

**ETHNIC IDENTITIES AND ISSUES OF DEVELOPMENT
A CASE STUDY OF MEGHALAYA**

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CERTIFICATE

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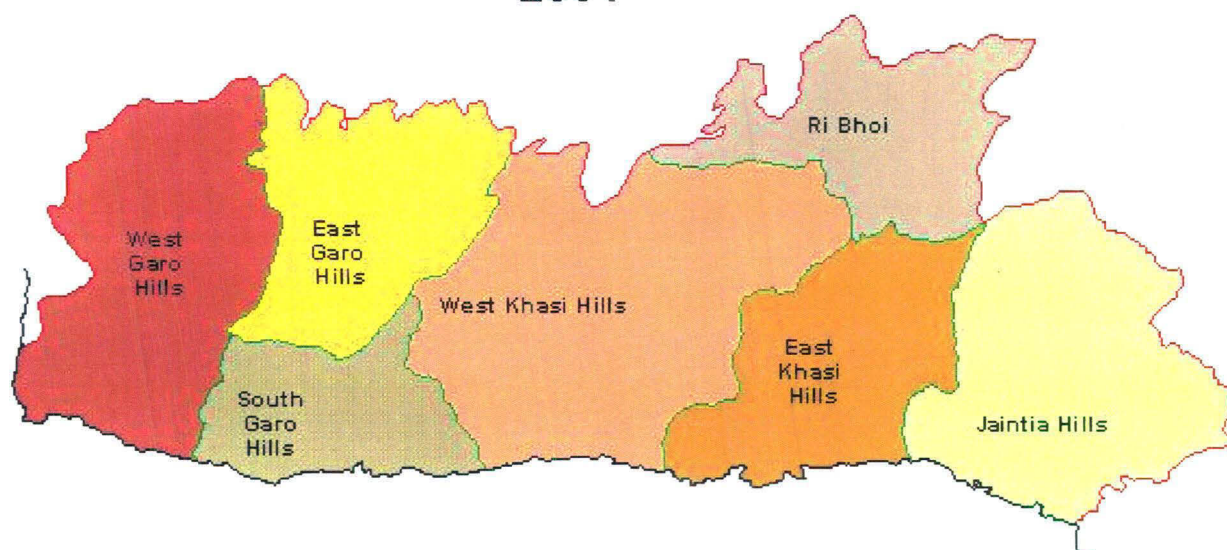
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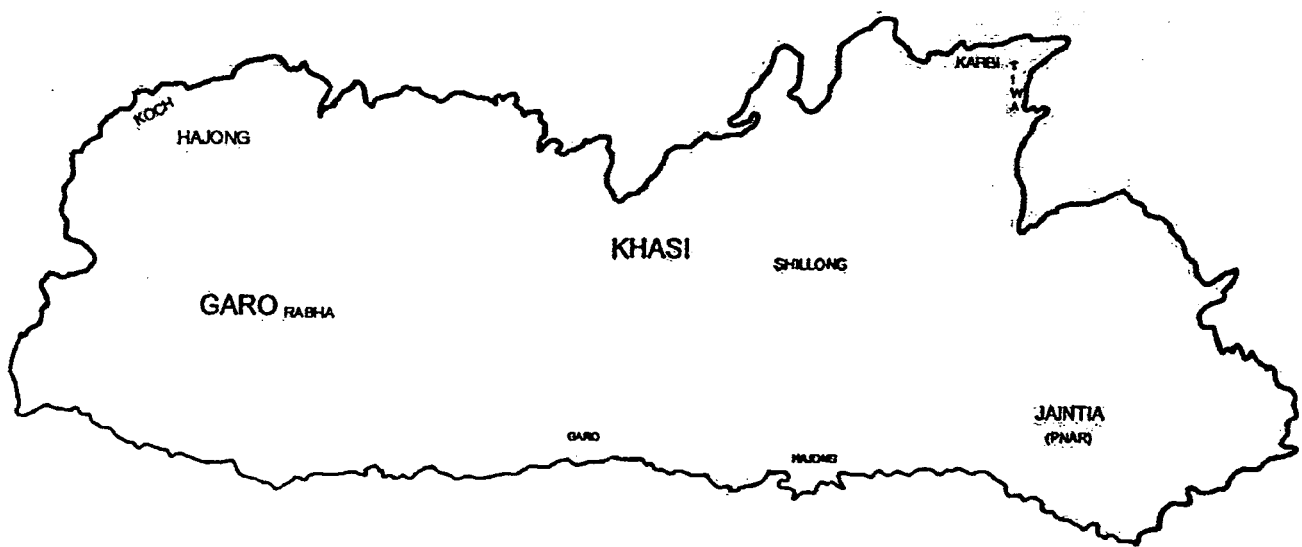
AASU	All Assam Students Union
ANVC	Achik National Volunteers Council
APHLC	All Party Hill Leaders Conference
FKJGP	Federation Khasi Jaintia Garo People
GSU	Garo Students Union
HALC	Hynniewtrep Achik Liberation Council
HSPDP	Hill State People Democratic Party
HNLC	Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council
HPU	Hill People's Union
HSU	Hill Students Union
KJSU	Khasi Jaintia Students Union
KSA	Khasi Students Association
KSU	Khasi Students Union
KHNAM	Khun Hynniewtrep National Awakening Movement
MBOSE	Meghalaya Board of School Education
MSU	Meghalaya Students Union
NSCN	Naga Socialist Council of Nagalim
PDIC	People's Demands Implementation Convention
UDP	United Democratic Party
SSU	Shillong Students Union

MEGHALAYA 2001



District Division of the State

Source: www.censusindia.net (2001)



Ethnic Groups in Terms of Area of Dominance

Source: www.iitg.ernet.in (2001)

Introduction

Most states in the contemporary world are multi-ethnic. The range of ethnic diversity among states differs and the state of group consciousness among different ethnic groups in different countries also varies. Amongst the countries in the world, India is very ethnically diverse and its people also ethnically conscious. Clifford Geertz emphasize that in any multi-ethnic situation there is 'a relatively even gradation of groups in importance, from several large ones through several medium sized ones to a number of small ones with clearly no dominant ones'¹. Within the Indian state there are numerous ethnic groups who are dominant in their respective regions or states like the Tamils in Tamil Nadu, Bengalis in West Bengal, Assamese in Assam etc. Amongst these regional dominant ethnic groups there are those groups which are dominant within their states but are considered as minorities on the national level. These kinds of ethnic groups are those that belong to the Northeastern region. For example the Khasis, Nagas and Mizos² are ethnic groups which are dominant within their state but at the national level they are considered as minorities and the special status of Schedule Tribe have been conferred to them. These groups though dominant in their own states constitute only a very small percentage of their population and since they are educationally backward this special status has been awarded to them.

Ethnic groups of the Northeastern region are very conscious about their ethnic identity. Since independence most ethnic groups have at some point of time demanded for more recognition of their identities from the Indian state. Ethnic groups mobilize themselves to seek more political power, economic resources and more autonomy. Ethnic groups which especially feel underprivileged and dominated by more dominant groups strive hard to demand from the State that they should get more recognition in the political and decision making arena. For achieving this purpose various agents have come up to fight for the rights of their respective ethnic groups. The most common agent throughout

¹ Geertz Clifford, "The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civic Politics in the New States," in Clifford Geertz (ed.), *Old Societies and New States: The Quest for Modernity in Asia and Africa*, The Free Press, New York, 1967, p. 117-18.

² Khasis dominate in numbers in the State of Meghalaya. Nagas in Nagaland and Mizos in Mizoram.

out the country is the role assumed by regional of parties which often profess themselves to fight for the interest of their ethnic groups through politics. Then there are the ethnic interest groups who try to put pressure through their different modes of protest and finally we also have the radical insurgents group which uses force and resort to violence to achieve their ends.

The North Eastern region is economically a backward region, though all the states have a lot of natural resources which if properly tapped will bring a huge boost to their economic development and improve the living standards of the people. But unfortunately because of the absence of large scale industries these raw materials cannot be manufactured within the region and hence it has just become only a major supplier of raw materials. Agriculture in the region is quite primitive³, subsistence farming is mostly practised hence the total output of agriculture is very low when compared with that of other states of India. All the states in the region are not self sufficient in terms of agricultural produce and hence have to depend from other parts of the country. The underdeveloped state of these two major sectors is a major cause to the economic underdevelopment of the Northeastern region. With the failure of these two sectors, employment generation has become a major problem in the region. With limited employment opportunities, ethnic groups gradually become very ethnic sensitive and very protective about their opportunities, resources and their land. There is an intense competition between groups who contend for the resources of the state. As a result ethnic groups become more aggressive and assertive in protecting their rights. The emergence of ethnic agents has strengthens this process of ethnic mobilization, by making people feel the need to demand exclusivity within their territorial dominance.

This study therefore, is an enquiry into the formation of ethnic identities in the North East and especially the case of Meghalaya. Throughout this study I will try to demonstrate how with the gradual modernization of the North Eastern region in terms of

³ Agriculture in the Northeast is quite primitive; there has been no major improvement in the framing techniques. Old methods like shifting cultivation, slash and burn, single crop framing are practised. Modern means of framing like the use of machines, high yielding variety seeds, fertilizers are still yet to be practised.

education, economy and polity, ethnic groups have become more sensitive in demanding exclusivity over the use of their limited resources. The competitive nature which arises due to scarce resources has made ethnic groups to be more intolerant towards any group who tries to compete for these limited resources available. The desire for the progress and economic development of these groups has resulted in the emergence of numerous ethnic agents who are committed to bring about this change. However how constructive and effective are their role in bringing about this change and what impact it has on the larger section of society will be examined in this study.

Theoretical Perspectives on Ethnic Groups

The concept of ethnicity became increasingly crucial and important in social sciences after the Second World War especially in the 1960's. This period was marked by the consolidation of the process of decolonization in Africa and Asia which saw the emergence of numerous new nation states. Anti-colonial and anti-racist arguments contributed to the generation of a new vocabulary in which the term ethnicity was used by sociologists and others to acknowledge the positive feelings of belonging to a cultural group.⁴ The renewed importance of ethnicity in politics has come as a surprise to most Western liberal scholars. It has been widely assumed that political modernization would bring about, changes in religion, ethnicity, caste and tribe. It was also assumed that the spread of liberal-democratic values would mean the abandonment of atavistic rivalries and communal solidarities. Forces of trade, commerce and industrial production would help transcending ethnic boundaries in all parts of the world.⁵

Michael E. Brown in 'Ethnicity and Violence' gives us six important criteria that are required by any group before they can claim themselves the status of an ethnic group. First, the group must have a name for itself; second, it must believe in a common ancestry; third, members of the group must share historical memories often myths or

⁴ Montserrat Guibernau and John Rex, (ed.) *The Ethnicity Reader: Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Migration*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. 1.

⁵ Smith Anthony D., *The Ethnic Revival in the Modern World*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981, p.2.

legends passed from generation by word of mouth; fourth, the groups must have a shared culture, generally based on a combination of language, religion, laws, customs, institutions, dress, music, crafts, architecture and even food habits; fifth, attachment to a specific piece of territory which it may or may not actually inhabit; and sixth, people should think of themselves as a group in order to constitute an ethnic community⁶. These six points can be considered as the basic attributes to the concept of ethnicity. Based on these categories, we have groups of people identifying themselves as a particular ethnic community. By belonging to a particular ethnic group, it provides an individual with answer to the question of “Who am I?” The presence of an ethnic group reassures the individual that “in the deepest and most literal sense he is not alone, which is what all but few human beings most fear to be.”⁷ In sheltering the individual from loneliness, the ethnic group may offer a sense of self worth—a reassurance that life has meaning and value. Ethnicity contributes to a sense of self esteem by placing a strong value on the “we” however it can have profound destructive effects by emphasizing the “they”.

An ethnic group gives rise to a sense of ethnic identity, which has been defined by George de Vos as consisting of the “subjective, symbolic or emblematic use by a group of people of any aspect of culture, in order to differentiate themselves from other groups⁸.” When a group of people make a decision to depict themselves or others symbolically as the bearers of a certain cultural identity they form an ethnic identity.

Max Weber was one of the earliest scholars, to give importance to the concept of ethnicity. He defined ethnic groups as ‘those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization or migration⁹’. He distinguished ethnic groups from ‘races’ conceived in biological terms. However it is not only biological difference that constitutes a group, but other factors especially common language,

⁶ Brown Michael E., “Ethnicity and Violence,” in Guibernau Montserrat and John Rex (eds.) *The Ethnicity Reader: Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Migration*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1997, pp. 81-82

⁷ Isaacs Harold, *Idols of the Tribe: Group Identity and Political Change*, Harper and Row, New York, 1975, p.43

⁸ George de Vos, ‘Ethnic Pluralism’ in George de Vos and Lola Romanucci Ross (ed.) *Ethnic Identities: Cultural Communities and Change*, Mayfield Publishing Co., California, 1975, p. 16.

⁹ Weber Max, *Economy and Society*, University of California Press, Los Angeles, 1968, p. 389.

common customs, shared religious beliefs and especially outward differences in terms of clothing, food habits, style of housing and division of labour between the sexes¹⁰. Along with these cultural and physical characteristics what is more important in defining ethnicity is the subjective perception of these characteristics, both by those who share them and by those who react to them

The point pertinent to the arguments in this research is found in Max Weber's study on ethnicity in which he claims that 'ethnicity emerges only because of politics'.¹¹ He says ethnic membership does not constitute a group; it only facilitates group formation of any kind particularly in the political sphere. He emphasizes that it is primarily the political community, no matter how artificially organized that inspires the belief in common ethnicity. He suggests that the belief in common ancestry is likely to be a consequence of collective political action rather than its cause; people see themselves as belonging together—coming from a common background—as a consequence of acting together. Collective interest thus not simply reflect or follow from similarities and differences between people; the pursuit of collective interest does however, encourage ethnic identification.

Unlike Weber, who argues that ethnicity emerges only because of politics for Clifford Geertz ethnicity emerges because of primordialism. Primordial attachments are derived from the "assumed *givens*—of social existence"¹². These are region and kin connection and include communities based on shared religion, language and social practices. He argues that each ethnic group has a different historical experience and consequently its position in society is determined according to its history¹³. Clifford Geertz falls under the primordialist school of thought which has always argued that human beings have always been grouped together on the basis of given primordial characteristics. Primordial sentiments are strongest with the case of minor ethnic groups

¹⁰ Montserrat Guibernau and John Rex, *The Ethnicity Reader: Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Migration*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1997, p.2.

¹¹ Jenkins Richard, *Rethinking Ethnicity: Arguments and Exploration*, Sage, New Delhi, 1997 p.10.

¹² Stack John F., *The Primordial Challenge: Ethnicity in the Contemporary World*, Green Wood Press, New York, 1986, p.6.

¹³ Geertz Clifford "The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New World" in Christopher Pierson (ed.) *The Modern State*, Routledge, London: 1996, p.120.

who identify themselves closely with their groups as they feel a sense of security and belonging when in the group. If we apply some of these proportions in the context of the North East we find there are numerous minor ethnic groups with the sense of primordialism that is very strong as each group wants to maintain its own identity. Neither are groups interested in assimilating with others nor are willing to intergrate.

Primordialism here is just one aspect of ethnicity, because factors which make up primordialism like race, skin, colour, tribe, caste, language, religion, tradition etc can be used to forge ethnicity according to different situations and context. People from northeast India living in metros cities will feel a sense of closeness and unity amongst themselves because of their similar skin colour, physical features, dressing, religion and eating habits even though they might belong to different ethnic groups from different regions. Similar will be the case if people from South India or North India would feel a sense of togetherness if they live in an environment which is totally different and sometimes hostile from what they are used to. Ishtiaz Ahmed emphasizes that apart from primordialism there is also the situational and contextual type of ethnic identity. He says that ethnic identity is multidimensional and it consists of different ingredients and which of these ingredients is relevant depends on the requirement of the situation¹⁴.

Apart from situational and contextual dimensions, another approach to the study of ethnicity is known as Instrumentalist approach. Fredrik Barth, is generally considered to be the proponent of this theory. He conceptualizes ethnicity as group identity that is essentially fluid depending upon how the boundaries of an ethnic group are drawn in a specific context, and hence the precise content of ethnic identity is defined in relation to the distinct external stimuli.¹⁵ The task of ethnic mobilization research is to determine what factors activate the creation of ethnicity in a given context. Paul Brass who agrees with the instrumentalist approach argues that often ethnic symbols and collective loyalties are mobilized especially for the attainment of a particular ends—principally

¹⁴ Ahmed Isthiaq, *State Nation and Ethnicity in Contemporary South Asia*, Pinter Press, London, 1996, p. 4

¹⁵ Barth Fredrick, "Ethnic Groups and Boundaries", in John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith (eds.) *Ethnicity*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1996 p.79.

gains in power and economic advancement¹⁶. Here the often unstated implication is that the material ends are the principal motive force underlying ethnic claims rather than the unquestioned loyalty to ethnic collectivity and this is quite professed in the way political parties mobilize their support base. Barbara Ellis Lal also explores a similar kind of situational and instrumental ethnicity. She writes about 'ethnicity by consent'¹⁷ which means that ethnic groups which have traditionally thought of themselves as distinct in terms of both culture and descent, submerge their differences and assume a common identity when the situation arises, like in demands from the government for more recognition and more resource allocation.

Abner Cohen just like Max Weber defines ethnicity as a 'political phenomenon'. He argues that traditional customs are used only as idioms, and as mechanisms for political alignment. People do not kill one another because their customs are different. They make jokes at the strange customs of other groups but this by itself will not lead to serious disputes. If people do actually quarrel seriously on the grounds of political cleavages it is only because these cultural differences are associated with serious political cleavages. People stick together under one group only because of mutual interest. Their unity is essential for their livelihood, for safeguarding their assets in the land, for mobilizing votes for elections and to gain benefits in development funds.¹⁸

For Joane Nagel who follows a constructivist approach. Ethnicity is constructed out of the material of language, religion, culture, appearance, ancestry, or regionality. The location and meaning of particular ethnic boundaries are continuously negotiated, revised, revitalized, both by ethnic group members themselves as well as by outsider observers. She emphasizes that the constructed ethnic boundaries determine who is a member and who is not and designate which ethnic categories are available for individual

¹⁶ Paul Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison*. Sage, New Delhi, 1991, p. 5

¹⁷ Lal Barbara Ellis, 'Perspective on Ethnicity: Old Wines in New Bottles' *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2, April 1983.

¹⁸ Cohen Abner, "Ethnicity and Politics" in John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith (eds.) *Ethnicity* Oxford University Press, New York, 1996, p. 83.

identification at a particular time and place¹⁹. The construction of ethnic boundaries or the adoption or presentation of a particular ethnic identity is often used as a strategy to gain collective political or economic advantage.

These are some of the major approaches and arguments to the concept of ethnicity and ethnic identities. After examining these theories, we see that ethnic identities have a multi dimensional approaches, while the primordial school argues that ethnic identities emerge because of the social 'givens', the instrumentalist school on the other hand emphasizes that ethnic identities is use as a means for the attainment of ends and Weber's definition that ethnic identities emerged only because of politics are crucial approaches to any for any study on ethnic identities. In the context of the North East, it would unwise to look at issues of identity from a single vantage point. I would therefore employ a multi disciplinary approach in analysing the ethnic problems in the North East and in Meghalaya. The three perspectives of primordialism, instrumentality and politics will be very useful in examining and characterising the nature of ethnic identities in the North East.

India's Northeast

India's North East comprises of seven states: Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. These states collectively account for about 8 percent of the country's geographical area and roughly 4 per cent of it population. Joined to the rest of India by only 21 kms area of land commonly referred to as the Chickens Neck is a part of great India's unity in diversity. Excluding the ethnic Assamese population and the Bengali population in Tripura, the majority population of the region consists of numerous tribal communities which since time memorial have migrated from different parts of East and South East Asia. These tribal groups live within their respective territories and follow their own lifestyle, language, economy, tradition and cultural traits of which are totally different from the others.

¹⁹ Nagel Joane, 'Constructing Ethnicity: Creating Ethnic Identity and Culture', Social Problems, Vol. 41, No. 1, February, 1994.

Recognizing the cultural diversity of these tribes to that of the rest of the India, the Indian Government has given special administrative status through the institution of the Sixth Schedule for protecting their traditional way of life and empowering their traditional institutions. The tribal groups from this region are also educationally quite backward and hence the Government of India has conferred upon them the status of Scheduled Tribe (ST) which is basically a reservation policy to enable these tribes to come up and be at par with the rest of the Indian population in terms of education. In my study however, I would prefer not to use the term 'tribe' as a means of characterizing differences but would prefer to use the term 'ethnic group' because when we speak of an ethnic group, it definitely implies a group of people who consider themselves different from others because of certain social and cultural commonalities which they possess that other groups do not have.

The existence of a multitude of ethnic groups which are different from one another in terms of language, cultures and lifestyles have led to an upsurge in identity movements in the region. The spread of western education, the gradual increase of population and the competitive nature of the economy have made ethnic groups to become more ethnic sensitive. Dominant ethnic groups are fighting hard to protect, promote and preserve everything which is within their territory and prevent outsiders from capturing their land, economy and eroding the cultures and traditions. Minor ethnic groups are fighting to get more territorial occupation, political representation and more access to resources. This ethnic sensitivity has brought about the emergence of numerous ethnic movements in the region.

Ethnic movements in the northeast are varied and of different natures. They can be classified in different categories; a) The first category would be ethnic movements which fight for the complete secession from the Indian state. In this case ethnic communities claim themselves as distinct nations that have nothing to do with India or Indians until they were forcibly merged with British India. These ethnic communities resist their forced integration with the Indian union and refuse to be assimilated into the Indian national mainstream. They characterize the state as a colonizer and project

themselves as victims of colonial oppression and exploitation. The best example we can find is that of the Nagas who have been demanding for secession from India since the early 1950's; b) In the second category we have ethnic groups fighting for statehood and regional autonomy. These ethnic groups often complain that they are being dominated by dominant ethnic groups within a region and hence they contend that their communities cannot develop unless they have their separate states within the Indian Union. For example, ethnic groups like the Bodos of Assam and the Garos of Meghalaya have started demanding for the creation of separate state; c) The third category is that of ethnic groups who fight for issues of culture and language. Their struggles are primarily against attempts at assimilation through the imposition of language and culture of dominant nationalities. They basically seek recognition and protection of their linguistic and cultural identities; d) the fourth category comprises of ethnic movements against communities usually referred as outsiders. Outsiders basically mean people who are not part of the ethnic group and who pose a threat to their economy and demography. Ethnic movements against outsiders are basically to check their influx, to deport illegal immigrants and to discourage them from finding employment in the region.

Looking at these different kinds of ethnic movements, the ethnic situation in the Northeast is quite complicated and much more since these movements are not easily distinguished and actually have overlapping interest. Each state of the Northeast has its own ethnic problems and ethnic movements which cannot be generalized as the same with the other states. Hence to understand the ethnic situation of the northeast we need to look at each state in detail. My focus is on the state of Meghalaya, which is quite peaceful when compared to other Northeastern states and has not witnessed any armed insurrections but which has its own ethnic problems especially when it comes to inter-ethnic conflict between the indigenous and the non-indigenous.

A Case Study of Meghalaya

Meghalaya achieved statehood on 21 January 1972 with Shillong the erstwhile capital of Assam as its capital. Meghalaya or *the Abode of Clouds* is known all over the

world because of Cherrapunji and Mawsynram as the wettest places on earth but apart from that little is known about this state. The state emerged due to the persevering demands of the people for a hill state for protection, promotion and preservation of their culture, ethnic identity and social norms. There were three major ethnic groups which spearheaded the demand for statehood, the Khasis, Jaintias and Garos. Will Kymlicka would argue that the reason why these ethnic or indigenous groups would demand for such a separation is because these groups feel that they that their lands have been incorporated into states through treaties by people who they consider as foreigners. Hence by freeing themselves from this foreign domination they would be able to maintain their traditional way of life and beliefs and also to get recognition and respect from the larger communities²⁰.

The dominant population in Meghalaya is constituted by the three ethnic groups the Khasi-Jaintias and Garos which comprise almost 80% of the population. Apart from these three dominant ethnic groups, there are also other minor groups like the Koch, Rabhas, Hajongs and Mikirs which form about 5% of the population and the other 15% of the population comprises of the communities like the Bengalis, Punjabis, Assamese and other minority communities. The Khasi-Jaintia community belong to the same ethnic identity and practise the similar culture and social norms. By culture and ethnic identity here one means a way of thinking, acting, consisting of set of codified and unspoken rules and norms which gives society cohesiveness and which reflect changes in the material and spiritual milieu of society. The Garos on the other hand are a distinct society belonging to a different ethnic grouping and similar to the Khasi and Jaintias only in terms of matriliney²¹. All the three tribes are located in their own region of dominance, which is the Khasi in the Khasi hills, the Jaintias in the Jaintia Hills and the Garos in the Garo Hills

²⁰ Kymlicka Will, *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2002, p.349.

²¹ The Khasi-Jaintias and Garos are three major tribes that inhabit the state of Meghalaya. One unique feature about all these three communities is they follow a matrilineal system of lineage i.e. lineage is taken from the mother and not from the father just like the rest of the world. It is important to note that matrilineal system does not mean that the society automatically becomes matriarchal but on the contrary it is the male members who makes all the major decision and is the head of the family and clan.

Geographically, Meghalaya is a land locked state which is bordered by Assam and shares a 423 kms international border with Bangladesh. Sharing an international border has both advantages and disadvantages for the state. The state is advantaged in terms of the profit that it earns from international trade especially in limestone and coal while it is seriously disadvantaged because this porous border has proven to create serious problems in terms illegal immigration, drug trafficking, smuggling and are excellent hideouts for the various militant outfits operating in the Northeast. Illegal immigration and safe hideouts for insurgent groups have been two variables which have contributed to the rise of ethnicity in the state. Illegal immigration generates both a fear and hate factor from the indigenous people while ethnic insurgents groups have used the border as their headquarters to operate their activities.

Meghalaya's economy is primarily an agrarian economy. About 81 per cent of the total population of the state lives in the rural areas and mainly depends on agricultural activities for their livelihood. However, the agricultural methods used are still very primitive and practices like slash and burn, shifting cultivation and single crop farming are still very common. As a result the agricultural output of the state is very minimal. The state is rich in natural resources and mineral deposits like coal, limestone, quartz, granite and uranium. The states forest products are also of a wide variety. The absence of large scale industries and wide spread industrial sickness of small scale industries has resulted in the absence of manufacturing units to manufacture these raw materials. The state has basically become a supplier of raw materials to other states. The state has only 7 units in the category of large and medium industries as in 1994 out of the 166 in the North eastern region²². Since neither agriculture nor industry has taken off the state is gradually facing unemployment problems and a lot of pressure is being mounted on the service sector and business and trade provide employment. With the state Government running out of steam to provide employment, people especially from the urban areas are looking out at other alternative means of employment in the service sector and in trade and related activities. This is the sector is very competitive and a huge chunk of the non-indigenous population is involved in this sector. The competitive nature of this sector has made the indigenous

²² Basic Statistics, 1995, Vol. 1, Government of Meghalaya.

population to adopt a negative attitude towards the non- indigenous with whom they are compelled to compete. Hence gradually ethnic groups became more sensitive and started becoming conscious of themselves as a separate community.

Impact of Education on Ethnic Groups

The spread of western education has made the people become politically and ethnically very conscious. It was the educated class that played a major role in ethnic mobilization that led to state creation. This class continues to makes people aware of their identity and the need to fight for their rights through the various regional political parties and ethnic interest groups. Ethnic interest groups are interest groups that have come up on the basis of traditional bonds and ethnic loyalties. These groups are organized associations that aim to influence the policies or actions of the Government. They try to exert pressure and influence on the Government from outside. In the case of Meghalaya, ethnic interest groups basically comprise of the student groups. These students groups which have come up do not limit their scope of influence only to student's interest but rather are more focussed on the issues concerning their ethnic identity. One of these students groups namely the Khar'i Students Union is so ethnically motivated that it has come up with slogans such as "We are Khasi by Blood but Indian by Accident"²³. This slogan explains the larger objectives and aims of theses student organization really is.

Ethnic interest groups have been very instrumental in evoking the indigenous people of the state to become ethnically conscious. Most ethnic interest groups have a very chauvinistic attitude, there is always the notion that it is Us vs Them. Them here refer to people who do not belong to the ethnic group and who are perceived as a constant threat to the well being of the indigenous ethnic community. Ethnic interest groups feel concerned that huge presence of non-indigenous groups will limit their opportunities to get jobs. They might also bring change to the cultural settings and the demographic pattern of the state. Hence ethnic interest groups take the responsibility to protect their

²³ Biswas Prasenjit, 'Construction of Identities in the Khasi Hills of Northeastern Perspective: A Foucauldian Perspective' *Proceedings of the Northeast History Association, Sixteenth Session, NEHU, Silchar, 1995*, p. 355.

ethnic interests and do not allow their ethnic community and land to be over run by outsiders. Their attitude towards outsiders became very hostile and they started demanding that the government should implement strict rules so as to protect the ethnic community from crossing borders. All this is not to deny that these groups are very committed to work for promoting the welfare of the ethnic groups and to bring all round progress and development for the people and the state.

Ethnic Identities and Development

Speaking of development, Meghalaya is still a very underdeveloped state. The concept of Development basically means a process of change, change for the better whether in terms of the economy, polity or the society. It means the improvement of people's live by giving them greater access to knowledge and education, better nutrition and health services, more secure livelihoods, security against crime and physical violence, satisfying leisure hours, political and cultural freedoms and a sense of participation in community activities.²⁴ However in the case of Meghalaya not much improvement has come about. Its economy is still very backward; primitive agriculture, absence of modern industries and poor transport and communications facilities has contributed to this economic backwardness. Its per capita income is less than \$ 535(Rs. 24114) meaning that most people in the state survive on less than \$ 1.5 (Rs. 67) a day²⁵. In terms of education, Meghalaya's literacy rate is 63.31 percent which is below the national average and ranks as low as 27 in the national level²⁶. The state has very few higher technical and professional educational institutions. In terms of health care, the state has still very few hospitals, dispensaries and medical clinics, according to the 1989-1999 census 1 doctor has to serve 5411 people.²⁷ These are a few examples to demonstrate that the state of Meghalaya is quite under developed.

²⁴ Haq Mahabub Ul , *Reflections on Human Development* , Oxford University Press, New Delhi: 1994, p.14.

²⁵ Blah Toki, 'The 2008 Reckonings', *The Shillong Times*, 09 June 2007

²⁶ *Meghalaya Socio-Economic Development 2004*, Meghalaya Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Shillong, 2004, P.21.

²⁷ *Ibid* , P.61.

There are various factors which contribute to this under-development and one major factor is the failure of the Government of Meghalaya to initiate policies which could have brought about an improvement in its economy.. However my aim here is to look at how the development of Meghalaya has been affected by the rise of ethnic identity formation in the state. Ethnic groups which are considered to be the main force behind ethnic mobilization in the state have used different methods and techniques to mobilize support and put pressure on the governments. These methods include both violent and peaceful. This study would examine on whether these actions and activities have any major impact on the development perspective of the state.

Outline of the Study

This study is mainly theoretical in nature. It relies on critically examining the assumptions underlying the research on ethnic identities in general. The study has comprehensively traced the various variables that are responsible for emergence and consolidation ethnic identity formation in Meghalaya. More specifically an attempt has been made to examine the role of regional parties, student groups in Meghalaya by using primary and secondary sources. Primary source were drawn from government materials and documents, memoranda, representations and press releases. Secondary sources include books, journals, magazines, newspaper and other printed materials.

This dissertation is divided into three chapters. The first chapter deals with the transformation of ethnic identities in Meghalaya. By looking from a historical perspective this chapter provides the basic understanding to how ethnic identity formation took place in Meghalaya. British colonialism has contributed a great deal to it. Their exclusionist administrative policies had a tremendous impact not only on the various ethnic groups but also on the Indian state when even after independence the Indian Government has to follow an exclusive administration pattern for the ethnic groups of the region. Western education brought by the British also had a major impact on the formation of ethnic identities in the Northeast. There was a growing realization among different ethnic groups of the differences that existed between them which led to demand for more recognition and autonomy of their territories. The educated class took to the lead in

mobilizing these ethnic identities and for protection their cultures, tradition and lands which later into the demand for the creation of separate states. This demand was fulfilled when the state of Meghalaya emerged in 1972. Following this success this educated class continued the task of ethnic mobilization through the formation of regional political parties not only for the purpose of contesting elections but more about promoting the interest of the ethnic groups of the state.

The second chapter examines the role of ethnic interest in the mobilization of ethnic identities. Ethnicity identities do not come just because people of certain area have certain common cultural characteristics, but on the contrary there should be some driving force which will make people believe that they belong to a particular group who are different from the others. In the case of Meghalaya the force often comes from the activism of ethnic interest groups. These ethnic interest groups are mostly student groups who have come up not only with the intention of pursuing the interest of the student community but also to pursue the interest of their ethnic group. Even before state formation, these student groups in Meghalaya have become more engrossed with ethnic identity issues rather than with student issues. Two ethnic interest groups namely the Khasi Students Union (KSU) and the Federation Khasi Jaintia Garo People (FKGP) have been examined for the purpose of demonstrating how instrumental these groups are in ethnic mobilization in the state. Besides these ethnic interest groups, insurgents groups have also come up on the basis of ethnic identities. I will examine the aims and objectives of these groups actually and their commitment to ethnic identities.

The final chapter is a critical perspective on how the strengthening of ethnic identity has its repercussions on the developmental perspective of the state. Development is a very vast area of study, for the purpose of this research, development here is more concerned about human development and the capabilities approach. I only focus on some specific themes related to development. The strengthening of ethnic identity has brought about a conflict situation in the state. Tussle between the ethnic interest groups and the state Government regarding various policies and issues has become a daily phenomenon. The KSU the premiere ethnic group in the state is a major player when it comes to these

conflict situations. Their demands and mode of operation have on many occasions come in conflict with the interest of the people that have retarded their freedom, choices and opportunities. Insurgents groups who proclaimed themselves to be the protector and defender of their ethnic groups end up using ethnicity as a means of furthering their own interests. In fulfilling their own aims they terrorize the state and bring untold misery and suffering to the people that they proclaim to work for. This chapter attempts to bring the correlation between ethnic identity and development as two variables which come into conflict with each other when there is an over emphasis on either one of these variables.

The final conclusion summarises the main research areas that I had set out to examine. This section highlights certain key areas which I consider are the most crucial factors that are responsible for identity formation in the Meghalaya as well as the Northeast. I also emphasized on how identity formation has its impact on the development perspective especially with the crucial role played by ethnic interest groups in ethnic mobilization. I conclude this study with some suggestions for multi-ethnic co-operation in this region.

Chapter 1

The Transformation of Ethnic Identities in Meghalaya: A Historical Perspective

Introduction

India was never an ethnic monolith inhabited by people united by a commonality of race, language and religion. On the contrary it is inhabited by multiple ethnic groups who profess different religions, speak different language, eat different food habits and follow customs and traditions which are different from any other. The northeast has made a huge contribution to the presence of multiple ethnic identities in the country. However since independence these ethnic groups have been very critical towards the policies of the Indian state and have resisted the nation-building project. These groups have often fought to maintain their traditional self-governing institutions, their language, their cultures, political institutions and the drawing of internal boundaries¹. To achieve this, they have demanded some form of autonomy in the form of state creation which was what most ethnic groups were demanding. At the extreme, these groups have demanded for out right secession from the Indian state just like in the case of the Nagas of Nagaland. This conflict between the state and the ethnic groups has contributed to a large extent the generation of ethnic identity movements in the region. Apart from this conflict with the Indian state, the relation among ethnic groups of the region has also been of a hostile nature. The want of dominance and control over land and resources have brought and upsurge in ethnic movements in the region².

The aim of this chapter is to examine the emergence of ethnic identity formation in the northeast and the state of Meghalaya by looking from a historical perspective. Tracing the development of ethnicity from the pre-independence British colonialism to post independence constitutional debates, we shall see how British colonialism as well as the emergence of the Indian state has been responsible in encouraging the emergence of

¹ Kymlicka Will, *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi., 2002, p.352.

² Baruah Apurba, "Conflicts and Communities Northeast Indian Perspective", in Girin Phukon (ed.) *Inter Ethnic Conflict In Northeastern India*, South Asian Publishers, New Delhi, 2005, p.26.

identity formation in the region. This historical perspective on the emergence of ethnic identities is aimed at giving a clear background on the emergence of the state of Meghalaya which was formed on 21 January 1972 on the basis of ethnic identity claims. The following chapters 2 and 3 will focus on how these claims are now sustained.

Ethnic Groups and Identity Formation

With the world becoming more advanced and modernization catching up to this region ethnic groups have become more ethnic sensitive. Liberalism assumed that as humans moved from a primitive, tribal stage of social organization to complex industrial and post-industrial structures the primordial dimensions of ethnicity would become obsolete. The parochial bonds of ethnicity in villages, cities, regions and countries would be transcended by the forces of trade, commerce, industrial production and markets³. It was generally assumed that ethnicity primarily concerns with a traditional society and that the spread of education would reduce the ethnic cleavages replacing parochial sentiments by universal ideas. But surprisingly, it appears that the more the society is modernized, the more ethnic demands are manifested and similarly, the more there is economic development the more there is ethnic conflict. Modernization brings in improvement in education, media and technology and increases the levels of competition for jobs. As a result this has made ethnic groups become more aware in promoting their identity and to be very competitive in protecting the limited resources at their disposal from outside invasion. In promoting their ethnic identity groups make efforts to acquire social, economic and political rights for the members of their group.

With population ever increasing, and resources become more limited, ethnic groups have started becoming very suspicious of other groups. There is a constant concern that another ethnic group might try to capture the economic resources of another and then proceed towards eroding the culture and lifestyle of that group. Hence this is the reason why there is so much ethnic tension in the Northeast. Initially when their population was small it appeared that land and natural resources were unlimited but gradually as

³ Stack John F., *The Primordial Challenge: Ethnicity in the Contemporary World*, Green Wood Press New York, 1986, p.6.

population kept growing resources became more and more limited. Today, every ethnic group in the Northeast is very ethnic conscious, we see that all ethnic groups are trying to protect, promote and preserve their interests. In this endeavour to promote their own ethnic interest, the region has witnessed so many conflicts and tension against the state and amongst various interest groups. Ethnic interest groups and insurgent groups who have come up on the basis of ethnicity have been largely responsible to the massive unrest that the region has been experiencing.

Emergence of Ethnicity in the Northeast: British Colonialism and Constitutional Debates

Ethnic mobilization and the politics of recognition in the Northeast started gradually; Tiplut Nongbri, Sanjib Baruah and Walter Fernandes have traced the rise of ethnicity as a social and political force in the northeast with the coming of British Colonialism⁴. Unlike the various tribes who have migrated through centuries from different parts of Asia to this region to inhabit and make the region their home, the British colonialists were here only for their business interests and to exploit the maximum out of every part of India for their profits. Their main interests in the region were especially tea and oil and hence they adopted certain policies and measures to suit their business needs⁵. The British followed a policy of administrative exclusion towards the hill areas. As early as the 1874 the British implemented the Inner Line Regulation Act⁶ and the Schedule District Act. The attempt became more conspicuous in the Government of India Act, 1919, where the colonial rulers used the principle of backwardness to exclude the tribal areas in Assam from the jurisdiction of the constitutional reforms and the administration of the provincial government.

⁴ Nongbri Tiplut, *Development Ethnicity and Gender: Select Essays on Tribes in India*, Rawat Publications New Delhi, 2003 p. 97.

Baruah Sanjib, *The Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2005, p.188.

⁵ Fernandes Walter, Melville Pereira, *Land Relations and Ethnic Conflicts: The case of North Eastern India*, North Eastern Research Centre, Guwahati, 2005 p. 12.

⁶ The British introduce the Inner Line Regulation Act regulated the flow on non-tribals to the hilly areas of the Northeast and to allow the tribals to live as they like.



The Statutory Commission, which in 1930 had examined the political conditions in British India and proposed constitutional reforms, observed that there was a 'complete statutory bar to the legislative authority of legislatures within every backward track'⁷. The Commission did not like the term 'backward tracks' but it agreed with the notion that such tracks should be outside the general constitution arrangements. The Government of India Act of 1935 therefore provided for excluded and partially excluded areas. Excluded areas comprised of the North-East Frontier Tract, (now known as Arunachal Pradesh), Naga Hills District, Lushai Hills district and the North Cachar Hills sub-division of Cachar district. The partially excluded areas included the Garo Hills district, Mikir Hills and the British portion of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills excluding the Shillong Municipality and Cantonment areas. All these areas lie outside the jurisdiction of the general laws. The difference between the excluded and partially excluded areas was that the former were to be administered by the Governor himself while the later were to be his special responsibility.

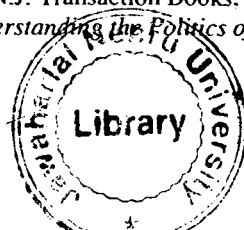
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The nationalist leaders viewed this special administrative policy of 'exclusion' as imperialist designs of the British to alienate the tribes from the general population and divide the country by playing on their social and cultural distinctions. However it is interesting to note that after India's achieved independence, the Indian government adopted the same principle used by the colonial rulers in the administration of the tribes. The Constitution of India of 1950, adopted most of the provisions of the 1935 Act, though the nomenclature and some of the institutional forms were modified. The constitution made a distinction between the tribal areas of Assam (five of the seven states of today's Northeast) and those of the rest of the country. While the tribal people of the rest of India came under the Fifth Schedule, the Sixth Schedule was provided for the administration of the tribal areas of the Northeast⁸.

The chairman of the sub committee of the Constituent Assembly that drafted the Sixth Schedule, Gopi Nath Bordoloi in presenting its proposal justified them by referring

⁷ Ghurye G.S., *The Schedule Tribes of India*, N.J: Transaction Books. New Brunswick, 1980, p. 109.

⁸ Baruah Sanjib, *The Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India*: Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2005, p. 189.



to the uncertain political conditions in the region at the time of independence. Bordoloi stressed the need for continued protection because of the doubts among the tribal people for what a post-colonial dispensation would bring⁹. The fear of being swamped by outsiders, once the colonial era restrictions were suddenly removed, was a major concern expressed by the leaders of the region. The hill leader Rev. J.J.M. Nicholas Roy of Shillong also played a major part in persuading the implementation of the Sixth schedule.

In the Constituent Assembly debates Roy stressed on the vast differences between the hill tribes and the plainsmen in terms of culture, language and religion. Culturally he emphasized that the society of the hill tribes are more egalitarian when compared to those of the rest of India. Caste and class is absent amongst the hill tribes. When people assemble together they sit together whether educated or uneducated, high or low. There is a feeling of equality among the hill tribes which quite uncommon among the plains people. Therefore the cultural identities of these tribes are to be maintained rather than assimilating it with the common cultures of India. Roy further argues that the hill tribes are people who have migrated from outside. They have never been under a Muslim or Hindu rule. They had their own rule, court and culture. To say that that the culture of these people must be swallowed by another culture, unless it is a better culture and unless it is by a process of gradual evolution, is rather very surprising to anyone who wants to build up India as a nation and bring its people together.¹⁰

Since the cultures of the tribes is totally different from that of the plains, India should recognize the cultural difference. It should not for a second think that these people should give up their democratic and egalitarian culture to be swallowed up by another culture which is quite different from what they have been used to and which is considered different by them not at all suitable for their society.¹¹

Rev. L.Gatpoh of Jowai (headquarters of the Jaintia Hills), and the Garos under

⁹ Chaube S.K, *Hill Politics in North East India*, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1999, pp. 86-87.

¹⁰ Excerpts from the Constitutional Assembly Debates Official Report, *Constituent Assembly of India* Vol. IX 30.07.1949 to 18.09.1949, 5th September 1949.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

the leadership of Jobang Marak from Trua (headquarters of the Garo Hills) strongly supported this move of Bordoloi's proposal for the implementation of the sixth schedule which will maintain the traditional institution of the hill tribes

The Sixth Schedule distinguished two sets of tribal areas of (undivided) Assam using the administrative categories that were then in effect: (a) the districts of the United Khasi and Jaintia Hills (excluding Shillong), Garo Hills, Lushai Hills, Naga Hills, North Cachar Hills and the Mikir Hills and; (b) the Northeast frontier tracts and the Naga Hills. The first set of areas today comprise the state of Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and parts of Assam, and the second category consist mostly of the states of Arunachal Pradesh and part of Nagaland. The Sixth schedule institution were meant to be applied for both set of areas, but the latter territories—which were mostly un-administered during colonial times—were considered not quite ready at that time for self governing institutions. The administrations of those areas were going to be carried out directly from Delhi—with the Governor of Assam acting as the agent of the Indian President.

The Sixth Schedule provided for autonomous districts and autonomous regions within those districts with elected councils which enjoy powers to make laws regarding (a) the allotment, occupation or use, or the setting apart of land other than any land which is a reserved forest for the purpose of agriculture or grazing or residential or other non-agricultural purposes; (b) the management of forest not being reserved forest; (c) the use of any canal or water course for the purpose of agriculture; (d) the regulation of the practice of jhum or other forms of shifting cultivation; (e) the establishment of village or town committees of any village or town of the council and their powers; (f) matters relating to village administration including village or town police and public health and sanitation; (g) the appointment of successions of chiefs or headmen; (h) the inheritance of property; (i) marriage and divorce; (k) social customs. The District Council also has the power to levy and collect taxes on (a) profession, trades, calling and employment's; (b) taxes on animals and vehicles; (c) taxes for maintenance of schools dispensaries or roads and (d) lands and buildings and tolls on persons residing within their respective

jurisdiction¹².

Apart from this administrative exclusion, as part of their colonization strategy the British followed a policy of encouraging missionaries to build their religious and educational institutions and use them as agencies of integrating the west with the tribal folk¹³. About 80% of the population are Christians in the three states of Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland. The arrival of the missionary groups like the Welsh Presbyterians in 1841, the Catholic Priests in 1890 and the American Baptists in 1864 marks a turning point in among the communities of the Northeast in the field of education. It took quite a while for the missionaries to penetrate their influence in the state and it was only with the beginning of the 20th century that formal education started. But the seeds of enlightenment had been sown and by the time India achieved independence; most tribal communities have been touched by education and are very much aware of what was happening around them especially at the national level.

Ethnic Crisis and Political Conflict: The dilemma of the Interim period

The gradual process of ethnic identity formation was preceded by a political conflict between the emerging identities and the Indian state. Conscious of their distinct identities and traditional political autonomy, some of the ethnic groups felt that with the withdrawal of the British from India they should be given the right to self-determination and recognize as sovereign powers in their own territory. This kind of situation is best defined by Donald Horowitz where he emphasizes that after most states achieved independence, context and issues changes. No longer was the struggle against external power the dominant issue. Within the new states, the question was to whom the new states belonged. As some groups move to succeed to the power of the former colonialist,

¹² Burman B.K Roy, "Constitutional framework for tribal autonomy with special reference to North-East India" in M. K. Raha and Alope Kumar Ghosh (eds.) *Northeast India: a Human Interface*, Gyan Publishers, New Delhi, 1998, p.86.

¹³ Das Gurudas, 'Migration, Ethnicity and Competition for State Resources: An Explanation of the Social Human Interface,' in M. K. Raha and Alope Kumar Ghosh (eds.) *North East India: a Human Interface* Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi, 1998, p.311.

others start claiming that self determination was still incomplete, for they had not achieved their own independence¹⁴.

In the case of the Northeast the various ethnic groups stiffly resisted the proposed formulation of the Sixth Schedule and their incorporation within the administrative powers of the state of Assam. The reason was that there was a general concern about the sincerity of the Assam Government in protecting their rights and interest and its ability to apprehend the large influx of plain people into the hills. The strongest resistance of the kind came from the Nagas under the leadership of Angami Zapu Phizo¹⁵. On 16th May 1951 the Naga National Council (NNC) organized a plebiscite on the question of independence or accession to India. The NNC collected signatures and thumb impression and were sent to the President of India through the Governor of Assam. Though the President rejected the plebiscite the Nagas continued to register their protests and boycotted the first general election of independent India held in 1952. The failure on the part of the state to tackle this Naga question triggered off the first insurgency movement in the region.

In the Khasi and Jaintia hills the process of accession was also beset with obstacles. The problem related to obtaining the consent of the Khasi states to sign the Instrument of Accession and Annexed Agreement with the Government of India. It may be recalled that the relations between the native states and the government of India were governed by the Standstill Agreement till 26th January 1950 or by section 290 A of the 1935 Act (section 290 A was added to the Government of India Act, 1935 by the Constituent Assembly of India through the amendment). In this connection some of the Khasi chiefs felt that there should be no hurry to sign the Instrument of Accession and Annexed Agreement since they had already signed the Standstill Agreement, which they did on 9th August 1847¹⁶. However, the Government of India, eager to complete the

¹⁴ Horowitz Donald, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, University of California Press, California, 1982, pp, 4-5.

¹⁵ Angami Z. Phizo was the President of the Naga National Council (NNC) who called for the plebiscite on whether to accede with India or to secede from it.

¹⁶ Nongbri Tiplut, 'Ethnicity and Political Activism in North East: Tribal Identity and State Policy' in P.S. Datta (ed) *The Northeast and the Indian State Paradoxes of A Periphery*, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 1995, pp. 46-48.

formalities of accession of the native states to the Indian union exerted pressure on the Khasi to do so. This pressure led to the rift in the Federation of Khasi States a political organization which represented the twenty five Khasi states. Under the unrelentless effort of Sir Akbar Hydari, Governor of Assam, nineteen of the twenty five states signed the Instrument of Accession and Annexed Agreement by December 1947. Prominent among the states which refused the sign was the state of Nongstoin (one among the prominent Khasi states) whose deputy chief, Wycliffe Syiem, played a leading role in determination for their future. Wycliffe Syiem went to New York to appeal before the General Assembly of the United Nations Organization. Wycliffe, however, failed to obtain the intervention of the United Nations in India's internal arrangement. Grievously disappointed by the failure he fled to East Pakistan where he remained till his death in 1988¹⁷. In the end all the Khasi states signed the Instrument of Accession and annexed agreement, with Nongstoin the last to do so on 28 March 1948.

The Federation of the Khasi states and its political wing, the Khasi States People's Union, also expressed strong opposition to the Sixth Schedule. The Federation wanted to incorporate the rights of the chiefs in the Indian Constitution and was hence against the Sixth Schedule and the inclusion of the Khasi states within the state of Assam. They felt that according to section 290 A of the Government of India Act, 1935, the Khasi states may be converted into a Commissioner Province or Union Territory, but there was no question of incorporating them within the State of Assam. The goal of the Federation however could not be achieved due to polarization of opinion in the Khasi society. Another organization led by J.J.M. Nichols Roy, came out in strong support of the Sixth Schedule. Although a meeting of the 'Khasi States Constitution Making Durbar' convened by the Governor of Assam, the Resolution passed by the Federation of Khasi won a clear majority against that of Nichols Roy when the matter was finally taken up by the drafting committee of the Constituent Assembly the demand for the Federation were totally ignored

¹⁷ Syeimlieh D.R.. "Integration of the Khasi States into the Indian Union" , *Proceedings of the North East History Association*, NEHU, First Session Shillong, 1980, p. 62.

The opposition expressed by the Federation against the Sixth Schedule, however, left a mark in that all the Khasi chiefs refused to sign the Instrument of Merger with the India Union and they were formally included into the state of Assam only through the promulgation of the constitution of India on 26th January 1950.

After most tribal states have been incorporated into the Indian union through the various decrees, the Assamese just like the nationalist leaders believed that the divide and rule policy of the colonial rulers which has segregated the people of the hills from those of the plains was now over¹⁸. With the British Colonialist gone, a chance of unifying both the people from the hills and from those of the plains has arisen. So immediately after India achieved independence, the Assamese politicians sought to hasten the process of Assamization or extension of Assamese influence in the neighbouring hills by introducing Assamese language as a compulsory language in the hill areas¹⁹. However, this was faced with strong resentment from the hill people. The constant harping of assimilation and 'Greater Assam' alarmed the hill people of losing their culture, language and even their main prop namely land. They gradually developed a fear of being exploited and outnumbered by their neighbours in the plains.

Administrative exclusion, enlightenment and the pressure of assimilation to a Greater Assam by the Assamese alarmed and strengthened ethnic identities in the hill areas. These factors enable ethnic groups to use ethnicity as a rationale to make demands especially in the political arena i.e. demanding a major say for the group in the political system, control over a piece of territory within the territory and increasing their share of scarce resources. Hence, after much negotiation, demands and protest from the hill people, it became inevitable that the then Greater Assam would be fragmented and several hill states would be created more on the basis of ethnic identity than on linguistic set up. Unlike in the rest of India where creation of states was primarily based on language, the Northeastern region presents such a complex situation where creation of

¹⁸ Barpujari H.K, *Northeast India: Problems Policies and Prospects*, Spectrum Publications, Guwahati, 1998, p.16.

¹⁹ Rymbai R.T., 'Social and Political Tension in Northeast' in J.B. Bhattacharjee (ed.) *Social Tension in Northeast India*, Research India Publications, Calcutta, 1982, p. 65.

states on the basis of language would not only be impracticable but also impossible.

Most of the Northeastern states that have been created by taking into account; (1) the group that is the majority within a specific territory; (2) groups using a common variable to unite themselves though they are ethnically different. Hence, we have today states like Mizoram which was basically formed on the basis of their majority within the Mizo Hills; states like Meghalaya were formed because of the persevering demands of the Hill People who comprise of the Khasi-Jaintia and the Garo. Though the Khasi-Jaintia and the Garo are ethnically different, they submerge their differences to assume a new identity under Hill people for the creation of a separate Hill State. Then we have the state of Nagaland, which comprises so many tribes but though they speak different languages, profess different culture they all unite themselves under one the ethnic group known as Naga's. Then we have Manipur, in which the Meteis which form the majority dominated the Manipur valley while the tribes resided in the periphery. Arunachal Pradesh comprised of so many different tribes who speak different languages and professed different traditions. However again though these tribes differ from each other, they have united to form a separate state. Hence the background to state reorganization in the Northeast is quite complicated. In recent years because of the limited resources available some ethnic groups have again started demanding separate states as they feel that they are dominated and exploited by a more competitive and educated ethnic group.

The redrawing of boundaries and the creation of hill states further strengthened ethnic identities in the region. Most ethnic groups now feel a sense of belongingness and closeness to their territory, they feel that now they have a home where they can identify themselves and be proud. Feelings of belonging and closeness inspire people to become patriots and to defend their territory from outside forces and from aliens who they feel would intrude into their territory and would capture their land either socially or economically. Hence this feeling of patriotism has made the northeast region to be locked in ethnic battles like the Naga secessionist movement demanding for Naga inhabited areas to secede from India, the Mizos, the Arunachalis, the Assamese and the tribals of Tripura demanding the expulsion and deportation of refugees and illegal immigrants,

ethnic tensions between the Meiteis, Nagas and Kukis in Manipur and finally the antipathy of the Khasis to any outsider or any non-tribal whether Indian or immigrant. These are just a few of the major ethnic tension and conflicts in the region not to mention the hundreds of minor conflicts between various minor ethnic groups inhabiting the region.

Historical Background: The Emergence of the Hill State 1950-1972

The coming of the Welsh missionaries to the Khasi hills as early as 1841 contributed a lot to the spread of western education in the hill areas²⁰. However, it took quite a while for the missionaries to penetrate their influence in the state and it was only with the beginning of the 20th century that formal education started in the Khasi hills. With the advent of formal education the Khasis were amongst the first community of the Northeastern region to produce English educated persons who became a very influential group among the Khasi community. It may be noted that in 1891 among the hill tribes of Assam, the Khasi-Jaintias ranked first in education with 38 literate males to every 1000 of the population.²¹ By 1901, the proportion of literates was 57 persons to every 1000 of the population²². In 1921, literacy rate in the Khasi and Jaintia hill districts was 7.64 percent of the population. Female education continued to remain the highest in this district at 2.52 percent²³. Achievements in education are an important force for the changes that came about in the hills.

Some Khasi educated elites like James Joy Mohan Nichols Roy, Roy Rowland Thomas, B.M.Pugh, Mavis Dunn Lyngdoh who had the opportunity of travelling to

²⁰ The arrival of Thomas Jones I a Welsh Presbyterian missionary. Christianity began to take firm roots in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. He opened a number of schools and frequently visited villages to spread the 'Good News' of Christianity. He was convinced that it was only through education that only through education of the local youths, that evangelization would be possible in the region. However, the most important step taken for promoting education was when he introduced the the Roman script to the Khasi language. He published a book Titled *Ka Kot Ba Nyngkong* (The Primer), the first Khasi book in Roman script. It was used in the elementary schools of the Khasi Jaintia Hills for many years. For this valuable contribution Thomas Jones I is regarded as the 'Father of the Khasi Language.

²¹ *Census of India 1891*, Vol. 1, Assam, p 146.

²² B.C Allen, *Assam District Gazetteer*, Vol. X, Shillong, 1906, p. 109.

²³ J.J.M Nicholas Roy, *Memorandum of the Assam Government, Indian Statutory Commission*, Vol. XIV London, 1930. pp. 58-60.

mainland India and interacting with the people there, got exposed to the cross currents of the Indian nationalist movements²⁴. These educated persons though few in number played a decisive role in influencing the community's perception and the political events in the region. This spread of Western education to the Khasi and Jaintia hills also enabled the people to realize the importance of maintaining their identity, society and language and also the importance of protecting and promoting their identity in the face of threat from the major communities.

After India's independence, the educated class began to perceive a threat of domination by non-tribals within the composite state of Assam. The limited powers given to the District Council were considered inadequate to protect the hill men against exploitation and backwardness and to effect their development according to their own genius²⁵. The educated elite became dissatisfied with the existing safeguards provided by the Sixth Schedule and they stressed for the need of getting more political power. In a memorandum submitted to the States Reorganization Commission 1954, the members of the executive committees of the Autonomous District Council of the Garo, Khasi, Jaintia, Mizo and North Cachar Hills demanded for the creation of a separate Hill state. Although the aspiration of different tribes were not exactly identical due to differences at levels of cultural and educational development, the general need to disassociate themselves from Assam seemed to have been felt by almost the entire tribal leadership of the composite state of Assam. The thought of a Hill state seemed to offer better prospects for political autonomy entailing major benefits for the tribal section of the tribal society. However the lack of consensus among the leaders of different hill districts on the hill state issue could not gather momentum. Fear of domination by the Khasi seems to have led the other hill tribe leaders to reject the idea of a hill state.

Within the Khasi-Jaintia hills district, urgent feeling of fear and insecurity had crept into the minds of the hill people regarding several key political decisions that have been made by the Assam Government like the policy of nominating 5 non-tribal

²⁴ See p.21 for J.J.M Nichols Roy

²⁵ Gupta Sushmita Sen, *Regionalism in Meghalaya*, South Asian Publishers, New Delhi, 2005, p 37.

members to the United Khasi Jaintia Autonomous District Council and the proposal to introduce Assamese language as a compulsory medium of instruction and the constant efforts of the Assamese to strengthen their influence in hills, were seen as policies which threatened to harm and affect the ethno-cultural settings of the hills. A fear factor began to emerge that the hills might be swamped by non-tribals and the identity of the hill people would stand at risk.

The hill leaders like Williamson Sangma²⁶, B.B. Lyngdoh, T. Cajee, Maham Singh and others interpreted the language bill as an effort to impose Language upon them. This issue led to the formation of the All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) which comprised of different Hill Parties which were looking for a common platform to articulate their regional grievances and mobilize public opinion in their favour. The Conference unanimously resolved to oppose Official Language Bill, mainly on the ground that "adoption of Assamese as the official language of the state will adversely affect the opportunities and prospects of the Hills people in Government services and other vocations notwithstanding any amount of safeguards which can be circumvented."²⁷ The APHLC was purely a tribal organization and non-tribals were not allowed membership. The hill leaders also felt that the hill people would always remain a minority in their in the present state of Assam and they could see no future in them as long as they remain a minority in their own state. Hence under the leadership of the APHLC a memorandum was sent to the President on 21 August 1960 urging him for the separation of the hill districts from Assam²⁸. A delegation led by Williamson Sangma, met Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and pressed for the creation of an eastern frontier state to satisfy the legitimate aspirations of the tribal people. After a series of negotiations and agitations that brought the state capital to a stand still, the state of Meghalaya was finally formed on 21 January 1972.

²⁶ Williamson Sangma a Garo, from Tura was a cabinet minister with the Assam Government, but with the introduction of the language bill, he resigned from his post to fight for the creation of a separated hill state.

²⁷ Resolutions passed by the 1st All Party Hill Leaders Conference of the Autonomous Districts Councils of Assam held at Shillong on the 6th and 7th July 1960, *APHLC souvenir*, July 1974, pp. 8-9.

²⁸ Barpujari H.K, *Northeast India: Problems Policies and Prospects*, Spectrum Publications, Guwahati, 1998, p.19.

The creation of Meghalaya was possible only with the unification of the 2 major tribal groups; the Khasi-Jaintias of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills and the Garos of the Garo Hills or as Barbara Ellis Lal would perhaps classify as 'ethnicity by consent' which means that these ethnic groups which have traditionally thought of themselves as distinct in terms of both culture and descent, submerge their differences and assume a common identity as hill people in their demands for the creation of a hill state of Meghalaya. Hence on this basis the state today is dominated by the Khasi-Jaintia and the Garos.

Role of Regional Parties

Regional parties have played a major role in the mobilization of ethnic identity formation within the state of Meghalaya. The very reason that the state of Meghalaya exist today is because of the immense pressure mounted by the APHLC on the Centre for the creation of a separate hill state to enable the hill tribes to develop according to their own genius. With the achievement of statehood, the leaders who led the successful hill state movement carried forward the banner of ethnic mobilization with the formation of various regional political parties. Most regional parties have an ethnic ideological basis. Let us examine what are the objectives and functions of these regional parties and what is their take on the ethnic factor.

Amongst the first regional parties to have emerged in the Northeastern region as well as in Meghalaya is the APHLC. The party proclaims that it is in favour of integration with the Indian Union as a concept and in practice. However the APHLC denounces any attempt by other parts of the nation to impose their will, their identity, their culture, their language and their ways of life on the people of a particular are, in the name of national integration. The APHLC is committed to Meghalaya's membership of the Indian Union, it emphasize that national integration should mean the preservation of distinct cultures of different ethnic groups and the tribes of Meghalaya. The party wants the customs and traditions of the tribal people to be protected and not diluted²⁹.

²⁹Gupta Sushmita Sen, *Regionalism in Meghalaya*, South Asian Publishers, New Delhi, 2005, pp.90-91.

Some of the regional parties which have come up on after state formation include the Hill State People Democratic Party (HSPD), Public Demands Implementation Convention (PDIC), Hill People's Union (HPU), United Democratic Party (UDP), People Democratic Movement (PDM) and Khun Hynniewtrep National Awakening Movement (KHNAM). The HSPDP declares itself as Tribal Regional party and promises to serve the state and its people better to enable them to develop according to their own genius. In its 1983 election manifesto the HSPDP states: Meghalaya is the abode of the tribals, who are a minority, having a separate identity, different and more backward than other major communities who constitute the bulk of the population in the country. The foremost duty therefore is to safeguard them through their own good customs and usages, and to develop according to their own ability and genius so that their identity would not be lost in the sea of challenges³⁰. The HSPDP reiterates that the regional identity of the tribal people of Meghalaya will have to be maintained and their regional interests are not to be sacrificed at the altar of national integration.

The Public Demands Implementation Convention (PDIC) was formed in 1977, its main aims is to focus attention on the problems of the farmers, to redress their grievances and to render assistance to them through the Government machinery. This emphasis apart the PDIC aims to protect anything that concerns the interest of the particular region such as language, culture, and customs. The PDIC vows to preserve the language, traditional trade and business, traditional sports, and cultural identity of the people of Meghalaya, which includes their religion, customs, usages and food habit.³¹

The Hill People's Union (HPU) was formed in 16th November 1984 by the former members of the APHLC and HSPDP as a party to provide a viable alternative to the national parties. The objectives of the HPU are as follows;

1. To safeguard and preserve the identity of the tribal people and to protect their interest, especially in respect to land, their democratic institutions, language customs and culture.

³⁰ Election Manifesto of the HSPDP, Syiem Offset Printers, Shillong, 1983, p.2.

³¹ Aims and objectives in the Constitution of the PDIC, Shillong, 1977. p.3.

2. To ensure the territorial integrity of the state of Meghalaya and to restore to the state the rightful areas and those contiguous areas which are predominantly inhabited by the tribal people.
3. To promote the economic development of the tribal people in particular and of the state in general.
4. To ensure social Justice and economic freedom in the state.³²

These aims and objectives of the Hill People's Union show that this party is clearly an ethnic party. The HPU has repeatedly asserted its commitment for the tribal cause.

In 1990 another regional party was formed under the banner of the United Democratic Party. The UDP emerged as a strong regional force in Meghalaya when it replaced the Congress (I) Government in 1998 to form a coalition with other parties. Since this party is formed by former members of the APHLC, HSPDP and HPU, its ideology reflects the ideology of all the three parties.

In recent years two more regional parties have entered the political scene of Meghalaya. The People's Democratic Movement (PDM) have emerged as a political wing of the Federation of Khasi Jaintia and Garo People (FKJGP) an influential ethnic interest group and its aims and objectives reflect that aims of the group. The latest party to arrive on the scene is known as Khun Hynniewtrep National Awakening Movement (KHNAM). This party is the political wing of Meghalaya's leading ethnic interest group the Khasi Student Union (KSU). Just prior to the 2003 elections, the KSU formed the KHNAM and some of its leader's including the KSU President Paul Lyngdoh contested in the elections. The aims and objectives of the KHNAM are to promote and to make the demands of the indigenous peoples materialize, that the KHNAM being an offshoot of thee KSU would work to implement the important demands of the KSU and the demands of the indigenous people, that both the KHNAM as well as the KSU should always listen to the voice of the people³³.

³² Constitution of the Hill People's Union, Shillong, 1984 p. 1.

³³ Ka Soskular hapteng ka KSU bad Ka KHNAM, 15 Jylliew 2002. (Memorandum of Agreement between the KSU and the KHANM, 15 June 2002).

Looking at the ideological basis of all these regional parties we can argue that all these parties are very ethnic based. How far have they been faithful to their ideology and election manifestos is all together a different question. One thing for sure is that these parties, using ethnic sentiments were very successful in contesting elections in the state and on many occasions they have successfully formed governments. One common agenda that all these political parties share is that they all work for the interest and upliftment of the indigenous communities (i.e. Khasi, Jaintia and Garo) and that they are committed to bring all round peace, progress, prosperity and security to the entire state. Apart from the regional parties, it is the ethnic interest groups that have been instrumental in taking ethnic mobilization to a higher level, with their frequent protest, agitations and demonstration over various issues which concern ethnic identities. Their actions and activities have had a major impact on the state and one can say that their actions have changed the history of Meghalaya. In the next chapter we shall discuss more about these groups to evaluate their roles, since achievement of statehood.

Conclusion

This chapter gives an insight into how ethnic identity formation came about in the Northeast. Arrival of British colonialism and the spread of western education can be considered as the two major factors which started the process of identity formation. The British exclusive administrative policies of what they considered the backward tracks made the hill tribes have very little interaction and intermingling with other cultures especially from the plains. Hence they maintained the distinctiveness of the tribal cultures. With the spread of education educated elites start fostering an attitude of protecting and protecting the interest of their ethnic groups. I would argue that the immediate period after India's independence is a turning point in the process of identity formation in the Northeast. The efforts of the ethnic groups to resist Indian integration tells that ethnic groups in the Northeast have transformed themselves from mere social groups who identified themselves in terms of culture to more politically conscious groups constantly demanding for greater autonomy of their territories from what they considered as foreign domination. However the differences in opinion among the

members of the numerous ethnic groups brought about the accession of all ethnic territories within the Indian union.

Being incorporated into the Indian Union does not mean that these groups became silent and submissive but on the contrary they became more aggressive in demanding laws which will protect and preserve their culture and their distinct identities. Recognising the wide differences socio-cultural difference that exist between ethnic groups from the North Eastern region to that of the rest of India, the constitution implemented the Sixth schedule which provides for the traditional institutions administration. However realizing that the Sixth schedule has limited powers for the promotion of ethnic interest, hill leaders took to the formation of regional parties to fight for the achievement of statehood. Meghalaya witnessed how the APHLC a regional party played a major role in state formation. From then on regional parties have moved forward with ethnic identity mobilization. Regional parties were very instrumental in forging ethnic sentiments in the state and I would agree with Max Weber's view that, *ethnicity emerges only because of politics*³⁴. The very fact that the Meghalaya emerged as a state is because of regional parties' interest in forging an alliance between the Khasi-Jaintia and Garos as Hill people who faced the constant threat from the people of the plains of Assam. The fact that the Khasi-Jaintia who are ethnically different from the Garo, but uniting for the purpose of creating a separate hill state speaks volume of how ethnicity emerge according to the situation. Regional parties through their ethnic ideologies and manifestoes; present themselves as the saviours of ethnic interest.

³⁴ Richard Jenkins, *Rethinking Ethnicity: Arguments and Exploration*. New Delhi, Sage, 1997, p.10.

Chapter 2

Ethnic Interest Groups and the Mobilization of Ethnic Identities

Introduction

As mentioned in the introduction, the reason why individuals have always belonged to a group or community of people is because by belonging to a group it provides the individual with the answer to the question of 'Who Am I'. By being part of a particular group it gives an individual a sense of identity and a sense of difference. I have discussed about the various criteria that make individuals constitute a group and to differentiate one group from another. Most significantly I discussed how ethnic groups try to assert their position and show their importance in the larger social political sphere. In this demonstration, we have often seen that throughout history; be it in our own region and nation or the world at large, some groups are more powerful and more assertive than others and have often subdued the weaker groups. In most cases it is the groups which are in majority of the particular region which wield power over the minorities. However, sheer numbers do not determine the strength of an ethnic group. There should be some driving force which strengthens the ethnic character of a group and makes the group to be more dominant. This driving force is often derived from individuals, especially charismatic persons with extra ordinary mobilizing skills or it maybe derived from ethnic interest groups who feel that it is their responsibility and duty to serve their community by defending and strengthening their ethnic 'difference' or as in many cases it is the combination of both the individual will and group interest. When I say interest group here it means a formal organization of people who share one or more common objectives or concerns and who try to influence the course of public policy to promote their aims and objectives. Iris Marion Young reserves the term interest groups for the 'self consciously mutually acknowledging collective with a self conscious purpose'¹

¹ Frazer Elizabeth, 'Iris Marion Young and Political Education', *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, Vol. 38, No.1, 2006, p. 42.

Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya is quite known all over the eastern part of India as an educational hub of the North East; the reason for this is that English education came to this part of the country as early as 1841 with the arrival of the Welsh Presbyterian Missionaries and with Shillong becoming the capital of Assam on 20th March 1874. The arrival of the Catholic Missionaries can be considered as a turning point in English education not only in Shillong but the entire North East, because with their arrival a number of schools and colleges were set up. This advent of formal education brought about a sea change in the lifestyle and mentality of the indigenous people gradually. It made them become aware of the events and happenings in and around, most importantly it bred a new Khasi-Jaintia mentality which realized the importance of freedom and self preservation. Educated Khasi-Jaintia people started coming out to forefront to take up issues for their community, students and interest groups also started rallying together to make various demand and to stand up for their rights.

This second chapter is focused on the role of ethnic interest groups in ethnic mobilization. I will be looking at how ethnic interest groups are instrumental in strengthening their ethnic identity in relation to other groups, what are the methods used for mobilizing public support and most importantly, to examine how their feeling of duty and responsibility towards their community and land has an impact on the people and society at large. In this study on the role of interest groups in ethnic mobilization, I will take up the case of two ethnic interests groups in Meghalaya namely the Khasi Students Union (KSU) and the Federation Khasi Jaintia and Garo Peoples (FKJGP). The reason why I have examined these two groups is since Meghalaya achieved statehood they have been very dynamic and are always on the forefront of every contentious issue in the state. Though there are many other interest groups in the state, their scope of functioning however is very limited and they have not made any major impact on the people and the state when compared to the KSU and FKJGP.

Emergence of Students Groups and their Role in Ethnic Group Formation

Interest groups are an organized association of people who share one or more common objectives and try to influence the policies or actions of the Government. Ethnic interest groups on the other hand unlike conventional interest groups, to which members choose to belong, are founded on the basis of shared heritage, traditional bonds and loyalties. Membership is based on birth, rather than on recruitment². In the case of Meghalaya, there are various numerous interest groups of doctors, lawyers, teachers, Government servants etc. These interest groups draw inspiration from their profession and work. Together they act as a cohesive group mainly to fight for their group's interest. Only in certain occasions they might go beyond their professional interest to lend their support to other interest groups or for the interest of the society at large. These interest groups hence function within the limited scale of their professional interest. Unlike these professional groups, there are other interest groups in the state who do not limit their interest within their specific boundaries of profession but on the other hand work for the interest of the people in particular and for the welfare of the society as a whole. These groups are mostly ethnic interest groups. As mentioned earlier, in the case of Meghalaya, most of these ethnic interest groups are actually student organizations whose activities are not limited to student issues alone. On the contrary they are more interested in issues relating to promotion of their ethnic groups and welfare of the state as a whole. These student organizations have been very active and vibrant in evoking the spirit of ethnic consciousness and since the early fifties and they have made a major contribution in shaping and moulding the present state of Meghalaya. However, at times the actions of these groups on several occasions have been quite controversial and were not reflecting the purpose for what they stand for. Some of their actions have brought negative repercussions upon the state and on the welfare of the people. However we shall examine this in the later stages of the study.

² Wilson G., *Interest Groups: A Clear and Concise Discussion of the Role of Groups in Liberal Democracies*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1990, pp. 4-5.

The 1950's marks the emergence of student movements in Meghalaya. In 1952 for the first time Khasi students came up to the forefront to agitate against the Assam Government on the occasion of the inauguration of the United Khasi-Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council which nominated non-tribal members to the Council. The students organized a black flag march and were supported by more than five thousand people to protest against the policy Assam Government. The Government on the other hand reacted to this situation and came down with a heavy hand to quell this agitation. On 27th June 1952 many students were arrested and physically injured when protesters clashed with the police authorities³. The following day about ten thousand people streamed down to the Khasi National Durbar Hall and demanded the release of the students arrested. Constant pressure exerted by the public made the Government to release all those arrested students. This was the first ever student agitation in the Khasi Hills, though unorganized on this occasion, it sowed the seeds for the foundation of other student agitations in later years.

On 30th July 1955, the first organized student organization known as the Khasi Student Association (K.S.A) was formed with the objective of nurturing the spirit of co-operation among the school students, to elevate the standard of education, to nurture politeness and work for the social and cultural development of the Khasi Hills. The Association pledges to be non-political and upheld the commitment for secularism⁴. Though this association was busy within its own academic sphere, it lent a hand to support the Hill state movement. With this start, other student organizations started coming up. In 1960' the Hill Students union (HSU) was formed which played a major part with the setting up of the University and the Law College in Shillong. While the KSA was reigning supreme, some Khasi students felt that it is absurd for them to stay out of politics when there was a movement for the creation of a Hill State was going on. Hence a section of the students formed the Khasi-Jaintia Students Union (KJSU) and held a public meeting together with the hill state leaders at the Khasi National Durbar Hall on

³Kharakor Spiton, *Ban lai Sah Kynmaw (To Be Remembered Always)*. Ri Khasi Press, Shillong, 1982, pp. 60-63

⁴ Address of the Khasi Students Association, Mr. Bestomanick Singh Syiem, in *The KSA Magazine*, Shillong, 1966, p. 3

30th September 1968. The students pressed the political leaders not to accept the Autonomous Hill State but only a full fledged state. In his address at a rally the KJSU president emphasized that the KJSU was a non-political body, but “as it is in other parts of the world, students have to participate and shoulder the yoke of their country”. The KJSU too strongly protested against the Assam Government’s attempt to impose the compulsory use of the Assamese language as the state official language in Governments and schools.

Though these organizations did not live long they played a major part in the Hill state movement and their contribution towards Meghalaya in achieving the status of a full fledged state is commendable. They also laid the foundation and set an example for the younger generation especially students, to stand up for their rights, language, land and especially to protect and promote their ethnic identity.

Consolidation of Ethnic Identities: The Post-Statehood Era

After Meghalaya achieved its statehood, the factor that was use to achieve this aim triggered the process what Barbara Ellis Lal would classify it as ‘ethnic stratification’ i.e. ethnicity is fostered by political groups and interest groups working for the interest of their ethnic groups⁵. The presence of multi-ethnic identities in the state has brought about an upsurge of interest groups as well as political parties who take keen interest in working on issues like reservation policies, land rights and cultural rights. Ethnic based groups reflect the consciousness of ethnic identity, political aspiration and consolidation. All these groups function within their respective ethnic territories and their influence sometimes is not limited to their own ethnic level but affects the other ethnic communities both positively an negatively. In this segment we shall see how influential ethnic interest groups are in the mobilization of their ethnic identities after state formation.

⁵ Lal Barbara Ellis, ‘Perspective on Ethnicity: Old Wines in New Bottles’ *Ethnic and Racial Studies* Volume 6 No. 2, April 1983.

With achievement of statehood, attention shifted from state to community, interest groups belonging to different ethnic community starts working more for the profit and benefit of the of their community and less for the benefit of the state as a whole. These signs were seen immediately when in 1974 a new student organization like the Shillong Students Union (SSU) protested against the state's Government action regarding its proposal to transfer the Meghalaya Board of School Education (MBOSE) to Tura, the headquarters of the Garo Hills. The main argument of the SSU was that the seat of education should not be located at a place which is 200 kms away from the seat of the Government and moreover most Government recognized schools were in Shillong and just a handful in either Jowai or Tura. However the Government went ahead with the proposed plan making the student leaders very annoyed saying this was done because of parochial reasons⁶. Though the issue was forgotten due to more serious agitations on illegal immigration, it did not die there but it just remained dormant for three decades and in September 2005, this issue surfaced up again and this time it was bloody and communal and chaotic, which we shall see in later stages of this chapter.

In 1975 another student organization was formed known as the Meghalaya Students Union (MSU) which later turned to Khasi Student Union (KSU), started agitating with the government regarding the 'foreigners' issue. The MSU demanded that the Government should detect and deport foreign nationals especially those coming from Bangladesh after the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971. Though the MSU lighted the spark it was only in 1978 when the MSU turned into the KSU that their demands got new impetus and were able to press forward their demands more vocally and dynamically and also public support gave the newly formed KSU inspiration and motivation.

The emergence of the Khasi Students Union working for the interest of the Khasi community led to the formation of the Jaintia Students Union (JSU) and Garo Students Union (GSU), like the KSU, both these organizations were formed with the interest of looking into affairs of their respective ethnic community their respective domains. Even though in many occasions these three have come in support of each other, but this support

⁶ Malngiang Pascal, *Student and Politics in Meghalaya*, Seven Huts Enterprise, Shillong, 1994, p. 10.

is limited only to issues which benefits all the three communities or the state as a whole like the immigration issue. Apart from such issues a clear demarcation line is drawn between them. Besides these three major student organizations, other interest groups formed purely on ethnic interest have also emerged like the Syngkhong Rympei Thymai (Association of New Hearts), Mait Shaphrang Movement (Strive Ahead Movement) and other small groups whose influence is limited only at the local level. But amongst all the ethnic based interest groups which are not student organization, the Federation Khasi Jaintia and Garo People FKJGP an interest group formed by the three major ethnic groups of Meghalaya has been very influential in mobilizing ethnic consciousness and has taken up ethnic issues with great intensity. The next section is a study and an analysis about these two groups the KSU and the FKGP on how they emerged, what role they have played in the formation and consolidation of ethnic identities and most importantly how have they changed the present scenario of the state with their actions since Meghalaya achieved statehood.

The Khasi Students Union and the Federation Khasi Jaintia Garo People: Emergence, Role and Influence

The Khasi Students Union was formed on the 20th March 1978. The organization was basically a student organization comprising of college and university students from all over the capital. On 18th December 1981 the Constitution of the KSU was adopted spelling out clearly the aims and objectives of the Union was to build up the spirit of unity, love, and co-operation among all the students of the Khasi Hills. All the members should contribute with all their might to uplift education and work for the social and cultural enrichment and the development of the Khasis. The KSU also sternly prohibits its members from taking part in any party politics and also involving the Union with personal religious beliefs⁷. On the 4th April 1993, the KSU amended its constitution and its objectives were further expanded to the following;

⁷'Ka Riti Synshar Jong ka Khasi Students Union' (Constitution of the Khasi Students Union) KSU Publication, Shillong, 1981, pp. 4-7.

- 1) To raise the education of the students through various ways and means.
- 2) To demand from the Government for infrastructural facilities for the upliftment of education according to the needs of time by setting up Government colleges, medical, engineering and agricultural colleges and enhancements of scholarship and stipends.
- 3) To demand from time to time from the Government to uphold the Khasi identity by protecting them through laws so that the children of the soil may control the economy polity and land.
- 4) To awaken the Khasi community to respect their language, culture, tradition and all that belongs to the Khasi nation.
- 5) To rebuild the social life of the Khasis by encouraging the spirit of hard work, abnegation, unity, patriotism and politeness
- 6) To foster the spirit of fraternity among all the children of the soil irrespective of differences in regions and religions.
- 7) To eradicate evil habits like alcoholism and drug addiction, mixed marriages with non-Khasis, benami transactions and others
- 8) To fight against the infiltration by people from outside the state and foreigners from other countries, since these touch the population structure of the Khasi nation.
- 9) To achieve peace in Khasi land within the framework of the Indian constitution by placing it on the same level with Jammu and Kashmir.

This organization was able to draw significant numbers of young unemployed youths and students who are attracted by the new message which gives them hope for a better future and offers them an active role in shaping their future. Since its inception, the KSU has been the most vibrant social movement and is at the forefront scrutinizing the pros and cons of any contentious issue and since Shillong the capital of the state is located in the Khasi Hills, the KSU were able to gain more recognition and were able to function and put pressure better on the Government than other student organizations like the JSU or the GSU.

The years 1979-1980, marks the beginning of a new era of ethnic mobilization and identity protection. After the fight for statehood was achieved, new issues started coming up and one of these issues is the issue regarding the illegal immigration of Bangladeshis from Bangladesh and from other parts of Assam.. As mentioned above that this was the period when the Assam movement against influx was at its peak and drawing inspiration from the All Assam Student Union (AASU), the newly formed KSU also took up the issue with great intensity. Their main agenda was to detect and deport the foreigners. It was in this period that violence was also used as a means of setting right their discontentment over the foreigner's issues. The assault of two tribal boys by non-tribals in 1979 was the spark that was require for issue to be engulfed into flames⁸. Hence agitations and violence in the city started and it continued for five long months during which different modes of protest and agitations like bandhs, picketing, Satyagraha were used. In these five months of agitations and violence the capital city was plunged into a situation of chaos and insecurity. One the one hand Students were facing the wrath of the Government when they were lathi charged, tear gassed, injured and some of them arrested under the Preventive Detention Ordinance, while on the other ethnic clashes erupted in the capital city of Shillong and other parts of the Khasi Hills, in which a huge number of the non-tribal population were at the receiving end. 34 persons lost their lives and thousands their hearth and homes were pushed out of the state where they could never return.⁹

By the end of 1980 a deep communal divide has been created between the tribals and the non-tribals. The ethnic tensions between the indigenous and the non tribal population have brought what Myron Weiner terms 'Nativist'¹⁰ sentiments to the indigenous people which further sowed the seeds of hatred against the non-tribals in the state. Feelings of resentment and dislike against the so called *Dkhars* (non-tribals) was strengthened

⁸ Nag Sajal, "Trumoil in the Abode of Clouds: Ethnic Conflict in Meghalaya" in Monirul Hussain's (ed.) *Coming out of Violence*, Regency Publications, New Delhi, 2005, p.155.

⁹ B.N. Sarma, 'Sarma Commission of Enquiry of the Disturbances at Shillong in 1992', Enquiry Report, Shillong, 1995.

¹⁰Weiner Myron, *Sons of Soil: Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi 1978, p.24.

because the tribals were aware that it is the non-tribals who are holding the major economic positions in the state and hence in the long run they would be able to dictate terms to the local population and with the infiltration and influx of outsiders the situation in the state will become worse as the rights of indigenous will be in jeopardy. When I say rights here, it means in terms of job opportunities, natural and man made resources, land and the indigenous culture also faces a threat¹¹.

By 1987 another spell of violence between the two communities took place and again this time the KSU was again at the helm of affairs. The non-tribals not only in Shillong but also those in the trading occupations in the coal belt of the Jaintia Hills were targeted. As we now know that the main reason for conflicts in the state was because of the 'foreigners' issue. The 1987 violence witnessed hatred directed not only at the non-tribal population but this time it was directed more towards the Nepalese, the contention of the KSU was that the state was being flooded not only by illegal immigrants from Bangladesh but also from Nepal who have been flooding to the state in their search for menial jobs as daily labourers and wage earners. Outburst of violence started on the night of 16th June, when on the last day of the three day KSU sponsored 'black out' troubles broke out at Umsohsun(a locality in Shillong) when a group of more than hundred young men started pelting stones towards the shops and residential houses of those who had defied the KSU's order to switch off their lights. With this spark the capital city witnessed massive violent incidents. Two persons one Abdul Rahim and another Biswal Paul Makri were killed, several people were seriously injured, shops and business establishment were plundered, numerous vehicles were burnt down and police were firing bullets at will to control the situation¹².

After the series of violent incidents, the KSU then held a number of talks with the Government and made several demands like the implementation of an Inner Line Regulation, so that inflow of non-tribals could be regulated and the reservation of all the

¹¹ Lyngdoh Ruben and L. Gassah, 'Meghalaya Decades of Ethnic conflict' *Economic and Political weekly* 29 November 2003.

¹² Manisana Comission Report, 'How Troubles Broke Out on June 16. 1987', *The Shillong Times* Vol.XLIV No. 227, 27 April 1989.

60 seats in the Assembly for tribal representatives¹³. They also demanded that the Indo-Nepal treaty of 1950 which allows Nepali Citizens to establish residence, own property and engage in trade and commerce in India just as Indian citizens can do in Nepal should be scrapped to stop the inflow of Nepalese to the state.¹⁴ The KSU also urge the indigenous people to be more sensitive when dealing with non-tribals, house owners in and around Shillong were requested to try not to lease their houses to non-tribals as they pose a threat to the indigenous community.¹⁵

In the both occasions of violence of 1979-1980 and 1987 the central theme of the agitations revolved around illegal immigration and influx of foreigners to the state. The common understanding is that if nothing was done about this influx of foreigners the indigenous people would be reduced to a minority and the interest of the indigenous people relating to employment opportunities both in the Government as well as the private sector would be in jeopardy. Hence, though initially the agitations were directed towards the Bengali speaking population since they were considered as illegal immigrants but by the 1987 violence it was clear that it has spread to the entire non-tribal population. Fear and hatred was running so high that the KSU even successfully protested against the state and Central Government initiative of bringing the state under the railway map of India by extending the railways to Byrnihat (Ri Bhoi District).¹⁶ The main argument of the KSU was that extension of the railways to Meghalaya would worsen the condition of uncontrolled influx from other parts of India to the state. The protest was so vehement that the state and central Government had to drop the plan both in 1983 and 1988. This action of the KSU was not properly analyzed before they took the decision to protest, as we shall see later that the state has missed out a lot with the abortion of the project especially with regard to development.

¹³ Malngiang P., 'Student and Youth Organization in Meghalaya' in A.K. Baruah (ed.) *Student Power in North East India: Understanding Students Movements*, Regency Publications, New Delhi, 2002, p.13.

¹⁴ Baruah Sanjib, *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2005, p. 199.

¹⁵ 'Kit Lang Ia ka Lyngkor ka KSU' (Shoulder the Responsibility of the KSU), *Ka Pyrta U Riewlum* Vol XL No. 25, 23 June 1987.

¹⁶ N.K and A.K. Nongkynrih, 'Khasi Students Union—A Preliminary Inquiry' in A.C. Sinha (ed) *Youth Movement in Northeast India*, Har Anand Publications, New Delhi. 1995, p. 202.

While the KSU by this time had gained so much strength, recognition and public support for what they are doing for their community, another organization known as the FKJGP was gradually emerging as an organization who aims to work not only for the interest of one particular ethnic community but on the other hand to work for all the three major ethnic communities of the state. It is the only social organization in the state to have a state wide membership. The main aim of this organization is to safeguard the identity of the indigenous people of the state, to protect the rights of the indigenous people, to preserve the cultural, customary and traditional practices of the indigenous people, to uplift the economy of the state and to create political awareness among the people¹⁷. Some of the major issues taken up by FKJGP include; solution to the border problems between Assam and Meghalaya, particularly in connection with Blocks I and II now in the Karbi Anglong districts of Assam, ending the joint cadre system of IAS and IPS between the two states i.e. Assam and Meghalaya, checking influx into the state, to change the name of the state to a more appropriate one based on the common cultural and topographical features of the state but most intense issue taken up was Trading License issue which became a major furore in the state in 1992.

After the two incidents of violence of 1979 and 1987, the state implemented a strict reservation policy¹⁸ which saw the depletion of non-tribals in the service sector i.e. in Government offices, schools and colleges. This steady decline started removing the threat perception that the indigenous had of losing their pre-eminence in this sector. However, business and other economic activities continued to be dominated by the non-tribals. With the gradual emergence of indigenous entrepreneurs, indigenous leaders felt this is another sector which the indigenous need to dominate as well. Hence a new issue came up regarding Trading Licenses. The Trading license issue is that any non-tribals willing to carry out business activities legally in the state should have a trading license which is issued by the District Council. On account of enabling local entrepreneurs to come up,

¹⁷Malngiang Pascal., "Student and Youth Organization in Meghalaya" in A.K. Baruah (ed.) '*Student Power in North East India: Understanding Students Movements*' Regency Publications, New Delhi, 2002, p.187.

¹⁸ Reservation of as much as 80 percent of state services for the three major tribes, 15 percent for the other minor tribes leaving only 5 percent as general quota which is again open to the tribal population.

the District Council was pressurized to deny trading licenses to non-tribals¹⁹.

In April 1992, the FKJGP launched the trading license agitations. It demanded from the Government that it should cancel and stop issuing trading licenses to non-tribals traders. Sounder Cajee the president of the FKJGP earlier claimed that the reason why they have launch this agitation is because “something like exploitation is going on in our economic sphere”, he emphasized that Iewduh (Meghalaya’s biggest market) is a market specially for the tribals and no other people should do business or trade in this market.²⁰ This issue became serious when members of the organization started directing non tribal traders who do not have valid trading licenses to down their shutters. Hundred of FKJGP members, swooped to Iewduh to check the non-tribal traders licenses. Those found without valid trading licenses or whose license has expired were force to down their shutters and were ordered to suspend their activities until they obtain valid trading licenses from the District Council.

On the 13th August 1992 the FKJGP, held a meeting within the premises of Iewduh. During the meeting a rumours spread that a Khasi lady was assaulted by police. On hearing this, a mob of around 400 persons started pelting stones at the police party. In the mean time two 2 non-tribals, Deba Bharali and Abdul Ghafar were set on fire by the violent mob in which both lost their lives. Police resorted to lathi charged and fired some rounds to dispersed this mob which injured 32 people seriously.²¹ With this incident another spell of violence began in the state. This agitation witnessed extreme cases of violence. There were numerous cases of stabbing, burning, stone pelting and bomb throwing. These agitations lasted for three months during which people suffered serious physical injuries, destruction of property and worst of all loss of numerous lives.

These incidents of violence unleashed created a sense of fear and insecurity to the non-tribal community. Many families were served quit notices and had to evacuate their

¹⁹ Nag Sajal, ‘Trumoil in the Abode of Clouds: Ethnic Conflict in Meghalaya’ in Monirul Hussain’s (ed) *Coming out of Violence*, Regency Publication, New Delhi, 2005. p.155.

²⁰ ‘Current Stir in Meghalaya Not Political’. *Assam Tribune*, 22 August 1990.

²¹ B.N. Sarma, ‘Sarma Commission of Enquiry of the Disturbances at Shillong in 1992’, Enquiry Report Shillong, 1995.

homes. During the 1987 riots, the number of evacuees from the different parts of the Greater Shillong area who were lodge at various relief camps was around 4000. In the October 1992 riots, as many as 30 people lost their lives of which 27 being non-tribals and 3 tribals²². Around 900 people were displaced from Nongmynsong*. While about 350 persons from Umlyngka* and Nongkseh* villages took shelter at the relief camps in Jhalupara* following incidents of intimidation and assault total damage of property has been estimated to more than 12 lakhs²³. Non-tribal leaders of Bara Bazaar area also had to withstand the worst of these attacks, shops were looted and even burnt while non-tribal traders were manhandled, beaten, injured and some even lost their lives. When these untoward incidents took place, the imposition of curfew by districts authority became a routine affair.

These series of violence incidents and strained relations between the two communities had an adverse impact on the non-tribal communities which have always been on the receiving end in all the three major occasions of violence. The most visible impact of these conflicts is that it seriously undermined the communal harmony of Shillong. A general fear seems to have prevailed upon the non-tribal community especially when major religious festivities like the pujas are around the corner. Organizations such as the Central Puja Committee would take the initiative in appealing to tribal social organizations not to resort to any kind of agitational programmes during these months. Apart from the disturbed communal harmony between the two communities, another major impact of the conflicts was the gradual decline of the non-tribal population in the state; the following tables below will show this gradual decline:

²² B.N. Sarma, 'Sarma Commission of Enquiry of the Disturbances at Shillong in 1992' (Shillong: Enquiry Report 1995).

²³ Lyngdoh Ruben and L Gassah, 'Meghalaya Decades of Ethnic conflict' *Economic and Political weekly*, 29 November 2003.

*These are all residential areas in the outskirts of Shillong

Table 1: Declining non-tribal population in Meghalaya

Year	Total Population	Non-Tribal Population	Percentage of total population	Percentage of non-tribal population
1971	1011699	197489	80.48	19.5
1981	1335819	259474	80.58	19.42
1991	1717773	256851	80.53	14.47

Source: Census of India, 1991

Table 2: Declining non-tribal population in Greater Shillong

Year	Total Population	Non-Tribal Population	Percentage of total population	Percentage of non-tribal population
1971	122751	71852	41.47	58.53
1981	174703	88870	49.13	50.87
1991	223366	104694	53.13	46.87

Source: Census of India, 1991

Table 3: Decline of Population in terms of Language

Languages	1981		1991	
	Population	Percentage of total population	Population	Percentage of total population
Khasi-Jaintia	629640	47.14	879192	49.54
Garo	399069	29.87	547690	30.86
Bengali	119571	8.95	144261	8.13
Nepalese	61259	4.59	49186	2.77
Hindi	29728	2.22	38930	2.20

Source: Census of India, 1991

Rise of insurgency and the Changing Nature of Ethnic Interest Groups

Since 1992 the state has not witnessed any major tensions or ethnic violence between the indigenous and the non-tribals although the issue about checking of influx and infiltration of outsiders comes out every now and then. One major reason for this decline in ethnic violence is because of the emergence of insurgent groups in the state. The Hynniewtrep Achik Liberation Council (HALC) which represents the Khasi and Garo tribes was formed in 1995. This group draws its inspiration and support from the NSCN and their main motive of protection of the indigenous people's land and rights and like the NSCN this group wants the breakaway of the Khasi-Jaintia and Garo Hills from the India. However, this group did not survive for long, excellent work by the police department in capturing some leaders and internal factions among the members led to the split of this group into two factions that of the Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC) in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills and the Achik National Volunteers Council in the Garo Hills²⁴. These two groups emerged on pretext that the indigenous people have been oppressed by mainland Indians and as they are different from the rest of India in terms of culture and tradition they should be given the right to secede from India and form their own nation. Their methods of achieving this end however were very undemocratic and by their constant use of force and coercion, they began to terrorize the people by their cold blooded killings, kidnappings and extortion activities which I would argue is no way a means of fighting for the interest of the people.

With the arrival of these insurgent groups on the stage, the ethnic tensions receded to the background and armed battle between the state and the insurgents seems to have taken centre stage. Though the real motive behind the emergence of the insurgent groups was to protect and promote their ethnic identity, this is far from what they doing, instead

²⁴ Verghese B.G. *India's Northeast Resurgent: Ethnicity, Insurgency, Governance, Development*, Konark Publishers, New Delhi, 1998, pp. 204-205.

their activities created fear and insecurity in the minds of the people. In order to sustain themselves with food, arms and ammunitions these groups were on an extortion rampage from rich non-tribals businessmen and traders. This further aggravated the life conditions of the locals because of soaring prices and adulteration in essential commodities. In the year 2000 things would change, the HNLC obsession for money and power had made them very greedy that even in broad daylight they dared attack the owner of an electronic showroom who failed to meet their demand. In this attack two Khasi youths present in the shop were accidentally gunned down. This brought huge protest from the people and the various sections of the civil society in Shillong and eventually brought down their popularity ratings that the group was faced a major crisis. Some of their members got fed up with their illegal activities and surrendered themselves to the police. Internal problems in the group also led to the defection of many of their cadres. The Government provided employment opportunities to the surrendered cadres which was too tempting for some who face constant hardships of hiding in the jungles. Hence, the power of the HNLC has drastically gone down but the case is not the same with the ANVC, they still continue to terrorize the Garo Hills.

Decline of the HNLC brought back the KSU into action. In 2001 the KSU started agitations against the United Democratic Party Government for its failure to meet or implement the demands of the KSU. The KSU earlier had submitted a 10 point charter of demands to the Chief Minister, E.K. Mawlong²⁵. The demands included the age old demand for the introduction of the Inner Line Regulation, issuing of work permits to workers coming from outside, acceptance of 1951 as the cut off year for identifying the indigenous population, changing the Land Transfer Act to prevent other tribal communities from purchasing land from the indigenous tribes, setting up of The Meghalaya Board of School Education in Shillong and the creation of 10,000 jobs in the state. Some of these demands were made right from the early 1980's but none of the Governments that have come up have been able to do anything because of the complexities involved in it.

²⁵ Letter to the Chief Minister of Meghalaya, *Long Pending Issues of the KSU*, Office of the KSU, Shillong 07 October 2000.

The failure of the Government to implement any of these demands made the KSU resort to bandhs, picketing of Government offices, banks and schools and pressurizing the Government to respond to their demands. The agitators also assaulted Government employees, destroyed public property and even attacked the chief minister's private house. This agitation lasted for more than two months and during this period the number of bandhs and picketings called by the KSU were numerous and it had badly affected the people and the state in all spheres. In order to appease the KSU, the Chief Minister, called for a one-to-one talk with the KSU leaders. The Chief Minister gave the KSU his assurances that his Government will try to solve these problems. However, this Government who had given a lot of assurances fell within a few months after the KSU agitations. When the new Government came to power it virtually paid no attention to the demands of the KSU and instead it accused them of an unholy nexus with the militants who were involved in extortion and other illegal activities.²⁶ Realizing that nothing positive would come out of the new Government, In May 2002, the KSU floated their own party called, Khun Hynniewtrep National Awakening Movement (KHNAM) which contested the 2003 elections on the KSU's agenda. This party managed to win only two Assembly seats. These agitations of the KSU however met with a lot criticism from the people. Their main argument was that nothing productive came out of the agitations. All it did was it brought a lot of inconveniences and suffering to the people economically and educationally.

After this mass criticism, the KSU calmed down their activities for sometime. By the year 2005 the KSU was back into action, this time the issue was regarding the inefficiency of the Meghalaya Board of School Education whose headquarter is at Tura in the Garo Hills. In 2005, after the Meghalaya board declared the results of the secondary and higher secondary school leaving certificate examination it was found in the mark sheets of the students that the board has committed numerous mistakes such as printing the result, tallying of marks, carelessness in spelling the names of the candidates. Angry

²⁶ Srikanth H., 'Prospects of Liberal Democracy in Meghalaya: A Study of the Civil Society Response to KSU-led Agitation', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 3rd September 2005.

and disgruntled parents protested against the Government and against the board's inefficiency which has cost the future of their children dearly. The KSU also took up this matter seriously and made it into an ethnic issue. It immediately demanded what it had been demanding since the 1980's i.e. the bifurcation of the Board into two one in Shillong and one in Tura. This was met with stern protest from the Garo Community and the Garo Students Union and created a very volatile situation in the state since the conflict is not between insider vs outsider but it's between insider vs insider.

Both these communities started mounting pressure on the Government by resorting to bandhs and strikes. However the most unfortunate incident of this agitation was the on September 30th in which police open fire at a mob of students protesting against the Government in Tura and in Williamnagar in which 9 youths lost their lives in this incident²⁷. During this agitation, the Garo Students Union from the Garo Hills, were planning to pressurize the Government harder, by staging a protest demonstration in the capital city. However, the KSU showing its hegemonic attitude, issued a press release saying that the Garo Students should not come to protest in Shillong as Shillong was a place exclusively for the Khasi's and that the Garo Students should protest whatever they want to protest within their own domain of the Garo hills.²⁸ This issue slowly receded to the background with the Government making a compromise with the KSU's demand showing once more the influential capacity of the KSU. The MBOSE issue created such high tensions in the state that the Garo students started demanding from the central Government for the creation of their own state or Greater Garoland. P.A Sangma the former Lok Sabha Speaker also accused the Government of the step motherly treatment meted out to them and he argued that the time was right to part ways from the Khasi-Jaintia Hills.

Finally the latest issue taken up by the KSU is regarding the proposal by the Government to mine uranium in the West Khasi Hills area of Domiasiat. Just like in the earlier issues, the immediate action of the KSU was to examine what are the demerits of

²⁷ 'Two Tribes and a School Board' *Times of India*, 25 December 2005.

²⁸ 'KSU-GSU Rift Widens Further' *The Shillong Times*, 12 January 2006.

Uranium mining. This time though it was not influx problem but rather the fear of radiation which would affect the health standards of the people and the environmental degradation that uranium mining would bring. This again brought unrest in the state when the Government decided to call for a public hearing on 11 June 2007. This hearing is basically called by the Government to explain to the people about uranium mining and also allow them to voice their opinion regarding the proposal. To oppose this action of the Government the KSU call for a 36 hour bandh on the schedule date of the hearing to protest against the hearing and against the uranium²⁹. This bandh called by the KSU is like a direct order from them to the people not to participate in the hearing. The bandh passed off peacefully with minor incidents of stone pelting on vehicles who defied the bandh. The irony however is that though there has been so much interest on this issue, neither the Government nor the KSU are well versed enough with the technical expertise to make judgments on what is good and what is bad. What we do both know is that camps depend heavily on secondary information and data that is gleaned from either the net, from hearsay or from written scientific testimony that like all scientific publication is full of ifs and buts and subjective idiosyncrasies that at the end of the day one is none the wiser on the subject³⁰. In both camps there is no one who can boast of an authentic lineage of being a nuclear physicist or scientist. Hence the actions of both the KSU and the Government unnecessarily giving the common man a hard time from his day to day routine.

Conclusion

I began by emphasizing the point that for ethnic groups to show their assertive and dominant character there should be a strong driving force which strengthens the ethnic character of a group. In our case ethnic interest groups have shown this character. Historically we have seen how ethnic interest groups which are mostly student organizations were very influential in mobilizing support for the creation of the state. The main reason why these groups have come up is because they feel responsible towards

²⁹ 'KSU 36 hours Bandh Begins' *The Meghalaya Guardian*, 11 June 2007.

³⁰ Blah Toki, 'The Uranium Impasse; A Holistic Approach Needed' *The Shillong Times*, 25 June 2007.

their ethnic groups and made it their duty to see that their ethnic group gets the maximum benefits and minimum disadvantages. The KSU and the FKJGP has shown on various occasions how committed they are to the cause of their ethnic groups. They have taken recourse to violent means to try and achieve what they think is in the best interest of their people. This gradual growing importance and dominance of ethnic interest groups has posed us with a serious question regarding the role of the state. As examined in chapter 1, Meghalaya emerged because of demands of the hill people for the promotion and preservation of their cultures and way of life. The various regional parties that emerged were very committed to this cause. The point that I want to argue here is though the Government (mostly formed by regional parties) and the interest groups both professed the same interest in the promotion of ethnic identity but they are in constant conflict with each other. From the ethnic interest point of view there seems to be a mistrust regarding actions and policies of the state Government. The failure of the Government to improve the economic conditions in the state, to implement laws to check illegal immigration are some of the reasons why ethnic interest groups have emerged to contest the policies of the state. In the process these ethnic interest groups try to present their own set of policies which they perceive to be the panacea for all the problems relating to the ethnic identity in the state. However in this process ethnic interest groups become more interested in showing their influential power to the state and hence the conflict assumes contestation of power between the state and the ethnic interest groups which overlooks the larger interest of the people.

Chapter 3

Ethnicity and its Impact on Development: A Critical Perspective

Introduction

The Indian democracy is widely considered as one of the largest and most vibrant democracies in the world. The framers of the Indian constitution have taken utmost care to draft a constitution that would provide to all its citizens justice, liberty, equality and dignity irrespective of their caste, class, religion or sex. Treating these principles as the fundamental rights of a person, the constitution has guaranteed their enforceability by law. The constitution has also taken special care to protect and promote the interest of certain sections of the society which are under privileged and backward. Article 46 of the Indian constitution specifically mentions the responsibility of all the states in the Indian Union to promote the educational and economic interests of the Schedule Castes and Schedule Tribes, and to protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation¹.

Further in recognition of the fact that tribes constitute a distinct political and social cultural category with a long history of independence and autonomy in their respective territories, Article 244 provides for special arrangements for the administration of the tribal areas in the form of the Fifth and Sixth Schedule². The idea underlying this arrangement is that tribal communities should be kept out of the application of general laws, as their simple world view, egalitarian ethos and communitarian lifestyle would be adversely affected when exposed to the more advanced, socially differentiated and hierarchically stratified caste based societies.

Apart from recognizing the unique lifestyle of the people of the North East, the Centre has also recognized the economic backwardness of the region and hence over the

¹ Austin, G., *The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of the Nation*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi 1965

² The Sixth Schedule applies to the administration and control of tribal areas in the state of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura and the Fifth schedule applies to the administration and control of tribal areas in any state other than these four North-eastern states.

years the Centre has introduced various schemes and developmental agencies like the North Eastern Council (NEC), Hill Area Development Project and Sub Plans, Tribal Areas Sub-Plan Ministry for Development of North Eastern Region (DONER) and various other schemes especially dedicated to uplifting the development and infrastructure of the region. In addition to these schemes, the North Eastern states have been declared as Special Category States; they get central assistance on the basis of 90 percent grant and 10 percent loan³. These schemes and developmental agencies have contributed a lot in developing the region. However though their contribution is significant these developmental agencies have not been able to achieve their maximum targets because of the numerous problems that the region faces.

One of the problems is that most of the states that were created were done so to fulfil the ethnic, political and cultural aspirations of the people of the region and when they were formed the issue of whether the territory in question must have revenue resources to meet its administrative and other developmental expenditure was conveniently ignored. Sanjib Baruah characterizes this character of federalism in the North East as 'Cosmetic Federalism'. Absence of independent sources of tax revenue in these states means over dependence on the Centre for funds thus reducing and compromising with the autonomy of the states. Development projects which are funded by the Centre are designed far away from the region and are unlikely to reflect the vision of the states and their future. With this policy of development state governments have very little power vis-à-vis New Delhi.

Another problem is the gradual emergence of ethnic identity issues which have resulted in numerous inter-ethnic conflict and rivalry and the emergence of numerous insurgent groups who stand to defend and fight for the interest of their ethnic group not only against other ethnic groups but against the both the State and Central Government. The growing consciousness of ethnic groups of the limited resources available has created not only a very competitive atmosphere but also a very volatile situation in which

³ Sachdeva Gulshan, *Economy of the Northeast: Policy, Present Conditions and Future Possibilities*, Konark Publishers, New Delhi, 2000, p.7.

conflicts can break out anytime. Hence, over the years the situation of peace and security has drastically declined and it seems that fear has overtaken the minds of the people because of the numerous killings, communal violence, kidnapping, extortion and other organized crime that are happening on a daily basis. This situation of fear and insecurity and frequent breakdown of law and order has affected the development of the region both in terms of human and economic development.

My aim in this chapter is to try to show how ethnic identities have an impact on the development perspective of the people and the state as a whole. As mentioned in the introduction, this study will look at development more from the human development perspective without ignoring the economic perspective as well. In the previous chapter I have examined how ethnic interest groups were very committed to working for the welfare and development of their ethnic communities. They have been very critical of the Government failure to implement policies and which will bring about an improvement in the life standards of the people. In their endeavour to bring about all round development to their people, ethnic interest groups have become very chauvinistic and they have frequently resorted to violence to achieve their ends. Hence I shall examine whether their actions and activities to promote the interest of their ethnic communities have contributed to the development of the people or whether they have been largely responsible for retarding growth, progress and all round development of the state.

Development: From Economic Growth to Capabilities Approach

Before going ahead with my discussion on ethnicity and development, it is imperative that I first discuss the concept of development which I intend to study. According to K.C Alexander, “development is fundamentally a process of change that involves the whole society—its economic, socio-cultural, political and physical structure, as well as the value system and the way of life of the people”⁴. Changes refers to improvement be it in the economic, welfare or socio- political spheres of the society and the state at large. This concept of development emerged as a response to the ills of

⁴ Alexander K.C., *The Process of Development of Societies*, Sage, New Delhi, 1994 p.8.

Industrial Revolution in the middle of the eighteenth century when there was a growing realization that steady and material progress was possible and desirable.. However, it was only during the Second World War that the ideas of development got greater attention. This period also saw the emergence of questions about the nature of development and the indicators required to measure it. Pigou one of the noted economists during the Second World War period used income as an indicator to measure the welfare and well being of the people. He described economic welfare as a measurable part of human welfare. Hence, development of a country was identified with increase in the national income, gross national product and per capita income. Development was linked to maximization of income and wealth and reduction in poverty. It was believed that in this process of development, income would trickle down to various sections of society which did not happen⁵. By the 1970's there were growing inequalities between the rich and the poor and a realization that economic growth did not automatically lead to poverty reduction and better living standard for the poor. Hence by 1990 a new school of development known as Human Development emerged. Human Development focuses on the objective that development is not simply to produce more goods and services for material enrichment, but to increase the capabilities of people to lead full productive and satisfying lives. The basic concern is the ability of people to lead healthy lives, greater access to knowledge and sufficient income to buy food and shelter. As per UNDP's first Human Development Report (1990) it states that "the real worth of a nation is its people and the purpose of development is to created an enabling Government for people to enjoy long, healthy and creative lives. This is simple but powerful and is too often forgotten the pursuit of material and financial wealth"⁶.

Mahabub ul Haq the pioneer of 'Human Development', stress that the basic purpose of development should be to enlarge people's choices. He says the difference between economic growth and human development lies in the fact that economic growth focus exclusively on the expansion of only one choice that is *income* while on the other hand human development embraces the enlargement of all human choices whether

⁵ Green Maia, 'Social Development: Issues and Approaches' in Uma Kothari and Martin Minogue (eds.) *Development Theory and Practice Critical Perspectives*. Palgrave, New York, 2002 p. 59.

⁶ Human Development Report 1990, Oxford University Press, New York, 1990.

economic, social, cultural or political. Rather than just looking at development in terms of figures of income and growth, development should be more about giving people better opportunities to improve their living standards, giving them greater access to knowledge and education, better nutrition and health services, more secure livelihoods, security against crime and physical violence, satisfying leisure hours, political and cultural freedom and a sense of participation in community activities. The objective of development therefore should be to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy and creative lives⁷.

Similarly, Amartya Sen, also emphasizes that development is not just about the maximization of income and wealth, “development has to be more concerned with enhancing the lives we lead and the freedom we enjoy”⁸. Expanding the freedom that we have reason to value not only makes our lives richer and more unfettered, but also allows us to be fuller social persons, exercising our own volitions and interacting with and influencing the world we live in. Freedom of the individual is very central to Sen’s concept of development. Having greater freedom means that an individual can do things he has reason to value. For example, he can choose his government freely and participate in crucial discussion regarding public affairs, freedom to exchange and transact freely with the market forces without any hindrance, freedom for people to decide what traditions they wish or do not wish to follow etc. Sen also emphasized the importance of giving more opportunities for people to be free so that people are not prevented from doing what they feel they can do and achieve. For example policies that restrict market opportunities can have an effect of restraining the expansions of substantive freedoms that would have been generated through the market system mainly through overall economic prosperity or when there is a conflict between preservation of tradition and advantages of modernity, there should be a participatory resolution and not for unilateral rejection of tradition in favour of modernity or vice versa by political rulers or religious authorities but people should be given the opportunity to discuss and debate what is in their best interest and what they have reason to accept.

⁷ Haq Ul Mahabub, *Reflections on Human Development*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1994 p.3.

⁸ Sen Amartya, *Development as Freedom*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2000 p. 16 .

Martha Nussbaum emphasizes the importance of freedom and maximization of opportunities as the main aim of development. In her Capabilities Approach, she emphasized that people should be able, to live long healthy normal lives without dying pre-maturely, to have good health, adequate nutrition and adequate shelter, to be treated as dignified beings whose worth is equal to that of others, to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life, to have the right to political participation, freedom of speech and association, to be able to hold property and to have the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others.⁹

Given the discussion above, the concept of development has moved away from the primary focus on economic figures of GNP and Per capita to a more human oriented approach. The individual moved to the Centre of development and his freedom and choices to make the maximum out of his life are now considered as the primary aim of development.

Retarding Human Freedom: The Role of Ethnic Interest Group

As mentioned in the earlier chapter, the state of Meghalaya came into being as a result of the vehement demands of the hill people that they constitute a distinct identity different from the people of the plains of Assam. Once statehood was achieved the hill people were very quick to assert their position that it is they who should control everything within the geographical limits of the state. Different laws and acts were implemented to strengthen their dominance in the state like the (a) Meghalaya Transfer of Land (Regulation) Act, 1971 which has prohibited the transfer of land by non-tribals to non-tribals except in the three wards of the Shillong Municipality known as the European Ward, (b) Reservation of as much as 80 percent of state services to the local tribal population, (c) 55 seats out of the 60 state Assembly seats have been reserved for the

⁹ Nussbaum Martha, 'Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements: Sen and Social Justice', *Feminist Economist*, 2000, p. 6.

local tribal and (d) 100 percent reservation of seats for MPs and in the District Council for tribal population¹⁰.

Apart from these laws the State witnessed the gradual emergence of regional political parties and ethnic interest groups who professed to work for the interest and the welfare of the indigenous population and to strengthen their dominance over the state and its resources. Regional political parties were all formed with the intention to work for the welfare of the indigenous and also to garner votes by using ethnic sentiments for the Assembly elections. However, these regional parties were active and vocal mostly nearing the time of elections. Then there are the ethnic interest groups who work for the interest of their ethnic groups in particular and for the state as a whole. As mentioned earlier, these groups are largely responsible for the ethnic mobilization taking place in the state now and even before state formation. They are very keen on promoting, protecting and preserving their unique ethnic identity and over the years they have made significant contributions to the people and the state. They have always voiced their concern for the interest of the indigenous people. Even before state formation, they were very supportive to the hill state leaders' proposal of the need to create a separate hill state which would specially cater to the interest of the hill tribes. They made a significant contribution towards this cause by their various agitational programmes against the Assam government. Hence they were very much involved in the affairs concerning the interest of the indigenous people and with the achievement of statehood they became more and more involved that of late in almost every issue of the state ethnic interest groups are involved in some way or the other

Though all ethnic interest groups voluntarily work for the welfare and interest of their community, they often forget that in their enthusiasm to achieve what they strive for their actions often offends the interest of the larger society. Their actions and activities regarding promoting, protecting and preserving ethnic interest lately have been quite contentious and have often met with stern criticism. The reason is that often ethnic

¹⁰ B.N. Sarma, 'Sarma Commission of Enquiry of the Disturbances at Shillong in 1992', Enquiry Report, Shillong, 1995.

interest groups take the confidence of the people for granted because whenever they call for agitational programmes and whenever they bring out a charter of demands they often forget to consider how their demands and actions will affect the people and the state not only immediately but also in the long run. Often whenever they press for demands people's consent is not taken into consideration. They are mostly concerned with how the government will respond to their demands and agitations.

Ethnic interest groups use both peaceful and violent methods of protest to pressurize the government. Peaceful methods includes presentation of memoranda, petitions, representations, issuing of press releases, holding of public meetings, press conferences and consultations with other social organization. Violent methods include blackouts, boycotting of classes and examinations, strikes, picketing, road blockade, hunger strikes and bandhs¹¹. Though peaceful methods are used for agitation, ethnic interest groups prefer violent methods more as they are more effective, less time consuming for the government to respond to their demands. The frequent usage of violent methods has a huge negative impact on the state and I would consider is a major factor of retarding development of the people and the state because whenever ethnic interest group uses violent methods, it brings the entire mechanism of the state to a grinding halt. The state faces a huge loss in terms of its revenue, people have to confine themselves to their homes and they have to incur huge losses in whatever business activities they hold, farmers have to bear the miserable pain of their produce being wasted and heavy loss of income that can be derived from it, daily wage earners lose their jobs and wages which are the key source of their small income to bring food on the table for their families etc. However the most disturbing fact of using violence is the sense of fear they create in the minds of the people that they have become silent spectators to whatever violent methods they use whether they like it or not. People are being dictated terms on what they should do and what they should not do. The freedom of choice is no longer available. The use of violent means of protest also affects the economy and the market of the state to a large extent, every time there is a call for a bandh or road blockade it affects not only the

¹¹Malngiang P., 'Student and Youth Organization in Meghalaya' in A.K. Baruah (ed.) 'Student Power in North East India: Understanding Students Movements', Regency Publication, New Delhi, 2002, p.179.

farmers or the traders, but the state as a whole because everyone is directly or indirectly involved in the selling and buying process. Hence the very ethnic interest groups working for the interest of the people are actually working against people interest by creating fear in their minds.

To illustrate more on how the activities of ethnic interest groups have affected the development of the state and the people, in the next section I will examine the role of the KSU which has been the premier ethnic interest group since the state was formed. This group as mentioned earlier has been on the thick of things since the state emerged, with its very ethnic based ideology, it has brought about major significant changes in the state. The basic aim of this chapter is to study the activities of the KSU and try to prove that ethnicity and development has definite and strong linkages.

Impact of Ethnicity on Development: The Role of the Khasi Students Union

In the second chapter I have examined how influential ethnic interest groups are in mobilizing ethnic consciousness. The main reason why these groups indulge themselves in ethnic mobilization is because they are concerned about the well being of the indigenous groups and want to promote their interest and development. In this endeavour they have used different methods to pressurize the state Government to implement policies which will work for the benefit of the indigenous. At times they have become very chauvinistic and have often resorted to violence to eliminate the threat perception they have about non-indigenous population. Amongst these ethnic interest groups in the state, the KSU is probably, the most influential amongst them all. Though it started as a student organization its aims were more ethnic than student oriented. Its primary aim is to work for upholding the Khasi identity by awakening respect for the Khasi language, culture and tradition and would fight against the infiltration of outsiders and foreigners and ensure that the children of the soil control the economy, polity and

land in Meghalaya.¹² In its effort to work for these issues the KSU has been very vocal and dynamic, it has severely criticize the state apparatus for failure to implement policies which would promote the interest of ethnic groups and it has been quite intolerant towards 'outsiders' who are considered as threat to the indigenous people in the state. They have resorted to different methods of protest and agitation to promote these ethnic interests and the most common method that we have seen is the frequent use of violence. Though the KSU is very committed to promotion of ethnic identity, the area that I want to examine deals with whether these actions of the KSU have brought any progressive changes towards their ethnic community, whether their major demands would really bring development and economic prosperity and has violent means really achieved any of their aims or whether their over enthusiastic ethnic ideologies have brought a negative impact on the lives of the people and the state. Let us now scrutinize the key actions and demands of the KSU on what effect they have on the people and the state as a whole.

Sensitivity towards influx has made the KSU protest against various developmental aspects that has been proposed by the both the Central and State government. As mentioned earlier, the Khasi Students Union had opposed the Government's proposal of bringing Meghalaya in the Indian railway map for reasons that it will bring uncontrolled influx of non tribals to the state. However, by 1998 this same organization demanded that the railways should be introduced in the state. The reason why is because the introduction of the railways would bring down the price rise of essential commodities because road freight charges are quite expensive and also it would generate employment for the youth of the state¹³. Hearing the plea of the KSU the Meghalaya government approached the Railway Ministry though initially their reply was that it was too late and that "you have missed the bus"¹⁴, however in 2007, the railways ministry agreed to put Meghalaya in the railway map. So because of the KSU's fear of influx and the concern for protecting the ethnic demographic population, the people till today have to bear the brunt of paying extra for their essential commodities, paying more

¹²H Srikanth., 'Prospects of Liberal Democracy in Meghalaya' *Economic and Political Weekly*, (3rd September 2005).

¹³ KSU Memorandum Submitted to the Hon'ble Food and Civil Supplies Minister on the Spiraling Price Index in the State, 21 September 1998.

¹⁴ No Going Back to Uranium Mining, House Told. *The Shillong Times*. 21March, 2005.

for transportation and thousands of youths have been deprived of employment opportunities which the Railways could have brought directly and indirectly as we all know the fact that the railways is the largest employer in India. Hence people have been deprived of, opportunities to enhance their living standard by getting access to better employment opportunities and cheaper means of transport and communication which are the key factors for economic development of the people and the state.

Paul Lyngdoh the former KSU president and at present a cabinet minister in one of his article 'Identity and Development a Tightrope Walk'¹⁵ talks of how tourism in the state has long been neglected and what needs to be done to promote tourism so that outstation tourists are drawn towards the Hill Station. He argues that tourism can generate huge employment opportunities for the local youths. No doubt one can argue that the state has immense tourism potentialities and there is huge revenue from this sector if properly tapped. But the question is how should we promote tourism? Paul Lyngdoh suggests that to promote tourism what is needed is infrastructure. By infrastructure he means carefully planned, locally oriented infrastructure. Yes infrastructure is very important but more important than infrastructure is peace, security and hassle free state policies. One of the major demands of the KSU till today is the introduction of the Inner Line Regulation act which was introduced by the British in certain parts of the North East way back in 1873. Let's say the government implements this age old act, what good it would do is that it will restrict the entry of outsiders because people who are not residents of the state will have to obtain a permit to enter inside the state hence the state will be saved from illegal immigration which is harmful to the interest of not only the indigenous but also the non-indigenous population settled in the state. Looking from the negative aspect, this act would discourage tourist as they would have to undergo the hassles of getting a permit to enter the state. It's just like acquiring a visa to visit a foreign country. The state at the moment is reeling under the pressure of how to generate employment for thousands of unemployed youths. The state itself cannot provide anymore jobs in the

¹⁵ Lyngdoh Paul, 'Identity and Development Tightrope Walk' *The Meghalaya Guardian* (15 November 1995).

government sector and hence the alternative left is in the service sector and investment from the both the public sector undertaking and the private sector.

It must be understood that private capital is a critical component for economic progress in the state. Higher levels of private investment are essential to generate productive employment, raise productivity and improve technology and work culture¹⁶. However for the private sector to be attracted to invest their capital in the state unnecessary hassles like the Inner Line permit should be absent, transport and communication facilities should improve and most importantly an attitude of hate towards outsiders should be substituted by an attitude of tolerance and understanding. Hence, implementing an act which is redundant in the 21st century would act as a barrier not only to outside infiltration but also act as a barrier to the opportunities that could have come to the state.

Since its formation, the KSU has used various means of agitating and mounting pressure on the Government, it uses both peaceful and democratic means as well as violent and undemocratic methods. But when it comes to major issues the KSU has always resorted to violent means to put pressure on the government. Violent means used by the KSU include bandhs, picketings, and road blockades. Initially when the KSU called for such agitational programmes, people support because they felt what the KSU was fighting for was right. However once the KSU gained considerable strength it started to take the confidence of the people for granted and started using these means of protest at will. These means of protest have a very negative impact on all spheres of life be it the economy, polity or the general welfare of the people of the state. Whenever the KSU calls for a bandh or road blockade, the entire activities of the state comes to a grinding halt. Sometimes these bandhs last for 24 hours, 36 hours, 48 hours and sometimes there is a call for indefinite bandh. Everyone from little school children to very elderly people. The state incur huge losses of its revenue as days goes by without getting any work done while it still has to pay to its employees, students are badly affected as completion of

¹⁶ Sachdeva Gulshan, *Economy of the Northeast: Policy, Present Conditions and Future Possibilities*, Konark Publishers, New Delhi, 2000, p 210.

their academic courses get delayed, daily wage earners lose their daily income as they have to sit idly at home without any employment, farmers lose a lot of income as their produce gets rotten and worthless, the business community from small shopkeepers to big retailers are also badly affected as their goods get stagnated and the list keeps going on and on. Another notable point of these bandhs is the frequency at which they occur for example in the 2001 agitations the KSU called for a 48 hour bandh on August 7 and 8 after that they called for picketing of government offices and educational institutions on the 13 and 14, again they called for a 48 hours bandh from August 17, again on the 20 and 21st of August they called for another picketing¹⁷. Hence out of the 31 days of August 10 days were wasted on bandhs and picketings. What's worse was that nothing productive came out of these bandhs and strikes. Hence it is people who have to bear all the losses and suffer all the repercussions of these violent agitations.

One common feature of violent agitations is the loss of public as well as private property. Agitations do not pass off without destruction of property like the torching of government vehicles government buildings, pelting of stones on houses and vehicles. The question often asked is what good will it bring in the interest of the indigenous community by destroying these assets which belong to no one else but the people themselves.

The increase and frequent use of violent means of agitations by the KSU over the years has made the KSU look like a hegemonic organization that is shrinking the democratic space of the people of the state. The reason why it is becoming so is because of its negligence to consider public opinion. There have been very few occasions in which the KSU has organized a public space for constructive criticisms, debate and getting the opinion of the people on what they actually want. Over the years the KSU has always taken its own decision on what is good and what is bad for society and sometimes even contradicted what it professed to do. In this process it has often failed to consider the situation of the common man when they take up any agitational programmes which

¹⁷Srikanth H., 'Prospects of Liberal Democracy in Meghalaya' *Economic and Political Weekly*, 3rd September 2005.

have a state wide effect. Hence whenever they call for violent agitations, they hurt the most vulnerable sections like children and their education, the poor and their daily livelihood the sick and the ailing, the weak and the marginalized deeply. They deprive people of their opportunities to livelihood, freedom to express themselves whether they agree or disagree with what the organization is fighting for, the freedom of choice is also reduced to the rules of the organization. Is this the way to promote the interest of the people by denying them their basic entitlements as human beings?

Apart from its major concern over issues of ethnicity, the KSU has also taken itself to be the guardians of the moral and cultural life of the people. The KSU has sought to impose cultural and moral codes on the community. It announced that in case women were found engaged in prostitution, drunkenness, go around with non-tribals or wear indecent clothing, a fitting lesson would be given to them. It strongly insisted that all Khasi girls must wear their traditional dress¹⁸. While it did not define what exactly it meant by indecent clothing, an examination of incidents occurring in the state capital in recent times shows that tribal girls who wears mini-skirt, sleeveless tops and Punjabi suits have increasingly become targets of street attacks¹⁹. Again the KSU here is retarding the freedom of choice and what people want to do with their lives. Forbidding people to wear what they want, move around with whom they like violates the basic freedom of an individual.

The frequent use of violent means of protest has also generated fear and insecurity in the minds of the people. Whenever there is a call for any of these agitational programmes, people humbly obey the diktat of the KSU with very few questions asked. The reason is because it uses force to make people obey to their orders. For example in 2001 when the KSU called for a 48 hour bandh, several government employees were assaulted and government vehicles were torched on the eve of the bandh. Looking at past experiences there have been numerous incidents of loss of life, physical assault and

¹⁸ 'The Student Organizations are thus Viewed as the Guardians of the society' *The Shillong Times* (03 January 2003).

¹⁹ Nongbri Tiplut, *Development, Ethnicity and Gender*, Rawat Publications, New Delhi, 2003, p.208.

damage of property whenever these bandhs are called. So in order not jeopardize their own safety they prefer to stay at home and become silent spectators. Non- indigenous people are the worst affected when such agitations take place. They become easy targets and always face the fear of being attacked. This generation of fear by the KSU has made the people very submissive to their whims. Though people often criticize their actions but it is often limited to private conversations. However, things changed after the 2001 agitations. People became frustrated with the actions and attitude of the KSU as they had suffered enough from agitational programmes called by the KSU. Hence through civil society, the press and even individually, people came out openly and started criticizing the activities of the KSU. Some of the major criticisms of civil society were that the KSU should not obstruct the smooth functioning of schools and educational institutions, deprive daily wage earners of their employment. Students activists were also criticized for their misbehaviour with the public and local merchants against the agitations. The press also criticized the activities of the KSU for example *Apphira* a local English daily sympathized with the KSU's demands but was sternly condemned the KSU sponsored bandhs, which have severely disrupted normal life and affected trade and economic activities..

Hence from these criticisms it can be easily understood that the activities of the KSU are not universally accepted by the people of the state. Given a chance for a more vibrant discourse, people will have more say on the issues taken up by the KSU and hence giving them the freedom to decide what is their best interest and not just the KSU to decide for them.

To sum up what I have been narrating so far, the KSU has been and will continue to be the premier ethnic interest group working for the interest of the ethnic community of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. However in its eagerness to protect, promote and preserve the interest of the Khasi community on many occasions it had strayed from what it aims to work for. The reason is that there is always a conflict between ethnicity and development. By pressuring the government to stop the railways, implement the inner line regulation act, usins bandhs for agitations, it is actually trying to protect, promote and preserve the

interest of the ethnic community but at the same time these if these demands are not carefully studied, scrutinized and researched it will have a negative impact on the development of the state and the people whom they are working for. So the point is though you achieve something at one end, you tend to loose more at the other end.

Ethnicity as an Instrument of Insurgent Groups

Apart from the role played by interest groups in ethnic mobilization, the state has also witnessed the emergence of insurgent groups which have come up on the basis of ethnic identities. Two prominent groups, one the Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC) which proclaims itself to work and defend the rights and interest of the Khasi-Jaintia people and the other the Achik National Volunteers Council (ANVC) which has come up to protect the interest of the Achiks (Garo's) and their lands have been very active in the state for more than two decades. These two groups have emerged on the pretext that the indigenous people who are distinct and unique from the rest of India have been forced to be under the rule of the Indian state. Hence the time has arrived when they should breakaway from this foreign oppression and colonization to form their own independent nation. One way of achieving this is by taking up arms and ammunitions to fight the Indian State. Hence a new era of violence and terror dawned with the emergence of these insurgents groups. There were frequent killings, kidnappings, extortion and demand notices were served to non-tribal businessmen in the state. These activities were in no way aimed at achieving the desired end, but on the contrary they were more of daylight robbers robbing under the pretext of ethnicity. These groups were never really serious about the well being of their ethnic groups .They are more interested in amassing as much wealth as they can through their unlawful activities.

These violent and illegal activities of the insurgents groups in the name of ethnicity have seriously affected the development of the state and its people to a great extent. First and foremost, is that the terror generated by these groups have created a fear psychosis in the minds of the people, people are not at ease to go about their regular activities freely. People are scared that they might be kidnapped or given extortion

notices at any point of time. Though the main targets of these insurgent groups are members of the rich business class, taxing them does not affect them at all on the other hand the burden fall directly on the common people. Whenever this business class is taxed it makes sure that it hikes the price of the commodities so that it is not they who pay the insurgent groups but it is the people who actually do it. Government schemes and developmental programmes are affected badly with the activities of the insurgent groups. These groups often make huge extortion demands from contractors undertaking big Governmental projects. To pay up, the contractors have to compromise with the quality of the work, hence when the project is completed it is done in a haphazard manner. Hence the quality of roads and other constructions is really bad and does not last for long. Again here it is the people that will suffer as means of faster transport and communication are being deprived to them. The existence of these terror groups also scare people away from coming to the state. It scares away Multinational companies and private entrepreneurs, who want to invest in the state, since they find it very difficult to buy peace from the insurgent groups. Tourists who are interested in visiting the beautiful landscape of Meghalaya are discouraged from visiting the state because there is no guarantee for their safety and security. Worst of all insurgents groups scare away opportunities that could have brought huge capital investment and employment opportunities to the unemployed youths in the state. Finally these insurgent groups always make their own decision on what is good and bad for the people. There has never been an occasion where people are allowed to voice out their opinion on whether they support or condemn their activities. This basically happens because insurgent groups don not give importance at all to their voice; they are too busy figuring out how to squeeze out as much money as they can form the ethnic community that they pretend to work for

Conclusion

Ethnic interest groups as well as insurgents groups profess to work for the interest of their ethnic groups they represent. However the methods on how they go about doing this actually contradict what they profess to do. For ethnic interest groups it appears that their struggle is no longer a struggle for the welfare of the people but it has become more

of a demonstration of power between the groups and the Government. In the case of insurgent groups identity becomes only an instrument for a group of like minded people to exploit as much resources as they can. They are hardly interested in the affairs of their ethnic community. Ethnic identity becomes some sort of platform for any group to secure their personal interest. However on many occasions their actions have an adverse affect on the well being of the entire ethnic community and the state as a whole. The point here is that ethnicity becomes a category which can be manipulated by a group of like minded people but the end result can have a detrimental effect on the development of resources for the people and the state as a whole.

Conclusion

This study is an enquiry into the emergence and consolidation of ethnic identity formations in Meghalaya and their impact on the development perspective. From what I have examined ethnic identity formation in the North East was a very gradual process. It evolved from different stages to arrive at the present stage where all ethnic groups in the region are very conscious of their ethnic identities.

I began with a historical perspective on how British colonialism contributed in a major way towards the 'emergence' of ethnic identity formation. Their exclusivist administrative policies protected the hill tribes from coming into contact with the people from the plains hence the society and culture of the tribes were not polluted by intermingling of cultures. The introduction of western education gradually brought about changes in the social behaviour and outlook of these tribes towards life and their society. A growing awareness of differences slowly starts emerging and few elites who had the opportunity of education started fostering identity formation within their respective ethnic groups.

With the British having sowed the seeds of identity formation, India's achievement of independence set another stage for the 'consolidation' of ethnic identities. The constitution of India recognizes both individual and collective rights of the people. In the case of the North East, the constitution has recognized the rights of the ethnic communities by the instituting the Sixth Schedule as a means to safe guard and promote rights of the ethnic groups. The emergence of this institution came as a result of the strong resistance of the ethnic groups towards nation building. Ethnic groups considered themselves to be culturally, linguistically and politically different from the rest of India and hence demanded that they should not be forced to integrate with the other cultures of India but on the contrary their distinct identity and social modes should be recognized by giving them more autonomy and political recognition. These demands of ethnic groups present them no longer as mere identities but as ethnic cohesive groups who have built themselves into a political force and who have defined the boundaries of their group

inclusive and exclusivity.

The political consciousness of ethnic groups in the region after the implementation of the Sixth Schedule kept growing and there was constant demand for more concessions and autonomy from the Indian State. The constant pressure built up by the various ethnic groups made the Indian State grant more autonomy to these ethnic groups by the creation of new States in the North East. From the single composite State of Assam the region was divided into 7 more States taking into account the ethnic diversity among the groups that inhabit this region. In the case of Meghalaya it was the language issue that led to the emergence of the State. With the creation of new States, ethnic groups began a process of strengthening their position in the State over the control and use of the land and its resources.

As Meghalaya achieved Statehood, different groups emerged to work for the welfare of the indigenous people. Numerous regional parties came up on the basis of ethnic identity with aims to safeguard and preserve the identity of the indigenous people and to protect their interest, especially in respect to land, democratic institutions, language, customs and culture. Ethnic interest groups particularly student organization made it their responsibility to promote, protect and preserve the interest of the indigenous people. Insurgent groups on the other hand presented themselves as the protector and defender of the indigenous people against the Indian State which they consider imperialistic. These groups have their own mode of functioning, the first uses politics, the second uses pressure and the third uses brute force to achieve what they proclaim to work for. I would argue here that though these groups may or may not achieve what they aim to work for but their mere presence sustains the ethnic identities in this region. These groups strengthen the feeling of people that there is an 'Us' and 'Them'.

Ethnic interest groups like the KSU and the FKJGP have come up basically to promote the economic, political and social development of the indigenous. The first and foremost task that these groups set to do is to eliminate competition from the non-indigenous groups by means of violence. Then they started demanding from the State

Government to implement laws which will benefit the interest of the indigenous groups and also scrutinize whether their policies are ethnic oriented or not. On occasions when these groups feel frustrated that their demands have not been met, they immediately resort to violence. In my view the reason why ethnic interest groups often resort to violent means of protest is because this method gets immediate attention from the Government. The Government is also largely responsible for provoking a violent attitude. On most occasions when interest groups protest democratically, the Government would turn a deaf ear, it is only when groups resort to violent means that the Government is willing to listen to the voice of these ethnic interest groups. However in this tussle between the Government and the ethnic interest groups, the impact is felt by the people who have no say at all about the issues and events that are taking place.

Ethnic interest groups in Meghalaya have been over emphasizing the importance of ethnic identity that for a group like the KSU all issues in the State becomes an ethnic issue be it employment, education or environment. The KSU is so pre-occupied with every issue in the State that it has become more of an opposition party rather than an interest group and believing that by just being a pressure group its ability to influence the Government is very limited it formed its own political party to fight elections so that it can influence the Government more if it forms part of the Government. This overemphasis of the KSU on the identity factor has had its major impact on the development perspective of the people and the State as a whole. On many occasions its actions and demands did not actually help in the promoting the development of their ethnic group on the contrary it hampers the interest of the people and retards the progress and development that could have come about. Their violent attitude has brought nothing but fear, insecurity and heavy losses. Their demands for exclusivist policies has also hamper the economic development of the State especially in terms of employment generation and raising people's standard of living. The KSU's intense commitment to their ethnic identity has made the organization to think that people should owe allegiance to them for what they are fighting for. Hence their actions have often become hegemonic and have shrunk the democratic sphere of the individuals. Freedom of expression, freedom of choice and freedom to participate has been obstructed by the KSU especially

whenever it decides to call for agitational programmes against the State.

Insurgent groups I would consider are the worst agents for ethnic mobilization and for advancing ethnic interest. For these groups ethnic identity is just an alibi to promote the group's selfish interest. Insurgents groups have no real motive to work for the interest of their ethnic groups on the contrary they are pre occupied with creating terror and extorting money. Their activities one can argue are not progressive at all but rather regressive. Their presence in the State has brought nothing but retardation of people's economic, political and social freedom. The situation of peace and harmony in the State is being replaced by a situation of anarchy and mayhem which poses a serious problem for economic and human development. By using the language of the gun people have become very submissive to whatever orders and direction insurgent groups give and have no freedom to express themselves at all.

One common feature in both these cases is that identity is being use as an instrument for group interest. Though initially it always starts with the aim of improving the conditions of the people, but gradually this aim gets diverted and becomes more complicated than just solving problems. These groups begin to involve themselves politically and economically in the affairs of the State hence getting a taste of political as well as economic power. Their fight now no longer is for the promotion of ethnic interest but on the contrary identity issues provide the background for furthering their political and economic interests. The KSU for example after years of proving that it is a very effective pressure group could not resist the temptation to join politics. If we ask the question why, the obvious answer is to promote ethnic interest by being part of the Government.

The intention these agents have is pretty clear that they want to make people more ethnic conscious and want to work for the welfare of their ethnic groups. But in this process these groups become self centred and think not in terms of the society at large but in terms of what they feel is in the best interest of their ethnic group. This often leads to a clash between identity and development. Ethnic interest groups often do not realize that

while trying to promote the welfare of their ethnic group their actions have larger negative repercussions than positive effects. Ethnic interest groups play an important role in pressuring the Government. However their undemocratic methods and actions have a larger negative impact on the people rather the results which comes out of the agitations. On the contrary if these groups do not pressurize and demand from the Government policies which will promote ethnic interest then the interest of the indigenous people will be in jeopardy from outside forces. Ethnicity and development therefore are co relational.

Looking at role of the State Government and the ethnic interest groups, there seems to be a constant conflict between the two on identity issues with no practicable solution. The ethnic interest groups especially the student organizations constantly demand from the government to implement laws and policies which will prevent outsiders from entering into the State and robbing the indigenous people of their opportunities and their resources. There is a threat perception that influx of non-indigenous people would change the demographic composition of the State and hence erode the cultures and traditions of the indigenous. I would argue here that the reason that has led the youths to demand such policies is the lack of opportunities for the youth to get employment and realize their potential. Economically Meghalaya is a very backward State, agriculturally it is very poor and its industry is in a very sad State. As these two major sectors have not taken off at all employment generation is becoming a major problem in the State. With the gradual growth of population and improvement in education facilities employment opportunities in the State have become very scarce. Thousand of educated unemployed are compelled to look for alternative opportunities and at times they stiff competition from the non-indigenous population especially in terms of trade and business related activities. These youths become frustrated and start developing a feeling of animosity towards the 'outsiders'. They start mobilizing on ethnic sentiments and press for demands to the Government to implement policies which will promote ethnic interest and discourage of non-ethnic interest in the State. On several occasions they have taken the law into their own hands and have resorted to violence to let out their frustrations on the non-indigenous population.

Therefore the economy of the State needs to be improved by improving the quality of agriculture and making it more intensive, industries have to be promoted especially small scale and cottage industries. The State needs also attract investment from both the public and private sector, planned decentralized policy would also be viable for giving local bodies more control of funds to implement the various schemes and projects. The more the State generates employment opportunities the more it will appease its relation with the ethnic interest groups. Apart from improving the conditions of the economy, the State needs to implement strict policies to check and control the influx of illegal immigrants. Illegal immigrants from foreign country pose a threat not only to the indigenous population but even to the sovereignty and integrity of the Indian State.

From the context of ethnic interest groups like the KSU, I would argue that the organization needs to limit their pre-occupation with every issue of the State. Making all issues become ethnic does not solve any problem but only aggravates the existing problems. For example as mentioned in chapter 2 the Meghalaya Board of School Education was an issue that emerged due to the inefficiencies of the Board when the results were declared. It had nothing to do with identity; however the KSU made the issue become ethnic by demanding that the Board which is in Garo Hills be bifurcated with another to be set up in the Khasi Hills. Rather than focusing their agitations on how to improve the functioning of the Board the issue became more of an ethnic tussle between the Khasis and the Garos.

The fear and hate perception that the KSU has about the presence of non-indigenous communities in the State also needs to be examined. To think of a utopian society where there will only be one community of people living amongst each other peacefully and in harmony is an absurd idea, because another identity formation will emerge out of it. For ethnic identity to survive there should be the notion and presence of the 'other'. The very thought of a monolithic ethnic State sounds like a very primitive idea. History teaches us that no people can prosper in isolation, for isolation will lead to stagnation or even backwardness. In fact we are living in a world of interdependence. It is an illusion to think that the problems real or imaginary, facing the indigenous people of

the Meghalaya would be solved if the non-indigenous are evicted. Development of any region implies mobility of people and it cannot be just one way traffic.

The constitution of India provides to all Indian citizens freedom of speech and expression as means for the people to voice their feelings and their criticism against the State and against any agency. However in the case of Meghalaya most ethnic groups in the State have a very hegemonic attitude and their actions have shrunk the democratic space of the people by neglecting to hear their voices whenever they take up an issue to make any demand or call for any agitational programme. If ethnic interest groups are really committed to promoting the welfare and interest of their ethnic groups, voices of the people need to be heard on what they feel about the issues and demands taken up by them as to whether they are constructive or not. The notion that whatever actions taken up by ethnic interest groups are in the best interest of their community needs to be changed by a more interactive process between the people and the ethnic groups.

Meghalaya has come a long way in terms of identity formation. The active and vibrant attitudes of the various agencies that mobilize ethnic consciousness have made Meghalaya a very ethnic conscious State. This consciousness has made the State to implement policies that would protect and promote the interest of the ethnic groups like the Reservation Policy and land policies. But on the other hand being too protective of its identity has cost the State and the people dearly in terms of human as well as economic development. Hence there is a constant need for the agencies to examine and scrutinize their role as to how they contribute to the people and the State as whole. Public opinion needs to be expressed more loudly so that people themselves can make their decisions not by what the agencies of the identity thinks. Despite the fact that Meghalaya is a very ethnic conscious State, no serious research has been undertaken on this subject, I would attribute this negligence to the constant generalization that all problems of the North Eastern States are one and the same.

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