ETHNIC CONFLICT IN THE CONTEXT OF THE HMARS OF DIMA HASAO DISTRICT OF ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

Ethnic conflict is one of the internationally recognized major social conflicts and takes different forms and varies substantially ranging from peaceful expression of grievances to outright use of physical force or violence in different parts of the world. It have caused massive human sufferings across space and time proving to be one of the most pernicious and destructive products of modern ethnic tensions. Ethnic conflict takes different forms with a nature substantially ranging from peaceful expression of grievances to outright use of physical force or violence. Given the North East diverse ethnic, cultural features, the Hmars, a hill tribe of Dima Hasao (old name: North Cachar Hills) district have faced untold conflicts within different tribes and the impact of the Ethnic conflicts is concerned among the masses and the government as transformation is needed as a whole. Therefore, ethnic conflicts of the Hmars serve both to illustrate the general character of the social, economic, traditional, cultural and political ethnic life thereby becoming a step in the long march to further strengthen stability of different ethnic tribes.

Keywords: Dima Hasao, Diversity, Ethnicity, Ethnic conflict, Hmars, Identity, Violence.

INTRODUCTION

Identity politics, sub nationalism and ethnic conflicts are definitely not a new phenomenon. It had existed since time immemorial; organized on some common descent, and culture. Ethnicity is emerging as a focal consideration in the politics of identity formation which dominates the contemporary political and social discourse across the globe. Demand for group specific rights, revivalism, recognition, displacement and quests for a separate space are the major phenomena around which such identity struggles revolve. In general, ethnic conflicts normally involve a clash of interest or a struggle for rights, rights for land, education, political representation, preservation of ethnic identity, to autonomy, majority-minority relationship and so forth. Most resistant and resurgent idioms are concentrated on the issue of language, and cultural tradition, which is mostly linked up with ethnic identity (Sharma, 2011)
The North East of India surfeited in contemporary assertive idioms of different ethnic groups for autonomous territories under the Indian Union is the worst affected by ethnic conflict and has become a common phenomenon. Ethnic conflict in this region not only affected the territorial and political sovereignty of the Indian state, but also the life of the various people living in the region in an incomprehensible and inexplicable term (Kumar, 1999). The term ethnic conflict highlighting the Hmars is the main key words of this paper. In the history of North East India, Dima Hasao (North Cachar Hills) district have faced untold conflicts within different tribes and the impact of ethnic conflict is concerned not only among the Hmars but also among the masses and the government as transformation is needed as a whole. Ethnic conflict is, however, not purely a matter of perception but the nature and intensity of ethnic conflict is also determined by the material conditions of the context within which it is taking place.

DEFINING ETHNICITY AND ETHNIC CONFLICT

Ethnicity and ethnic identity are indices/indexes to phenomena in human society which are too complex to be comprehensively defined. The thought processes and activities with the help of intellectual parameters are found to be variously featured and open up possibilities for reader/observer centric, community centric and group centric negotiations. Hence, it is obvious that, depending on aspects like territory, society, and culture, the discourse about identity struggle are bound to be self-defining and context specific to a great extent, making it impossible to apply any pre-mediated approach. (Nath, 2008) Ethnic conflict is the most common type of internal armed conflict in the world and often involves systematic attacks on civilian populations. Theories of ethnic conflict rely on some combination of two broad categories of motives: instrumentalist and primordialist. Instrumentalist explanations emphasize the fact that participants in conflict hope to derive some material benefit from the conflict, such as jobs, wealth or power. Primordial’s views focus on the intuitive dimension of conflict, which they interpret as an eruption of mutual antipathy. To some extent it is possible to think of these two views as, respectively, conceiving of ethnic conflict as a technology, as it modifies the constraints and opportunities faced by individuals, or putting it directly into the agents’ preferences. (Caselli, Coleman, 2006)

GENESIS OF THE HMARS ETHNIC CONFLICT

The Hmars are historically, a group of hill tribes in North East India and Myanmar (then Burma), living in the states of Manipur, Assam, Mizoram, Tripura, Meghalaya and Upper Burma. On the origin and meaning of the term ‘Hmar’ there are two theories, whereby the first theory suggests that the term might have originated from the word ‘Hmar’ which means ‘North’. The second theory opines that the term was originally derived from ‘Hmarh’ or ‘Tukbemsawm’ which means “tying of one’s hair in a knot on the nape of one’s head” (Lal Dena, 2008) Whatever be the truth, this much is true that the term ‘Hmar’ as a common nomenclature which gained popularity and wider acceptance among the Hmar ethnic group living in different parts of North-East India only with the dawn of political consciousness by the beginning of the 20th century (Lal Dena, 2008). The Hmars have a number of grievances be it political, social and
Economical and these are all because of the long neglect of the tribe by the central government in spite of their repeated demands for various development.

Ethnic conflict is caused by the collective fear of insecurity and is born out of involved ethnicity in diverse society. Some factors that are responsible for ethnic conflict are basically the majority-minority issues; whereby the minorities are discriminated and oppressed by the majorities. Demand for land rights and territorial council is also the other factor responsible for ethnic conflict in Dima Hasao district. North Cachar Hills District Council was inaugurated on 19th April, 1952 under the provisions of the sixth schedule to the Constitution of India. This North Cachar Hills Autonomous District Council (N.C.H.A.C.) was mandated to administer this autonomous district with the proviso that it will have three wings of administration, viz., Legislature, Judiciary, and Executive. North Cachar Hills also remained as a Sub Division of the district till February 2, 1970 on which date it was upgraded into a full-flagged Civil District in Assam. On 2nd February, 1970, the Government created an independent administrative district, viz., North Cachar Hills District with the geographical boundary of autonomous North Cachar Hills district council. Besides the subjects enshrined in the sixth schedule, the Government of Assam claims to have transferred almost all the departments along with the executive power to the Council except General Administration, Police, Treasury, election and judiciary. The Autonomous Council under the Sixth schedule has become a disputed excuse for making the society motionless and serving the minorities at the cost of the majority.

Even with the existence of the Autonomous Council under the Sixth Schedule, the socio-political relationship between the subgroups remain along with the struggle for tolerance and equity because of the changing group numbers and shifting political condition.

Different languages impede easy cooperation and to secure the benefits of association, those in contact must generally be able to communicate easily with each other, that is to say, they must share a common language. Because contact is potentially a cause of adaptation, it is also a cause of conflict. Factors such as a desire for self-expression, perceived discrimination and injustice, aspirations of small time politicians, better economic development by any majority results into conflicts. The majority communities do not recognize even the legitimate needs and aspirations of weaker ethnic groups and such intolerance and the lack of interest lead to the growth of a feeling of discrimination and alienation on the part of the minority group. The smaller groups get lost in the process of forced assimilation in the name of accommodation and integration thereby causing ethnic conflict. The main factors for ethnic conflict are the fights for their rights and as a self protection against the atrocities made by the majority ethnic groups towards the minority ethnic groups. Minority consciousness, feelings of in-group – out-group, perceived marginalisation have been causing ethnic unrest in the long history of this region. Though the unrest in the district has a history of
political causes it is much related to multi ethnicity and the core issues are about gaining more power, land and other resources.

The major consequences faced by the Hmars were during the conflict with the Dimasas of Dima Hasao (old name: North Cachar hills) district of Assam and this brings out the structure of minority and majority relationship whereby the minority are discriminated and oppressed. The demand for land and the exclusivities including the demand for Dimaraji or Dima Hasao Raji (meaning Hill kingdom of the Dimasas) and the intention of changing the present name of the district in 2002 whereby the Hmar representative were held responsible by the Dimasas led to the Hmar ethnic cleansing operation since 1988. And relating to the conflict of 2003, the main outcome was the kidnapping of the DimaHalamDaogah cadres in Ditokcherra (P.Zoar) in the North Cachar Hills by NSCN which was mistakenly believed to be done by the Hmars. The DimaHalamDaoga(DHD) then let loose reign of terror in the Cachar bordering the North Cachar Hills resulting to the outcome of many atrocities by the Hmars as well but the adoption of the P.C.Phukan Commission (an inquiry under justice P.C.Phukan probing the ethnic clashes between Hmars and Dimasas of 2003) there have been no cases of violent incident so far (Hmar Inpui, 2004). But unfortunately, the data and information on the region is not sufficiently analyzed and communicated between the region and the centre, contributing to further misinformation, mismanagement and alienation. In a drastic and dreaded sense, there is a culture of conflict and unfortunately, people have submitted to such an existence. However, amidst the widespread sense of helplessness, there is also an overwhelming desire and force to be free from such a situation of conflict which cripples the people from all sides.

In the light of these trajectories of conflicts, the various aspects of cultural diversity and conflicts in the North East India focus on the problems and challenges faced by smaller tribal communities like the Hmars of Dima Hasao district in a conflict situation. Internal conflicts in India’s Northeast are overwhelmingly conceptualised within the framework of unique ethnic identities is often seen as a representative of an undeveloped cultural mainstream. While some of the conflicts in the region certainly fit into the general framework of interpretation, but others are entirely unrelated to this struggle freedom by ethnic minorities against the homogenising state.

CONSEQUENCES OF ETHNIC CONFLICT: THE HMARS PERCEPTION

Northeast India and specifically Assam is the homeland of different ethnic groups with a variety of cultures speaking different languages and dialects is considered the melting pot of diverse races, castes, religions, languages and cultures. It is also often identified as a flash point in the subversive politics that question the logistics of the Indian nation, emerged as a cartographic area that posits questions of internal ethnic diversity and multiculturalism (Kumar, 1999). Each ethnic group has its own basic interests or expectations which may or may not contravene with those of other ethnic communities. Given the diverse ethnic and cultural features of North East, the impact of colonial principle of divide and rule as well as the impact of the recent introduction of multi-party politics, there is an urgent need to examine the potential problems of inter-ethnic animosity that has been intensified in this country. (Sharma, 2011) The Cachar and North
Cachar Hills districts of Assam, located in the southern bank of the river Brahmaputra witnessed the worst ever-ethnic mayhem between the Dimasa and Hmar tribes, rattling the age-old bonhomie. Dima Hasao (old name: North Cachar Hills) district like other plural societies has multi-ethnic and multi-cultural characteristics which pose a great challenge in the articulation of public interest that is surrounded in contemporary definite idioms of different ethnic groups which need to be understood as part of the tentative and narrow mechanisms of North East India. Therefore, ethnic conflicts and its impact serve both to illustrate the general character of the minority tribes traditionally, politically, socially, culturally and economically.

Inter-ethnic conflicts and struggle for identity among the ethnic groups too are not new but a frequently occurring phenomenon. However, such conflicts have become more common and all pervading at present. Ethnic conflicts often involve serious costs and consequences. Economic factors can weaken the political institutions that uphold the social contracts that provide social stability and this is mostly seen aftermath conflicts. It can also weaken the institutions which repressed those cultural groups with political grievances. Economic crisis and change always cause social disruption and radical dislocation of communities. The social consequences of the violence that is caused by ethnic conflict cannot be quantified. Most of all, affected population apply certain devised survival strategies to cope with conflict situations. The most obvious outcome of ethnic conflicts in this area has been deaths directly resulting from injuries sustained during attacks. The point here is that due to the violence, young people have been left on their own, and a critical analysis of ethnic conflict reveals that the inter-ethnic tensions opened up a number of other conflicts at individual and family levels. Ethnic violence in the district has led to destruction of property, loss of cultivable land, loss of income for many individuals and families. With every new wave of the conflict, victims of violence were forced to begin all over again: for example, to build new houses, to re-stock their animals and to buy household items such as utensils and furniture. Political instability is seen because of ethnic conflict and the feeling of deprivation of the minority by the majority led loose the ethnic relation. This social fragmentation brings forth a political consciousness among the marginalised which adversely impact a district where different ethnic group are present. Displacement was the main outcome of ethnic conflict faced by the Hmars during the conflict with the Dimasas, and many of them could not resettle the villages that they have abandoned. Having been displaced from rural areas, most of the refugees did not have any other skills besides farming and cultivation to make them cope in the areas they sought refuge. Violence during the ethnic conflict disrupted the local economy, which depended on inter-ethnic cooperation for market access, manual labour, and transportation services. The displacement of farmers and business people worsened the prospects for local economic recovery. Moreover, the fact that many people began to depend on relief food for survival played a great role in undercutting local economies by creating a dependency syndrome. The financial and the fiscal crisis in Dima Hasao district has exacerbated conflicts over the distribution of means of livelihood and privileges such as state allocation of money for infrastructure, and jobs. Helped by these conflicts, there have been contradictory conceptions of what the political community should be or what should be the articulation between various sorts of citizenship within a single political space, such as ethnicity and nation, indigenous and immigrants. The hegemony of state administration has thus partly
broken down leading to fierce contestations over access to and control of available resources, hence the term the violence of economics can be reconsidered. One of the long term economic repercussions of the violence was that land that was previously used for farming and cultivation by the Hmars was abandoned by the owners because of insecurity. Most of the owners relocated or reconstruct villages to other places. In time, some of the abandoned farms were used as grazing pastures. Disruption of agricultural activities led to poor yields and consequently low income to a majority of villagers. Mention may be made that in the areas where ethnic violence had occurred, there was a decline in production as many farmers had run away due to insecurity. The impact of violence on agriculture was noted as one of the most vulnerable disruption that the people have faced. The land clashes has also played a big role in the current state of poverty by creating tension, insecurity, forced migration and time wastage which would have been otherwise directed towards productive activities.

Different mechanisms through decentralisation may produce support for political communities, both for the overarching state and for the regions associated with ethnic groups enjoying limited self-rule. It focuses on three sets of prevailing variables: socialisation mechanisms, perceptions of grievances and threats, and perceptions of interests, which also depend on regional economic wealth and demographic composition. Political consequences has bring forth problems challenging the political life which are many in number, some of them are cultural in the sense that they are related to cherished practices inherited from indigenous cultures. The challenge of integrating cultural identities in the processes of political integration and democratization is closely related to the problematic concepts of nation state, citizenship and common good. Dima Hasao is a multi ethnic society and many communities have lived in harmony for many years but in recent years however the dominant ethnic groups have been on the forefront in fighting for political power. The contemporary significance of the political consequences of ethnic conflict is reductions in governmental capacity to address issues of ethnic inequality and disadvantage has not been extensively explored, but such loss of capacity has the potential to be an important constraint on the development of policies which may restructure ethnic tensions where these are linked to structural inequalities in society.

CONCLUSION

Diversity in itself is not a problem and the existence of diverse communities in the Dima Hasao district does not necessarily lead to violence or conflict but it can become a reason of conflict when it is used instrumentally in politics. When diversity is instrumentally politicised the majority are benefitted and the minorities remain outside the mainstream as they are lesser in population. This relative deprivation has simultaneously leads to the outbreak of violence and conflict. When the marginalised communities experienced relative deprivation simultaneously; it results in the outbreak of violence and conflict. A settlement in one district that satisfies one group will alienate some communities in another part of the same district and same in case of the states. There are special laws, constitutional provisions such as the Sixth Schedule and Article 371A, which seek to protect the traditions, lands and rights of various hill communities but as the practice of the system on the ground differs from what was perceive to bring
regulations, eruptions of ethnic-conflicts became an obvious phenomenon. Even with the existence of the Autonomous Council as an existing institutional framework under the Sixth Schedule, the socio-political relationship between the diverse ethnic groups remain along with the struggle for tolerance and equity because of the changing group numbers and shifting political condition.

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