



## **Interrogating Elite Conflict vis-a-vis Ethnic Crisis in Northeast India**

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### **Abstract**

Ethnic assertion is not irrational and impulsive, but it is a cover for elites to compete and strive for power. It was the educated elite who formed an influential group within the middle class and who were at the forefront of nationalist movements. This process always involves competition and conflict for political power, economic interests and social status between competing classes. Although conflict and competition between elites are common in modernizing societies, they do not always push distinct cultural groups toward ethnic differentiation. Through the process of modernization, many ethnic groups can integrate into the language and culture of the ruling nation, however, the politicization of ethnicity highlights the importance of inequalities in the distribution of available resources, social benefits and opportunities between different ethnic groups. Tribal communities in this region remained largely isolated from political and social developments taking place elsewhere in the country. The hill tribes in particular, had little opportunity to participate in the electoral process that had begun elsewhere before independence. The hill elites believed that in a free India, the people of the plains would have the wherewithal to exploit them more permanently. They believe that if the hills completely merge with the plains, they will lose their traditional privileges and socio-political dominance over the hills. This paper is an attempt to deal with elite conflict as a factor of ethnic crisis in the context of Northeast in general and Assam in particular.

**Keyword: Tribal, Elite, Identity, Exploitation.**

### **Introduction:**

Ever after independence of the country, the northeast India has been passing through a serious crisis leading to ethnic conflict and turmoil. The activities of a section of the ethnic assertion of the Karbirs, Khasis, Garos and Arunachalists in the hills and the Bodos, Kacharies, Tiwas, Rabhas, Misings, Ahoms, Chutias, Deuries, Koch Rajbanshis, Moran, Matak in the plains are the manifestation of the urges and

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aspiration of these ethnic communities for their all round development. The ethnic assertion should not be summarily dismissed as outburst of emotive and irrational sentiments. It can be understood as a form of elite conflict. In fact, ethnic assertion is not something which is irrational and impulsive but it is a cover through which the elites compete and struggle for power. There is hardly some worthwhile study which examines the phenomenon of ethnicity from this point of view. The term 'elite' refers to an influential sub-group within an ethnic group and 'classes' when referring to sub-groups within ethnic groups, the terms 'elite' and 'class' may however coincide. In fact, it is the educated elite who constitute an influential group within the middle class and they take the lead in the ethnic movements. In some specific circumstances, elite conflict stems from the larger political and economic environments rather than from the cultural taboos of the ethnic groups. But at the same time, the cultural forms, values and practices of ethnic groups become political resources for elite in competition for political power and economic advantages. The resources become symbols for the identification of members of the group which create a political identity. This process always involves competition and conflict for political power, economic interests and social status between competing classes. This process invariably involves competition and conflict for political power, economic benefit and social status between competing elites. The cultural and linguistic differences separate ethnically the relatively "disadvantaged aspirant elite group" from their competitors in the dominant group. These differences become the basis for a special claim for job and other advantages. Such claims are, by and large, associated with the efforts to mobilize the disadvantaged ethnic groups and to create a sense of identity among its members. At this stage, the process of intensifying the differences between the disadvantaged group and dominant group can begin. The former can claim that the later is culturally different and descends from alien intruders and it is the "sons of the soil" and represents the indigenous culture.

Although the conflict and competition between elites, they are common in modernizing societies, they do not always push distinct cultural groups towards ethnic differentiation. As a result of the modernization process, many ethnic groups can assimilate into the language and culture of the ruling ethnic group. However, the politicization of ethnicity highlights the importance of inequalities in the distribution of available resources, social benefits and opportunities between different ethnic groups. Indeed, a distinct national consciousness emerged in response to the exploitation of one indigenous group of one social class by another. If the disadvantaged ethnic group is a concentrated minority in a geographical area, its elites will demand a 'legitimate' sharing of political power within political system. They will also call for some kind of politico-administrative devolution of political power or in some cases for secession.



### **Objectives of the study:**

- i. To understand kinds of elite back up political movement.
- ii. To find out the changes affecting the traditional elite structure under the impact of modernizing process.
- iii. To assess their sense of identity and level of political and economic aspiration.

### **Methodology:**

The research design is descriptive and analytical in nature. Descriptive research method focuses on providing a detailed and accurate account of a specific situation, group, or phenomenon. It describes characteristics, behaviors, or relationships in a given context without looking for underlying causes. On the other hand, analytical research helps to use facts or information already available, and analyze these to make a critical evaluation of the objects. It helps in elaborating things and gives different dimension and perspective to the study. In this study, the data have collected from secondary sources.

### **Analysis:**

The tribal population inhabiting in the northeast region is of Mongoloid origin. The population of many races, mainly Mongols, Indo-Aryans, Australoids or Austriacs and Dravidians, the later forming a very small minority represented by immigrants. While the first settlers were the Mongols, the Indo-Aryans and other groups came later. There is certainly a predominance of Mongoloid elements in the population of northeast India. Most tribes or tribal communities are concentrated in the hilly states of Arunachal Pradesh; Nagaland; Manipur; Mizoram. Apart from racial differences, there is also a tribal-non-tribal duality recognized by the Indian Constitution to ensure certain benefits to tribal communities, to help them catch up with the rest of the society. Most of the indigenous people of northeast India embraced Christianity, changing the social ethos and cultural practices of the Nagas, Mizos, Khasi and Garos. The Bodos, the largest tribal group in the region and largely confined to Assam, have adopted Hinduism and are known by various names such as Bodos, Kacharis and Mechs. The Kukis of Manipur and the Tripurs of Tripura are other important tribal groups. The non-tribal population, which constitutes more than 70% of the population in northeast India, is limited to Assam, Manipur and Tripura. In all these states, the non-tribal population is more than a percent; and in Assam, the most densely populated state in northeast India, 88% of the population belong to non-tribal groups. The Assamese society consists of people following different faiths, though a large majority follows Hinduism. They speak Assamese, an Indo-Aryan language, which has its own script and a rich literature. The Assamese culture has syncretised a culture that has derived

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multiple elements from neighbouring societies. Besides, most of the Other Backward Communities of Assam like the Ahoms, Chutias, Koch-Rajbanshis, Morans, Matakas, also belonging to the great Mongoloid race, have been demanding for recognition of tribal status. Although geographically, the northeast is a part of South Asia, culturally it is much closer to Southeast Asian countries. This is clear from the fact that like the Southeast Asia the large majority of its population racially belong to the same Mongoloid stock.

The northeast region is rich in mineral resources such as oil, natural gas, coal and limestone. There is also fertile land for producing of tea, rice and jute vast forest resources such as wood, rivers and waterfalls have great potential to produce hydroelectric power. With all these resources, the region can become a self-sufficient region if the resources can be mobilized with proper planning. Tea, oil, timber and natural gas contribute a large share towards the national exchequer. Hydropower potential, if properly utilized, can easily meet the industrial needs of the region. Unfortunately, people in the border areas still feel that they are neglected, exploited and discriminated. One of the most important reasons for the slow development of the northeast is the long term existence of tribal, feudal society with a little of capital formation and commodity production. During the pre-British period, the indigenous accumulation and capital formation did not take place. Thus, trade and commerce were not sufficiently developed to bring together heterogeneous tribes and ethnic communities by bringing them into a common market. Furthermore, during the colonial period, the infrastructure necessary for indigenous economic development was not fully developed. On the contrary, the imperialist rulers exploited the natural resources without reinvesting in regional development. Even after more than half a century years of independence, people of northeast still find that Indian state treats the entire region primarily as a supplier of raw materials and a market for manufactured goods in the rest of the country. Therefore, there is a widespread feeling that the northeast is considered as a colony of the Indian state and is described as a "Colonial Hinterland". However, this does not mean that the regional backwardness of the region is the sole cause of the rise of ethnic nationalities. It has its historical roots and the people of this region are very conscious of their cultural and linguistic identity, political rights and social status.

The tribal communities in this region remain largely isolated from the political and social development taking place elsewhere in the country. The hill tribes, in particular, had little opportunity to participate in the electoral processes that began elsewhere long before independence. However, plain tribals such as Bodos, Rabhas, Sonowals, Lalungs (Tiwas) Misings and Deuris were somehow integrated into both Pan-Indian and Pan-Assamese nationalism. More importantly, they were virtually Aryanized long before the



colonized Assam. However, it may be noted that racially, a large number of the inhabitants of Assam belong to Mongoloid stock. The Ahoms, Chutias, Koches, Morans, Matakas who are of Mongoloid origin have particularly assimilated into the Assamese nationality. Another important segment of Assamese nationality is the upper caste Hindus minority, the Assamese Brahmins, Kayasthas, Kalitas, Keots and other low caste Assamese and Assamese Muslims. However, two major migrant groups, tea garden workers and Muslim peasants from East Bengal did not integrate well with the Assamese nationality in colonial Assam. Nevertheless, during the colonial period and even after, Assamese are the most advanced nationality in the northeast and among the Assamese the upper-caste, Assamese Hindus are the most articulate and dominant group in an economically backward, multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-lingual in the northeast. As a result of exposure to Christianity and western education, articulate tribal elites emerged in the hills. They acted as opinion builders and motivators of socio-political awareness among the hill tribal. At the beginning of independence, they even laboured under a suspicion that the rule of white people in the hitherto "Excluded Areas" would be replaced by "more advanced neighbours on the plains of free India. By and large, the hill elites believed that in a free India, the people of the plains would be well placed to exploit them more permanently. This feeling of hills was mainly shared by the newly emerged western educated hill elite and the tribal chiefs (syiems). They thought that if the hill areas completely merge with the plains, they will lose their traditional privileges and socio-political dominance over the hills. To meet the aspiration of the hill people, the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution was introduced, formed an Autonomous District Council in addition to other measures to protect their interest. Thus, the Nagas, Mizos, Khasis, Jaintias, Karbis and Dimasas enjoyed autonomy in the management of their affairs. But gradually, they began to realize that the autonomy granted to them under this statutory provision was not adequate to protect their interest under the Assamese elite dominated administration. The language policy of the Assam Government (1960), which made Assamese as the official language of the state, alienated the hill tribal from the Assamese people.

In fact, they became preoccupied with their disadvantage status among the Assamese dominated upper class. In fact, the hill elites were forced to agitate, not primarily because of a threat to their own ethnic identity, language, traditions and culture but they felt that their individual rights in the political field were virtually threatened. Indeed, the personal ambitions of the hill elite had a lot to do with the Hill State movement in the sixties, which aroused the tribal sentiment in the hills against the Assamese. Therefore, it was necessary to accept the request to create new hill states in the northeast. As such in the post-colonial period, the hill tribal became increasingly aware of their distinct identities, which they used



to realize their political aspiration. Thus, it seems that the conflict between elites in the northeast manifests at two levels: (i) Conflict between the hill elites and plains elites i.e. the dominant Assamese elite; (ii) Conflict between the dominant and non-dominant elites of the Assamese society, i.e. the Assamese upper-caste elite vs non-caste ethnic elite. However, in this exercise, however, we will mainly focus on the second point.

It is worth mentioning that after independence, the composition of the ruling class had changed significantly. Due to obvious reason, the Indian ruling class is composed of national bourgeoisie, landlords and bureaucrats. Furthermore, it was noticed that the intelligentsia had become a partners of the Indian ruling class. In a federal country like India, the ruling class operates two levels national and regional. Despite being a part of the Indian ruling class, the regional (state) ruling class tries to assert its autonomy at the regional level in order to gain concessions to ensure its survival and power. In fact, the state adopts a capitalist economic development path that allows the ruling class to exercise a monopoly on political and economic power. The national bourgeoisie, with the help of the regional bourgeoisie, takes advantage of development and turns weaker nationalities into "colonial hinterland". The Indian ruling class clearly wants regional ally in Assam to exploit natural resources and develop a market economy. Therefore, the former is prepared to grant some concession to the later. Likewise, at the regional level, the dominant hegemonic ruling class allows it to impose its culture in a manner that the smaller nationalities feel threatened. The hegemonic class uses emotional slogans to disguise its real interests. Thus, with the Indian ruling class, the Assamese ruling class asserts its autonomy and identity at the regional level. The Assamese ruling class, i.e. a weak and small bourgeoisie is composed of a few tea planters, owner of powerful regional press, transport operators, contractors, professionals, bureaucrats and the rural gentry. The dominant among them clearly belongs to the Assamese upper-caste elites. They use the state machinery for their own interest and tried to establish their socio- cultural hegemony over the entire Assamese society. However, it should be noted that the ruling class of Assam is not a bourgeoisie in the productive sense, although it appears very similar ideology and culture. It could also project his own identity crisis as the crisis of the entire Assamese people.

Despite its weak position in that it was not being bourgeois in the productive sense of the term and in terms of the Indian ruling class, the Assamese ruling class attempted to establish its hegemony by controlling state government apparatus. It was always reluctant to share power and benefits even with other oppressed and backward sections of the Assamese nationality. More importantly, this class has succeeded in projecting its class interests into the interests of the entire Assamese masses. It may be



reiterated that after independence and partition, Assam lost its Muslim and Bengali dominated district Sylhet to erstwhile East Pakistan. This substantially reduced the number of both the Muslims and the Bengalis in the post-colonial Assam. However, Bengalis dominated the Cachar district in the Barak Valley and the entire northeastern hill region with the exception of NEFA (now Arunachal Pradesh), Manipur and Tripura remained with Assam. Thus, in post-colonial Assam, the Assamese were numerically and politically stronger, and for the first time they became the single largest group in Assam. In fact, after independence, the scope of Assamese nationality expanded significantly. The Assamese people did not lose their identity despite migration during the colonial and even post-colonial period.

Most of the migrant groups, such as the tea plantation labourers, immigrant Muslim peasant adopted Assamese as their mother tongue and identified with Assamese nationality. As a result, the Assamese grew faster than any other group in Assam, mainly due to the strong integration of the Assamese language. However, a sizeable number of people are still not fully assimilated into the Assamese nationality. But what is quite surprising is that some groups, especially ethnic communities, who once considered themselves as a part of the larger Assamese society and had assimilated with the Assamese people, are now trying to revive their own identity and demand for political autonomy for their political identity. Although the tea garden labourers and Muslims immigrant both accepted their own oppressed status and the dominant position of the Assamese caste-Hindu elite, the indigenous tribals and the other ethnic groups were not yet ready to accept this domination. It seemed to them that their interests were not protected by the Assamese ruling class. This sentiment manifested itself in the movements for a distinct identity launched by ethnic groups under the leadership of their respective emerging educated elite. The intolerant attitude of the Assamese ruling class and public opinion builders in Assam has further deteriorated the situation. It refused to recognize that small communities were ethnic and the assertion of their identities by ethnic groups was seen as a threat to the nation-building process of the Assamese people.

It may be noted that the tribals were the first indigenous people of Assam both in the hills and the plains. The plain tribals i.e. the Bodos, Misings, Sonowals-Kacharis, Deuris, Rabhas, and Tiwas have been sharing their traditional home-land in the Brahmaputra valley, with the Aryan Assamese and other mongoloid communities such as the Ahoms and the Chutias. Therefore, it is impossible to separate the rich tribal and ethnic heritage from the composite Assamese society and culture of the Assamese people. But the tribals remain much more backward socially, economically and even politically than other sections of the Assamese society. In post-colonial Assam, the Assamese ruling class did not pay much attention to the problems faced by the plains tribals. They faced the problem of land alienation, poverty,

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indebtedness, unemployment and political oppression. As already noted, the hill tribes enjoyed autonomy in managing their own affairs under the provisions of Sixth Schedule, but similar facilities are not extended to the plain tribals. Although the areas dominated by the plain tribals are classified as "Tribal Blocks" and "Tribal Belt" to protect the tribals from non-tribal encroachment into their areas, but non-tribals were still allowed to acquire land and settle in the tribal areas.

### **Conclusion:**

The plains tribals have become more aware and articulate about their distinct ethnic identity and have begun to use their differences as a means to gain political power, and removing their socio-economic backwardness. The issues of language and culture as well as other overarching factors began to be raised after the emergence of conflicts between elites at different levels due to conflicts of interest. The conflict of interest created by feeling of deprivation and negligence motivated the elites of the ethnic community to achieve emotional integration into their respective communities so that they can fight against the dominant community. Thus, the elite tend to generalize their conflicts and build up their respective community mobilization movements politically.

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