

From Tribal To Ethnic Identity: The Transformation of North-Eastern India

Sudha Ratan
Georgia Southern University

This paper examines the political mobilization of tribal identities in north-eastern India. Using examples from Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, and Arunachal Pradesh, the paper suggests that more attention needs to be paid to domestic politics within the Indian state which have contributed to the mobilization of tribal peoples into highly politicized ethnic groups. The paper will explore the impact of government policies in these hillstates and the role of political elites in such mobilization.

The dynamic relationship between ethnicity and the state is changing the political map of India as new groups are given political and economic recognition by the Government of India. A number of these groups are located in the northeastern part of the country. In this paper, I examine recent developments in north eastern India, specifically, the hill states of Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, and Arunachal Pradesh (the "seven sisters"), which suggest that more attention needs to be paid to the nexus between the activities of institutions of the state and the mobilization of tribal people into highly politicized ethnic groups.

In recent years violence has taken a heavy toll on human life as well as property in the hill states in north east India. The conflict between dominant tribal groups in these states and the resultant use of force by government troops has put the official death toll in Nagaland and Manipur alone at over four hundred lives in the past two years. Despite the signing of peace accords and agreements between the Government of India and the various tribal groups, there is continued protest and unrest in the north east as more and more groups stake out their claims to political recognition and greater economic opportunities. This paper begins with a brief overview of the use of ethnicity in political mobilization within the Indian Union. The next section examines why and how tribal peoples in these states began to mobilize politically around new constructions of

Explorations in Ethnic Studies Vol. 18, No. 1

tribal/ethnic identities. The paper concludes with a brief look at future directions for government policy in the hill states of north-eastern India.

Ethnicity is defined here as the shared historical experiences, myths, and symbols like language, religion, and caste, which are used by the members of a group to set themselves apart from others.¹ Thus, members of an ethnic group often view themselves as part of a "nation." In contrast, tribes (like clans) tend to be more united and differentiated as they are almost feudal in character with every family having a status and a role within a specific community. Confederations of tribes can and sometimes do begin to function as ethnic groups by adopting unifying symbols, myths, and histories, and this paper examines the process of transformation among Indian tribal groups.² Tribal/ethnic group relations with the state are vital for understanding the process of transformation. The state is treated here as a relatively autonomous actor whose policies can be shaped by the dominance of certain groups within it as well as by its selective support to specific ethnic elites.³ These policies in turn can have an impact on ethnic group consciousness as well as inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic relations.⁴

Ethnicity and the Indian Union

Religious, linguistic, and, caste groups have been a driving force in both the creation and the evolution of the Indian Union. The secular character of the Indian struggle for independence was largely the result of a pragmatic recognition of these forces by the leadership of the nationalist movement. Indian secularism, unlike its western counterpart, was concerned with equal government protection for all religions rather than a pure separation of church and state. It was this vision of secularism that guided the leaders of the independence movement.

The Indian National Congress, which was the driving force behind the movement for independence, conceded the importance of ethnic, and more specifically, language, caste, and regional identifications, long before independence. Gandhi, in his attempt to mobilize the Indian masses, encouraged the rise of ethnic elites who could help "build bridges" to India's villages for the Congress movement. As early as the 1920s, the Congress accepted the principle of linguistic states after independence in order to win the support of regional leaders for the struggle against British rule. By the time of independence in August 1947, religious and linguistic nationalisms had established their stake in the state-making process underway in the Indian sub-continent. Hindu and Muslim nationalism and language chauvinists from around the country sought to assert their rights. The strength of these forces became very visible with the Muslim League's successful campaign for an Islamic state of Pakistan.

Ratan - From Tribal to Ethnic Identity

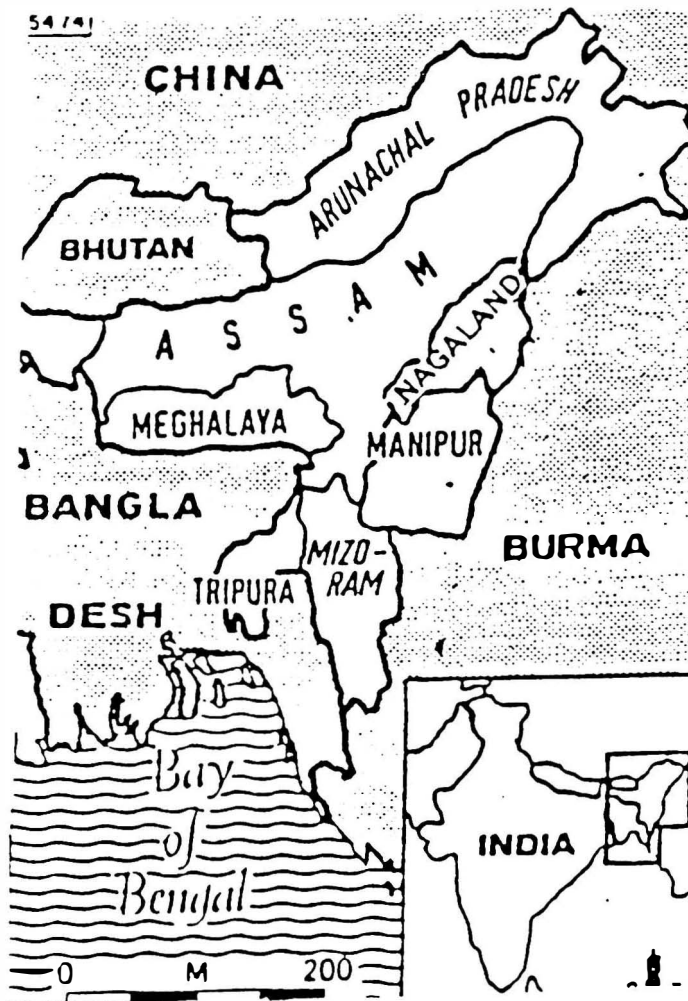
The creation of Pakistan only served to strengthen the Congress commitment to secularism, and the Constitution drafted under its leadership provided extensive government support for ethnic minorities.⁵ Thus, religious, linguistic groups, backward, and tribal groups as well as economically depressed groups were all given certain fundamental rights to propagate their beliefs and protect their culture, language, and, until the passage of the 16th amendment in 1963, the right to preach secession.⁶ Ethnic identities therefore came to be openly acknowledged and were made the basis of political organization and bargaining. Ethnic group activity in the years immediately after independence also played a role in transforming the structure of government by wresting territorial concessions. The federal system bequeathed by the British to India had been retained in the Constitution and consisted of a central government and numerous states arbitrarily created (as in other British colonies) for administrative convenience. Nehru had promised that after independence linguistic states would be created to replace these British administrative units. However, the violence that followed the partition of the country had generated concerns about the need to provide the central government with effective powers to keep the country together, and on the recommendations of the Dar commission, it was decided that four administrative units would be created in lieu of a number of linguistic states.⁷

Language became a rallying symbol around which ethnic groups mobilized to challenge the central government. The first battle cry was sounded by the Telegu-speaking people of the south who demanded the creation of a separate state of Andhra. The popular support for this movement generated similar demands from other parts of India and led to the setting up of the State Reorganization Commission, which in 1955 recommended the redrawing of state borders along linguistic lines. The reorganization led to the creation of fourteen states and five centrally administered territories. The use of language to back territorial claims continued in the subsequent period. In the state of Bombay, the conflict between Gujarati and Marathi-speaking peoples ultimately led to the partition of that state in 1960. When the Sikhs were refused a state on religious grounds, they began a movement to secure a separate Punjabi-speaking state. In 1966, Punjab was divided into a Punjabi-speaking state and a Hindu-speaking state of Haryana. Popular support for this movement was fueled by the economic concerns of various groups. The demand for the creation of states on a linguistic basis reflected the concerns of middle and lower class groups who had traditionally used government employment to improve their economic and social status. Their interests were closely tied to the creation of state governments and bureaucracies operated in the local language. The forces at work in other parts of India also manifested themselves in the north-eastern parts of the country.⁸

Tribal to Ethnic Identity in North-Eastern India

The region that today comprises Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, and Arunachal Pradesh was annexed from Burma by the British in 1826. In 1905, it was amalgamated with East Bengal (now Bangladesh) to form the Province of East Bengal and Assam. The only exceptions were Manipur and Tripura, which were independent states and were recognized as such by the British. The population was almost entirely tribal and was dominated by tribes like the Nagas, Mishmis, Adis, Miris, Apa Tanis, and Nishis. The entire region was administered by a skeletal staff comprised of commissioner/district commissioner assisted by a few clerks and a small force of soldiers.

Map of India's North-Eastern States



Ratan - From Tribal to Ethnic Identity

The rise of political awareness among the tribals in the hill states and their mobilization around ethnic symbols like language, history, and tradition needs to be examined in connection with three major factors; the change in official government policy towards the hillstates after independence, the spill-over effects of linguistics/cultural nationalism, and the influence of political elites.

Government Policy

In comparison with other parts of India, the tribals of these areas were well served by the British policy of non-interference and protection which allowed them to retain their lands and continue with their traditional lifestyles. Plainsmen were not allowed to acquire land in the hills, and the indigenous system of land tenure was also maintained. In the prolonged negotiations that preceded independence in 1946, there were discussions about the future of Assam, but the focus remained almost exclusively on the Hindu-Muslim question. At the time, a few of the larger tribal groups like the Nagas made their dissatisfaction felt while others stressed the need for constitutional safeguards to protect educational and employment opportunities. The vast majority of tribes stayed out of the negotiations of which they were only dimly aware.

Independence changed all that. Despite Prime Minister Nehru's advice that "People should develop along the lines of their own genius and the imposition of alien values should be avoided," the reality was that the Indian government adopted a much more aggressive and intrusive administration of these hill areas. To villagers who were used to managing their own affairs, the interference of lowly officials from the plains and from other parts of India who were often ignorant and uncaring of local customs was at the least offensive. As one Indian administrator who served in this part of the country for more than thirty years wrote,

While inter-village rivalries and casual skirmishes have been endemic in the tribal areas since time immemorial, it has been only since Independence and the imposition of a much heavier administrative control that violence and armed insurgency have come to be accepted as the normal pattern of life.¹⁰

The problem of administration was complicated by the rush of Assamese plains-people who had hitherto been forbidden from acquiring or owning land in the hill areas. These plains-people were themselves tribals who had been converted to the Hindu religion and had developed a distinct language called Assamese with its own script, grammar, and literature. During the colonial period there had been occasional incidents in which the Assamese had complained against the colonial

Explorations in Ethnic Studies Vol. 18, No. 1

policy of protection of the hill states since it was not applied to Christian missionaries. There was also some resentment that colonial administrators had actively encouraged the dissemination of English and the adoption of the Roman script among tribal groups whose lingua franca was a form of simple Assamese.¹¹

Prevented during colonial rule from interacting with the people of the hillstates, the Assamese seized the opportunities presented by independence to begin the process of assimilation. The government's encouragement of the plains-people in attempt to generate economic prosperity for the hill people through cooperative ventures like paper and plywood industries only helped to deepen the animosity between the bigger tribes and the Assamese, who resented the privileged treatment given the tribes under British rule.

Government policy not only encouraged business interests from outside the region but also drew in a large number of non-tribals who possessed the necessary technical and other skills thought necessary for development. They in turn brought their kinsmen, and the lure provided by government development money brought in large numbers of contractors. The result was that the tribals found themselves becoming second class citizens in their own territories. In addition to this, as Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf has documented, government policies of land tenure and revenue collection also facilitated the transfer of tribal lands to outsiders.¹²

The Nagas were among the first to organize against this "invasion" from the plains. The constitutional recognition of tribal identity and the right to organize and preach secession was used by the Nagas in the years after independence when they formed the Naga National Council to spearhead the demand for a separate state to be carved out of Assam. After almost fifteen years of violent agitation, a moderate section of the Naga leadership settled for statehood within the Indian Union in 1963, although separatist groups continue to operate on the border with Burma. The Naga agitation against Assamese and Indian domination laid the basis for demands from other groups who were confronted with a much more intransigent Assamese state.

Spill-Over of Linguistic/Cultural Nationalism

In the 1960s other tribal groups began to mobilize around the issue of language and cultural preservation. They were responding to Assamese initiatives which were themselves a reaction to the influx of people from the East and West Bengal in the aftermath of partition. The presence of a large number of Bengali-speakers ("foreigners") in certain sectors of the economy led to fears of perceived Bengali domination of Assamese life and led to the passage in 1962 of the Assam Official Language Act of 1960 (making Assamese the official language in the

state).

The passage of this Act triggered unrest among the forty-four percent non-Assamese speaking groups in the state. Hill tribes like the Khasis, the Garos, and the Mizos, among others, launched separatist movements. While all of these groups had in the past used Assamese in various forms, they now began to distance themselves from Assam and claim separate linguistic/cultural status. In 1969, the Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo Hills were taken away from Assam to form an autonomous unit called Meghalaya. In the years that followed, Mizo protests intensified, leading ultimately to the reorganization of the north-east along tribal/linguistic lines in 1971-72. The reorganization led to full-fledged statehood for Meghalaya, Manipur, and Tripura, and union territory status for the Mizo hills (called Mizoram) and the North East Frontier Agency (called Arunachal Pradesh). In the late seventies and early eighties, both these areas were given full statehood within the Union.

Concerns about language and cultural preservation are often masks for economic issues, and the latter have been at the forefront of ethnic group mobilization in north-eastern India. The demand that the indigenes or “sons of the soil” be given their fair share of the benefits of government development led many groups to follow in the footsteps of the Assamese activists who had successfully linked their economic concerns about “foreigners” with questions of linguistic and cultural differences. The Assamese agitation against Bengali domination was spearheaded by the All Assam Student’s Union (AASU), and the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), a spin-off from the AASU. Their demands included a call for central government intervention to protect the interests of the “sons of the soil” while keeping foreigners out of the state. The AASU and the AGP were able to mobilize Assamese society using non-violent demonstrations, rallies as well as bombings, burning of vehicles, and other tactics aimed at intimidating the government. They portrayed themselves as victims of Central government indifference and “foreign” domination. Similar strategies have found favor with groups in Meghalaya (All-Meghalaya Students Union), in Assam (All Bodo Student Union), and in Tripura (Tribal National Volunteers), among others. At the same time, there are groups in Nagaland and Mizoram which continue to seek separation from India. In Nagaland, the forces of Naga separatist leader Mr. A. Z. Phizo continue to destabilize the border with Burma, while another and more violent group (the Nationalist Council of Nagaland), led by Thuingaleng Muivah, is based in Burma. In Mizoram, despite government efforts to enter into talks in the 1980s with Mizo National Front (MNF) leader, Mr. Laldenga, problems continue.

The demands by these groups gathered force in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and following the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi, new initiatives were put forward by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi towards resolving the situation. Accords were signed in Assam and Tripura, and an

agreement was reached with Mr. Laldenga. In elections held in the aftermath of the accords, regional parties were brought to power in many of the north-eastern states. However, the situation did not improve. For example, in the elections held in Assam in 1985, the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) won the state assembly elections and immediately put into effect policies that have accelerated the pace of fragmentation in the region. Among other decisions, the AGP authorized Assamese to be compulsory in non-Assamese language schools and also began a campaign to evict "foreigners" and "encroachers" (most of whom turned out to be indigenous people) from forest areas. The AGP, government which was dominated by upper caste Hindu-Assamese, faced intense opposition from other sectors of Assamese society who felt their interests were being neglected. Some commentators have suggested that the ruling Congress party in New Delhi encouraged the growth of opposition to the AGP among tribal groups like the Bodos, Rabhas, and Misings. In any event, the AGP government proved short-lived, and the current Congress government faces destabilization from the United Liberation Front of Assam (UNLFA), which claims to represent the "80% of the people of Assam constituting the economically exploited sections."¹³

A more serious concern is that many of the insurgent groups appear to be cooperating with one another in recent years. For example, the NSCN-Muivah faction, the Bodo Security Force, the ULFA, and the People's Liberation Army of Minipur are said to have formed a new organization aimed at coordinating policy and strategy.¹⁴ There is also concern that the activism has spread to other tribal groups in neighboring states. The demand for a state of Uttarkhand has been put forward by youth-dominated groups like the Uttarkhand Kranti Dal (UKD) and the more extremist Uttarkhand Mukti Sena (UMS) on the grounds that these hill districts in northern Uttar Pradesh constitute a separate geographical and cultural region which should be given independent status within the Union. However, their negotiations with the government indicate that their major concern is with rectifying what they perceive to be the economic injustices inflicted upon the peoples of the hill by the government located in the plains. Unemployment, water-shortages, and lack of access to government contracts thus emerge as the primary considerations.¹⁵

Similar factors have contributed to the emergence of the demand for Jharkhand comprising the tribal pockets of Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa, and Madhya Pradesh. In the case of the latter, the Union government has under pressure conceded in principle to the creation of Jharkhand if the four affected states agree. The Gorkha National Liberation Front's (GNLF) demand for Gorkhaland similarly reflects the concerns of its leader, Subhas Ghising, for the plight of six million Nepalis in West Bengal whose underdeveloped status is credited to their lack of access to higher education and administrative jobs, as well as the offi-

cial rejection of the Nepali language.¹⁶ In all these cases the need for economic development is causing groups to seek out and reinforce cultural and language commonalities that then become the basis for political organization. Like the earlier movements centered on language, these groups also seek a separate territorial status in the hope that this will give them a measure of control over their political and economic futures.

The Influence of Political Elites

Paul Brass, writing about India, held that ethnicity and nationalism were the creation of elites who "draw upon, distort, and sometimes fabricate materials from the culture of the groups they wish to represent in order to protect their well-being or existence or to gain political and economic advantage for their groups as well as themselves."¹⁷ This becomes very apparent in examining the rise of ethnic identification in the Indian north-east. While government policies and the rise of Assamese cultural nationalism acted as catalysts in mobilizing the various tribal groups, such mobilization would have been impossible in the absence of leaders who seized the opportunities provided by these factors.

These individuals are part of a growing body of educated tribals who are now leading various insurgencies in the hill states or are part of mainstream political activity within these states. While the more radical elements like Phizo (Nagas), Laldenga, and Muivah (Mizos) have distanced themselves from India and are seeking separation, others like Bejoy Hrankhwal (Kuki from Tripura) have accommodated themselves to the idea of independent statehood within the Indian Union. These individuals, unlike many of their tribal compatriots, have received an education and have come to understand the history of the tribal people within the Union as one of exploitation and injustices. As the number of educated unemployed youth grows, the insurgents will have no trouble finding potential leaders and recruits among their number.

The power of the tribal elites lies in their ability to bring people together in defense of common symbols and to even create symbols where none may have existed. Thus, educated Khasi elites (with the help of missionaries) were responsible for the development of the Khasi language, script (Roman), and literature to the point where few Khasis (unlike other hill tribes) had any knowledge of Assamese. This made it easier for independence from Assam and, in recent years, to get Khasi recognized as one of the languages in which examinations can be taken at the University at Guahati.

Similarly, the movement for "Udayachal," or Bodoland as it is called, also focused on separating the Bodo language from Assamese. The Bodo Sahitya Sabha was founded in 1952 to make Bodo a language of instruction, a goal that was not achieved until 1963. There was little interest at the time in denying the importance of learning Assamese,

which was seen as an important route to economic and social mobility. Then in 1973-74, there was violent struggle over the choice of script for the Bodo language which had until then use Assamese. Bodo leaders launched a struggle in favor of the Roman script and, after the loss of twenty-one Bodo lives, the government agreed to a compromise candidate, the Devanagari script (in which Sanskrit is written).¹⁸ The resulting alienation has led to the fact that most Bodo youth today have little knowledge of Assamese, and Bodo elites use this as one more argument in favor of separation from Assam. The movement has made some headway in recent years, and a Bodoland Autonomous Council has been created. The success of the Bodos has in turn sparked demands by non-Bodo plains tribes in Assam like the Rabhas and the Misings, who are next in line for autonomous councils. Political elites have thus aided the process of identity formation in these hill states.

Conclusion

The increasing number of groups seeking some kind of separate identity is a clear signal that all is not well in the Indian Union. There is no indication that the process will cease. In fact, the Indian experience indicates that successful mobilization by one group can encourage other groups to do the same. There are those who would argue that the consequences on the state of continual mobilization of ethnic groups would appear to be fragmentation and ultimately disintegration. However, it must be made clear that while some members of the Nagas and Mizos have sought separation from the Indian Union, the rest of the groups have sought separation from Assam. As long as the central and state governments are able to identify and facilitate genuine demands for cultural/linguistic expression and economic development through greater autonomy/statehood, there is little cause for concern. The Indian Constitution has a clearly established pattern which every ethnic group in the country has had to follow to get constitutional requirement. The first step is the creation of a separate district, then an autonomous region or district council, later an autonomous state or union territory, and finally a full fledged statehood.

There are two major sources of problems in the north-eastern states. The first lies in the area of economic development. The constant complaints about the destruction or alienation of tribal lands in the name of industrialization provide ammunition in the hands of those who would seek separation. It is important that state governments take actions to restrain or prevent these activities. Secondly, the increasing use of the Army to put down violence in states like Manipur and Tripura brings back memories of the campaigns waged against the Nagas and the Mizos, and we know that Army-inflicted violence in these states leaves a long and bitter trail. It is absolutely imperative that the ruling Congress party

Ratan - From Tribal to Ethnic Identity

lend its support to regional initiatives instead of undermining (as it often has) non-Congress leaders and politicians who may hold the key to peace in these states. The ability of the Indian Union to weather the transformation underway is ultimately going to be determined by the policies adopted by the Government of the Union.

NOTES

¹Ted Rober Gurr, *Minorities At Risk: A Global View of Ethnopolitical Conflicts* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1993), 3.

²Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 240-41.

³Paul Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1991), Preface.

⁴David Brown, "Ethnic Revival: Perspectives On State and Society," *Third World Quarterly* 11 (October 1989): 1-17.

⁵*The Constitution of India* (New Delhi: Rupa Publishers, 1965), The Preamble, Articles 14-17, 25, 29-30.

⁶The term minorities as used in the Indian constitution refers to any group that lays claim to equal or preferential treatment on the grounds of religion, language, or other cultural factors. K.K. Wadhwa, *Minority Safeguards In India* (New Delhi, 1965), 21.

⁷M. J. Akbar, *India: The Siege Within* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1985), 79-81.

⁸Brass, 221-27.

⁹Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, *Tribes of India: The Struggle For Survival* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 35.

¹⁰Nari Rustomji, *Imperilled Frontiers: India's North-Eastern Borderlands* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 147.

¹¹Rustomji, 27.

¹²Von Furer-Haimendorf, 286-322.

¹³"ULFA Unanimous Resolution Passed, " *Hindu* (International edition),

***Explorations in Ethnic Studies* Vol. 18, No. 1**

29 February 1992: 6.

¹⁴Editorial, *The Hindu*, 22 January 1994, International Edition.

¹⁵P. K. Roy, "Now, For An Uttarkhand," *Frontline* (Madras, India), 11-24 June 1988: 22-28.

¹⁶Urmila Phadnis, *Ethnicity and Nation-Building In South Asia* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1990), 95-96.

¹⁷Brass, 8.

¹⁸M. S. Prabhakara, "The Bodo Agitation In Assam," *Frontline* (Madras), 11-24 June 1988: 35.