

Pre and Post Independence Tribal Unrest in North East India: A Review Study on Historical Perspective

Dr. Gautam Mushahary

Assistant Prof., Dept. of History, Kokrajhar University, Kokrajhar, Assam, India

Abstract:

This study is undertaken to explore and highlight the basic undercurrents of Tribal unrests and agitations in the Northeast India in Pre and Post-independence period and to trace their dynamics of origins, deep rooted forces of articulations and powerful drivers of socio-economic and political changes in the regions. The uprising of the tribal people against the exploiter groups is not a new phenomenon. There are different forms of tribal movement. Some of them launched with an objective to preserve their political and social identity, some are for the revival of their traditional religious system and some are for the safeguard of their economic interest against the encroachers. In the pre-Independence period, the tribal unrest or self-assertion evolved around land issues. The policies adopted by the British in their economic policy, money lenders and non-tribal contractors forced the tribes to start movements so that they could maintain their rights over the ancestral land and forest. Although the main issue was economic and regaining land rights, yet the movements were not totally devoid of political hues. The tribes felt that the colonial rulers tried to make inroads into the socio-cultural arena of the tribes. They were apprehensive of losing their distinct identity in future. The tribal unrest and identity formation movements of the post-independence period in the Northeastern region are in a way continuation of the pre-Independence period but, of course, with more demands coming in, while some are newborn movements with the similar kind of demand.

Keywords: Tribal unrest, Northeast India, Identity issues, Socio-economic crisis, political rights

1. INTRODUCTION

North East India is a mosaic of races and cultures. It is also the most important tribal belt of the country, covering seven states namely Assam, Manipur and Tripura with sizeable tribal population and the tribal states of Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh. The Great mountain ranges of the eastern Himalayas and its southern branches which form the great divide between South Asia and South East Asia, and three important river valleys, the Brahmaputra, the Imphal and the Barak, have for centuries, provided the physical ecology for the various ethnic groups who migrated to the region from the pre-historic times down to the present day. The fertile river valleys are the cradles of human civilization where the migrating and conquering ethnic groups including tribes, built up their own kingdoms and principalities. In the resultant process of migration and settlement which was a part of the struggle for economic and social survival and political domination, there were contacts between various

ethnic groups resulting into integration and assimilation of their respective cultural traits. Yet, despite the impact of the contact with Hindu kingdoms, the conquering Ahoms, the invading and migrating Muslims and the British colonial administration, the tribes, more or less preserved their distinctive identity. The North-East has emerged as a distinctive regional identity in India's national life.

The tribal people of north east India are referred to in the classical Indian literatures as the Kiratas. They are the Indo-Mongoloids divided ethnically and linguistically into Austric, Tibeto Burman and Siamese Chinese who form a cultural bridge between India and South East Asia, Inner Asia and China. The Tibeto-Burmans are the Bodos, Tripuri and the Garos; the Karbis, the Nagas, the Kuki-Chins including the Mizos and the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh like the Monpas, Daflas, Apatanis, the Adis, etc. There are several Plains tribes in the Brahmaputra valley also. The representatives of the Austric are the Khasis including Jaintias who have linguistic Affinity with the Hos and Mundas of Bihar and Nicobarese of Andaman and Nicobar, and with the Mon and Mon-Khmer of South East Asia. The Siamese (Tai) speakers are the Khamti and Singpho tribes of Arunachal Pradesh who are the kith and kin of the Ahom-Tai of Upper Assam. The Indo-Aryans who migrated from the West to the north east India established political supremacy over the Brahmaputra valley, and Hinduised the tribals wherever possible and in due course enforced the tribes to confine themselves in the interior regions of the Brahmaputra valley and the neighboring hills (Chaudhury, B. ed.: 1992: 203-204). In the early part of the 19th century, with the decline of the Ahoms due to internal rebellions and civil war, and ultimately the Burmese, the political fortunes of the tribal states were greatly affected. The Burmese conquest of north east India (1819-1826) and the First Anglo-Burmese War created a radical change in the contemporary political situation. The British conquest of north east India was just started and gradually the British were determined to occupy all the tribal areas of the region-Jaintia and Kachar were under protection of East India Company. Manipur and Tripura were independent; but Assam already lost her independence. There was of course, strong confrontation among the hill tribes, to British imperialism, starting with the Khasi revolt under U. Tirot Singh and Sadya uprising. But gradually the British captured the Khasi state which accepted the British paramountcy. Jaintia was annexed, Cachar was annexed in 1832. Mathak under the Moran in 1842, upper Assam in 1838 and North Cachar was annexed in 1854 (Kabui, G: 1992: 205-206)

Thus by the middle of the 19th century, all the tribal states were annexed into British India. Only Tripura maintained her independence. Manipur by the time had become completely Hinduised state (Kabui, G: Ibid:206). The British penetration under the Forward policy into Naga Hills was resisted in the form of the Revolt of 1879-80 which was serious attempt to push out the British. The revolt was suppressed with severity and since then the British gradually pushed into the interior and by the end of the 19th century, except the Tuensang area of the Konyak Nagas, the Naga areas were brought under the regular administration (Kabui, G.: Ibid: 208). Likewise, the Lushai Hills expedition in 1871-72 ultimately led to the subjugation of the Mozos and their region was constituted into Lushai Hills District in 1896 under the British province of Assam. The tribes of Arunachal were also brought under the Balipara Frontier Tract and Sadya Frontier Tract which were later on combined into North Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA) now Arunachal Pradesh (Kabui, G.: Ibid: 209). Though the established tribal kingdoms lost their status, a new phase in tribal history of north east India started with the British penetration into tribal areas which were not earlier organized into principalities or states, though they had village level polity formations. After the British conquest the hill tribes came under their colonial policy which aimed at the

extension of the British empire, collection of revenues, maintenance of law and order, adjudication of disputes, exploitation of natural resources for capitalist enterprises, encouragement of Christian missions for proselytizing activities on the pretext of civilizing the tribal people and provision of some welfare services.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

1. To highlight the genesis and background of Tribal Unrest in Northeast India.
2. To highlight the momentum and forces of Pre Independence tribal agitations.
3. To highlight the Post-independence tribal unrest focusing on socio-economic and political issues and crucial changes taking place in the recent past.

3. METHODOLOGY

In this research work I have followed the systematic application of Socio-Anthropological and Historical methods mainly basing on the secondary sources.

Tribal movements in the north-east are entirely different from those elsewhere in the country and stand in a category by themselves because of its unique geographical situation and historical background. Many tribes living on the international boundaries traditionally acted as bridge or buffer communities until the advent of colonialism and shared ethnic and cultural affinities with tribesmen across the frontiers. Developments across the frontiers have had a profound influence on the situation in the north-east. This region was also not completely integrated within the politico-economic system of colonialism. It remained relatively isolated from the cultural systems of the mainland and the political upheavals of the freedom struggle. Yet another fact to be noted in regard to the development of the tribal movement in this region, as mentioned earlier is that unlike middle India the tribals everywhere except Tripura are in overwhelming majority and have never faced any threat of the kind to their identity that inspired the millenarian movements elsewhere in the country. Their institutions are relatively intact. They stayed put in possession of their land and forest. Therefore, there were no agrarian and forest-based movements of the type that occur in middle India. Christianity emerged as the strongest factor of modernization, and gave the tribals a strong sense of identity as it has done elsewhere. Considering the geopolitical factor, the relative isolation from the political system and cultural influences from the mainland, the dominant form of movement has been political, seeking goal ranging from autonomy to self-determination and relying on means ranging from legal agitation to armed insurgency. Even the cultural movements in this region have been only a dimension of these political processes (Singh, K. S.: 1982, pp. xi-xii). On the eve of the transfer of power political processes in the hills became active. To accommodate tribal aspirations new states were created. The Six Schedule in the process became outdated. A section of Nagas chose the path of insurgency, so also the Mizos, Meiteis and Tripuris.

The uniform administrative mechanism of elsewhere British India was also introduced in the North East part and the tribals inhabiting this region was also not freed from alien exploitation. Many a movements surfaced in varying forms in this part of the region during the colonial rule itself and the British administrative legacy of divide and rule guiding principle still continue here within the tribals elites as well as tribals and non-tribals in some states. The tribes of Northeast India were also politically, socially and culturally active even during the colonial Raj. The Nagas, the Garos, the Khasis, the Bodo Kacharis, the Mizos, the Kukis, etc. of this region were active in surfacing the movements of various forms and

dimensions since the colonial rule to the post-colonial era. They fought injustice and deprivation. Series of insurrections, raids, murders, armed actions against the alien rulers were the orders of the day because the colonial occupation was followed by a period of administrative confusions, of extortions and oppressions, and miseries of people (Barpujari, H.K.: 1977: pp. ix-xiii). They organized the movement when they suffered incursions, loss of land, swindling, bankruptcy and undermining of their culture by literate and technologically superior invaders both British and India. There were many instances of attacks on British officials, the landlords, the moneylenders, the revenue agents etc. For example, the head hunting of Lushai-Kukis in Sylhet and Cachar against unfair dealings of some business community, the revolt of Synteng of Jaintia Hills in 1860-62, the Manipur rebellions in 1891, the Assam riots of 1894 etc. to mention a few (Paul, M.C.: 1992: 304).

It is to be noted that the tribal movements in this part of the region had not ceased to occur even after the departure of colonial power. In fact, after independence, movements with political overtone and much articulation had increasingly surfaced against the glaring inequality and deprivation. The nature of movements had changed with the accentuation of deprivation and economic exploitation. The tribal peasants had mobilized by the articulated tribal leaders under various political banners to seek justice of the misdeeds done by the colonial masters. Some adopted non-violent parliamentary methods and tactics for autonomy and others adopted non-parliamentary tactics for sovereignty (Paul, M.C.: Ibid): 307).

The Christian missionaries were largely responsible for awakening of the tribals in this region regarding their individual identity. The phenomenal rise of Christianity in all Northeastern states except in Arunachal Pradesh, during 1961-81 became a symbol of tribal regionalism. The nativistic revival movements such as Seng Khasi, Sanamati cult, Zeliangrong, Boro and Meitei movements are expressions of cultural magnitudes of tribal regionalism though their strength varies (Datta Ray, B: 1992: 475). The geographical aspect too caused these tribes to remain outside the political system as well as cultural influence of the mainland India. During the British period these tribals were brought under the colonial territorial authority. After India's independence many of these tribes emerged very powerful and began seeking autonomy which even ranged to sovereign country.

In developing a sense of larger tribal identity, education and gradual emergence of small and educated middle class among the tribes in the hills and plains have been playing important roles. It began with the demand for representation of the tribal population in Provincial Legislative Assembly. The Nagas, Khasis, Bodos, Miris and Deuris pressed their demand in 1930s through Naga Club, Seng Khasi and the Tribal League. On the eve of independence there were two political trends clearly visible - the first was in favour of asserting more tribal autonomy within the Indian Union and the other was goaded by the ideas of independence for tribal areas. The first trend was clearly visible in the policies of the Mizo Union and Garo National Council, East India Tribal Union (1952) and the APHLC (Datta Ray, B: Ibid: 475-476). The Naga National Council, United Mizo Freedom Organization formed in 1946 and the Mizo National Front formed in 1961 may be included in the second category of revolutionary groups. The growing sense of ethnic identity among different communities in Northeast and the fear of losing identity contributed to the growth of regional ethno-political movements in Northeast India. The tribal movement in North-East India is a manifestation of fight for regional identity although based on ethnic considerations. Another prime reason for tribal movement lies in the conflict for controlling of political

power and economic resources by the elite tribal societies and neighbouring society. The Tribal uprising is an aggressive assertion for share of limited economic resources. The rising tribal aspirations are expressed through regional movement on cultural identity crisis, the basis of which is economic (Datta Ray, B: Ibid: 477). The aspirations and ambitions crop up and economic development is utterly sluggish and uneven, militancy is bound to grow up. The rising middle class and petty bourgeoisie in tribal society are bound to take up arms against their counterparts in other societies.

The political movement in the hills surfaced with the transfer of power. The tribal movement, though apparently political in character, agrarian issues and economic aspirations gave a new dimension to the solidarity movement. Industrialization in the hills was non-existent. Agriculture was primitive unable to cater to the minimum needs of the hill people. The crisis of land alienation was acute. The communal ownership of rural land has been notional. The rich in the tribal society cornered all social wealth in the form of forest and agricultural land all over Northeast India. The unplanned exploitation of mineral resources created a class of neo-rich alienated from traditional tribal society. The poverty has out rightly become the relief map of the hills in Northeast India and the economic scenario has also become deplorable. The agrarian and economic issues would, therefore, bound to dominate in tribal movement. The new owning class in tribal society needs political instrument to consolidate its hold on economy of the underdeveloped tribal society. This political tool has been in the hands of new elite alienated from traditional society with a distinct class affiliation, cutting across inter-tribal distinction (Datta Ray, B: Ibid).

On the eve of the India's independence, there were a number of proposals for the future political and administrative system of North East India. The hill tribes were affected; the Naga National Council raised the demand for independence and made a nine-point agreement with Governor Akbar Hydari of Assam in 1946 (Kabui, G: Ibid: 210). The Shillong based Khasi and Garo leaders raised the demand for hill state to be carved out of Assam Hills. The Mizos were motivated to raise the demand for independence. The Constituent Assembly of India was fully conscious of these ethnic aspirations of the tribes of Assam hills and devised the district level autonomy in the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The Assam hill leaders cautiously accepted it while the Nagas out rightly rejected it though the basic points pertaining to land and natural resources, customary laws and judicial process incorporated in the 9 points agreement were accepted in the Sixth Schedule of constitution (Kabui, G: Ibid: 211). The NNC revolted for an independent Nagaland. The extremist wing of NNC under the leadership of Phizo declared independence on August 14, 1947. The 1951 general election was boycotted by the Nagas and instantly struggle for an independent Nagaland began in 1954. On 1st August of 1960, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru announced in the Parliament to make the Nagaland as the 16th state of the Indian Union (Das, N. K.: 1983: 45-46). However, the leaders of the extremist wing of the NNC remained underground. The formal talks between the Government and the Nagas began in 1964. The efforts to establish peace culminated in the signing of the Shillong Accord on November 11, 1975 and the underground leaders who voluntarily signed on behalf of the Federal Authorities accepted Nagaland as an inalienable and undisputable part of the Indian Union. But the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), a secessionist outfit continued the fighting for independent Nagaland and most recently this outfit is on cease-fire agreement with the Government of India paving the way for further solution to the Naga problems (Das, N. K.: Ibid: 47-51).

In the state of Manipur also there were unrest and revolts even from the British period such as the Kuki rebellion and Zeliangrong movement surfaced during the British rule. Manipur was given statehood in 1972 but the problem continued and even to these day tribal movements for autonomy is on. The insurgency groups again troubled Manipur and the outfits such as Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA) formed in 1978 by N. Bissesar and the Peoples' Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK) led by Tulachandra created huge unrest in the state. But, at present, both the groups are being brought under control by the Government (Bhattacharjee, C: 1996: 8).

The indigenous tribals of Tripura by and large being dominated by the non-tribals during and after the independence still continued to be in a very miserable and dismal condition. Since the economic and political powers have passed on the non-tribal populations, the tribals finding no alternative for survival started several movements ranging from autonomy to insurgent movements to drive out the non-tribals from Tripura. Several underground militant outfits such as Sangrek led by Anant Reang, Tripura National Volunteers (TNV) etc. began insurgency movements. Violence broke out in Tripura in 1979. Ultimately an agreement was signed between the Union Government, the Tripura Government and the TNV leaders which brought an end to the insurgency movement in Tripura (Bhattacharjee, C: Ibid: 8-9). The Language Bill of Assam, which was tabled in the Assembly on October 10, 1960, was strongly opposed by all the hill tribes. The All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) was formed with their demand for a separate state within the republic. The APHLC continued their non-violent movement in September, 1968 and finally the Assam Reorganization Bill was introduced on December 15, 1969 to form Meghalaya as an autonomous state within Assam and it achieved the status of a full-fledged state in 1972.

The present state of Mizoram also had witnessed a series of insurgency movements. Lushai Hills District, as it was known before, received the status of District Council in 1952 and dissatisfied with this minimum fulfillment, the Mizo Union began the demand for autonomy in the same year. The Hmar community withdrew its support from the Mizo Union and began identifying themselves as a distinct tribe of Mizoram. They, consequently, demanded an Autonomous District Council for themselves within Mizoram. The language issue in Assam led to the formation of AHPLC which also included the members of Mizo Union. However, they withdrew their membership from the APHLC in 1962 (Bhattacharjee, C: Ibid: 9-10). The social welfare organization - The Mizo National Famine Front (MNFF) that was floated during the worst famine days in Mizoram - was renamed Mizo National Front (MNF) to give it a political impetus. The MNF got the assistance from the neighbouring Bangladesh (elsewhere East Pakistan) which supplied them arms to sustain their movement for a sovereign state. The Mizos, who were not with the MNF, became gradually dissatisfied with the State Government's attitude towards them and demanded a separate state within the republic. In February 1966, the MNF and the Mizo National Army (MNA) began insurgent activities when the Pataskar Commission recommendation to establish an Autonomous Council for hill people was not accepted by the Assam Government (Bhattacharjee, C: Ibid: 10). The Mizo insurgent activities continued for ten years but ultimately came to an end with an honourable understanding between the government of India and the secessionist Mizo leaders with the signing of the peace accord on July 1976 and finally Mizoram received Statehood in February, 1987 (Goswami, B. B. & Mukherjee, D. P.: 1983: 146).

The language policy of Assam Government was not acceptable to many non-Assamese communities including the Karbi-Dimasas. A memorandum, therefore, was submitted to the Prime Minister of India by the Mikir and North Cachar (N.C.) Hills Action Committee in November 1980, demanding an Autonomous State comprising of Karbi-Anglong and N.C. Hills. In 1981, a Separate State Demand Committee (SSDC) was formed under the presidentship of Dhaniram Rongpi (Bhattacharjee, C: Ibid: 10). This committee too demanded a separate state through a memorandum to the Prime Minister of India. In 1986, the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) was set up. The Karbi Students' Association (KSA) joined hands with the ASDC, who together laid stress on an autonomous state for Karbi-Anglong and N.C. Hills. A mass-based movement began and in January 1990, the ASDC and KSA jointly submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister, V.P. Singh, and in March in the same year they submitted an ultimatum to the Chief Minister. In 1991, the United Peoples' Conference (UPC) emphasized on full-fledged State. The State Government declared in 1992 that the District Council's power would be extended to over thirty-two additional subjects. Though it was appreciated by the ASDC-KSA, they refused to withdraw the ongoing movement for an autonomous state (Bhattacharjee, C: Ibid: 10-11).

The dynamics of plains tribal movements show as a product of contradictions introduced by the colonialist and the perpetuation of the same in the post-independence Assam in some form or the other. This has caused acute deprivation, frustration and deep-rooted resentment among the plains tribals. This irretrievable discontentment and deprivation of their land and forest that generated an emotional state of mind wherein the tribals were forced to move for a better alternative of equitable social order for themselves free from exploitation and injustice (Paul, M. C.: 1992, 359).

The tribal strife and identity formation movements of the post independence phase in the Northeastern area are in a way continuance of the pre Independence period but, of course, with more issues and demands coming in, while some are newborn movements with the similar kind of demand surfaced that are no less important than the earlier ones. The new movements were largely conceived from the psychology viewpoint of the concerned communities who feared the domination of an alien culture or superior culture would lead to loss their distinct identity. Referring to these identity crisis states and identity formation movements, Apurba Baruah remarks that the movements of various communities to assert and protect their ethnic identity are the most important aspects of the contemporary socio-political reality of India's North East (Baruah, A: 2005: 17). J.B. Bhattacharjee also writes that in the post - colonial period, the quest for identity in the Northeast essentially originated in the crisis of under-development. Whereas the political leadership in the states and intellectuals in general talked of the indifference or apathy (or even neglect) of the Government of India towards economic and infrastructure development of the region, the ethnic and linguistic minorities in various states gradually became vocal in alleging exploitation and deprivation of the minorities by the majority community in respective states. The cultural and linguistic supremacy of the majority community was an additional factor that cause alienations and made the minority more aware of its identity, whereas leadership of the majority community painted the threat of cultural invasions from outside and the danger of becoming minority or being swamped by the outsiders. The polarization and alienation eventually resulted in the demand for - and creation of - new states or autonomous areas within the states (Bhattacharjee, J. B.: 2011: 6)

Ethnic assertion or revival of ethnicity becomes a characteristic feature of some of the Indian tribes particularly in the post-independence period. Due to large scale interaction and expansion of educational facilities to the tribal people today, they possess quite a number of educated persons and they no longer tolerate the injustice, mal-administration and oppression. Identity formation has offered new dimensions to the exclusiveness of the ethnic groups. To attain the goal the strategy adopted varies from group to group. Some tribal took language or culture as the easy tools for demanding separate identity, while others resort to backwardness in relation to fellow communities. The avowed non-political character of such movements ends in political aspirations (Hazarika, Lohit: 2014: 6). Assam is a land of diversity and home of diverse ethnic groups. The culture, language and customs of ethnic groups contributed considerably over the centuries to the growth and development of a composite Assamese society through a process of socio-cultural fusion. Independence made Assamese the dominant group in socio-economic and political sphere of Assam. Therefore, the Assamese tried to safeguard this social space by imposition of Assamese language on its diverse people and in that process gave rise to political conflicts around identities in Assam. In the years following independence, Assam had witnessed a number of identity movements including Bodo identity assertion (Deka, H. M.: 2014: 6). The Bodo leadership emerged at that point of time was no exception to this idea of feelings and eventually developed a strong sense of alienation in the light of their socio-economic and political backwardness and deprivation for which they held the high class Assamese Brahmin ruling group responsible. Vastly apprehensive of losing their identity by the aggressive assimilating policy of Assamese ruling class, the educated middle class began mobilizing themselves in the form of different organizations to safeguard their community which solely played determining role in the Bodo identity formation (ABSU: 1998: 22-26). The Bodo movement did not emerge out of a vacuum. It was the product of a long historical process of identity formation among the Bodos that started in the colonial period and became gradually assertive in the post-independence period. The twentieth century brought about some momentous changes in the collective life of the tribe. The spread of education led to the emergence of a small number elite class which felt the need to reform the Bodo society to save it from complete extinction and from caste-Hindu domination (Deka, H. M.: Ibid: 6).

The Socio-Political Movements of the Bodos are also basically characterized by the manifestation of assertive political demand for changing the existing political order through identity articulation vis-a-vis other community developments agenda. It was in the late 20th century when the social movement of the Bodos exerted its greatest force with its political character (ABSU: 2001: 1).

4. CONCLUSION

Thus, it is witnessed that consequently the North-Eastern region was also a hot bed and breeding ground for many uprisings and movements beginning from the Colonial period and till to this date. This region, like elsewhere in India, witnessed anti-colonial and anti-foreigner movements, movements against encroachers, socio-religious movements, political self-autonomy, statehood, separatist-secessionist, insurgency movements etc. Though, most of the past movements disappeared and few became insignificant, yet, some of the old movements along with new born movements in the region still holding strong position, particularly in the Brahmaputra Valley where many more new ethno-political agitations are gaining ground even today.

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