

The Department of Sociology, NEHU, Shillong will organize a National Seminar on *Modernity and Ethnic Processes in India* under the SAP-DRS on the 14th and 15th March, 2012 at NEHU, Shillong

**Concept Note
On
*Modernity and Ethnic processes in India***

Modernity backed by tremendous political and intellectual support spread across the globe in a relatively 'unproblematical' manner. Both in terms of reach and intensity, there are a few phenomena which are comparable to modernity. There is hardly any society which has remained immune to the influence of modernity and the degree to which it has impacted different societies is quite profound. Modernity has had a deeply critical impact on the social structures and cultural institutions across the globe. When modernity spread everywhere, it came in contact with different socio-economic and political realities prevalent in different societies. One of such realities was ethnicity.

Both Marxists and non-marxists (to follow the conventional categorization) have argued that ethnicity would decline in its significance in conditions of modernization. Marxists would contend that the inevitable development of class consciousness, which is taken as an expression of modernity, would strike at the very root of ethnicity. Non-marxists would argue that the development of rationality and scientific outlook, as reflected in the privileging of reason over faith and belief in the modern world would lead to the emasculation of "traditional" social bonds, of which ethnic attachments are a prime example. For example, Durkheim would argue that the growth of individualism would more or less make the ethnic groupings redundant. Or the growth of rationality would strike at the very root of traditional structures, as Weber would emphasize. They may not have always used the expression ethnic. But what they indicated would more or less refer to such groupings.

But one notices spectacular manifestations of ethnicity in the contemporary world. One can rationalize them in terms of inadequate modernization in the case of traditional

societies. But how would one explain them in case of even the "modern" and advanced societies ? This is what motivates us to engage ourselves in a reproblematicization of the relationship between modernization and ethnicity.

India, too, has had its share of protracted ethnic and cultural movements. These occurred even in those areas which were supposed to have become quite progressive and advanced. One recalls the situation in Punjab in the 1980s when one of the most powerful identity-based movements took place. Tamil Nadu, too, had seen its own share of ethnicity-based movement. Some of the studies conducted in cities such as Bengaluru observed that people continue to think along ethnic lines, however modern they may be otherwise. When one moves towards the north-east, one realizes that some of the most protracted ethnic/national movements took place even in the context of political modernization having been activated. In the present times also, demands continue to be structured around issues of identity. Ethnic/national identities continue to assume a prominent place in the discussions on the nature of socio-economic and political changes which are sought to be introduced.

How one explains this apparent 'paradox' is the question which has been engaging the attention of the scholars for quite some time now. Many explanations have been offered. One such explanation, for example, offered by some scholars is that the very logic of modernization reaffirms the need for an identity. Modernization with its accent on homogenization seeks to subvert everything that does not fit into its framework and ridicules different forms of social and ethnic cohesions. It regards itself as the first claim to universality that leaves no one out of its domain. There is only one legitimate structure of power, morality and truth. All others are invalid. The end result of such a hegemonic world view is the creation of a sense of rootlessness and restlessness among groups which then crave for what they regard as 'authentic' identity. Thus modernization ironically reasserts and consolidates ethnicity. Apart from such an explanation, one also needs to search for more sociologically grounded explanations to account for this 'paradox'. The seminar which is proposed to be held would endeavour to dwell on the relationship between modernization and ethnicity by not only critically examining various theoretical formulations available but moving beyond them in an attempt to arrive at more meaningful and satisfactory explanations. It would also seek to contextualize these explanations in concrete empirical situations.

It is towards this end that the seminar would focus on the following areas:

1. Modernity and its trajectory and multiple forms of engaging with it.
2. Ethnicity, Race and Nation : A conceptual engagement
3. Theories of ethnicity and nation

4. Relationship between modernization and ethnicity : Different forms of negotiation with it.
5. An examination of various ethnic movements in India with a special focus on the situation in the north-east.

The list of areas mentioned above may be treated as illustrative rather than exhaustive. Paper-presenters are free to choose an area of their interest which broadly falls within the theme of the seminar i.e. modernity and ethnic processes in India. Papers will be reviewed by a committee formed for this purpose. Outstation participants whose papers are accepted for presentation will be paid AC three-tier railway fare for the travel. Those who wish to present papers are requested to note down the following:

Last Date for the submission of full papers : 15th November 2011.

How to send : Two copies of the paper, one as an email attachment and one hard copy, are to be sent.

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