

Ethnicity, Conflict and Population Displacement in Northeast India

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ABSTRACT

Since India's independence Northeastern region of India has been witnessing episodes of secessionist and insurgency related violence and conflict. The problem has become more complex, as the region is inhabited by people belonging to different racial stock, speak different languages and have varied socio-cultural tradition. These people are now fighting for the same geographical space to protect and preserve their identity and culture. Illegal immigration from neighbouring countries, especially from Bangladesh has aggravated the problem as it has reduced the number of indigenous people to minority in some parts of the region. Though the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India has become an important tool to provide special protection to indigenous people in Northeastern states, the problem lies in the fact that many of these ethnic groups do not live in distinct areas and their demand for ethnic homeland often overlap with other groups. As a result their demand for ethnic homelands has led to conflict and in turn internal displacement.

Key words: Conflict, Insurgency, Displacement, Indigenous community, Immigration, Land alienation

INTRODUCTION

Northeast India refers to the easternmost region of India comprising of states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Mrghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura and new inclusion is Sikkim. The region shares international border with countries like China, Tibet, Bhutan, Burma and Bangladesh and is connected to the rest of India by a narrow passage. Northeast India is the homeland of large number of ethnic groups who came to the region from different directions at different historical times. These groups belong to the different racial stocks, speak different languages, and have varied socio cultural tradition. As a result the region has become the epicenter of numerous ethnic nationalities. Especially the society in the hills of Northeast region reflect high degree of diversity as each community living therein has its distinct characteristics.

According to the 'People of India' project sponsored by Anthropological Survey of India out of 5,633 communities living in India 635 are categorized as tribals, of which 231 are residing

in India. The project had listed 325 languages of which 175 belonging to the Tibeto-Burman group and Mon-Khmer group are spoken in Northeast India. (Bhaumik S. , 2005).

For the past several decades the Northeast has received a continuous flow of economic migrants from neighbouring countries and as a result of that in the states like Tripura and Assam demographic imbalance has been tilting against indigenous population. The waves of refugees and migrants besides causing demographic change also causing displacement of indigenous population from their ancestral land. In such cases displacement generally takes place quietly without direct conflict. Only when indigenous people realizes the danger to their existence, they begin to express their grievances through mass protest and social movement and only then the displacement drew public attention (Dutta, 2008). This had happened in the states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura and Meghalaya.

1. Causes of internal displacement in Northeast India

Considering the magnitude of the problem of internal displacement in Northeastern region, it is difficult to outline all the causes of internal displacement. However some of the prominent causes of displacement in the region are listed below.

- Due to natural disasters like earthquake, flood, erosion, draught and climate change;
- Due to violence—ethnic, religion and language conflict, wars and revolutions;
- Due to development driven reasons and governmental policies;
- Due to take over of land by migrating communities

Conflicts have regularly caused considerable internal displacement of population in most of the northeastern states. Displacement of population is caused by violent conflict between security forces and insurgent groups, different dissident armed groups and counter-insurgency operations of security forces. The Northeast India accounts for almost half of India's conflict induced internally displaced persons.(Bhaumik, 2005). The region has witnessed a number of major causes of conflict-induced displacement in recent years.

- Displacement of Bengali Hindus and Muslims from and within Assam;
- Displacement of Adivasis and Bodos within and from western Assam
- Displacement of Bengalis from Meghalaya, particularly from Shillong, the capital city of Meghalaya;
- Displacement of the Bengalis from and within Tripura;
- Displacement of Nagas, Kukis and Paites in Manipur;
- Displacement of Reangs from Mizoram;
- Displacement of Chakmas from Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram (Bhaumik, 2005).

2. Conflict and displacement in Assam

Violent conflict that has been witnessed to-day in Assam is the result of number of socio-economic factors operating right from the advent of British rule. Human migration is an ongoing phenomenon in the Brhmaputra valley for centuries. Various immigrant groups

belonging to Mongoloid group had entered Assam from neighbouring South-East Asian countries. When the British took over the administration of Assam in the year 1826, it changed the traditional social culture of Assam. After taking over of Assam, British established tea and oil industry in Assam and brought educated Bengali Hindus to work in important positions in the colonial administration and other important professions like teachers, doctors, lawyers and magistrates. The local people were reluctant to work in tea gardens which results in lack of labour force in colonial Assam. As a result the colonial rulers encouraged migration of tribal people from Jharkhand and Orissa in order to meet the demand of cheap labour in British owned tea gardens. In search of better living the poverty ridden tribal people of those areas migrated to Assam. The situation opened the floodgates of migration of people during British regime. Thus the British owned tea gardens had remarkably grown but failed to accommodate emerging Assamese middle class in jobs. This had eventually led to an anti Bengali feeling amongst Assamese middle class who failed to understand the colonial limitation. The British also ignored the demand for replacement of Assamese as language in schools and courts. The linguistic conflict between migrant Bengalis and native population generated socio cultural conflict between the two groups.

The immigration of people from erstwhile East Pakistan took a dangerous turn during post independence period but the Government of India did have no definite policy to tackle the problem. On the contrary Nehru-Liaquat Pact facilitated and accelerated infiltration during post independence era by providing for restoration of rights of immigrants over their properties, if they choose to return not later than 31st Dec. 1950 (Pact, 1950). The agreement was against the spirit of Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act, 1950 enacted by Parliament that provided for expulsion of certain immigrants from Assam (2, 1950).

In early sixties, the Govt. of Assam armed itself with Prevention of Infiltration from Pakistan (PIP) Plan, 1964 launched an aggressive campaign to flush out immigrants, who settled in Assam since January 1951. Bimala Prasad Chaliha then Chief Minister of Assam even disregarded the then Prime Minister's plea to go slow on the deportation. Chaliha even went on to say that the problem was so critical that Assam's demography and culture would be permanently damaged (Hazarika, 2000). Chaliha's campaign pressed a panic button among the Muslim immigrants. Ultimately Chaliha's Plan was put in cold storage and those who were deported earlier gradually returned and again settled in Assam.

It has to be noted here that the Assamese members of the Constituent Assembly advocated for giving much wider power to the States. The proposals include the right to legislate on immigration; inclusion of citizenship matter in the concurrent list; giving residual powers to the states; limitation of central power over subjects in the central list; not to give power to the Union Government to unilaterally redraw state boundaries; to make state Governorship an elected office and to give a much larger share of the exercise and export duties on tea and petroleum to the producing states (Baruah, 2005).

During the post Bangladesh era, the All Assam Student's Union (AASU) started a movement called Bideshi Khedao Movement which is also known as Assam Movement. The movement was actually triggered by the discovery of sudden rise of registered voters in the electoral rolls

in 1070s. Taking advantage of the deep rooted sentiments and discontentment of Assamese people, AASU successfully translated the agitation into widespread popular movement. Tens of thousands of Bengalis—both Hindus and Muslims were displaced all over Assam in violence unleashed during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, particularly during six years of anti foreigners agitation. However, the agitation leaders when came to power and ruled the state since 1985 to 1996 failed to detect and deport the illegal immigrants.

According to the noted security analyst and former Army Lt. General (Retd.) D,B,Shekhatkar, the efforts made by some political parties to create vote bank of illegal migrants changed the demographic pattern in Assam especially in BTAD areas and in the process, the land belonging to the tribal groups including Bodos, are being occupied by the suspected migrants (Chaudhury, 2012, Sept. 6).

2.1. Conflict and displacement in Bodo areas

Like other sub-nationalists and ethnic movements the Bodo movement in Assam has been associated with ideas of autonomy, liberation and revolution. The violent conflict in Bodo areas started with the Bodo movement in 1987. The Bodos who are the largest plains tribe in Assam alleged that there has been long socio cultural alienation, discrimination, de-culturalisation and anti-tribal policies of the government to deal with them. Moreover, two other factors have contributed in the alienation of Bodo people from the Assamese people. First reorganization of states particularly Assam on the basis of language and second their perception of Assamese hegemony. The Assam Movement that resulted in Assam Accord mainly aimed at preserving and protecting Assamese identity and culture. The Bodos objected the clause 6 of the Assam Accord (1995), which promised to safeguards the culture and identity of Assamese people. The All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) along with Bodo Sahitya Sabha launched the Bodo Movement demanding a Bodo state for protecting and preserving their identity. In initial years the movement was quite peaceful and democratic but later on the movement turned violent because of emergence of insurgent groups targeting the non-Bodo population. To establish peace the state government and ABSU signed an accord making provision for setting up of Bodoland Territorial Council (BAC). However, BAC failed to meet the aspirations of Bodo people (Deka, 2012). The BAC area is not contiguous and in some areas under the BAC there were more than fifty per cent non-Bodo population. This dissimilarity stalled the process of demarcation of boundaries of BAC. Many people argued that with a view to have complete hold over the territory Bodos started ethnic cleansing with large scale attack on Muslims of Bengali descent in October 1993. Violent clash between Bodos and immigrant Muslim settlers displaced 3568 families consisting of 18,000 people in Kokrajhar and Bomgaigaon district. Again in May-June 1996 massive attack was launched against Adivasi Santhals. The conflict has resulted in displacement of 42,214 families consisting of about 22,62682 persons throughout western Assam. After this initial outbreak, conflict between the two ethnic groups became a regular feature in western Assam (Phanjaubam, 2007).

In 1998, clash between Bodos and immigrant Muslims displaced 48,556 families and within a span of two years, nearly 5.5 lakh people were living in camps at some point and about 44,000 of them are children. Again in August 2008 communal violence took place between the two groups in Udalguri, Darang, Chirang and Sonitpur districts killing 55 and displacing 2,12,000 persons. During the conflict 54 villages were directly affected and residents of 150 villages fled from their homes for fear of being attacked though there was no attack in their villages. More recently in July 2012 conflict between the two communities displaced 400,000 people from about 400 villages (2012 Assam Violence, 2012). In 2004 Bodo Santhal conflict resurfaced again leaving 37,000 people displaced.

The enmity between immigrant Muslim settlers and tribal communities have increased over the years in Assam as the migrants encroaching upon the areas previously dominated by tribal communities. Both groups are fighting over the same natural resources and geographical space.

Over the years, it has been found that majority of the protected class of persons are so backward both economically and socially that they could not protect themselves against more advanced immigrant farmers. Further Government's failure to protect tribal belts and blocks leads to vast tracts of land belonging to tribal people were illegally transferred to various non-tribal and immigrant settlers. As a result tribal people are being displaced from forest as well non-forest areas.

Due to the non-implementation of the accord two insurgent groups the Bodo Liberation Tiger (BLT) and National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) came into existence making a fresh demand for separate state for Bodos. However the state and central government selectively engaged in peace talks with BLT and a new peace accord was signed February 10, 2003. The accord created the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) under Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. The new accord tried to meet the deficiencies of the earlier BAC accord. However, the government did not negotiate with the NDFB while signing the BTC accord and thus the group's demand for a sovereign Bodoland continued to persist (Deka, 2012).

2.2. Conflict in North Cachar (NC) Hills and Karbi Anglong

The two hill districts of Assam NC Hills and Karbi Anglong are mostly inhabited by indigenous tribes like Karbi, Dimasa, Kuki, Khasi, Jaintia, Hmar, Bodo, Tiwa and Zeme Naga. These two districts are continued to be plagued by unprecedented ethnic conflicts in recent years. Root causes of the conflicts are control over land resources and establishment of homeland based on ethnicity. A number of insurgent groups representing different tribal groups emerged demanding independent tribal homelands. Karbi-Kuki, karbi- Dimasa, Dimasa-hmar, Dimasa-Zeme Naga groups fighting with each other leading to killing and displacement of people in large numbers. Dimasa insurgent group Dima Haram Daoga was formed in 1995 with the objective of establishing a Dimasa homeland comprising of Dimasa inhabited areas of North Cachar Hills and Karbi Anglong and also parts of Nowgaon district. However internal dissensions have led to bifurcation of two outfits, one led by Dilip Nunisa and the other by Jewel Garlosa. Another most domination insurgent group in Karbi Anglong is United Peoples Democratic Solidarity (UPDS). Formed in 1999 UPDS is fighting for separate Karbi homeland

outside the state of Assam. According to report by the Asian Centre for Human Rights, as a result of ongoing conflict 44,016 Karbis and Dimasas have been displaced till October 2005 in Karbi Anglong, North Cachar Hills and Hojai sub-division of Nowgaon district (Laskar, *Insurgencies in NC Hills and Karbi Anglong*, 2008).

3. Naga Insurgency and displacement in Manipur

Naga people's struggle for independence is one of the oldest struggle for self determination in India. In pursuant of their declared national decision, the Naga people launched Civil Disobedient Movement and successfully boycotted the general election of the free India. In 1963, when Nagaland was formed as a separate state within the Indian Union militants were not satisfied and continued their freedom struggle. In 1975, a section of rebel leaders came out and signed Shillong Accord. Under the accord the militants were asked to accept without condition, the Constitution of India. It irritated leaders like Issac Swu and T. Muivah, who openly denounced the accord and decided to continue their struggle. By aligning with S.S.Khaplang a leader of Konyak Nagas the two radical leaders formed the National Council of Nagaland(NSCN) in 1980. But NSCN suffered a jolt in 1988 when the organization was split into two factions one led by Swu and Muivah and the other by Khaplang.

In the year 1997, when Government of India concluded a ceasefire agreement with Muivah faction of NSCN to extend ceasefire agreement to all Naga areas in the Northeast, it was met with violent protest in Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. The ceasefire agreement was seen as a step towards the establishment of a greater Naga state, which could infringe on the territory of the neighbouring states. Some 5,000 Nagas, fearing revenge attack fled the Imphal valley in Manipur to Naga dominated districts in Manipur and Nagaland (IDMC, 2006). The riot forced the Indian Government to reverse its decision, and limit the ceasefire to Nagaland only.

In the middle of of 1992, conflict between Nagas and Kukis resulted in wanton killing, kidnapping, and burning and destruction of houses. Conflict had forced the common people to flee from their original place settlement. A large number of people affected by ethnic clashes moved to villages and towns where there is some sense of security and more economic opportunities leading to significant change in demography in the hills districts of the state. As a result of that, population in the state's least populated district of Chandel, that had only 71,014 as per 1991 census jumped to 1,18,327, in 2001 census (Thongbam, 2006).

Naga-Kuki clash was followed by Meities and Pangal clash in 1993. The last in the series was the Paite- Kuki clash in Churachandpur district of the state. A number of factors are responsible for the outbreak of the clash. There was an disagreement between Kukis and Paites over the acceptance of the term to be used as the common nomenclature to describe all the Kuki-Chin-Mizo group of tribes in the state. Another important factor which contribute to the Kuki-Paite clash was the fact that the Kukis and Zomis including Paites are at loggerhead over the issue of Kuki homeland taxes and fees. The third reason was that the Paites always wanted to rename Churachandpur as Lamka, which was opposed by Kukis. The Paites killed 210 Kukis in clashes

and lost 298 of their own tribesmen. Three thousand houses in 47 villages were destroyed and 22,000 Kukis and Paites displaced (Phanjaubam, 2007).

4. Displacement in Tripura

After independence of India, the plains of Tripura i.e. Chakla Roshanabad which generated surplus revenue, was taken away from Tripura and annexed with Pakistan. As a result a large number of Hindu Bengali entered into Tripura from Chakla Roshanabad. This migrant population put sudden pressure in the state. The influx of large number of people over a long period of time brought about demographic changes in Tripura. The indigenous people in the state, who accounted for 95 per cent of the population of Tripura in the 1931 census, had been reduced to just 31 per cent at the time of the 1991 census. This had resulted serious discontent among tribals, who have become minority in their own land (SATP). The demographic explosion which reduced the tribals to minority created fear psychosis in the minds of the tribal people and paved the way for ethnic conflict.

The continuous influx of Bengali people from Bangladesh intensified the progressive alienation of tribal lands and traditional forest rights. As the Bengali migrants practiced relatively advanced pattern of wet-rice cultivation compared to the age-old jhum cultivation. There were large scale transfer of cultivable land of the tribal people to the Bengali migrants. Almost all writers on Tripura insurgency have identified land alienation amongst the tribal people as the major cause that had fuelled the violent insurgency in the state (Bhaumik S. , 2005). In settled agricultural areas like Khowai and Sadar, between twenty to forty per cent of the tribal lands have been alienated by the end of seventies, when tribal insurgency gathered momentum. In some parts of south Tripura district, as much as sixty per cent of the tribal lands were sold in distress conditions as sequel to an unequal economic competition with the Bengali settlers (Bhaumik S. , 2005).

As a consequence of influx of large number of migrants, a growing number of ethno-centric tribal parties mushroomed. The Debar Commission and Hanumanthiya Commission which looked into the development of the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) suggested a tribal compact area to fulfill the aspirations of development of tribal people. In the mean time the government enacted Tripura Land Reforms and Restoration Act in 1960 to restore alienated tribal land. The Act was amended in 1964. But all these had failed to prevent the alienation of tribal land to other non-tribal groups, creating a feeling of mistrust and betrayal amongst the tribals. This led to the formation of Tripura Upajati Juba Samity (TUJS) in 1967 (Ali S. , 2011). In 1967, when as a direct fall out of large scale alienation the Sengkrak Movement started, the ruling Congress government backed the forcible occupation of tribal in the Deo valley by the Swasti Samity—an organization of Bengali settlers (Ali S. , 2011). The Sengkrak movement was subsequently outlawed by the state. The state witnessed serious ethnic conflicts between tribals and non-tribals since 1980 till March 2002 and during the conflict about 2000 Bengalis displaced in the state (Phanjaubam, 2007).

In an attempt to tribal insurgency, the state government enacted Tripura Tribal Autonomous District Council under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India with a view to

empowering indigenous people to bring all round developments so as to protect and preserve their culture, customs and traditions. The problems of indigenous people of Tripura has been continuously ignored by the successive governments. As a result, instead of exercising control over their land these people have found themselves politically displaced.

5. Displacement in Mizoram

5.1. Reang (Bru) displacement

Tension started in 1997 between Mizos and Reang community presently known as Bru which is the second largest tribal group of Mizoram, because they demanded autonomy within Mizoram. Mizos consider it as an attempt to fragment the Mizo state and became very emotional. To counter such demands of minority tribal groups Mizos branded them as outsiders. All sorts of attempts were made to nullify their claims like deleting their names from the voter's list, questioning the census report. According to Bru leaders, their cultural practices were obstructed and they are forced to adopt Mizo language. Despite their having native language Kokborok they are forced to accept Mizo language as medium of instruction. Bru leaders also alleged that the names of about 20,000 Reangs were deleted from the electoral rolls (Ali S. S., *The Reangs of Northeast India: A tireless battle of existence*, 2005).

In 1997 Mizos had reportedly unleashed a wave of terror against the minority Reangs. As many as 35,000 to 50,000 people belonging to Reang tribe crossed over from Mizoram to Tripura following atrocities committed against them allegedly by Mizo tribes (Ali S. S., *The Reang Refugees*, 1998). The Reang women were raped and men were beaten up and killed. The Reang militant group, which calls itself the Bru National Front (BNLF) started attacking Mizoram police and that further provoked the Mizos to commit atrocities on Reangs. The Tripura Government says that 30,690 Reangs belonging to 6,859 families have fled into Tripura during the period of three years. But the Mizoram Government refuses to accept them. According to Mizoram government Tripura government has not given details of residence of 10,435 people belonging to 2,075 families. Therefore, their claim to be residents of Mizoram is untenable (Bhaumik S. , 2005).

5.2. Insurgency in Mizoram

There are various causes of growth of insurgency in Mizoram. Exploitation by chiefs, poverty, economic imbalance, poor communication, lack of contact between government and people , long history of neglect, corruption, nepotism and non-participation in the process of development alienated the people from the ruling elites. Further differences in culture, language, religion, habit etc. also contributed towards the growth of insurgency (R.K.Satpathy).

Immediately after the outbreak of insurgency in Mizoram, the Government of India launched a counter insurgency operation both by land and air. During the operation houses were burnt and demolished, men were arrested and tortured. As a result, many Mizos had to leave Mizoram and taken shelter in neighbouring states like Manipur and Meghalaya. Magnitude of internal displacement during the period of insurgency was so much that at one time Aizawl, the capital

of Mizoram was almost empty. But this was not for a long period. Majority of Mizo families who fled to Manipur and Meghalaya came back to Mizoram after staying there for some years. But some of them did not go back to Mizoram and staying there till today (Lianzela, 2002).

5.3. Grouping of villages

One of the biggest causes of internal displacement in Mizoram during the period of insurgency is the grouping of villages. Nearly 45,000 Mizos from 109 villages were herded into 18 group centre guarded by military in the first phase of grouping.. In the second phase another 87,000 Mizos were grouped in 84 regrouping centers. Almost half of the population of Mizo hills was affected by displacement engineered by army. However, the final phase of displacement could not be carried out due to stay order issued by the Gauhati High Court (Bhaumik, 2005).

6. Displacement in Meghalaya

One of the unique feature of the state of Meghalaya is that majority of tribal population follows matriarchal system where lineage and heritage traced through women. The non-tribal communities in Meghalaya made up of migrants from other parts of India and recent migrants from neighbouring countries particularly Nepal and Bangladesh. The Khasi and Garo hills fall under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India that provides for establishment of autonomous district council to enforce customary law, use of land as well as reservation in Parliament, educational institutions and government employment. There are mainly two militant organizations operating in the state. Hynniewtreps Achik Liberation Council (HNLC), Achik National Volunteer Council (ANVC) are the two most prominent militant groups in the state. The HNLC aims to transform Meghalaya into a state exclusively for the Khasi tribe, which it claims long been dominated by Garos. On the other hand ANVC founded in 1995 demands 'Achik Land' in the areas of Garo hills comprising the present districts of Garo hills in Meghalaya and large chunk of Kamrup and Goalpara districts of Assam. Other political groups such as Hills State People's Democratic Party (HSPDP) fight for the self-governance of the Khasi Pnar and Garo people. The Garo National Council (GNC) is an independent separatist organization, which demands a Garo state comprising of three districts of Garo hills in the state (Sahni).

It has to be noted here that unlike some of the states in the Northeast which have been passing through violent insurgencies, Meghalaya has not yet experienced a full blown insurgency but large scale exodus of Bengali and Nepali people had taken place on several occasions.

Since late eighties numerous cycles of ethnic cleansing rocked the state and people belonging to Nepali, Bengali, Bihari and Marwari communities became the target of the attack. In the 1990s Bengalis remained the prime target of the ethnic violence. The pattern was repeated at regular intervals mostly before or during the main Bengali Hindu festival of 'Durga Puja'. Unlike Tripura or Assam, only about 50 people had died in these attacks, but that was scary enough to trigger a Bengali exodus. Since the early 1980s, an estimated 25,000-35,000 Bengalis have left Meghalaya to other parts of India especially to West Bengal. In 1981, there

were 119,571 Bengalis in Meghalaya—8.13 per cent of the state's population. Ten years later in 1991 it stood at 5.97 per cent of population (UNHCR).

Ethnic conflict between Rabha and Garo communities in December 2010 and January 2011 displaced tens of thousands of people in Assam's Goalpara district and adjoining East Garo Hills district of Meghalaya. During the conflict ten people had been killed and more than 50,000 persons displaced from both communities. Conflict between the two groups took place because of tension between the two communities over the legislative and executive status of the Rabha dominated Rabha Hajong Autonomous Council.

Conclusion

Ethnic tension in Northeastern region in most cases is a byproduct of land alienation owing to demographic change as the people are fighting for natural resources in the same geographical space. Therefore, it is obvious that peace can be restored in the region by land restoration, poverty alleviation, education and development especially in rural areas. Problems of indigenous people of the region have been continuously ignored by successive governments. Instead of exercising control over their land these indigenous people have found themselves politically displaced. Further there is dearth of strong and dedicated leadership in the region because of which human resources of the region could not be utilized in an effective and productive way.

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