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Ethnicity and Development – A Civil Society Perspective from North-East India

Susmita Sen Gupta[1]

[1] Department of Political Science, North- Eastern Hill University, Shillong, India

Abstract

Civil society in northeast India has emerged gradually over the last few decades. It is observed that civil society organizations especially student and youth groups have thrived on the margins of the Indian political system, in the buffer space between political parties and insurgent groups. It is significant to note that most of these organizations in the northeast are based on ethnic affiliations, and hence ethnicity creeps into all civic spheres into which these organizations intervene, prompting some scholars to describe these organizations as "civic representatives" of ethnic groups and communities. In the context of the above, the proposed research paper seeks to examine the role of some major student and youth organizations of Meghalaya, a state of northeast India, as champions of the interests of the respective ethnic communities they claim to represent. The paper also proposes to focus on the developmental agenda of the Indian State and to enquire into the contradictions and dilemmas that have arisen as a result of the vigorous pursuit of ethnic agenda by these civil society organizations. The paper is structured into the following sections. The first section conceptualizes student and youth organizations as important components of the civil society in northeast India. In the second section, development constraints in northeast India have been discussed. The next section highlights the role of some of the student and youth organizations of Meghalaya as champions of ethnic interests. The fourth section identifies a few contemporary issues are dominating the developmental agenda in Meghalaya and focuses on the views of these organizations on the same. The final section examines the contradictions between ethnic sensitivities and the developmental agenda in Meghalaya and summarizes the main observations of the paper.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Nationalism, Development, Civil Society, Student, Youth.

Introduction

The existing literature on ethnicity and nationalism shows that while some scholars have looked upon these phenomena as primordial identities and have even sought to discover historical evidence of their existence in the past centuries, other scholars like Paul Brass consider ethnicity in terms of manipulation of culture by an elite and regard it as a contemporary phenomenon. According to the latter viewpoint, ethnicity becomes manifest when a cultural group led by its dominant sections uses various aspects of culture like language, traditions, and cultural practices to distinguish itself from other groups (Brass, 1991).

In the Indian context, the presence of multiple linguistic and cultural groups has led to ethnic pluralism, and each ethnic group has been articulating its interests in terms of the protection of its distinct identity. This phenomenon has assumed a lot of significance in the context of northeast India which is a homeland of diverse ethnic communities.

The capitalist path of development undertaken by India since independence has further intensified in the post-liberalization and post-globalization era. This process has its own dynamics and compulsions with far-reaching implications for India's multi-ethnic society in general and for the multiple ethnicities of northeast India in particular. The interface between the multi-ethnic setting and the developmental agenda of the Indian State brings into sharp focus the role of the civil society as the champion of distinct ethnic interests.

Conceptual Framework

In view of the above, it is pertinent to arrive at a broad understanding of civil society. Broadly speaking, civil society is the aggregate of non-governmental organizations and institutions that manifest interests and will of citizens. The literature on relations between civil society and democratic political society has its roots in early classical liberal writings like those of Alex de Tocqueville (Zaleski, 2008, p.50). Twentieth-century theorists like Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba identified the role of political culture in a democratic order as vital (Almond & Verba, 1989). More recently, Robert Putnam has argued that even non-political organizations in civil society are vital for democracy because they build social capital, trust and shared values (Putnam et al.,1994). Others, however, have questioned how democratic civil society actually is. For Marx, civil society was the 'base' where productive forces and social relations were taking place (Lenin, 2010).

Deviating from Marx, Gramsci located civil society in the political superstructure and viewed it as an instrument of bourgeoisie hegemony. Rather than posing it as a problem, Gramsci viewed civil society as the site for the problem- solving (Ehrenberg, 1999). Misunderstanding Gramsci, the New Left assigned civil society a key role in defending people against the state and the market and in asserting the democratic will to influence the state (Ehrenberg, 1999, p.30). At the same time, Neo-liberal thinkers consider civil society as a site for the struggle to subvert communist and authoritarian regimes (Ehrenberg, 1999, p.33).

Thus, the term civil society occupies an important place in the political discourses of the New Left and the Neoliberals. The concept of civil society, expressing what Marx referred to as `the struggles and the aspirations of the age′, has become the foundation of the reconstruction of both left-oriented radical political theory and liberal theory. Most of these works see civil society as a residual category composed of everything that is not the state. Neera Chandhoke argues that this position is flawed and proposes that the state can be understood only by referring to the politics of civil society and vice versa. She states that it is necessary to sift through many historical layers of meaning that inform the concept and unearth the system of meaning which can stimulate the democratic imagination (Neera Chandhoke, 1995).

Civil society in northeast India has emerged gradually over the last few decades. It is observed that civil society organizations especially student and youth groups have thrived on the margins of the Indian political system, in the buffer space between political parties and insurgent groups. It is significant to note that most of these organizations in northeast India

are based on ethnic affiliations sand hence ethnicity creeps into all civic spheres into which these organizations intervene, prompting some scholars to describe these organizations as "civic representatives" of ethnic groups and communities (Das, 2007, p. 43).

In the context of the above, the paper seeks to examine the role of some major student and youth organizations of Meghalaya as champions of the interests of the respective ethnic communities they claim to represent. The paper also enquires into the dilemmas and contradictions that have arisen as a result of the vigorous pursuit of ethnic agenda by these civil society organizations.

Development Constraints in North-East India

It may be observed that the northeastern region of India has its own opportunities and constraints, strengths and weaknesses and needs and priorities, but the development initiatives so far have followed the national perspectives of development and the region continues to be backward in spite of some special packages and programmes and institutions like North Eastern Council (NEC) and Development of the North Eastern Region (DONER). In the era of globalization and liberalization, there is a shift in development paradigm, from a top-down approach to bottom up, from people around development to development around people, from an emphasis on growth factor to concern for sustainable development and from centralized initiatives to democratic decentralization in making economic decisions.

Associated with such a shift in development paradigm is changing development initiatives in North East India (Behera (Ed).2004). It may be noted in this context that growing presence of Multinational Corporations, an invariable concomitant of the globalization process, is yet to take place in the North East in a big way, primarily because ethnic strife and insurgency stand in the way of a favorable investment climate. Moreover, the difficult terrain and transport bottlenecks have kept the North East starved of business. To offset this disadvantage, the Government of India introduced the North East Industrial Policy (NEIP) in 1977. This policy offers tax holidays and a range of subsidies to companies setting up industries in the region. But in spite of such concessions, business tycoons still shy away from investing in the region. Companies like Tatas are yet to venture to the North East.

Only the infotech wing of the company, viz., Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) has started operations at the IIT Premises in Guwahati. While Assam is showing some amount of openness to woo business to the State, other states of the North East have not, however, been as spontaneous. This is because land continues to be the major bone of contention especially in tribal areas where it is owned by communities and individuals. The Land Transfer Act in States like Meghalaya and Nagaland has been a handicap to the setting up of industries. To circumvent this obstacle, several companies which require land beyond the government acquired industrial estates have resorted to benami transactions and have acquired land in the name of tribal partners (Mukhim, 2008). Such clandestine acquisition of land by companies threatens to snowball into a major crisis like the Singur situation in West Bengal and is integral to the nationwide debate on the viability of Special Economic Zones (SEZ).

Role of the Civil Society in Meghalaya

The three major ethnic groups of Meghalaya are the Khasis, the Jaintias, and the Garos. The Khasi Students' Union (KSU), the Jaintia Students' Union (JSU) and the Garo Students' Union (GSU) are prominent student organizations which claim to be the sole champions of the interests of these ethnic groups. Apart from these, there is a youth organization called the Federation of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo People (FKJGP) which is an umbrella group representing all the three ethnic communities. While the regional political parties of Meghalaya profess to work towards the " protection and preservation of tribal identity," in reality, it is the student and youth organizations which have stolen the propaganda mileage from the regional parties on all vital issues that affect ethnic community interests. This is the reason why local scholars have argued that these organizations are taking the shape of pressure groups (Nongkhlaw, 2011).

Indeed civil society organizations in Meghalaya have effectively pressurized and bargained with the Government of Meghalaya and have even clinched decisions in their favor on important issues affecting the interests of their respective ethnic groups. The issues taken up by these organizations include both political as well as socio-economic issues. For instance, the introduction of Innerline Regulations to check influx of outsiders in Meghalaya is a major political issue around which the KSU and other student and youth organizations have organized agitations and have mobilized public opinion to pressurize the Government. It is interesting to note that issues like price rise have never dominated the economic agenda of these organizations. However, regulation of trade by non-tribals in Meghalaya, issue of work permit for migrant laborers from outside the state, etc. have very often led to intervention by these organizations and have even triggered a confrontation with the state. This clearly reveals the ethnocentric nature of the demands raised by these organizations.

The paper proposes to examine the stand taken by the student and youth organizations of Meghalaya on three key issues of development, viz. introduction of railways, large-scale industries, and uranium mining. It may be noted in this context that until recently, Meghalaya was excluded from the nationwide railway network. In 2015, railways were extended up to Mendipathar in Garo Hills. But railheads are conspicuous by their absence in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya. Civil society organizations like the KSU have been in the forefront of the protest movement against railways. Although all regional parties of Meghalaya have opposed railways in their election manifestoes, the student and youth groups have been more vigorous in their campaign against the move on the ground that the introduction of railways will aggravate the problem of influx into Meghalaya.

As a matter of fact, opposition from the Khasi Students' Union (KSU) resulted in abortion of what should have been Meghalaya's first railway project in Byrnihat in 1988. It was later learned that the students' body acted at the behest of the truck owners' lobby who wanted no competition for their business. As a result, Meghalaya coal is today traded as Assam coal once it is loaded on to railway wagons in that State (The Shillong Times, August 22, 2008). This is a classic example of a students' body assuming a hegemonic role as pseudo-representatives of the larger population so much so that a popularly elected government has systematically succumbed to pressures from such exclusive groups, making a mockery of all democratic norms.

It is interesting to note that the KSU has been the most vocal organization on this issue and the fiery KSU leader Mr. Paul Lyngdoh has persistently opposed the railways. However, Mr. Lyngdoh subsequently joined a regional party called the United Democratic Party (UDP) and became a minister in a coalition government. Interestingly, of late, he has given up his resistance, presumably due to the compulsions of coalition politics and has welcomed the introduction of railways in the state.

Ever since the formation of Meghalaya in 1972, no large scale industries have been set up in Meghalaya till today. Some small-scale agri-horticultural industries have come up. However, civil society organizations have stubbornly resisted any move for industrialization alleging that this will attract migrant laborers from outside the state and will hurt the job prospects of indigenous laborers. On this issue, all regional parties have lent their support to the student and youth organizations, and thus, the cleavages between the civil and the political society in Meghalaya often gets blurred. It is significant to point out that Meghalaya lacks important sources of revenue in the absence of large-scale industries. Unemployment is also quite rampant among the local youth. In view of this grim scenario, it is ironical that industrialization is being opposed by student and youth organizations.

These organizations have been arguing that there is a lack of trained manpower among the indigenous labor force and hence industries will have to recruit people from outside Meghalaya. Prominent civil society organizations are, therefore, demanding training facilities and employment guarantees for the local youth. This is a classic instance of contradiction between the goals of rapid economic growth and the concerns of small ethnic communities about protection of their delicate demographic balance and preservation of traditional livelihood practices like jhum cultivation. The student and youth organizations have effectively articulated these community concerns and have even succeeded in stalling the establishment of any major industries so far.

In the context of the above, it may appear that Meghalaya does not harbor any global ambitions. But the reality is that a gradual transformation of the protectionist psyche in favor of an open economy is becoming perceptible. This was reflected at the Seminar on "Business Practices in Meghalaya" held in Mumbai on the 28th of August, 2008, in order to promote the 'Scotland of the East' as a good place to invest in. A high-level team of the Government of Meghalaya headed by the Chief Minister, Dr. Donkupar Roy, invited investors from across the country, hard selling the State's potential for development (The Shillong Times, August 29, 2008, p.1). A number of private companies showed interest to invest in Meghalaya in different Sectors starting from education to tourism during the day-long seminar. International Banks like ABN Amro and Deutsche were interested in micro-financing and skill development respectively.

It seems that the Government of Meghalaya has identified tourism, information technology, education, health, mineral resources, horticulture, food processing and floriculture as the most potential Sectors and has promised incentives for investors in these Sectors. Addressing the 4th North East Business Summit in Guwahati, the Chief Minister of Meghalaya called upon the Government of India to facilitate trade with neighboring Bangladesh through the State in a much greater scale for mutual benefits. In this connection, it may be noted that the Minister for Development of North Eastern Region (DONER) sought to assure the investors by stating that the security concern should not be allowed to come in the way of investment for tapping

huge pool of natural and mineral resources and infrastructure Sectors in the region which is India's gateway to the prospering economies of South East Asia. In the Summit, the Chief Ministers of the North Eastern States demanded waiving of the Restricted Area Permit (RAP) and Protected Area Permit (PAP) System now in vogue in the region in case of foreign visitors, as these are major deterrents to promotion of the most potential tourism Sector in the region (The Shillong Times, September 16, 2008, p.1).

However, in spite of the initiatives taken by the State Government of the region to facilitate investment proposals, resistance from local pressure groups continues to mount in the form of demands for ensuring job guarantees for the indigenous youth. In view of the above, the dilemma for the prospective investors will be to accommodate such demands to a certain extent, even though trained manpower may not be available locally to cater to the technical requirements of a sophisticated industry.

 It appears, therefore, that the Government of Meghalaya has initiated some moves to attract investment to Meghalaya, particularly in order to tap the huge tourism potential of the state. However, no major breakthrough has been achieved in so far as the industrialization of Meghalaya is concerned. Thus, civil society organizations are a force to reckon with as and when the Government of Meghalaya takes any vital policy decision on the issue of industrialization.

Another important developmental issue on which the civil society organizations have voiced their concern is uranium mining in Domisiat in West Khasi Hills of Meghalaya. The issue has acquired significance particularly in view of the Civil Nuclear Deal between India and the United States. Pressing ahead with its proposal to mine uranium in Meghalaya, the Union Government held a series of meetings with State political leaders and NGOs on the thorny issue and reiterated that it was awaiting the green signal from the Meghalaya Government to the proposed uranium mining project at Mawthabah, West Khasi Hills, in view of the country's requirement of 20,000 MW of nuclear energy. The Union Cabinet Secretary K. M. Chandra Shekhar who held separate meetings with leaders of Khasi Students' Union (KSU), Federation of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo People (FKJGP), Garo Students' Union (GSU) and other local organizations admitted that a consensus was yet to evolve on the issue of uranium mining in the State (The Shillong Times, August 23, 2008, p.1).

While the KSU has been the most vocal in its opposition to the project, the FKJGP maintains that the issue of health hazard from uranium mining should be addressed properly before arriving at a final decision on the project. GSU and West Khasi Hills Students' Union seem to support the project provided it brings maximum benefits to people of Mawthabah and adjoining areas in terms of infrastructure and employment opportunities ('KSU sticks to stand,' The Shillong Times, August 23, 2008, p.1). It may be noted that no consensus has emerged on this issue even within the ruling coalition and two allies of the Meghalaya Progressive Alliance, viz., Hill State People's Democratic Party (HSPDP) and Khun Hynniewtrep National Awakening Movement (KHNAM) have continued to oppose the open-cast uranium mining (The Shillong Times, August 24, 2008, p.1). The Hill State People's Democratic Party (HSPDP) has been opposing uranium mining from the very outset. But the civil society organizations have come out more strongly against this move. The resistance is

mainly centered on three grounds, viz. potential health hazards for the people located in and around the mining site, environmental concerns, and demand for employment opportunities for the local people. The protesting organizations have even deputed study groups to exist uranium-mining sites like Jadugoda to assess the impact of mining on the people of those areas. Meanwhile, to allay the apprehensions of the local people, public hearings have been organized by the Uranium Corporation of India Ltd (UCIL). Some developmental activities have also been undertaken by the UCIL such as the construction of roads etc. Such activities had important consequences on the resistance movement.

For instance, the KSU is persistently opposing the move, but the West Khasi Hills Students' Union (WKHSU) now supports it, indicating signs of polarization of opinion within the civil society on the mining issue. Interestingly, the debate on uranium mining has triggered some positive and enlightened thinking among a section of the educated elite of Meghalaya. One such view asserts that the presence of uranium provides Meghalaya with a unique bargaining power vis-à-vis the centre, in order to improve its backward infrastructure and emphasizes the need to infuse a healthy dose of inclusive progressive nationalism into the prevailing techno-centric, purely regional outlook, not only for the sake of energy security of the country, but also for the good of the local people (Shira, 2008, p.4).

Thus, the issue of uranium mining reflects contradictions between the developmental agenda of the Indian State and ethnic sensitivities. The issue has become significant from another perspective. The civil society resistance against uranium mining in Meghalaya is ideologically connected with the worldwide movement against nuclear proliferation and is also an integral component of the anti-state movement against the overall developmental agenda of the Indian State.

Concluding Observations

In the context of the above discussion, it may be argued that civil society organizations in Meghalaya are apparently articulating the legitimate concerns, aspirations, and sensitivities of their respective ethnic communities. Their voice of dissent has very often questioned the Indian State's developmental agenda. But a critical look into the phenomenon reveals that the rigid ethnocentric perspective of these organizations has sometimes been self-defeating for the very ethnic communities they claim to represent. For instance, resistance to railways and the setting up of large industries would be prejudicial to the larger interests of these communities in the long run, particularly in view of the fact that they do not have many alternative sources of revenue generation. Of course, some of the concerns voiced about uranium mining are genuine and need to be addressed by the concerned authorities before they seek to go ahead with the mining operations. An understanding of the interface between ethnicity and development in Meghalaya from the civil society perspective will require an enquiry into these processes.

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