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North-East Interface: Ethnographic Reading of the Hidden Land

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to explore the general and demographic overview of North East India pertaining to ethnicity and ethnic set up. There is no other part in the country which is more diverse to us than the entire North East and it's not some small corners of India, it spreads over 2.6 lakh square kilometres, larger than hundred sixteen nations of the world and inhabited by more than two hundred fascinating communities largely originated from Caucasoid, Mongoloids and Australoids. They also show an ethno-cultural bridging with the neighbouring countries of South East Asia. This region has more than four hundred languages and dialects representing each and every ethnic community with Assamese as a 'lingua-franca'. North East is also home to more than seventy five percent languages belonging to the four language families i.e. – Indo-Aryan, Tibeto-Burman, Austro-Asiatic and Dravidian. To find four language families in such a place is really incredible and could be well regarded as a linguistic area. The phenomenal rise and growth of multi-ethnic identities in this kaleidoscopic land presents the picture of the possibilities of exploring the human scrapes, its culture, demography and above all the 'ethnic way of life' (Biswas and Suklabaidya,) with the view of imagining an inside of thinking. It further tries to widen the

socio-political and philosophical imaginations of the 'nation from below' (Biswas and Suklabaidya, 231). Also ethnography sets an agenda to explore the cultural position of ethnic groups lost in the universalist mapping of humanity.

Keywords: North-East, Ethnic, Ethnicity, Mongoloid, Caucasoid.

“Without the sense of what or who I am, I am lost in the world – an unaccommodated deluded creature that is unaccommodated by language, memory and community”

_ Mrinal Miri, Interview at DD

Located at the foothills of the Himalayan mountain range, vibrant, mysterious, strange and alienated, surrounded by lofty mountains and tiny hills, valley to shining rivers and small lakes, i.e. the North East of India, frequently referred as 'Seven Sisters'. The past of the North East Indian community are nomadic, tribal and non-literate communities, comes down to an orality from generation to generation through its language, music, songs, dance, rituals, beliefs, practices, other forms of creativity and its great variety of narratives, tales, stories, legends, myths. These are the elements that constitute the thickness or density of North East Indian history. The place is too complex as the whole terrain of northeast is a fascination, especially to an ethnographer to apply his mind. Diversity, preservation, factors that cultivate respect or dominance in the context of the region's engagement with the larger Indian diversity and this treasure of diversity and its preservation may be the lens, through which North East should be understood.

The myths, legends and history of this land dates back to antiquity. This region has been inhabited by earlier settlers since 2000 BC and the clues for this historical information have been narrated in Vedic, Buddhist and Tantric literature and also in the myths, legends and folktales of the-then Ahom kingdom known as Pragjyotish or Kamrup. Also the historical

and seminal texts of later days, like Allahabad Prsasthi by Samudragupta, Alberuni's India, Natural History of Piny, Ptolemy's Geography and even in Periplus of the Arethrean Sea we get the reference and vivid description of this region. The first recorded history of this region may be found in the narrative of Hi-en-Tsang, who visited the court of Assamese king Bhaskaravarman in the first half of the seventh century. History of North East India is well contested. Everybody has their own version of history and the politics of identity derived from this well contested version of history. The history of this land needs to be taught, needs to be written, needs to be evaluated in the light of historiography. Mainstream Indian historical discourse does not cover the history of North East though it had six hundred years of Ahom kingdom, longer than the Mughal regime.

This paper will be an attempt to study some of the ethnic processes and ethnicity formation in North East India since much of the public focus are largely confined to insurgency, tribal issues, brutalities and foreign national issues, demographic, cultural and economic affairs in regional, national and world press. This exercise will be guided principally through the analytical models of ethnography developed in recent decades. Ethnography is an academic study which covers humanities, social sciences and some other interdisciplinary approaches and emerged in the second half of the twentieth century with western perspectives. It has been originated from anthropological studies and dedicated to explore the ethno-archaeological and socio-cultural spheres of smaller communities in any country. In recent decades, it has widened its -area with the multiple and burning issues of identity, representation, socialization, racial and ethnic formation. The term 'ethnic' refers belonging to a particular sect or group with several common features and traits, indigenous or aboriginal in nature. Since time immemorial different races have intermixed in different propositions in different parts of the globe and at present humanity is a synthesis of races or 'jatis'. So in this way pure race or jati (Choudhury: 14) or ethnicity bears no meaning and

now it has been turned into a myth. However the term ethnic bears a specific meaning in a wider context as per the statement of E. Hunter and Phillip Whitten – This term refers to any group of people within a large cultural unit who identify themselves as a distinct entity, separate from the rest of that culture. Along with this element of self-identification, this group usually has a number of other characteristics which show its distinctiveness and put social distance between itself and others. These characteristics may include a separate language or dialect, distinctive traditions and social customs, distinctive dress, food and mode of life and a circumscribed land base. In some stratified societies, ethnic groups may be identical to social classes or castes. In the modern world ethnic groups are present in many societies for two major reasons: migration of peoples from their original homeland to other countries; and incorporation of several small, separate cultural units into one large nation state. (qtd. in Pakem: 27)

India is one of top twelve mega diverse countries of the world and perhaps there is no such place in India which is more diverse to us than the entire North East. Demographically this region holds around 4% of the total Indian population. If India has an estimated 8% tribal population of the world, then 10% of the total tribal population in India inhabit in this region. This place is an ethnic cluster, consisting of 160 Scheduled Tribes recognised by the Indian constitution under Article 342. In pre-colonial period it was assumed from various sources that there was peace, prosperity and comfort to the people belonging to this region. They had their natural independence and maintains a close relation with the rest of Indian subcontinent, particularly with Bengal. The Ahom kings maintained a policy of non-interference in the tribal and ethnic way of life. They had tolerance towards tribal institutions, traditions and distinct way of life. The history of the world is about migrations and if migration is a dynamic process then we can certainly say that all the ancestors of the present inhabitants in North East India migrated here from different corners of neighbourhood. The population of

this region primarily consists of five races, namely- Austrics, Aryans, Negroids, Dravidians and Kirats, which entered in various periods of history. The migration of Austrics occurred from Indochina and the representative tribes are, Jaintiyas and Khasis in Meghalaya and Morans of Assam. They have matrilineal society. The Negroids migrated here from south-west and south China and currently Nagas in Nagaland represent them. They have a strong peasantry and traditional village system. Gender equality is a key feature among them. The Kirats are basically of Mongoloid origin and now-a-days the Bodos represent them. The Bodos have a strong presence in Assam, Meghalaya, North Bengal and Tripura and in Bangladesh too. On the other hand, the Aryans marked their significant presence since 2nd century BC, mostly from Bengal and north Bihar. Presence of Dravidian ethnic groups is comparatively a recent phenomenon as they entered in this region through British colonization. Unlike the British colonization in mainland India, the British political foot holes entered in the North East India through the first Anglo-Burmese War in 1824-26. Gradually they became the 'de-facto' rulers and control over the political domination towards the hill tribes and in the plains of Brahmaputra Valley. During the colonial period, the desire of oil exploration, tea plantation and the expansion of railways in Assam had brought a large number of migrant workers from Chotonagpur, Odisha and Bihar. This migrant population generated the Dravidian ethnicity in this region besides being the parallel growth of Arya speaking population.

The public assumption is that it's a disturbed area, infested with insurgency and militants, but it's twice removed from reality. If we look little bit closely, we shall hardly find 30-40 troublemaker groups and out of this 5-10 are little seriously involved in all the scenario. So based upon such a little number of militants, it's not rational to limit this land of 45 million people as a disturbed area though right from the time of independence it has seen violence and secessionist movements. In postcolonial national narrative the location of North

East Frontiers may be defined by the statement of Jawaharlal Nehru: The tribal areas are defined as being those lying along the frontiers of India which are neither part of India nor of Burma nor of any Indian states, nor of any foreign power. The areas are subsidized and the Governor-Generals relations with inhabitants are regulated by the sanad, custom or usage. In the matter of internal administration, the areas are largely left to themselves. (qtd. in Das)

Everybody in the North East is a multilingual because of the numerous languages spoken there. There are as many languages as there are tribes and within the tribes as many villages as the dialects. Many of these languages are on the UNESCO list of Endangered Languages. Linguistically all the ethnic groups speak languages that have common origin in Indo-Arya, Tibeto-Burman, Austro-Asiatic and Dravidian. This region is home to nearly four hundred languages and dialects representing each and every ethnic groups with Assamese as a 'lingua-franca'. This region is also home to more than seventy five percent languages belonging to these four language families. To find such a linguistic diversity in a small space like North East India is really incredible and could be well considered as a linguistic area. In literature there may be the existence of several kinds of racial classifications, but there is no such agreement among the anthropologists. However we may broadly divide the entire human population into three major categories, namely – Caucasoid, Negroid and Mongoloid consisting over five thousands ethnic groups. In Northeast India both the elements of Caucasoid and Mongoloids are largely visible. Ethnic way of life in North East India is the result of ethnic fusion and amalgamation of different cultures. Starting from the pre-historic time to till date, settlers, invaders and intruders from all corners exposed this land, deriving a complex cultural phenomena. All the cross cultural issues, such as – hybridity, mimicry, cultural assimilation and multiculturalism are prevalent in this region. The most important cultural phenomenon in this region is the assimilation of Arya and Mongoloid cultures. While exploring the ethnic affinities in North East India, almost in all the cases and context, we had

to encounter the historical truth that there were waves after waves of migration from all the neighbouring places of South East Asia, particularly from China and Burma. Gradually they conquered and control the state system of this region, resulting to the alteration of indigenous and ethnic way of life. It's not an easy task to give a comprehensive account and conclusion over the ethnic affiliation of North East India. The whole terrain consists of a wide and diverse population of more than four hundreds tribal, non-tribal, ethnic, non-ethnic groups with their distinct way of life and separate identical features. So the phrase 'Incredible India' is aptly applicable here. Generally Scheduled Tribe population in this area have Mongoloid features while the Arya population in the plains have Caucasoid features. Even the blending of Mongoloid and Caucasoid elements is also visible. It's a difficult task to analyse and determine the ethnic affinities and racial roots of the population belonging to this region, particularly to analyse each and every tribe separately. Assimilation of smaller ethnic groups in a larger group and splitting of larger ethnic groups into smaller segments is a key process of ethnicity formation in northeast India. Ethnicity has been an underlying principle in formulation of states in the North-East in post-independence era. When we study the ethnic movements in North-East India we find that the first step of this movement is to assert the identity around certain social problems and next step is to concretize the identity by forming an ethnic association. The third step is to claim for a separate administrative arrangement, for that the group concerned can preserve their cultural heritage, language, distinct identity etc. and the last step is to demand a separate administrative unit comprising the areas where the ethno-cultural group forms the majority. (Pakem: 30)

Exploring and preserving ethnic heritage is very critical, particularly when it comes to North East India since the heritage and history of this region is not documented as yet. The architectural style, dress, decorum, music and dance varies from tribe to tribe and from place to place. Majority of the people are largely depending on agrarian sector particularly shifting

cultivation or 'Jhum' in the hill areas while the rest of the population are based on secondary activities, ranging from traditional nomadic practices to modern day services. The rich and diverse storehouse of folklore in its varied forms is under a severe threat of westernization, particularly with the advent of Christianity. It's a considerable issue among the ethnic communities, particularly to hill tribes. They have lost in the past its tremendous and rich heritage of knowledge on traditional medicine. They have lost a huge number of manuscripts. They have lost so many cultural practices. So many social practices are no longer existing. Their dances can mesmerize us. They have immense stories that date back thousand years. They tell us history, history unwritten, history doesn't describe in words, but in music and harmony. The process of worship to the creator of the world in different forms, dance becomes prayer, ritual and entertainment, all in one. Such is the power of tradition that they preserve. Its self-sustaining life, where tradition and modernity must blend, but not to lose heritage, perhaps to enrich it. In the words of Temsula Ao – Before literacy came to us, everything is contained in the oral tradition. There were knowledgeable people in the society who carried the history of the people in their heads, who knew the names of forefathers, who knew the stages of migration, who knew the origin of clans and who knew the old songs and stories. So they have a rich repository and that have to be preserved (North East Interface). Christianity played a pivotal role in influencing the ethnic set up in North East India. The arrival of American Baptist Missionaries and the establishment of first printing press in Assam by Reverend Nathan Brown with the sole purpose of spreading and translating Bible in vernacular brought a marked change in forming the worldview of the tribal people. Besides this, there were other western influences, like modernity and all of that. Animism or tribal religion which accounts for 25 % population in the North East and showed a colourful way of life in the past centuries is on decline in recent decades due to the considerable religious change in this region. Emergence of composite culture is a recent phenomenon in this place.

Projecting this panoramic region under the umbrella term 'North East' is not justifiable to its people, culture, belief and variety that are existing there. Not 'Unity in Diversity' but 'Diversity in Diversity' could be the appropriate phrase to sum up North East at a glance. There are more things to explore in this multi-ethnic and multi-cultural region than it just being a natural paradise. It's the demand of time for the entire nation to look at North East as it really is, leaving apart the stereotypes.

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