



## Ethno-Politics and Crisis of Governance in North-East India : A Theoretical Prospective

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### ABSTRACT

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Ethno-politics in Northeast India has been the subject of study and considerable controversy ever since the time of independence of India. After independence, Northeast India became part of Indian Union but the undercurrent of the feeling of alienation from the mainstream India remained off and on. Northeast India's politics is highly ethnicized and ethnicity is highly politicized which has created the problem of governance in this region. The concept of regionalism, tribalism, sub-nationalism, separatism gradually evolved and grew to contribute to the phenomenon of ethno-politics that occupied a pivotal feature of North-eastern politics. Thus, the better understanding of conceptual framework of ethnicity and governance is very necessary to understand North-eastern politics. With the help of good governance, a sound climate must be created and ethnic problems should be carefully handled.

Keywords:

Ethnic Identity, Ethnic Mobilization, Rightful Share, Middle Class, Development.

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**INTRODUCTION**

The issue of ethno-politics and crisis of governance has been a worldwide phenomenon today. The phenomenon of ethnicity has been an important component of socio-political realities of multi-ethnic states of India. The politics of India has been highly ethnicized because of the awakening of ethno-cultural consciousness and assertion of ethnic identities (Phukon, Girin, 2003, p.54). Ethnic identity has been manifested through ethnic political mobilization and ethnic movements. Thus, ethnic issues influence the political agenda of all over India including Northeastern states. Northeastern states of India have experienced various ethnic conflicts. Ethnic movement occurs when ethnic competition increases. Besides, denial of basic human rights, breakdown of political order, discriminatory economic policy, conflicting theory of modernization are seem to be responsible for ethnic conflict. In view of all these, the phenomenon of ethnicity has been an important component of the socio-political realities of states of Northeast India. Thus ethnicization of politics and politicization of ethnic identity (Phukon, Girin, 2003, p.37) has sharpened the ethnic consciousness in the region.

**CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Even after decades of independence of the country, the ethnic communities of Assam increasingly felt that they remained much more backward than other sections of the people of the state. Indeed, they had not only been experiencing the problem of land alienation, unemployment, economic and political oppression under the existing socio-economic system but also discrimination in achieving their 'rightful' share in the society. Therefore, it appeared to them that unless they are organized on a sound footing nobody would care for the development of their respective communities. In view of this, the ethnic groups of Assam began to organize their communities with a new vigor.



The ethnic elite increasingly realized that they were being deprived of their 'legitimate share' ( Phukon, Girin 2003, p.37) of political rights. Obviously, most of the ethnic groups realized that the monopoly of political power of the dominant section of the Assamese was bound to restrict the scope of their aspirations. Thus a section of the emerging educated elite of the ethnic groups began to feel that in order to establish their communities into a rightful place, they must be politically powerful. For this purpose, some of them started forming certain political platform too such as Karbi Autonomous State Demand Committee, Ahom Tai Mongoloid Rajya Parishad (Renamed as Ujani Asom Rajya Parishad), Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA), Bodo Peoples' Action Committee, Mising Autonomous Demand Committee, Rabha Autonomous Demand Committee etc. Since the late sixties of the last century some of the ethnic groups became more articulate and organized capable of challenging the dominant position of the ruling Assamese elite and bargaining for adequate share of administrative jobs and political power.

At the beginning, the ethnic groups started their assertion with non-political issue i.e. protection of socio-cultural identity, development of their languages, instruction through mother tongue, continuation of English as medium of instruction and so on. Subsequently these culminated in political demands. The Official Language Bill of 1960 was perceived as barrier to their advancement and as an obstacle to get job in government offices. The impositions of Assamese language backed by the movements made the tribal ethnic groups suspicious about the hidden motive of the dominant section of the Assamese (Phukon, Girin, 2003, p.101). The demand for separate and Autonomous States in present Assam has been the manifestation of such a feeling and sentiment.

**ETHNICITY CUM POLITICS IN NORTHEAST INDIA**

The concept 'ethnic' is derived from the Greek word 'Ethos' which means nation, people, caste, and tribe and so on. It indicates the racial, linguistic and cultural ties of people with specific group or exotic primitive culture. Ethnicity, therefore, stands for the ethnic quality of a group bearing different meanings in varied situational context. In fact, ethnic groups are the categories of ascriptions and the identification which is made by the actors themselves. Thus, race and sub-race, sect and sub-sects, tribe and sub-tribe, caste and sub-caste, class and sub-class, language and dialect, religion and faith, territoriality, nationality, degree of aristocracy and at times levels of techno-culture efficiency have all been used sometimes singularly or in various combinations to delineate ethnicity (Danda, Ajit K, 1991, p.51). An ethnic group succeeds by its own efforts in achieving and maintaining group rights through political action and political mobilization it goes beyond ethnicity and community to establish itself as a nationality (Brass, Paul R. 1991, p. 22).

Ethnicity is also a sense of ethnic identity, which has been defined as consisting of the objective, symbolic or emblematic use by a group of people of any aspect of culture, in order to differentiate themselves from other groups (Vos, George De, 1975, p. 16). Paul R. Brass has rightly observed that ethnic identity formation is seen as a process created in the dynamic of elite competition within the boundaries determined by political and economic realities (Brass, Paul, R. 1991, p. 22). The term ethnicity is comparatively a new area of study, which is gradually evolved from 19th century. Most of the ethnic groups of the world organized and mobilized to assert their rights. Each and every ethnic group utilizes the concept of 'ethnicity', to mobilize a society to make concrete demands on the political system to improve their status and the ultimate aim is to gain political power.



On the other hand, the ethnic group can either be a large or small group of people in either backward and advanced societies who are united by a common inherited culture (language, music, food, dressing, customs and practices), racial similarity, common religion, belief in common history and ancestry and who exhibits strong psychological sentiment of belonging to the group (Ganguli, Rajat, 1998, pp.11-12). Every ethnic group differentiate themselves from the other ethnic groups of the society. In 20th century ethnic crisis was considered as a most dominant socio-political phenomenon, which was the source of insurgency, large-scale conflict, leading to civil war, and disintegration of states. In reality the more society is modernized, globalized, the more ethnic demands are manifested. Mostly in tribal societies the ethnic demands are handled by the newly educated middle class. Modernization has created in its development process in the tribal regions, a tribal middle class consisting of professionals, contractors, power brokers and it is these people who are in the forefront of the ethnic or autonomy or regional movements. In all ethnic movements the middle class elite plays an important role. The middle class makes the people aware of their ethnic origin, creates crisis for their identity and takes lead in ethnic assertions. With the onset of commercialization and industrialization tribal rights over land, forest and water have received a serious jolt, as non-tribal peasants, traders, job-seekers and businessman have moved into tribal land. But, no adequate measures are forthcoming to promote tribal development. In such a situation, the tribals, especially the educated section, feels relatively deprived in comparison to the non-tribals. The emerging tribal middle class thus took cudgels against the state government demanding a say in the political decision-making process, control over their economic resources, job opportunities etc. Indeed, the ethnic groups believes that achievement of political power and adequate share in the decision making process will fulfill their interest. The ethnic groups put pressure over the government either for the creation of separate and



autonomous state on the basis of their lingo-cultural identities or for special constitutional safeguards of their communities.

India is a secular multinational state where ethnicity has become a unique feature of its politics. Similarly, the politics of Northeast India has been increasingly influenced by ethnicity and ethnic assertion. Different ethnic groups have been launching movement for maintaining their respective distinct ethnic identities. In fact, the ethnic assertions of the region are mostly linguistic and cultural in nature. After independence, most of the ethnic groups of Northeast region started demanding separate states. As such, Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh were born on ethnic line. The demands for either separate states or autonomous states have not ended yet. Like the Bodos, the Tiwas, the Rabhas, the Misings and the Karbis have been launching movement for separate and autonomous states leading to inter-ethnic clashes in many areas. Thus mobilization of people on ethnic line has been a dominant feature of politics of the region in recent years. Uses of cultural symbols of the ethnic groups for socio-political and economic goals give rise to ethnicity. As a matter of fact, ethnic mobilization is conditioned by the overall political and economic environment. It is apparent that ethnic impulses have been the potential instrument of movement for autonomy. Obviously, such movements are the resultant of lack of good governance. In order to deal with this problem, it is desirable to understand the concept of 'Governance' from a theoretical perspective.

### **ETHNO-POLITICS CUM GOVERNANCE**

The concept of ethno-politics is closely related to governance. Governance is a kind of art in which power is exercised in the management of economic and human resources of a country. It implies the exercise of economic, political and administrative authority to manage a country at all levels. Word Bank define governance as legitimacy of



Government (degree of democratization), accountability of political and official elements of government (media freedom, transparent decision-making, accountability mechanisms), competence of governments to formulate policies and deliver services and respect for human rights and rule of law (individual and group rights and security, framework for economic and social activity and participation) (World Bank, 1994, p.19). United Nations Development Programme underlined eight major principles of good governance which are – Participations, consensus-orientation, transparency, accountability, responsiveness, equity and inclusiveness, effectiveness and efficiency and rule of Law (UNDP, 1997, p.19). Governance is the stewardship of formal and informal political rules of the game. Governance refers to those measures that involve setting the rules for the exercise of power and setting conflicts over such rules (Hyden,1999, p. 185). Governance refers to self-organizing, inter-organizational networks characterized by interdependence, resource- exchange, rules of the game and significant autonomy from the state (Rhodes, 1997, p.15). In fact the concept of governance may be defined as a use of political authority and exercise of control over the management of resources for social and economic development. It is a continuous process through which diverse and conflicting interest may be accommodated. The democratic governance is inextricably connected with the concept of political development. In recent years, however, the term governance has been interpreted to promote human development, which is treated as combination of good economic, political and civic governance. In order to promote human development, it has to be not just pro-people but it has to be owned by the people. Therefore, under a good governance, government remain accountable to people. Similarly, affective participation of the people in policy making process and formation of civil society are pre requisites for good governance.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

Thus it appears that governance refers to the management of affairs of a state ranging from the socio-economic to political development for all round development of a society. From the sociological point of view, it is an effort to integrate the society by promoting secular values. From the economic stand point it implies a people centered economic development and formation of a society in which worst off can preserve dignity. Similarly, from political point of view, it as a democratic process in which people will actively participate in the affairs of the state. Establishment of rule of law, free and fair elections, accountable government and efficient bureaucracy, guarantee of fundamental human rights, order and cohesion in the society are some of the fundamentals of the concept of good governance. Unless public policies are designed to reduce economic inequality, condition is created for active participation of people in the policy making process and develop the minimum value consensus, the chances of establishing good governance bound to be nebulous. These ideas of 'governance' may be taken into consideration in order to understand the problem and prospect of governance in the Northeast. There is need of good governance which can eliminate misunderstanding and the ethnic tribes could get their proper place and better developmental facilities.

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