Research Article

Contesting Hierarchies and Multiple Identities: Conflict and Development in Bodoland

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Abstract: The post-colonial Indian state, the colonial legacy of communalism and various exclusivist identity-related movements have been significant forces in the Assamese political arena. Consequently, the displacement of the Assamese population has been greatly influenced by their exertion at specific junctures. Ethnicity, which becomes a fundamental element in the identification of dichotomies and emergence of conflicts rests upon symbolic resources and affective ties. Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) is one of the most ethnically disputed corridors of lower Assam. The region has attracted the attention of national and international media for one of the most large-scale ethnic displacements in post-colonial modern India. The question of being indigenous and the fear of becoming a minority in an area which was once dominated by Bodos, has led to the eruption of a movement which `later on became a violent conflict. In this paper, I shall try to address underlying issues leading to ethnic acrimony within the diverse Assamese society with reference to the historical and demographic backdrop of Bodoland. The paper seeks to de-construct the proposed models of development as a solution for conflicts. Thereby, the argument would be made for decentralization of decision-making authority and power-sharing strategy directed by local leadership. Furthermore, the paper acknowledges that the side-lining of non-dominant ethnic groups has led to the continuation of hostilities within the region. The last section highlights the significant role of civil society and the implementation of affirmative action which becomes critical for securing political rights for inadequately represented communities which may grant them political authority and social legitimacy.

Keywords: Ethnic Diversity; Conflict; Development; Post- Development.

Introduction

In Assam's endless cycle of violence, the death toll is not what matters. What ultimately matters are how many managed to escape the carnage. Such has been the ferocity and intensity of the massacre within the state over the years that casualty figures have become mere numbers to assess the terror count.

December 23, 2014, was another in a long list of shameful days that one of Northeast India's largest and arguably the country's most diverse states have gotten accustomed to. This was visible when the government failed to act despite having intelligence inputs about the breakaway militant faction of the National Democratic

Front of Bodoland (NDFB) which was planning a major strike[1]. The list is long and with time becomes normalized day by day[2].

The Bodos, who constitute the largest tribal community out of a total of 34 tribal communities in Assam, have been fighting for greater political autonomy since the early decades following independence. This dissent gathered momentum with the organisation of the Plain Tribals Council of Assam (PTCA) in the 1960s and then matured with the demand for a separate state by the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) in 1987. According to the 2001 Census, Bodos constituted 40 per cent of the total 12.41 per cent share of the Scheduled Tribe (ST) population in Assam. The Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) was established as a special territorial privilege under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution in the form of the Memorandum of Settlement of February 2003 between the Government of India, the Government of Assam and the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT). The BTC has 12 electorate members with a reserved Scheduled Tribe seat in the Lok Sabha (The Hindu, May 12, 2014[3]).

The present conflict between the Bodos and other communities (Santhal and Muslims) people in Assam is only one example of the situation prevailing within Northeast India. This region has seen the transformation of many non-violent movements aimed at self-determination into armed struggles triggering spirals of unabated violence between the state and mobilized communities. Autonomy struggles have also led to the generation of a fair amount of inter-community violence as a part of which opposing ethnic groups often target unarmed villagers. These are bound to trigger counter-narratives of ethnic discrimination which eventually lead to mobilization on the other side as well. As a result, the other communities ("minorities") also try to stake their claim within the disputed territory with a similar ferocity.

Inter-ethnic violence, in part, reflects the inherent paradox of self-determination movements, where "one nation's independence may be the beginning of another nation's oppression" (Walzer, 1992, p. 169). Migration and mixing of human beings have been ever-present processes on the planet; therefore, it is extremely difficult to find ethnically homogenous territories in which undisputed, national self-determination can be established.

This paper shall address the questions in relation to the present situation in Bodoland in Assam, a region with extreme "ethnic complexity". I will examine the much-sought measure of development for 'peacebuilding' and 'conflict resolving' in relation to the political assertions. Making arguments surrounding 'decentralization of decision-making authority' and 'power-sharing strategy' paper will acknowledge the side-lining of non-dominant ethnic groups that have led to the continuation of hostilities in the region. At last, the paper will highlight the significant role of civil society and the implementation of affirmative action which becomes

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[1] http://www.tribuneindia.com/news/the-killing-fields-of-assam/23325.html

[2] Deputy Speaker of Legislative Assembly of Assam Bhimananda Tanti gave a statement after this attack that, "Such attacks keep occurring, nothing new in it. Be it Pakistan, Bangladesh or Assam, such attacks happen despite proper security arrangements." (Source: http://www.tribuneindia.com/news/the-killing-fields-of-assam/23325.html)

[3] http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/bodo-hopes-and-minority-rights/article5998693.ece

critical for securing political rights in democratic set-ups for inadequately represented communities which may grant them political authority and social legitimacy.

The Question of 'Indigenousness': Who is and Who is Not?

The concept of "indigenous people" has recently found its way into Indian politics and has inevitably also become a rallying point. The tribes, in certain areas[4], are also referred to and refer to themselves as *Adivasis,* a Sanskrit derivation meaning "original dwellers," in translation, the indigenous people. Karlsson (2001) argues that increasing numbers of tribes have begun to use the English term "indigenous peoples," signalling an effort at self-ascription that internationalized local struggles and places local demands in relation to the indigenous peoples' movements in other parts of the world. It is this internalization, that, as the sociologist Virginius Xaxa argues, makes the term "indigenous people" particularly controversial in India today (Xaxa, 1999, p. 3590).

Leadership in internationalizing the struggle has come from a number of organizations, including the Indian Confederation of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (IOTP)[5]. ICITP demands, among other things, that the Indian Government ratifies the ILO Convention No. 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, and they further use the UN draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as a key reference in public debates and publications. According to ICITP, the scheduled tribes should, be equated with indigenous peoples and thereby should be covered by both the International Labour Organization Convention (ILO) and the UN (draft) Declaration (Bijoy, 1993, p. 1359)[6]. Identical claims have also been made by the Northeast Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Forum[7]. Various other organizations in India and internationally similarly refer to the tribes or the "scheduled tribes" as the indigenous peoples of the country (Karlsson, 2001).

The Indian Government and a number of leading sociologists and anthropologists take the opposite stance while arguing that the concept of "indigenous people" and the related international framework is not applicable in the Indian context. The Government has consistently stated that neither the tribal people nor any other particular category of people in India can be defined as "indigenous". B.K. Roy Burman, one of India's leading experts on tribal matters, supports the position of the Government and strongly criticizes the ILO and the UN Workgroup for their approach toward the issues of Indigenous Populations. He has critiqued both the tendentious composition of the committee (with, for example, very weak Asian representation) and the outcome (the ILO Convention and the UN Declaration).

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[4] '*Adivasi*' term has been used by tribes in Assam who came from the central part of India. Other tribal groups in the region do not call themselves as 'Adivasis'.

[5] 'The Indian Council of Indigenous and Tribal People' was formed in 1987, largely as an initiative by Jharkhand activists. The organization is affiliated with the World Council of Indigenous People and regularly attends their international meetings.

[6] Interview and speech by Ram Dayal Munda, President of ICITP, in Uppsala (Sweden), during a European tour, September 1994.

[7] Resolution from the Convention held in Guwahati (Assam), 28-30 September, 1994 (third paragraph, page 4).

Roy Burman argues that in order to ascertain who is to be regarded as an "indigenous people," one needs a more precise definition of the term. The UN draft Declaration still lacks such a definition. He contends that the term has a clear "Eurocentric bias" in its deployment by the UN because no European peoples seem entitled to such a status, while the majority of indigenous peoples inhabit other continents of the world, particularly Asia. He also opines that behind these organizations, there are global forces at work trying to undermine the newly independent countries in Africa and Asia (Roy Burman, 1996, p. 42; 1992, p. 32). He talks about a "double standard" that serves the hegemonic interests of the Western powers. Albeit the problem of definition is indeed real, both Govt. of India and Roy Burman's standpoint are not strong. The weakness lies in the fact that the Govt. of India itself does not define the term 'tribe' clearly. Roy Burman's double standards also become visible, as he ridicules the international work based on the undefined concept of "indigenous people", but at the same time praises the Indian Govt.'s approach which itself lacks a formal definition.

The well-known Indian social scientist, André Béteille, also questions the categorization of Indian tribal people as indigenous. Béteille points out that it is difficult to single out any category of people in India as "indigenous." The blanket use of 'indigenous people' in place of 'tribal people' is "seriously misleading" (Béteille, 1998, p.188). Béteille points toward the existing problem of defining who the tribal people are, and says that after 60 years of affirmative action, no formal definition exists and the term "tribal" merely stands for communities listed in an official schedule: the "scheduled tribes." He also argues that tribal people for centuries and millennia have co-existed with non-tribal populations and that it is impossible to draw a clear line between the two. It is also impossible to establish any definite criteria (habitat, racial traits, language, or religion) to single out the tribals.

Béteille argues that if the "idea of indigenous people" in this situation carries any meaning, the term must relate to people who in the past and the present inhabit a certain territory. But here also, difficulties arise. For example, how far can a people disperse and still be regarded as indigenous? The aspect of time must also be considered. Do people never cease to be indigenous and, regardless of historical transformations and the way they live their lives, continue to carry such an identity (Karlsson, 2001)? According to Béteille, the popularity of the new term thus relates to its "merit of political correctness" rather than its intellectual and practical usefulness (Béteille, 1998, pp. 187-191). Well-meaning advocates of "cultural survival" embrace the term without realizing its wider consequences: creating "intellectual confusion" and, worse, providing "ideological ammunition to those who would reorder the world according to claims of blood and soil" (Béteille, 1998, pp. 190-191).

As these dilations show, "indigenous peoples" is indeed controversial and not an easy notion of applying in the Indian context. In the case of Bodoland conflicts (especially Bodo-Santhal conflicts), the Bodos can claim

the historical connection of both previously and presently inhabiting the area. In contrast, the bulks of the Santhals were brought to the area as tea-garden coolies by the British and have been in their current location for a century at the most. The crucial questions are should only the Bodos enjoy the status and rights of an indigenous people or should it be applied also to the Santhals[8]? The answers are not easy and involve lots of social, economic and political discussions as well as assertions. However, the lack of definitional clarity on the concept of 'indigenous' does not seem to prevent increased use of the concept. Not only in India but in other parts of Asia same cases are coming up. International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) reported about a conference in Thailand on Indigenous Peoples in Asia with delegates from all over Asia (including India), agreed on the relevance of the term "indigenous peoples" in the Asian context and, further, that a strict definition of the term was unnecessary and that the general definition "used" in the UN system could be accepted. The conference also pointed out some useful indicators for the application of the term in Asia, such as special attachment to the land, sense of shared ancestry, distinct language/culture/spirituality/forms of knowledge, political institutions of their own, or marginalization and colonization not only by European colonial states but also by later independent states (IWGIA, 1995, pp. 33-34).

The fact cannot be denied that all around the world marginalized communities have increasingly started to identify and mobilize as indigenous peoples. The main attribution of this goes towards the issue of being recognized internationally. However, the problems with the categorization and classification of the UN and ILO framework remain unresolved.

Land Alienation and Ethnic Conflict: *Insiders vs Outsiders*

The Northeast has a long history of immigration of different ethnic groups. For a long time, it has attracted nomadic tribes from Southeast, South and inner Asia. But the distinct feature of immigration which makes it unique is that, as they entered the region, they created their specific history and myths of origin. Common to all the communities is the fact that after they arrived in the region each group developed its own identity and lived in it as inhabitants, not as colonisers running the region on behalf of another country as the British did (Fernandes and Pereira, 2005, p. 6). Besides, in pre-colonial times, migration rarely resulted in intense competition or conflict for resources because the land was abundant (Bose, 1989, pp. 38-39).

The pattern of migration changed with the British colonialist acquiring *de jure* control over the Northeast with the Anglo-Burmese Yandabu Treaty of 1826. They established *de facto* rule in stages beginning with the Brahmaputra valley and moving towards the hill areas (Datta, 1993, pp. 5-6). Thus, a distinctive feature

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[8] This question has been raised because Santhals and other tribal groups which were migrated from Central India at a point of time are categorized under Other Backward Classes (OBCs).

of the colonial age is changing land relations that continue to dominate the Northeast even today and lead to ethnic conflicts (Acharya, 1990, pp. 75-80).

Immigration has been one of the major components contributing leading to complex entanglements within the social fabric of the region which results in violent conflicts due to numerous demographic pressures and resource (mainly land) constraints. The issue of land access became so closely linked to immigration because of the influx of labourers from outside the region. The waves of immigration have also impacted the tea industry in Assam which was built on indentured labour from Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and other regions where the *Permanent Settlement 1793* and the *Zamindari* system had displaced people on a large scale (Guha, 1975, pp. 17-18).

It was followed by the immigration to western Assam from East Bengal that later became East Pakistan and Bangladesh. It began in the 1920s as a deliberate British policy to settle people in what they called wastelands that the Bodo considered their livelihood (Bose, 1989, pp. 62-64). In a similar manner, when there was excess labour some tea garden managers encouraged them to cut the forests in the neighbourhood, create *bastis* and settle down in what they called unoccupied land that communities like the Bodo considered their livelihood (Kar, 1999, pp. 32-35). According to Nag (2002, pp. 32-35), the type of migrants changed once again during the Partition in 1947. A large number of Hindu refugees whom the political situation forced to leave erstwhile East Pakistan came to the Northeast and many Muslims went to East Pakistan from this region.

Most of such conflicts that began in the colonial age were land-related and usually has an "outsider-insider" component. Post-1947 immigration intensified the conflicts built on this spirit and most of them are around the land which took the shape of political assertion later.

The British had earmarked upon the capture of Assam for tea and later for petroleum and mines and that required the massive acquisition of land. In the latter half of the 19th century, the colonial regime acquired land for tea from Ahom, Koch, Bodo, and others on highly exploitative terms while the main thrust for oil and coal comes after 1947 (Jha, 1996). Such acquisitions were central not only to the process of turning the colony into a supplier of capital and raw material but also to transform it into a captive market for the finished products of the British Industrial Revolution. In order to ensure its proper functioning, they introduced legal changes in land ownership all over South Asia (Sen, 1979, pp. 15-16). In Assam, the tools which the British used to get control over land were the 'Assam Land Act, 1834' and the 'Assam Wasteland Rules, 1838.' They defined the ownership and wasteland in such a manner that any land left uncultivated for a season could be called wasteland and taken over without compensation (Barpujari, 1996, pp. 254-258). Ramanathan (1999, pp. 19-20) provokes issues which are close to not only tribes of Assam but all over India. He ascertained that most communities of the region depended on the Community Property Resources (CPRs) but the law was individual-oriented. What

was not individually owned was considered State property. So, the CPRs could be acquired without compensation. This process explains why land agitation began in Assam much before 1947.

Changing land relations caused by encroachment has led to a new interpretation of the indigenous status in the region-specific which is the "insider-outsider" bias given to it. That turns the struggle into an ethnic conflict that began in the Bodo area with the occupation of "wasteland" by immigrants from East Bengal and later the foundation of Santhal *bastis* on what the tea estate managers called forest land (Roy, 1995, pp. 28-29). In the Northeast, the divide is between "insiders" and "outsiders" of the region, not the chronologically first tribal inhabitants as in mainland India. Thus, also some non- tribal dominant groups like the Ahom and Meitei lay claim to the status (Das Gupta, 1990, pp. 50-51).

Whatever the interpretation of the indigenous status, most conflicts are around the alienation of their livelihood resources of land, water and biodiversity, the foundation of their culture, economy and identity (Fernandes and Pereira, 2005, p. 14). The threat to the livelihood and alienation lead to hardened ethnic identities and exclusive claims over the depleted resources. In reaction to this, many ethnic communities rewrite their history in order to declare themselves the original inhabitants of a given area and lay exclusive claims to its resources (Fernandes and Pereira, 2005, pp. 14-15).

However, the importance of factors other than land alienation cannot be understated. 'Land alienation' was the 'structural cause' which was analysed and specified by scholars and journalists as the cause of violence which is embedded in the history and social structure in the area (Kimura, 2003, pp. 233-34). In addition to this, there is always some 'direct cause' which acts as a spark upon the simmering tensions resulting from 'structural cause' and turns it into a violent conflict. The direct cause is usually simpler and articulates the immediate disputes which individuals in mob observe in their daily lives.

Development as a Tool

Political economy-related explanations of development outcomes usually focus on society's polarization and degree of social conflict (Alesina, 1994). Societies that are ethnically divided are plausibly more prone to polarization and social conflict. The adverse effect of ethnic diversity on growth may stem from the political economy of the 'wars of attrition' that take place between ethnic groups (Alesina and Drazen, 1991).

The state has a peculiar approach to the development of these regions. Instead of investing in the region's infrastructure and allowing market forces to do the rest, the county's federal government pumped a huge quantum of funds to sustain the region's economy (Bhaumik, 2009, p. 231). The Vision 2020 document for the development of the North Eastern Region (NER) and the North East Council (NEC) identified three 'critical non-economic requirements' that will condition the region's economic performance:

1. Law and order, especially internal security.

2. Good governance, including governance at the grassroots through institutions of local self-government, and

3. Diplomatic initiatives with the neighbourhood of the Northeast to secure what the Minister of External Affairs has described as the 'new paradigm' where 'foreign policy initiatives blend seamlessly with or national economic development requirements.

Development as a tool to resolve or minimise ethnic conflict is a double-edged sword. It has a two-sided approach where both approaches may be complementary and contradictory to each other simultaneously. As argued above, it has been established that in a broader sense, the economy is a prime factor in evoking differences and agony between communities. Considering this fact without reflecting much, it has been sought that using development as a tool and by providing various measures of it, ethnic conflicts can be minimised. From one point of view, these arguments stand strong and have a fair position. However, if we change our position of observation, then multiple ethnic groups are subject to "the tragedy of the commons" as each ethnic group extracts from a common resource (Easterly, 2001). Bhaumik (2009, pp. 232-33) has pointed out that the contention that India has neglected the development needs of the Northeast is far from true if one were to base such an assertion on the volume of fund transfer to the region. However, he further added that much of the considerable funds from the centre have not been used to develop infrastructure that could, in turn, draw investments and create jobs.

The two crucial questions which arise after going through the data about the inflow of money in whatever form by state and its economy are whether the money would have been translated into infrastructure to build a stable economy which Bhaumik (2009) has pointed out whether it would be able to take on the on-going ethnic conflicts especially in Bodoland and in general in Northeast? To put it differently, are we seeing the divide between different ethnic groups only through the economic point of view? I agree that the economic divide and distribution of resources between different ethnic groups have further widened the gap, but this gap has translated into a more superstructural phenomenon moving away from its base from the economy and class factors. On the surface, it may be visible that the prevalent factor is the development and the gap in income or standard of living, but there are examples from all over the world that testify to the fact that mere development was never enough to fill the gap between different communities. Marx's notion of base and superstructure holds a different ground in this condition. The base in most of the events has a minimal, if not negligible role. And it is mainly the superstructure which acts as the driving force.

The second question deals with a more grassroots level issue of who would be the beneficiary of this development? Whether this development will be inclusive or not? Development cannot be counted merely in terms of per capita income or length or road or similar determinants. It should reflect on the lifestyle of the

community. As per Gandhi's vision, it should incorporate the last person of the society who is most destitute. If the process of development is not inclusive, it will only widen the gap between communities even if we assume that economic development will erase ethnic gaps.

From time onwards, development is the measure which has been used to resolve conflicts in the long term but has failed miserably to bring about any positive sustainable change. There is a need to look beyond this and think over some serious questions not only from the economic point of view but from a sociological perspective also. The reason for the origin of ethnic divides may be economic, but in due course of time, it translates into the social, cultural and political arena. To tackle this, the state agencies should look beyond the phenomenon of 'development'.

Looking Beyond Economic Measures: De-Centralization as a Measure

Political decentralization is a system of government in which there is a vertical division of power among multiple levels within the government that have the independent decision-making power of multiple levels of government over at least one issue area (Ricker, 1964; Roden, 2004)[9]. Arguments for decentralization are often criticized by those who believe that decentralization does not help in reducing ethnic conflict but increases the secessionist ideology by invoking a free reign to regional powers. However, the proponents of this point overlook that it is the ethnic conflict and secessionist forces which compel the centre to decentralize not vice versa. Brancati (2006) showed that decentralization is a useful mechanism for reducing ethnic conflicts and secessionism. By giving statistical evidence, he concluded that decentralised systems of government are less likely to experience inter-communal conflict and anti-regime rebellion than centralized systems of government.

The argument in favour of 'decentralized government' cannot be considered relevant in the case of Bodoland. After getting the status of the autonomous council in 2003, the broader procedure of decentralization had already taken place. In this context, the issue does not revolve only around addressing some provisions at the level of central, regional or local government. The roots of the problem go much deeper than that.

In any democratic structure, representation of every community especially minorities is very crucial. Democracy cannot be democratic until and unless it does not include representation from minorities whose interests are at stake. The foundation of decentralization and more generally whole democracy is this representation and inclusiveness within the economic, social, and political arena.

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[9] Political decentralization, as it is defined here, is sometimes known by different names, including federalism, see Riker (1964); policy decentralization, see Rodden (2004); or decision-making decentralization, see Treisman, 2002. Increasingly, scholars are replacing the term federalism with the term decentralization for various reasons, including the desire to consider countries that do not describe themselves as federal, such as Spain or Italy, but which have subnational governments with independent decision-making powers, as decentralized.

To ensure this representation there is a need for 'affirmative action' in the form of reserving constituencies at all levels and especially village level to ensure power-sharing between distinct groups. Considering Panchayati Raj System in non-fifth and sixth schedule areas, reservation in local village level Panchayats have played a great role at two-level: 1) at direct level- to benefit materially those who elected as a representative. This benefit comes in more tangible form and improved conditions of the family from where representatives belong, and 2) indirectly- to the community from which representatives belong.

The decentralization of decision-making (in favour of communities whose representations are not as per their population size) positions within the decentralized local government will not only help in giving them participation in policy formation and implementation at the local level but also a 'sense of belongingness' to the state and government. This sense of representation in the decision-making authorities helps the community to have the spaces under the broader framework of democracy for raising demands as well as negotiating with state and decision-making authorities for the welfare of their community.

The only development which incorporates a section of every community will be helpful in maintaining peace and prosperity. This inclusive model of development which produces a sense of representation in communities will help in resolving conflicts as well as gaps between communities. Bhaumik (2009, p. 270) articulated it in form of three strategies: 1) the aspiration of the smaller nationalities and tribes who have stopped identifying themselves with Assam's 'mainstream'; 2) the aspirations and security concerns of the minorities; 3) the aspirations of the Assam's power-holder groups.

It will not be easy to harmonize these aspirations. These aspirations will have to be expressed on negotiable grounds so that an overall solution could be worked out. These attempts should be made by the state with the help of other agencies in order to salvage the prevailing situation in Bodoland. Through the course of this, an important role would be played by civil societies and other non-state actors who would have to come to the forefront and make significant contributions.

Role of Civil Societies and Non-State Actors

If one thought of the engagement of civil societies in the peacebuilding process the question comes what are the mechanisms that link civic networks and ethnic conflicts? And why is associational engagement a sturdier wall of peace than everyday engagement? Varshney (2001, p. 375) provides answers to these questions by proposing two mechanisms- first, by promoting communication between members of different ethnic communities, civic networks often make neighbourhood-level peace possible. Routine engagement allows people to come together and form organizations in times of tension. Such organizations, though only temporary, turned out to be highly significant. Called peace committees and consisting of members of both communities,

they policed neighbourhoods, killed rumours, provided information to the local administration, and facilitated communication between communities in times of tension (Varshney, 2001).

The second mechanism which Varshney talks about allows us to sort out why associational forms of engagement are sturdier than everyday forms in dealing with ethnic tensions. If vibrant organizations serving the economic, cultural, and social needs of the two communities exist, the support for communal peace tends not only to be strong but also to be more solidly expressed. Everyday forms of engagement may make associational forms possible, but associations can often serve interests that are not the object of quotidian interactions (Varshney, 2001).

The engagement with civil societies within regions like Bodoland has to be at two levels: first to ensure interaction between two levels. During the tenure of my stay, I observed that there is a wider gap between different communities i.e., between Bodos and Santhals (or other Adivasi groups); between Bodos and Bengali-speaking Muslims; between 'Adivasis' and Muslims. Despite different groups living together for decades, people of one community in the majority of the cases do not understand the language of others. The very basic foundation of communication which translates into cultural interaction has no base. This 'cultural pretermission' by other groups creates spaces for misunderstanding, prejudices, biases and rumours. For a multi-ethnic society to subsist harmoniously, the members of different communities need to interact on a cultural level upon a common platform. That being said, the burden of maintaining this harmony does not rest solely on the shoulder of only one community, but it should be voluntary. In ensuring this cultural exchange, civil societies of the area can play a crucial role by forming associational forums where people of every society can interact and discuss. This process will lead to discontinuing further segregation of the communities and stop the phenomenon of 'othering'.

The second level of engagement of civil societies should be according to the conventional understanding of civil society i.e., acting as a connecting bridge between individuals and state (specifically in this case, between different ethnic groups and state because 'group identity' or 'community identity' has an upper hand). By ensuring this relation, civil societies will not only make relations between different communities and state more prosperous but can also minimise the hostility towards the state about the business of obstructing secessionist powers. Civil societies not only can help in reviving the traditional leadership but can also help create spaces for democratic negotiations both between state and communities and between different communities.

Conclusion

The nature, intensity and forms of expression of ethnicity are determined by various factors like the size and location of diverse, linguistic and cultural groups in the society, the strength and cohesion of their leadership, the courage, determination and nature of the leadership of the underprivileged classes, the degree of foreign influence in the society, the nature, pervasiveness and power of the dominant ideologies; prevailing social customs, traditions and cultures of the various linguistic groups. Other factors include historical patterns of the relationship between cultural groups, the socio-economic contexts in which groups make contact and patterns of group migration to the place of contact. Thus, ethnicity varies from place to place depending on the existence and significance of these factors and the combination of them. It embodies both positive and negative elements. On the positive side, it involves an appreciation of one's social roots in a community and cultural group without disparaging other groups. On the other hand, the negative aspect makes it problematic for social harmony and peace in multicultural societies (Goswami, 2001).

A multi-ethnic society with few connections across ethnic boundaries is very vulnerable to ethnic disorders and violence. What matters for ethnic violence is not whether ethnic life or social capital exists but whether social and civic ties cut across ethnic groups. Trusts based on the inter-ethnic network are more significant as compared to intra-ethnic assumptions. "Self-policing," a mechanism of peace proposed by Fearon and Laitin (1996), may well be relevant to such a segregated setting as Bodoland. Keeping in mind the discussions across the paper, it means intra-ethnic, or intra-communal, policing. If exercised by elders, by an ethnic association, or by civic organizations, inter-ethnic policing may lead to substantial results.

In this paper, I tried to deal with various issues which are related to ethnic conflicts in Bodoland. The much-discussed tool of development along with its problems and loopholes needs to be emphasized while seeking other measures for conflict resolution. As far as the latter is concerned, the resolutions of solving conflicts within inter-ethnic relations and the roles of civil society have been neglected by state agencies. In order to establish an enduring resolution to this ethnic conflict, these two measures need to be synthesized with the provisions for decentralization and distribution of decision-making power for every community.

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