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IDENTITY, DEPRIVATION AND DEMAND FOR BIFURCATION OF THE STATE OF MEGHALAYA

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Abstract

The paper seeks to examine why the youths of the state of Meghalaya are forced into militancy and violence and are raising their demand for bifurcation of the state. To fulfil this objective first a brief description has been given on the formation of the state of Meghalaya. It is mentioned that unlike many other states in India that were created on linguistic basis, Meghalaya was carved out from Assam on the basis of ethnic identity. Though the state was created it continued to witness intolerance among various ethnic groups and between tribal and non-tribal population. The present demand for division of the state by Garos is another form of intolerance among ethnic groups within the state on linguistic basis. Garos feel that they are neglected and deprived by the Khasis, the major ethnic group in the state. The fact remains that it is not deprivation which is the root cause of dissension but intolerance among themselves and the so-called struggle for their identity and language. The authors argue that the more the ethnic groups stress on their differences the sharper will be the contours for conflict. There is a need to learn to live together and to solve their problems together. Since sharing of economic opportunities is the bone of contention between the two major ethnic groups, policy makers should stress on equitable distribution of development initiatives in the State. Bifurcation of such a small state is not the panacea for the present crisis.

Key words: Identity, deprivation, internal conflict, militancy, violence, Meghalaya, North East Region.

1. INTRODUCTION

Deprivation is a term used in the social sciences to describe feelings or measures of economic, political or social disadvantage which is relative rather than absolute. Relative deprivation is the experience of being deprived of something to which one thinks he is entitled to. It refers to the discontent that people feel or perceive when they compare their positions to those of others similarly situated and find out that they have less than they deserve. It is a condition that is measured by comparing one group's situation to the situations of those who are more advantaged. Relative deprivation reflects a perception by a region/state/community that the circumstances or the lives of their people are not provided benefits to which they are justly entitled. When an ethnic group experiences relative deprivation, the potential for spontaneous outbreak of violence directed at rival groups intensifies (Hossain, 2009). It is also possible that a group might perceive or measure their condition wrongly without considering the other ends. The situation in the North Eastern Region (NER)¹ of India including the state of Meghalaya is a bright example in this regard where decades of economic, political, environmental and social deprivations have forced the youths into militancy and violence. However, the demand for division of the state of

¹ North Eastern Region (NER) of India consists of eight states– Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura

Meghalaya in the recent past is not a clear cut case of deprivation but of intolerance among ethnic groups within the state. The present paper is nothing but an argument in this regard.

2. THE STATE MEGHALAYA

Meghalaya is one of the smallest states in the region, predominantly occupied by the three major tribes– Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia. Each of them had their own Kingdoms until they came under the British administration in the 19th Century. However, other tribes, claimed to be the aboriginals of the state like the Kochs, the Hajongs, the Rabhas, the Mikirs, etc. have also been living for years along with the major tribes. According to 2011 population census, the Khasis constituted around 45 per cent of the total population of the state, followed by the Garos with 32.5 per cent and the rest 22.5 per cent are from other communities including the Bengali, Assamese, Nepali/Gurkha, and Hindi speaking communities from the so called mainland India. The state has a total geographical area of 22,429 sq. km., and is surrounded in the East and North by the state of Assam and in the West and South by Bangladesh. In other words, the state is about 0.7 per cent of the country's total area and 8.6 per cent area of the region (NER). Of the total geographical area, about 37 per cent is covered by the forest which is also notable for their biodiversity. Much of the forest is privately managed. The state government controls only area under the reserved forest, which is about 4 per cent of the total forest area. The climatic condition of the state, though varies with altitude, is moderate and humid. The state is also a storehouse of mineral resources in the region. Some of the major minerals that are presently exploited in the state are the Coal, Limestone, Clay and Sillimanite. Though the communities of Khasi and Jaintia Hills districts speak a similar language, they have different dialects. The Garo Hill districts have very different customs and different languages. Though principal languages are Khasi and Garo, English is used as the official language in the state and they practice matrilineal system.

3. ETHNICITY AND STATE FORMATION

As mentioned above, Meghalaya is the homeland of three major hill tribal communities– the Khasi, Jaintia and the Garo with their numerous divisions into clans. The term 'Khasi' is often used in generic sense and includes the Khasi, Jaintia, Bhoi and the War. They are collectively known as the 'Hynniewtrep' people and are mainly found in the four districts of east Meghalaya namely– the East Khasi Hills, West Khasi Hills, Ri–Bhoi and the Jaintia Hills districts. The Jaintias are also known as 'Pnars'. The Khasis occupying the northern lowlands and the foothills are generally called the 'Bhoi'. Those who live in the southern tracts are termed as the 'Wars'. In the Khasi Hills, the 'Lyngams' inhabit in the North-western part of the state. But all of them claim to have descended from the *ki-hynniew-trep* and are known by the generic name of Khasi–Pnars or simply 'Khasi' or 'Hynniewtrep'. The Garos belonging to the Bodo family of the Tibeto–Burman race live in the Western Meghalaya. They prefer to call themselves as *Achiks* and the land they occupy as *Achik land*².

Right after country's independence in 1960, when the All Party Hills Leaders' Conference (APHLC) of the then undivided Assam was formed, the leaders of the then North Cachar Hills and Mikir Hills, too, joined it. As a result of which, the Meghalaya State was created on 21 January 1972 following concerted efforts made by the combined tribal leadership of the Khasis, the Garos and the Jaintias under the flagship of the APHLC party (Upadhyaya, *et al.*, 2013). The people of North Cachar Hills (presently Dima Hasao district) and Mikir Hills (presently Karbi Anglong district) who were living closely with the

² Karna, M.N. [http://www.ide.go.jp/English/Publish/Download/Jrp/pdf/133_7.pdf]

Khasis and Garos decided not to join the new state Meghalaya, though an option was given to them (Hussain, 1987; The Assam Tribune, September 5, 2013; Gohain, 2014).

Historically, under the Government of India Act 1935, the hill areas of undivided Assam were divided into two categories– one, the Lushai (Mizo) hills and North Cachar (NC Hills) which were classified as 'excluded area'. Two, the united Khasi and Jaintia hills districts with partial exception of Shillong town which was also the capital of Assam at that time, the Garo hills, Naga hills and Mikir (Karbi) hills which were classified as 'partially excluded area'. The government of Assam had no jurisdiction over the excluded areas which were administered under the special power of the governor. After the independence, the Constitution also accepted broadly the spirit of the Government of India Act of 1935 by providing each hill district an Autonomous District Council with a fairly large autonomous power under the 6th Schedule (Hussain, 1987). This led to the then hill districts of Assam, namely the Naga Hills, Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Garo Hills and Lushai Hills for the creation of new States one after another. The former Naga Hills district became the full-fledged State of Nagaland in 1962 and in 1972, the Khasi and Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills formed the Meghalaya State and in the same year the Lushai Hills became a Union Territory and subsequently a full-fledged State, Mizoram (The Assam Tribune, 2013). Other major part of the hill area– North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) which was under the control of central government (India) and ruled through the State of Assam, became union territory of Arunachal Pradesh in 1972.

4. INSURGENCY MOVEMENT AND CONFLICT IN MEGHALAYA

Although Meghalaya relatively is a peaceful state compared to some other states of NER, it has been raven by ethnic conflicts between the indigenous community and non-local migrants since its formation in 1972. The steady rise of economic migrants, mainly Bengalis from Bangladesh, Nepalis from Nepal and other parts of India resulted in uneasiness among the locals. These migrants began to dominate business establishments, labour force and other employment opportunities. As a result the state witnessed ethnic riots between indigenous tribals and migrant non-tribal communities in 1979, 1987 and 1992 (Haokip, 2013). Since the eighties numerous cycles of ethnic cleansing incidents rocked the state and people belonging to Nepali, Bengali, Bihari and Marwari communities became the target of the attack. In the 1990s, Bengalis remained the prime target of the ethnic violence. Since the early 1980s, an estimated 25,000 to 35,000 Bengalis have left Meghalaya to other parts of the country especially to West Bengal. In 1981, there were 119,571 Bengalis in Meghalaya, 8.13 per cent of the state's population. Ten years later in 1991 it was reduced to 5.97 per cent of population (Baruah, 2004; Phukan, 2013).

With the reclamation of tribal identity in the new state amid gnawing scarcities led to a range of conflicts. The rise of ethnocentric politics emerged as the major plank around which much identity-based conflict transpired. Predicated on the cultural superiority of two tribal communities– the Khasis and the Garos over the non-tribal population, politically motivated ethno-centrism led to the commission of many dreadful acts against members of Meghalaya's non-tribal population. This trend was more conspicuous in the Khasi Hills, where the elevation of the Khasis to a dominant political position in the newly created state led them to challenge the hitherto ascendancy of the non-tribal population, who were often branded as 'Bangladeshis'– nationals of Bangladesh. Of the various causes of conflict in Meghalaya, economic disparity emerged as the most prominent. The state's community-based agrarian economy lost much of its verve as a result of the unchecked privatization of community land, while the decline of agrarian resources made it extremely difficult for members of the tribal population to maintain their livelihoods. As a result of which, in the state, first witnessed insurgent activities in the early 1980s and these took on a virulent

aspect in the 1990s with the emergence of the Achik Liberation Matgrik Army (ALMA) and the Achik National Volunteer Council (ANVC) in the Garo Hills, and the Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HLNC) in the Khasi Hills³. However, since the mid-1990s, there has been a relative change in the nature of ethnic relations between the communities of the state. Although the relations between the tribals and non-tribals relatively improved, ethnic tensions in Meghalaya shifted to the so called indigenous tribes in the recent past (Haokip, 2013).

5. INTERNAL CONFLICT AND DEMAND FOR BIFURCATION OF THE STATE

The spectre of unemployed youth haunts particularly Meghalaya's Garo Hills region– the worst site of underdevelopment and poverty in the state. The situation in this area is all the more disconcerting for its inhabitants when they contrast their conditions to those in the relatively developed region of the Khasi Hills. This is what we refer to as deprivation. The Garo Hills' meagre infrastructure and essential services, scanty health and education facilities, and poor connectivity to the rest of Meghalaya accentuated the sense of relative deprivation in the region (Upadhyaya, *et al.*, 2013). The issue is– does the claim or demand of the community is recognized by the other group? If it is negated, often the end result is outbreak of conflict, or this is what we termed as *internal conflict* in NER.

The mushrooming of militant groups in Garo Hills becomes a cause of worry. While the Achik National Volunteer Council (ANVC) and its splinter group, ANVC-B, are officially under ceasefire with the government, the Garo National Liberation Army (GNLA), the United Achik Liberation Army (UALA) and the Achik National Liberation Army (ANLA was formed in October 2013), are active in the interior areas of Garo Hills and in its adjoining areas of Assam and West Khasi Hills. Again, there is the GNLA-F led by former GNLA militants Reading T Sangma, Jack Baichung and Savio R Marak. Meanwhile, ANVC suffered a further split in mid-November 2013 when seven members deserted the designated camp where they have been living since the truce and formed a new outfit, adding to the murky scene⁴.

Figure 1: Separate State Demanded by Garos in Meghalaya



³ See, Upadhyaya, *et al.*, (2013)

⁴ See, Das (2013)

Source: The Telegraph, Kolkata, Friday, August 2, 2013

To be precise, the main bone of contention between Khasis and Garos was the implementation of the 1971 Reservation Bill. Secondly, the hegemony of the Khasis was felt during 2005 when the Meghalaya Board of School Education, which had its head office in Tura (in West Garo Hills), agreed to reorganize itself in Shillong (Khasi area) along the lines demanded by the Khasi Students Union. Undoubtedly, these episodes shaped the embittered situation between the Khasis and the Garos, which may develop into violence. The subsequent massive outcry resulted in demands by the Garos for a separate state (Upadhyaya, *et al.*, 2013). The demonstration and agitation have been intensified in the State and is being organised by the Garo Hills State Movement Committee, a conglomeration of various pressure groups and political groups. The demand for Garo is that the Central government (India) should consider creation of separate Garo and Khasi-Jaintia states in Meghalaya based on linguistic lines as envisaged in the States Re-organisation Act, 1956. In short, the Garo National Council (GNC) and the Garo Students' Union (GSU) have been demanding a separate state for the Garos on linguistic lines while the Hill State People's Democratic Party (HSPDP) has been demanding a Khasi-Jaintia state on the other.

6. ARGUMENT OF THE STUDY

Though it is a little happening, the state of Meghalaya is facing internal conflict and it is getting worse day by day. Recently, as a part of its effort to regulate alienation of indigenous land, the state government proposed deleting certain Scheduled Tribe (STs) from the existing list of STs in the state, leading to an agitation of the indigenous minorities living in the state (Haokip, 2013). The mute question is— who is being relatively deprived and by whom? If all the relatively smaller communities start demanding separate states or taking up arms for their discontent that they feel or perceive when they compare their positions to others, there will not be an end to further division of the states in the country and armed conflict in the region. It is a reign of terror especially in NER now. It is much hated by everyone in the society but few dare to speak up and for those who speak up would be bashed up. Also, there is no guarantee that the present demand for bifurcation of the State will not have further re-organisation or bifurcation of it in the years to come.

Meghalaya cannot be compared to Mizoram or Nagaland in terms of demographics. Shillong, the state capital of Meghalaya, was a British outpost and later the capital of undivided Assam which included almost all the seven states. Shillong has a sizeable non-tribal population and so does large sections of Garo Hills particularly areas bordering Goalpara in Assam. The people of Meghalaya cannot just forget history and pretend to write on a clean slate (Mukhim, 2013). Violence against the outsider or others is not the panacea for all. The insiders (aboriginals) become outsider when they move out. If so happens, the same method of violence can be applied to them. One should consider the limitation of the others and should respect other communities. In this context, seeing the new ethnic movements in Meghalaya, Mukhim (2013) raised few questions— when we need a good doctor do we check his tribe, caste, class or do we repose our faith on his expertise and his credentials? The same is the case with a good teacher or lawyer. So if we are inter-dependent then is it not fair to share a slice of the cake with those who strive to build Meghalaya as much as the tribals do?

As discussed above, the Garo belongs to Bodo family who are concentrated in present Assam and spearheading separatist movement for theirs. As also demand for territorial integration and bifurcation of the states based on the linguistic, ethnic or

geographical (e.g. Figure 1) lines have been the order of the day in NER, there is no guarantee that they will not demand for integration of these ethnic communities (Bodo of Assam and Garos of Meghalaya). On the other hand, there is no guarantee that the Jaintias, Bhois, Wars or any other minority tribal communities of Meghalaya who are fabricated in the larger Khasi identity will not demand for separation from the larger confederation. Had the Karbis and Mikirs of present Assam joined Meghalaya when it was formed, there could have been different a phenomenon in the state.

7. CONCLUSION

As we have discussed above, though the State of Meghalaya is relatively better in terms of conflict and violence, one cannot completely ignore the tension between the indigenous tribal communities and immigrants since its creation in 1972. The state has experienced a series of communal riots since 1980s. However, in the recent past, the ethnic tensions in the state have shifted to the indigenous tribes. Given that economic insecurity, especially employment opportunities in the public sector, is the primary cause of tension between the majority indigenous communities in Meghalaya, equitable distribution of economic resources would be one giant step towards reducing discontentment in the backward areas of the state such as Garo Hills (Haokip, 2013). Therefore, politicising and polarising the communities based on any sort of criteria, for personal vote stunt opportunities will exacerbate the present crisis of Meghalaya, NER in general.

Also, efforts to achieve peace through the appeasement policy of economic incentives or peace talks are unlikely to endure any sustainable settlement in the state. Therefore, commitment while negotiating conflict from the government and community leaders should be maintained. Also, one should not forget that the Indian Constitution guarantees certain fundamental rights to all citizens irrespective of their caste/creed/tribe. The tribes, especially NER have been enjoying special protection under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. But other communities in the region do not enjoy such protection. Should we call them as relatively deprived section? Therefore, it is good to learn from other countries where a shared citizenship based on affinities rather than differences defines human relationships. The more we stress on differences the sharper will be the contours for conflict. As the people/community in any state of NER is the confederation of many tribes and communities, we need to learn to live together and solve the problems together. Since the economic opportunities is identified as the bone of contention between the two major indigenous communities in Meghalaya, policy makers should also emphasise on the equal distribution of development initiatives in the State. One should also remember that the bifurcation of the existing state is not the panacea for the present ethnic crisis.

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