faced by the local population. Factors such as limited access to quality education, healthcare facilities, and employment opportunities have hindered the region's progress and contributed to its underdevelopment. Lastly, it is essential to acknowledge the role played by external forces operating from foreign soil. These external actors have exerted influence on the region, both directly and indirectly, impacting its socio-political dynamics. Understanding the involvement of these external forces is crucial in comprehending the complexities and intricacies of the

region's development. By examining these three factors, we can gain a deeper understanding of the unique characteristics and challenges faced by the region under study. Sharma posits that a number of factors can be attributed to the emergence and prevalence of ethnic assertion in the region of North East India (Sharma, 2005). The initial explanation posits that the impediments to emotional cohesion between the people of the region and the rest of India can be attributed to the divergent geopolitical and cultural factors. Hence, it can be observed that instances of discontentment within the local populace of the given geographical area tend to swiftly manifest in the form of ethnic divisions or conflicts. The second explanation posits that the inhabitants of the region developed a sense of neglect due to the adverse socio-economic conditions prevalent in their surroundings. The subsequent elucidation also acknowledged the utilization of regional resources, a factor that engendered animosity and antipathy towards the nation-state. According to Sharma, the third explanation can be interpreted as a statist explanation that seeks to attribute the causes of the ethnic upsurge in the north east to external factors. The provided explanations effectively encapsulate the collective ethnic assertion observed in the Northeast region. The present analysis provides a comprehensive overview of ethnic assertion within the Northeastern state, specifically in the context of the Indian state.

The ethnic assertion observed in Northeast India can be attributed to various internal factors. One significant factor is the competition among elites belonging to different ethnic groups within the region. This competition often stems from the desire to secure resources, power, and influence. Another contributing factor is the response of larger communities towards smaller nationalities within Northeast India. The dynamics between these groups can lead to tensions and conflicts, as larger communities may exert dominance or marginalize smaller nationalities. Such interactions can fuel ethnic assertion as smaller nationalities seek to protect their cultural identity and secure their rights. Additionally, the role of the state plays a crucial role in the ethnic assertion observed in Northeast India. The actions and policies of the state can either address or exacerbate ethnic tensions. State interventions that fail to adequately address the concerns and aspirations of various ethnic groups can contribute to the assertion of ethnic identities as a means of seeking recognition and justice. In summary, the internal issues within Northeast India, including competition among elites, the response of larger communities towards smaller nationalities, and the role of the state, are significant factors contributing to the ethnic assertion observed in the region.

In relation to the nature of ethnic groups in the region, Baruah alludes to Paul Brass's conceptual framework encompassing three distinct stages of ethnic groups. The classification of ethnic groups in Northeast India into three stages of development, as proposed by Baruah and supported by Brass, is a significant contribution to the understanding of the region's social dynamics. The initial phase of ethnic groups refers to those whose cultural markers are readily identifiable, yet their political significance often goes unnoticed. The subsequent phase of ethnic groups encompasses individuals who possess a heightened political awareness pertaining to their distinct and individualistic identity. In this particular stage, it is observed that groups of a moderate size tend to be prevalent. The third stage pertains to the collective endeavors of prominent ethnic groups that advocate for the establishment of a distinct national identity, thereby asserting their entitlement to self-determination (Baruah, 2005).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is apparent that the presence of complexity and diversities among the ethnic groups in North east India necessitates a thorough examination of the phenomenon of ethnicity in the region. The interplay between the process of national building and integration and the concept of ethnicity is mutually influential. In order to ensure the effective and efficient

implementation of government measures and policies in the region, it is imperative to undertake a thorough and rigorous analysis of the reality at hand from an academic perspective. This critical analysis serves as a crucial foundation for informed decision-making and strategic planning, enabling policymakers to navigate the complexities and nuances of the region's socio-political landscape. By adopting an academic lens, policymakers can gain a deeper understanding of the multifaceted challenges and opportunities that exist, thereby enhancing the likelihood of successful policy outcomes. The influence of ethnic identity on the concepts of peace, human rights, and economic development in the region is profound. The examination of the academic perspective is crucial in assessing the significance of the educated elite, the various stages of development observed among different ethnic groups, and the prevalence of an isolation mindset within tribal communities. This comprehensive analysis allows for a deeper comprehension of the socio-economic and political implications associated with ethnicity within the given region.

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