

Social Exclusion and Ethnicity in Northeast India

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Abstract

Social exclusion is a multidimensional term that encompasses social, economic, political and cultural spheres. Exclusion is linked to the recognition of social identities, resource allocations and power relations. In most cases, both subjective consciousness and actual inequalities lead to ethnic assertions and extremist activities. Unlike other studies on ethnicity and extremism, the present article tries to understand ethnic assertions in northeast India in the context of rampant social exclusion taking place in the region.

Keywords: Social Exclusion, Ethnicity, Nation-Building, Tribal Community, Extremism.

Northeast India is known to other parts of India and world as the hotpot of ethnic violence, extremism and insurgency. The region witnessed the emergence of a number of extremist organizations challenging the sovereignty and integrity of the Indian state. These include United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), National Democratic Front of Bodoland, National Socialist Council of Nagalim, Kuki National Army, Garo Liberation Front, Bru National Liberation Front, National Liberation Front of Tripura, Hmar People's Convention (Democratic), Zomi Revolutionary Army, All Tripura Tigers Force, Liberation Tigers of Arunachal, National Liberation Army of Arunachal, United Liberation Tigers of Arunachal, Revolutionary Army of Arunachal Pradesh, etc. The demands of these extremist groups vary from autonomy to secessionism and sovereignty. Since independence, this region witnessed the emergence of number of movements which mobilized the people on ethnic lines. For instance, the Assam Movement of 1979-84 was against illegal migration and protection of Assamese identity, the Naga movement can be seen in the context of crisis of Naga identity and the Mizo movement was

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the outcome of the neglect of Central and state governments during the famine. Though India adopted liberal democracy with inherent institutional safeguards for the protection of the interest of various communities and groups, extremist tendencies based on ethnicity is taking roots in recent past. In this context, it is pertinent to ask the question as to why extremist trends are developing in a liberal democracy.

The ethnic mobilization often leads to virulent form of extremism and violence in a society. Extremism is a tactic adopted by a group or individual to achieve their goals which are not reflected or achieved through normal channels of liberal democracy. In the present world, no society is free from extremist challenges of one or the other forms. Ted Gurr views that violent or extremist acts pose a threat to the political system in two senses: “they challenge the monopoly of force imparted to the state in political theory; and, in functional terms, they are likely to interfere with and, if severe, to destroy normal political processes” (Gurr, 1970: 4).

Understanding Social Exclusion

Exclusion is a multidimensional process covering social, economic, cultural and political domains. Exclusion is linked to the recognition of social identities, resource allocations and power relations. Marshall Wolfe talks about various kinds of social exclusion – exclusion from livelihood, exclusion from social services, welfare and security networks, exclusion from political choice, exclusion from popular organization and solidarity, and exclusion from understanding of what is happening (Wolf, 1995: 81-101). Social exclusion refers to both individual exclusion and group exclusion from society, other groups or individuals. It results in the denial of access to opportunities, public goods, public offices and institutions and self respect in the public spheres. It is argued that “social exclusion is about the inability of our society to keep all groups and individuals within reach of what we expect as a society . . . or to release their full potentials” (Power and Wilson, 2000:27). The socially excluded is deprived of social recognition, self-respect and social values. The basis of exclusion can be race, ethnicity, gender, religion, language, region, or caste. Each form of exclusion has its nature and manifestation.

The issue of social exclusion is usually related to the problem of equal opportunity. Though modern liberal democracies formally recognize full citizenship, very often it create unequal citizenship in actual practice, as the structural accommodation through citizenship and affirmative action policies fail to bring about the desired change. Charles Taylor argues that there is an inbuilt tendency towards exclusion in liberal democratic states “arising from the fact that democracies work well when people know one another, trust one another, and feel a sense of commitment toward one another” (Taylor, 1998: 147). Human history is a history of struggle for equal share in public resources and equal opportunity for occupying public institutions. Social exclusion results in injustice to certain communities as it denies the access to public offices and primary goods. Rawls, for instance, in his celebrated theory of justice viewed that opening of institutions and distribution of primary goods as means to ensure social justice (Rawls, 1971).

Conceptualizing Ethnicity

After having explained social exclusion, it is pertinent to understand the concept of ethnicity. Ethnicity is often identified with the ideas of primordialism based on descent, race, kinship, territory, language, history, etc. It is also related to the memory of a golden age which is closely linked to a sense of collective destiny. Ethnicity is defined as “the sense of collective belonging to a named community of common myths or origin and shared memories, associated with an historic homeland” (Smith, 1999: 262). Ethnicity also refers to some form of group identity related to a group of persons who accept and define themselves by a consciousness of common descent or origin, shared historical memories and connections (Chazan, Mortimer, Ravenhall and Rothchild, 1988: 35). Ethnicity can be classified into two groups - instrumental ethnicity which emanates from material deprivation – and symbolic ethnicity based on one’s anxiety to preserve one’s cultural identity (Noyoo, 2000: 57).

Ethnicity entails a subjective belief in common ancestry. Ethnic membership is based on group identity and often identities would be invented or constructed. In certain cases, ethnic identity is intrinsically connected with language. Language is very often becomes a maker of cultural differences. Ethnicity is often considered as the outward expression of discrimination – discrimination in access to resources and opportunities.

Such “discrimination is built into the normal operating procedures of institutions” (Yinger, 1997: 169). T.K. Oommen identifies six reasons for the process of ethnification. First, a nation may continue to be in its ancestral or adopted homeland and yet it may be ethnified by the colonizing or native dominant collectivity. That is, the link between territory and culture should not be viewed merely as a physical phenomenon. Second, the denial of full-fledged participation in the economy and polity to an immigrant collectivity which had adopted a new land as its homeland. Thirdly, the tendency on the part of a settler collectivity to identify with its ancestral homeland even after several decades, sometimes even after centuries, of immigration. Fourthly, ethnification also occurs when a state attempts to ‘integrate’ and homogenize the different nations in its territory into a common people. Fifthly, if those who migrate to alien lands are denied basic human and citizenship rights even when they become eligible for them, they are ethnified in that they are treated as strangers and outsiders. Finally, even when immigrants are accepted as co-nationals by the host society, the former may not want that identity and might wish to return to their homeland (Oommen, 1997: 13-15). Thus, one can see that Oommen’s analysis of ethnification is more related to the process of social exclusion.

Social Exclusion and Ethnic Identity Formation

Social exclusion, in many cases, leads to identity assertion which in turn causes conflict, sometimes violent. Social exclusion leads to crisis at individual level, societal level, national level and international level. Individual self cannot be located within the community which is facing some level of identity crisis. Identity crisis, in turn, problematize political boundary and national imagination of the nation state. Social exclusion is closely linked with material exclusion – exclusion from land, from other productive assets or from market for good. In his study on ethnicity Paul Brass identified that ethnic identity formation involves three processes. Firstly, “within the ethnic group itself for control over its material and symbolic resources”, secondly, “between ethnic groups as a competition for rights, privileges, and available resources”, and thirdly, “between the state and the groups that dominate it, on the one hand, and the populations that inhabit its territory on the other” (Brass, 1991: 247).

Social exclusion is a process and state that prevents groups from full participation in social, economic and political life and from asserting their rights. (Beall and Piron, 2005) It is viewed that “ethnicity or ethnic identity also involves, in addition to subjective self-consciousness, a claim to status and recognition, either as a superior group or as a group at least equal to other groups” (Brass, 1991: 19). The civic nationalism championed by modern nation state has bearing on the emergence of ethnic cleavages in a multicultural society. It is argued that “although not always as conflict prone as ethnic nationalism, civic nationalism may be discriminatory as well, if only in the sense that it does not acknowledge ethnic differences and thus potentially deprives members of ethnic communities other than a country’s dominant group from opportunities to preserve, express, and develop their distinct identities” (Wolf, 2006: 32).

Amartya Sen says that sense of one’s identity creates a sense of exclusion from mainstream and in “many cases carry with it the perception of distance and divergence from other groups” (Sen, 2006: 2) Constructing a national identity and in the process ignoring the specificities of smaller communities further creates exclusionary tendencies. In liberal democracies, governance diffuses tensions between the state and the people. Democratic institutions are not merely the instruments for running the affairs of the government, but are also the agents of mediating the interests between various social classes. Institutions are expected to respond to the democratic needs of the people.

Raphael Zariski while analyzing ethnic extremism among the ethno territorial minorities in Western Europe analyses three dimensions of ethnic extremism - willingness to resort to violence, ethnic exclusiveness and separatism. First dimension, according to him, was “the readiness of a political actor to resort to the use of violence to achieve proclaimed objectives, even when there are legal avenues available for pursuing these goals”. The second dimension of ethnic extremism is cultural and political exclusiveness. According to Raphael, “members of some ethnic minorities are very reluctant to seek political support from other ethnic groups or to make any effort to admit willing recruits from such groups to their ranks”. The third dimension is creating a feeling of separatism and leading to separatist movements (Zariski, 1989: 253-254).

The Case of Northeast India

The northeastern region of India is often described as the cultural mosaic of India consisting of diverse tribal communities, linguistic, and ethnic identities. Often these identities transcend the territorial and social boundaries drawn by the Indian state and the larger community respectively. The region, connected to the mainland India with the 22 k. m. long “Chicken-Neck Corridor”, consists of eight states and has international border with neighbouring countries, namely Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal, China, and Bhutan. In the international scene, it is a strategic location linked to South and South-East Asia. From internal security point of view, the region is known for the ‘problem states’, experiencing law and order problems, inter and intra tribal conflicts and human rights violations by the security forces.

The politics of northeast India is marked by ethnicity and extremism for a long time. The assertion of various ethnic identities and the attitude of the state in containing ethnic extremism make the region distinct from the rest of India. The root cause of ethnic assertion can be found in the identity crisis of various tribal communities who extend over the territorial boundaries drawn by the Indian nation state. Most of the ethnic assertions are due to ethnic groups’ desperate attempts to protect their identity, culture and language. For instance, it is argued that “claims to ethno-nationalism of the Bodos can be interpreted as closely intertwined with issues of institutional and social exclusion based on language politics” (Saikia, 2011: 60). In other words, the basis of ethnic assertion can be seen in two contexts. Firstly, the tribal communities’ subjective consciousness of being excluded, oppressed and marginalized. Secondly, the process of development failed to address the legitimate concerns of the people. Though after independence the Indian state tried to integrate and assimilate various ethnic communities in the mainstream national identity, the development process generated a feeling of alienation among them. Moreover, development led to the unequal distribution of resources across the communities and regions. Thus, both non-economic (subjective consciousness) and economic (material) factors created a sense of exclusion among the some ethnic communities.

In northeast India, the fear of exclusion started even before Independence. The Nagas foresaw the possibility of exclusion in postcolonial India in the event of their integration with Indian Union, and

started mobilizing Nagas for a separate nation free from the clutches of the Indian state. Moreover, they also felt that their community life and values would be threatened with the increasing number of the majority communities from other parts of India. The sense of social exclusion in the northeast was articulated with the emergence of new social forces – educated elite, students and youth groups, etc. The reasons for the emergence of social forces in the northeast include: the impact of Christianity on the socio-cultural life of the people, spread of education, etc. Oommen identified three major agents of change among the tribes of northeast India – the state, the civil society (of which the Church is the major element) and the market forces. (Oommen, 2009: 10). Ethnic identity provided the grouping ground for their mobilization. Like Dalit mobilization started among the educated sections of Mahars in Maharashtra, these social forces articulated the grievances of the communities. It is argued that the Youth who feel alienated from society and excluded from job opportunities and decision making may turn to ethnic mobilization. Karna argued that the process of ethnic identity formation in the northeast region was based on the idea of large group formation (Karna, 1991). Moreover, the social exclusion of ethnic communities has a dialectical link with psychological exclusion of the tribal communities of the region. These include exclusion from deliberative institutions due to their lack of cognitive orientation and the epistemological inequality due to lack of access to epistemological resources. The impersonization of their social, cultural, economic and political life by people from other communities or modern state further accelerated this process.

Ethnic Exclusion and Nation-Building Process

Among the various actors involved in the exclusionary practices, nation-states constitute the major instrument. In other words, the nation-state itself often creates exclusion of certain ethnic communities. This exclusionary strategy is best depicted by Andres Wimmer who argued that “in many cases, minorities are meant to remain permanently outside of the sphere of national imagination but inside the state’s territory” (Wimmer, 2006: 339). While endorsing this view in a different context, Stefan Wolf states that neither ethnicity nor nationalism in itself causes ethnic conflict and, however, when state or government ignore the legitimate political, social, and economic grievances of disadvantaged ethnic groups contribute to ethnic conflict. (Wolf, 2006: 5).

In India, freedom from the British did not bring any solace to the communities of the region as the dominant nationality suppressed the smaller nationalities. The major factors that contributed to the social exclusion and subsequent emergence of ethnic mobilization are the pitfalls of nation-building process, the faulty modernization process, and the nature of the nation-state. The nation-building process undermined the specificities of ethnic minorities of the region generated fears among them. The modernization, especially the capitalist modernization weaned away the traditional values, norms and practices which are inherent in the tribal communities. Moreover, the modern nation state erected arbitrary territorial boundaries, in place of traditional ethnic boundaries.

After independence, India's constitutional democracy instead of adopting a confrontationist approach followed a policy of accommodation and assimilation. The Constitution of India provides institutional accommodation for tribal communities of northeast India through various measures like protective discrimination policies. In some states in the region, the interests of tribal communities are protected by invoking Inner Line Permit (for instance, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Mizoram) and special provisions. The Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution gives special status to the traditional institutions and makes provisions for the creation of autonomous district councils. In spite of all these accommodations, the tribal communities are confronting with multiple kinds of exclusion. Moreover, all these institutional mechanisms proved to be futile when the State and its institutions indulge in human rights' violations.

In the process of nation-building some communities were left out either because of their low numerical strength or due to low bargaining power with the power structure. Though the postcolonial states initiated a number of policies to ensure 'inclusiveness' for the discontented communities, the efforts did not yield much result. Initially most of the discontent was manifested in a more peaceful manner and latter it assumed extremist posture. The Naga movement first began in 1947 as a peaceful movement and when the Indian state undertook counter insurgency activities, it took a violent turn affecting the life and property of the individual. In the western context, nation created state, while in India the states is in the process of constructing the nation and instilling national consciousness among the people. When the state with its all powerful authority constructs nation

and wider national identity it often meets with a problem. Sometimes in this process the state imposes its will and authority on the people. In other words, while the state is engaging in nation-building through the construction of national identity, smaller identities move in the opposite direction, when they feel that they are about to lose their identity. In this context, various ethnic groups are seeking larger space in state and are trying to protect their peculiar identity. The state initiative to integrate all communities and groups proved to be counter-productive. As Roy argues that the “formation of a rebel consciousness in the ethnic formation is an obvious corollary of this hegemonic goal of the Indian state. The ‘rebel consciousness’ has found articulation in the formation of ‘nations from below’ which, by nature, contests the state-centric Indian nation” (Roy, 2005: 2176).

The postcolonial development process tried to integrate and assimilate ethnic communities towards the mainstream development process while ignoring their cultural and economic specificities. The centralized planning and the capitalist modernization further lead to the exclusion of various tribal communities from mainstream. Biswas and Suklabaidya view that “the tribal life-world suffered heavily owing to the introduction of the state sponsored agencies to govern development” (Biswas and Suklabaidya, 2008: 124). It is argued that “the governmental machinery created only a top down administration within which the local self-governance and traditional institutions of various tribes could retain a nominal presence. Rather it gave rise to intense conflict between traditional institutions and state government leading to an unaccountable condition of development” (Ahmed and Biswas, 2004: 5). Though, not in largescale, the capitalist development strain the relationship between culture and nature. The indigenous way of development was disturbed by the penetration of the capitalist development leading to underdevelopment, displacement of communities from their settlement and livelihood and erosion of community life.

The postcolonial modernization initiated by the newly independent India generated some kind of discontent among the communities leading towards violence. As Gurr observes, “if discontented people have or get constructive means to attain their social and material goals, few will resort to violence. Only men who are enraged are likely to prefer violence despite the availability of effective nonviolent means for satisfying their

expectations” (Gurr, 1970: 317). While analyzing ethnic unrest in Assam, Hiren Gohain identifies two possible factors responsible for the transition of ethnic movements to armed militancy. Firstly, “the naxalite theory in the late 1960s identified the Indian state as a ‘prison-home of nationalities’ and encouraged armed revolt among such oppressed tribal groups against the Indian state”. Secondly, “as with the determined armed opposition of the state to the most overwhelming mass movements, tribal leaders came to the end of their tether” (Gohain, 1997: 391).

The Indian state and the governmental machinery often treat extremist activities as a mere law and order problem. The state, in this context, became more repressive often invoking the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958. The state government, under the provisions of the Act, can declare any areas as disturbed and give a free hand to the armed forces to arrest a person on the basis of mere suspicion. The state repression in the name of counter insurgency leads to human rights violations. When the state considers extremism a law and order problem, the response was the invocation of draconian laws on the innocent civilians who mostly belong to tribal communities. Apart from perceiving ethnicity and extremism as mere law and order problem and firmly deal with it through army, police and other paramilitary forces, at times the state also opens up the door for dialogue and negotiation with the extremists groups.

Insider vs Outsider Phenomenon

In some parts of the northeast, the issue of ethnic identity assertion is related to migration that resulted in a sense of exclusion. This region since Independence witnessed migration of Bangladeshis, Nepalese and migrant workers from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ syndrome crippled the social, political, economic and cultural life of the tribal communities. In Tripura, the indigenous tribal population became landless and land alienation of tribal to Bengali migration. The tribal community was reduced to minority and the migrant Bengalis emerged as the dominant force. The threat to their survival due to illegal migration created further social exclusion. Apart from creating a feeling of ‘us’ and ‘them’, it led to the alienation of natural resources and cultural specificities of ethnic groups leading to identity crisis. As Fernandes argues that “given their symbiotic relationship with the land and the close link between natural resources and culture, the affected ethnic groups view the

land shortages also as an attack on their identity” (Fernandes, 2004:4610). The material existence of tribal communities was threatened by the influx of migration, occupation of key government jobs by non-tribals leading to their further exclusion. The phenomenon of ethnic extremism is further activated by declining jobs opportunities in the government sector.

Ethnic communities feel in terms of “us” and “them” in the process of generating ethnic consciousness. This feeling emerges out of one group or community realizes its relative deprivation in comparison with others. Ethnicity, in this context, is the “phenomenon of an ethnic group coming to self-awareness that enables it to reaffirm its identity and pursue its interests” (Heredia, 1997: 1011). The frustration of the unemployed youth was utilized by the extremist organizations to serve their interests. The demands of the extremist groups are varying from autonomy to secessionism. They often challenge the sovereignty and integrity of the nation-state. The assertion of ethnic identity and the accompanying extremist tendencies are related to the feeling of losing one’s own identity, marginalization and exploitation by others.

Elite Formation and the Emergence of Middle Class

The problem of ethnicity and extremism is further aggregated by the regional consciousness aroused by elites, especially the middle class (Singh, 1998; Baruah, 1991; Sharma, 1990). Both in the western context and India in general, the middle class is viewed as the champion of liberal democracy promoting democratic values such as toleration, liberty, equality and justice. However, in the northeast, the middle class can be seen as the promoter of ethnic extremist movements. For instance, the Assam movement emerged as Assamese middle class movements whose interest was mostly affected by the migration of outsiders (Baruah, 1991).

Another dimension of the elite formation in the tribal communities is that the dominant communities allied with state power exclude certain groups from accessing resources, institutions and opportunities, generating a feeling of exclusion of other groups. In such situation, smaller ethnic communities assert for resources and opportunities. The assertion of marginalized identities and its extremist posture are giving a new direction to state politics. In this context, democratic politics is overshadowed by ethnic politics. The elite within the ethnic communities mobilize people in

ethnic manner to realize its goals. As Brass argues, “the cultural norms, values, and practices of ethnic groups become political resources for elites in competition for political power and economic advantage” (Brass, 1991: 15). The assertion of Hmars in Mizoram against the domination of Mizos and the assertion of Garos against Khasis in Meghalaya is a self-evident factor to prove this argument.

From Ethnicity to Ethnic Politics

The ethnic demand for homeland created a number of smaller states in the northeast. For instance, the greater Assam was balkanized into Nagaland (1963), Meghalaya (1972), Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram (1987) to meet the demands of these ethnic groups. However, mere making of territorial boundary did not solve the problem; on the contrary, it further aggregated it. It is argued that the creation of separate state further fanned the fire when “various smaller and bigger communities started to demand establishment of more states; on the other hand, the state showed their inability to deliver the basic goods” (Madhab, 1999: 320). The denial of basic goods to various communities can be seen in the larger contest of denial of social justice for the communities. John Rawls, the contemporary American philosopher, in fact, states that the discrimination of primary goods such as basic rights and liberties and self-respect, income and wealth, etc. as the precondition for ensuring justice in a society (Rawls, 1971). In the context of India, Ambrose Pinto states that “the competition for power among different social and ethnic groups was legitimized on the premise that all social and ethnic groups will have equal space and opportunities. However, with the majoritarian groups or the dominant social group gradually aspiring for power; the attempt was to create a national culture. In the process the ethnic groups have felt marginalized and rejected. The culture of ethnic groups remains restricted to private expression within the group with no attempts to include it, in spite of the constitutional slogan of ‘unity in diversity’” (Pinto, 2000: 189). Moreover, it is viewed that, “when the state fails as the principal agent of socio-economic transformation and cannot ensure distributive justice to its citizens, it tends to become increasingly coercive” (Misra, 2002: 3784). Further, the creation of smaller territorial units acceding to the demands of the dominant ethnic community in a region often threaten the existence and survival of numerically less ethnic communities as the positions and

jobs and resources were monopolized the dominant ethnic group. The Hmar problem in Mizoram and the Garos disadvantageous positions in accessing resources and positions in Meghalaya are such examples forcing them to arouse ethnic feeling and violent mobilization. While the making of territorial boundary satisfied the dominant ethnic community, it created despair for the minority ethnic economic communities. As a result, the level of extremist activities percolated from one level to another.

The ethnic mobilization assumes an extremist posture when various ethnic movement arousing emotive issues to expand its mass base among the society. The Mizo National Famine Front formed under the leadership of Laldenga used the famine situation of 1959 to arouse ethnic consciousness and later turned it into an underground movement. The Assam Language Movement (1960-70) raised the issue of making the Assamiya language as the medium of instruction upto graduation level in addition to existing English language. As Srikanth argues, “by provoking national and ethnic identities, the Assam agitation has prepared the ground for the rise of militancy in Assam” (Srikanth, 2000: 4122). The emergence of ULFA as a militant extremist organization was a radical offshoot of the Assam movement. When Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) turned to a political party after the Assam Accord of 1985, ULFA continued its extremist path.

Another kind of social exclusion visible is in the area of language. The introduction of alien language over local language also created ethnic mobilization. The early movements in Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland is due to the domination of Assamese. The Assam Official Language Act 1960, had its repercussion on the Mizos, Khasis, Garos and Bodos, and it further rekindled the regional consciousness among the divergent ethnic groups in the United Assam. For instance, the people of Khasis Hills, Jaintia Hills and the Garo Hills under the leadership of the All Party Hill Leaders Conference demanded separate state. There are criticisms against popularizing Hindi in Arunachal Pradesh.

Ethnicity to Ethnic Conflicts

In the debate on social exclusion and ethnicity it is pertinent to examine reasons behind the extremist positions taken by some extremist groups when they are moving away from normal democratic process provided by constitutions and other institutions. The multidimensional

manifestation of social exclusion is articulated by the emerging social forces leading to ethnic based conflict in a society. It is argued that:

Social exclusion is a leading cause of conflict and insecurity in many parts of the world. Excluded groups that suffer multiple disadvantages may come together when they have unequal rights, are denied a voice in political processes and feel marginalized from the mainstream of their society. Peace may be the first step, such as marches, strikes and demonstrations. But if this has no effect, or if governments react violently to such protests, then groups are more likely to resort to violent conflict if they feel there is no alternative (Beall and Piron, 2005: 8)

According to Marshall Wolf, ethnicity is not the ultimate, irreducible source of violent conflict. In other words, violence does not spontaneously erupt between otherwise peacefully coexisting ethnic groups. Power and material gain can be equally strong motivations, for leaders and followers alike, to choose conflict over cooperation, violence over negotiations” (Wolf, 2006: 3). Most ethnic movements emerged initially within the Constitutional framework and peaceful manner. In course of time, they turned violent when the state used its repressive machinery and resorted violence while engaging in peace negotiations. The state viewed that it can suppress the ethnic mobilization by invoking force. The assertion of ethnic identity, in course of time, percolated to the realm of politics. The state often conveniently uses one group against another, at times extending patronage to one ethnic group, as in Naga-Kuki conflict in Manipur.

Conclusion

In NEI, social exclusion and ethnicity reinforce each other in many contexts. The prevailing exclusionary tendencies show that most of the institutional means of accommodation such as granting autonomy to particular ethnic groups in a particular region and even the formation of separate state for some communities would not yield desired results. The exclusionary tendencies created by both the state and the dominant community lead to the ethnic assertion of specific ethnic communities. However, such exclusionary practices cannot be tackled by mobilization of ethnic communities and identity politics but ‘recognizing’ the specificities and material needs of community through the mechanism of the state. The state needs to adopt more conciliatory path and bring the alienated sections into the mainstream.

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