Is There a Pan-North-East Identity and Solidarity?

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India’s north-east is often generalised, misunderstood and understudied. Its cultural diversity, decades of armed insurrections, ethnic violence and identity politics have intrigued scholars for the past few decades. To many, the understanding of some major tribes of the region – their lifestyle, world view and aspirations, and putting them together as an analytical category and clubbing the whole north-eastern states as “north-east” – seems to snugly fit their analysis. The generalised presumptions, time and again, overlook the diversity of the region. In contrast, each state has described itself as a “mini India”.

Duncan McDuie-Ra’s “The ‘North-East’ Map of Delhi” (EPW, 28 July 2012) is a well-studied review of north-eastern migrants in Delhi. However, it suffers from presumptive calculations of, what can be termed as, the “general way of looking at the north-east”, where he is carried away by the views of the dominant ethnic groups on some issues while ignoring the “other” minorities.

Apologia to a Diverse ‘North-East’

There is frequent generalisation of the north-eastern region in terms of race, topography and as a troubled periphery with multifarious law and order problems. In terms of race the region is identified as the home of mongoloid people who are often invectively referred to as “chinky”. These groups of people are mostly categorised as scheduled tribes (STs) by the Constitution. As per the Census of 2001 the STs constitute 26.9% of the total population of the north-east. Thus, even though the region is conceived as tribal, taking it as a whole the non-tribal population is more than the tribals. In terms of topography the often described hilly northeast is not devoid of misconception. The Brahmaputra, Cachar, Imphal and Agartala plains constitute a large chunk of land mass of the region. Similarly, in terms of the generally conceived “troubled region”, except for Manipur, Assam and Nagaland, the other five states, namely, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, Mizoram and Sikkim, are relatively peaceful. Nevertheless, most problems in the region are seen through the lens of security and this myopic vision only compounds the problems.

The tendency among scholars and policymakers to club the whole north-eastern states together as “north-east” and use the term as an analytical category for the whole region is always questioned in terms of practical relevance. Udayon Misra pointed out that the use of the term “north-east” is itself problematic as the region represents a varied cultural mosaic and has never considered itself to be one compact unit. To him New Delhi suffers from a strong misconception and has failed to appreciate the complex nature of the problem. Wasbir Hussain (2004) delineates:

“By bracketing the eight north-eastern Indian states, with its diverse tribes, customs and cultures, into what is called the ‘North-east’, we tend to ignore the distinct identity and sub-national aspirations of these ethnic groups. More so, such clubbing together of the region, in an attempt to look at it as a single entity, has led to stereotyping of the problems that plague the area. The fact that each state has a different set of location-specific concerns and grievances often gets blurred in the scheme of things of policy framers and government leaders who are supposed to address these issues.”

Historian Manorama Sharma also observes that, “The north-eastern states of India may be looked upon as a political unit for purposes of administrative convenience by the Government of India today, but historically at no point of time has it ever been a political unit, either culturally, economically or politically” (Sharma 2004: 1). Harping on the region as a political unit of the British and post-Independence Indian government, she rhetorically insinuates that “even a term like pre-colonial creates problems because there is no uniformity even in that phase of development”. Each state
and each tribe has different historical experiences.

**Analytical Tools**

Most economic analysis of India’s north-east in relation to the “mainland” has been done on the centre/core-periphery, development-underdevelopment paradigm. This core-periphery relation created north-east India as an internal periphery. The northeastern region is converted from a frontier region during the British rule to an internal periphery in the post-independence period. This development in the region can be termed as “internal colonialism”.²

According to this approach the geopolitical integration of north-east India into the Indian state is considered as unequal. When political integration was compounded by economic exploitation, the north-eastern region was converted into India’s “internal colony”. This condition emerged with the spread of industrialisation from Indian mainland to the peripheries. Capitalist industrialism created a new economic dependence of the periphery on the core. Trade and commerce in the north-east is monopolised by members of the core and economic development in the region is designed to complement and promote economic development of the core. There is a relative lack of services, lower standard of living and higher level of frustration among the members of these peripheral groups. There is national discrimination on the basis of language, religion or other cultural forms. Thus, the aggregate economic differences between core and periphery are causally linked to cultural differences (Hechter 1975: 33-34).³

The cultural differences are compounded by racial discrimination of the peripheral mongoloid “north-east” people in the mainland. The death of two students from the north-east, Richard Loitam on 18 April and Dana Sylvia Sangma on 23 April 2012, raised a hue and cry over racial discrimination of the peri-

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A Pan-North-East ‘Identity’ and ‘Solidarity’?

While mainland Indian states were re-organised along linguistic lines based on the report of the States Reorganisation Commission constituted in 1953, north-east India was reorganised on ethnic lines. Thus, it is a general notion that Mizoram state belongs to the Mizos, Nagaland to the Nagas, Manipur to the Meiteis and Meghalaya to the Khasis, Jaintia and Garos. These ethnic states were created after decades of struggle for political autonomy and the creation of such ethnic states have sharpened the divisions.

The joining of hands in protest against racial discrimination and violence may look as if identities are “reconfigured” in Delhi and seemingly indicate “an emergent pan-north-east solidarity” (p 72). However, showcasing ethnic solidarity and protest against oppression or state policy is more frequently observed than protest against racial discrimination and violence.

Whenever the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak Chisi Swu and Thuingaleng Muivah (nscn-im) leaders, Th Muivah and Issak Chisi Swu, visit New Delhi for peace talks with the Government of India, Naga students in Delhi give the duo a grand welcome. The proposed renaming of the North Cachar Hills district in Assam as Dima Hasao in May 2010, an ethnicised name of the district after the Dimasa tribe, led to a protest by the other ethnic minorities in the district – Naga, Kuki and Hmar in the national capital. Likewise, the planting of landmines by the proscribed United National Liberation Front (unlf) in Khengjoi, Manipur which killed and maimed tens of Kukis and the abduction of 400 Ts Laijang villagers by the unlf to Myanmar has resulted in violent protests by Kuki students on 5 and 23 March 2007 in Delhi.

**Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act**

Although the north-eastern region is regarded as a periphery within the Indian state, there are peripheral areas within this periphery. Such areas are inhabited by minority communities who are often educationally and economically backward compared to the majority communities.

In conflict-ridden and militant-infested states such as Manipur, Nagaland and Assam where the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 (afspa) is clamped to deal with militants, AFSPA is seen as a draconian law. However, such special powers of the army may be welcomed by certain ethnic minorities against domination and oppression by dominant ethnic militants even though such views may be hardly expressed. The special powers of the army, no doubt, have draconian elements affecting ethnic minorities but the extent of perceived protection and security given by it from other dominant militants may counterweigh it. Thus, there may be solidarity among most of the north-east people including migrants in Delhi in opposition to the AFSPA but not every ethnic group opposes it.

In conclusion it must be noted that while Duncan McDue-Ra talks of embedded stereotypes about north-easterners, there are areas where he has made misconceived generalisations without taking into confidence the perspectives of the minority “others” within a state or within the north-eastern region.

**NOTES**


2. The conceptualisation of “internal colonialism” to a large extent originated from the research carried out in Latin America by Gonzales-Casanova during the mid-1960s. However, Michael Hechter’s Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development is considered to be one of the most pivotal publications on the subject.

3. For detailed analysis of political integration of different states and historical background of economic development in north-east India see Thongkhholal (2012, 2010).

**REFERENCES**


