

Social Exclusion and Ethnic Mobilization: A Perspective from North East India

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Abstract: Social exclusion and ethnic mobilization reinforce each other in many contexts. In the post-independent India, the nationalist leadership in connivance with the regional counterparts adopted a number of policies aimed at promoting the process of national integration in the Indian state. But in the national assimilation process, the smaller communities increasingly felt insecure about protecting their ethnic identity in the apprehension of being submerged in the bigger national identity. Hence, these suppressed ethnic communities have initiated some measures to protect and preserve their identity. The inability of successive Indian national and regional state governments to understand these diversities itself created crisis of Indian nation-state. It is worthwhile to study the problem of social exclusion to understand ethnic mobilization and extremism in the context of North East India.

Key Words: Social Exclusion, Ethnic Mobilization, Political Economy, Language Policy, Political Elite, North East India

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Social Exclusion refers to the process and outcome of keeping a social group outside the power centres and resources. It is a powerful form of discriminatory practice. Exclusion has taken the form of segregating a group of people from the social, political, economic, cultural, educational and religious domain of societal life. Further it also culminates into a system of domination and subjugation. All these processes not only lead to oppression and exploitation, but also keep certain social groups away from the mainstream development. Social exclusion may be of various kinds, such as exclusion from livelihood, exclusion from social services, welfare and security networks, exclusion from political choice, exclusion from popular organization and solidarity, and exclusion from understanding of what is happening (Wolf, 1995: 81-101). It results in the denial of access to opportunities, public goods, public offices and institutions and self respect in public spheres. Social exclusion is the inability of our society to keep all groups and individuals within reach of what we expect as a society or to release their full potentials (Power and Wilson, 2000:27). The socially excluded is deprived of social recognition, self-respect and social values. The basis of exclusion can be race, ethnicity, gender, religion, language, region, caste and so on. There is an inbuilt tendency towards social exclusion in liberal democratic states (Taylor, 1998:147). It leads to injustice to certain communities as it denies the access to public offices and primary goods (Rawls, 1971).

On the other hand, ethnicity refers to the ideas of primordialism based on descent, race, kinship, territory, language, history, etc. with distinctions from another group of people sharing certain common attributes among themselves. It is also defined as “the sense of collective belonging to a named community of common myths or origin and shared memories, associated with a historic homeland” (Smith, 1999: 262). Ethnicity is based on group identity and often invented or constructed. In certain cases, ethnic identity is intrinsically connected with language. Ethnicity is often considered as the outward expression of discrimination – discrimination in access to resources and opportunities (Yinger, 1997:169). For Paul Brass, the ethnic groups are any group of people dissimilar from other groups in objective cultural criteria containing within its members. This has become the cultural basis of ethnicity which is ‘a sense of ethnic identity to create internal cohesion and to differentiate themselves from other groups (Brass 1991: 19).

Social exclusion leads to ethnic identity crisis and in turn identity assertion. Paul Brass identified that ethnic identity formation involves three processes. Firstly, “within the ethnic group itself for control over its material and symbolic resources”, secondly, “between ethnic groups as a competition for rights, privileges, and available resources”, and thirdly, “between the state and the groups that dominate it, on the one hand, and the populations that inhabit its territory on the other” (Brass, 1991: 247). Social exclusion prevents groups from full participation in social, economic and political life and from asserting their rights. It is viewed that “ethnicity or ethnic identity also involves, in addition to subjective self-consciousness, a claim to status and recognition, either as a superior group or as a group at least equal to other groups” (Brass, 1991: 19).

The North Eastern region of India is often described as the ‘miniature India’ consisting of different races, cultures, languages and religions, leading to a diversity rarely seen elsewhere in India. With an area of about 2.6 lakh square kilometre, it is a conglomeration of around 475 ethnic groups and subgroups, speaking over 400 languages (Bhaumik, 2009: 1). The region, connected to the mainland India with a narrow corridor, consists of eight states and has international border with neighbouring countries, namely Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal, China, and Bhutan. In the international scene, it is a strategic location linked to South and South-East Asia. From internal security point of view, the region has been seen as the ‘problem child’ since the very inception of the Indian republic because the region has been experiencing law and order problems in the form of inter and intra ethnic conflicts and resultant human rights violations.

The politics of North East India has been marked by ethnicity and extremism for decades. The assertion of various ethnic identities and the policies of the Indian state in containing ethnic extremism make the region distinct from the rest of the country. The root cause of ethnic assertion can be found in the identity crisis of various tribal communities. Most of the ethnic assertions are due to ethnic groups’ veiled attempts to protect their identity, culture and language. In fact, ethnicity is a sense of ethnic awareness. Ethnic mobilization is conditioned by the overall political and economic environment. As the state operates under the laws of market economy within the broad politico-economic environment giving birth to uneven economic development, it widens the gaps among ethnic groups. Therefore, ethnicity is the outward reaction of various socio-cultural groups against the existing politico-economic system wherein either inequality or competition acts as catalyst in mobilizing people on the basis of ethnicity (Phukon, 2003: 15). In other words, the basis of ethnic assertion can be seen in two contexts. Firstly, the tribal communities’ subjective consciousness of being excluded, oppressed and marginalized. Secondly, the process of development failed to address the legitimate concerns of the people. Though after independence, the Indian state tried to integrate and assimilate various ethnic communities in the mainstream national identity, the development process generated a feeling of alienation among them. Moreover, development led to the unequal distribution of resources across the communities and regions. Thus, both non-economic (subjective consciousness) and economic (material) factors created a sense of exclusion among some ethnic communities (Bijukumar, 2013: 19-35).

In post-independent period, India’s constitutional democracy followed a policy of accommodation and assimilation and protected the interests of tribal communities by adopting special provisions. The Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution gives special privileges to the tribal communities of North East India. In spite of this, they are confronting with multiple kinds of exclusion. All these institutional mechanisms proved to be futile as in the process of nation-building some communities were left out either because of their low numerical strength or due to low bargaining power with the power structure. Though the postcolonial states initiated a number of policies to ensure ‘inclusiveness’ for the discontented communities, the efforts did not yield much result. While the state is engaging in nation-building through the construction of national identity, smaller identities move in the opposite direction, when they feel that they are about to lose their identity. In this context, various ethnic groups are seeking larger space in state and are trying to protect their peculiar identity. The state also makes provisions for the creation of autonomous district councils. In spite of all these accommodations, the state initiative to integrate all communities and groups proved to be counter-productive.

The Indian postcolonial development process tried to integrate and assimilate ethnic communities towards the mainstream development process while ignoring their cultural and economic specificities. The centralized planning and the capitalist modernization further lead to the exclusion of various tribal communities from mainstream (Biswas and Suklabaidya, 2008: 124). The indigenous way of development of the ethnic communities was disturbed by the penetration of the capitalist development leading to underdevelopment, displacement of communities from their settlement and livelihood and erosion of community life. Thus, the postcolonial modernization initiated by the newly independent India generated some kind of discontent among the communities leading towards violence (Gurr, 1970: 317; Gohain, 1997: 391). The problem of ethnicity and extremism is further aggregated by the regional consciousness aroused by elites, especially the middle class (Singh, 1998; Baruah, 1991; Sharma, 1990). Again the dominant communities allied with state power exclude certain groups from accessing resources, institutions and opportunities, generating a feeling of exclusion of other groups. In such situation, smaller ethnic communities assert for resources and opportunities. The assertion of marginalized identities and its extremist posture are giving a new direction to state politics. North East region

of India was to be reorganized in the sixties and early seventies of the last century creating a number of states such as Nagaland (1963), Meghalaya (1972), Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram (1987) to meet the demands of these ethnic groups. Even after reorganization of original state of Assam, the demand for creation of more states still continues. It is argued that the creation of separate state further fanned the fire when “various smaller and bigger communities started to demand establishment of more states; on the other hand, the state showed their inability to deliver the basic goods” (Madhab, 1999: 320). Again the ethnic mobilization assumes an extremist posture when various ethnic movement arousing emotive issues to expand its mass base among the society. Another kind of social exclusion visible is in the area of language. The introduction of the Assam Official Language Act 1960, had its repercussion on the Mizos, Khasis, Garos and Bodos, and it further reinforced the demand for separate political identity and consciousness among the divergent ethnic groups in the united Assam.

Thus, social exclusion and ethnic mobilization reinforce each other in many contexts. In the post-independent period, the nationalist leadership in connivance with the regional counterparts adopted a number of policies aimed at promoting the process of national integration in the Indian state. But in the national assimilation process, the smaller communities increasingly felt insecure about protecting their ethnic identity in the apprehension of being submerged in the bigger national identity. Hence, these suppressed ethnic communities have initiated some measures to protect and preserve their identity. Though they share common Indian identity, they equally carry their regional or in some cases sub regional or community based identities. Such regional or community based identities were not given due importance by nationalist leadership and regional ruling elite who viewed it as a threat to India’s unity and integrity; instead they used a number of coercive measures to subside these identities. The inability of successive Indian national and regional state governments to understand these diversities itself created crisis of Indian nation-state.

I. POLITICAL ECONOMY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

The North East India shows tremendous multiplicity in terms of language, caste, race, religion, ethnic groups, but there are common features which are distinctive from the rest of the country. The tribal people dominate the hilly areas while the non tribal people dominate the valleys. The post colonial Indian state continued with the Inner Line Regulation within the Nehruvian policy framework, which has a component of leaving the tribes themselves. Thus, starting from pre-colonial era to colonial and post colonial era there has been recognition of specific tribal and ethnic identities through the policies of the state. Such policy of pursuing development through political concessions and funding from the centre has drawn the region into the fold of nation-building process. However, this process sharpened the difference and unevenness between levels of progress as obtained at the national and regional level.

The North East India has been facing some of the major problems in the contemporary period. Located in a complex geo-political interface, the region has been affected by the demographic consequences of partition. The steady flow of immigrants and refugees across the border resulted into a kind of ethnic outburst throughout 60s and 70s in the last century. The issue of influx has been pitted against the problem of inequitable distribution and thereby such an issue thwarted more urgent issues of economic struggle. Lack of development compounded with ethnic difference posed severe constraint on the possibilities of attaining legitimate political and economic aspirations towards which ethnic mobilisation were directed to. Non-fulfilment of various legitimate concerns alienated large sections of ethnic communities of North East India.

Assam had to be divided into other smaller states as it was not possible to fulfil the minimal aspirations of various ethnic communities. The carving out of separate states was a restatement of self-development for the tribes, but the machinery and governance could not fully attain such a goal. The goal of welfare could not have been achieved with underutilization of funds and resources leading to a kind of under development of such newly formed states. The government machinery created only a top down administration within which the local-self governance and traditional institutions of various tribes could retain a nominal presence. It gave rise to an intense conflict between traditional institutions and state government leading to an unaccountable condition of development. The resource base of the region is gradually weaned away resulting in a displacement of communities from their life world leading to unbalanced growth.

Patnaik (1973) sheds light on the development of capitalist economy in the Indian sub-continent and the concomitant process of accumulation thus creating development in the metropolis and under development in the periphery. Bagchi (1988) makes an attempt to analyse the nature of colonial enterprises in India in order to trace the processes of primary accumulation and its impact on labourers who constitute the subjects of development. Amalendu Guha’s *Planter’s Raj to Swaraj* (1977) clearly shows that the tea industry drew upon the labour force from the regions of the country which are impoverished due to surplus extraction and primary accumulation. Sanjib Baruah (2000) shows how transfer of surplus of the tea industry to the mainland and further to England resulted into a severe contradiction between two types of resource use: *gathering of natural resources* by the indigenous people of the region versus *settled cultivation used for transfer of resources for*

economic purposes giving benefits to settlers. Misra (1980) argues that there has been a systematic exploitation of the rich resources of Assam before 1947 by the colonial rulers and since then by the Indian state. She deals extensively the features of this exploitation in the extractive industries of tea, oil and forest. She notes that one positive outcome of the popular movement in the 80s was the emergence of growing awareness of colonial pattern of the exploitation of the Assam's natural resources among the masses.

II. LANGUAGE POLICY, SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND REORGANISATION OF NORTH EAST INDIA

In independent India the language issue emerged as one of the most intransigent problems. In the wake of the reorganisation of the states on linguistic basis in 1956, a number of unilingual states were carved out in India. But even this operation could not solve the acuteness of the linguistic problem. The national problem remains unsolved leading to the emergence of various problems like communalism, separatism and linguistic chauvinism both at the state and regional levels. The Assamese elite also became increasingly assertive of their socio-cultural and linguistic rights in the post-independent period. Indeed, they intended to adopt certain measures to establish their language in its rightful place. The *Asom Sahitya Sabha* campaigned for recognition of Assamese as the state language and language of education in 1950 and celebrated July 16 as "State Language Day". Thus, "the *Assamisation* design of the governing Caste-Hindu Assamese elite caused nightmarish experiences" (Datta 1993: 19) for the ethnic groups in Assam. In April 1954 'Cachar States Reorganisation Committee', submitting a memorandum to States Reorganisation Commission on the issue said that "something has been rotten in the State of Assam since independence which has fouled the air and alienated from the Assam administration every other group of people except the Assamese. That rotten thing is the idea – "Assam for the Assamese." (Memorandum of Cachar State Reorganisation Committee, 1954). However, the *Asom Sahitya Sabha* gave an ultimatum to government to declare Assamese as the State language in 1959.

Amid intense controversy, the Government of Assam finally introduced the State Official Language Bill of 1960 in the Assembly. A section of the Bengali elite of Assam were, however, not happy with the Assam Official Language Act. The Nikhil Assam Banga Samiti submitted a memorandum to the President of India on 5th April 1961, with a request to repeal the Act. They formed the Cachar Zilla Gana Sangram Parishad, which decided to launch a civil disobedience movement (Katoky 1997: 136). A similar movement was also organized in the Brahmaputra Valley by the dominant section of the Assamese leading to acute law and order problem. Under such a situation, the All India Congress Committee which met at Durgapur deputed Lal Bahadur Sastri to Assam as peacemaker. After meeting parties to the dispute, Sastri formulated his proposals, which brought to an end the language conflict in Assam if not permanently. Besides Bengalis, the hill leaders also opposed the proposal of imposing Assamese as the official language upon them. In fact, they felt terribly insecure of their interest within a greater Assam. Indeed they were never happy with the dominant leadership of the plains during the British rule. The British incorporated these tribal areas with Assam and conceded traditional pattern of governance. They possessed their own language and culture which was characteristically distinct from the plains. After independence, the sense of deprivation and exploitation by the plains reached its extreme point in the minds of hill people. This section, in a memorandum submitted to the State Reorganization Committee complained that:

The Assamese who happened to be the single majority community in a heterogeneous state try not only to dominate others in all affairs of administration of the state, but also try to impose their language on the non-Assamese. (Memorandum of United Mizo Freedom Organization, 1954)

Thus, it appears that hills were not bound with the plains by any ties of language and religion. So, the hill elite were very much affected when Assam Official language Bill was passed. The Assembly debates in Assam reflect their attitude towards the Bill. The passage of the bill, they thought, would lead to the separation of the hill tribes from the plains and felt very much disturbed with the language policy of the Government of Assam which reinforced the demand for separate political identity in the hills and in due course Nagaland, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram were formed reducing the size of Assam. The role of Language Act in the development of Hill State movement was analysed by S.K. Chaube in the following way:

The Hill State movement was not really born until the middle of 1960, when the hill parties were in real disarray. It was the language issue which helped them to unite on a common platform, following the outbreak of violence between the Assamese speaking and Bengali speaking communities in the Assam plains. (Chaube 1973: 127)

Again, in the early seventies, the dominant Assamese elite wanted to make 'Assamese' as the sole medium of instruction in the state as a measure of protecting their lingo-cultural interest on a firm basis. In view of this, Gauhati and Dibrugarh universities in conformity with the language policy of the union Government decided to switch over to the regional language, i.e. Assamese as the medium of instruction in the state. However, they decided to retain English as an alternative medium of instruction giving option to write answers in any of the three languages, i.e. Assamese, English and Bengali. But the dominant section of the Assamese

elite did not like the decision of the universities. On the other hand, a section of the Bengalis demanded the 'Bengalee' not only as the medium of instruction but also as medium of examination. As a result, a movement and counter-movements were launched in Assam leading to acute law and order problem.

Besides, the Bengalis, some other ethnic groups, such as the Bodos, the Karbis, the Misings, and the Tiwas, who have been maintaining their lingo-cultural identity, were also not happy to accept Assamese as the medium of instruction. The decision of the AGP government to impose Assamese language as compulsory third language upon the non-Assamese medium students in secondary schools, through a Circular given by the Secondary Education Board of Assam on February 28, 1986 was resented by All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU). Gradually the tribals, who greatly contributed in Assamese nation building process, started demanding their own language as the medium of instruction which they thought was the symbol of identification of their communities. Even some of them demanded separate or autonomous states as a measure of maintaining their distinct lingo-cultural identities.

The Bodos who may be described as the aborigines of the Brahmaputra valley became largely organized in a bid to maintain their distinct lingo-cultural identity. This would be possible, they believed, only in a separate Bodo state. Therefore, they started revitalizing their demand for a separate state. Besides the Bodos, the two hill districts of Assam, North Cachar and Karbi Anglong also did not like the linguistic "chauvinism" of the Assamese. In fact, a series of meetings were held and decisions taken in these meetings. The leaders of Mikir and N.C. Hills district met in a joint conference at Diphu on 18th February 1973, after the introduction of Assamese as the sole medium of instruction, and submitted a memorandum to the then Prime Minister of India and complained that: The "Assamese Junta" are determined to "Assamize" them by forcing Assamese upon them and wiping out their own language and culture which they cherish to develop (Memorandum on separate state by Mikir and North Cachar Hills, 1973).

Thus it seems that the people of the hill districts of Assam felt that Assamese language and culture were sought to be imposed on them by the dominant section of the Assamese though they wanted to develop their own language and culture. They became unhappy with the introduction of Assamese as the medium of instruction and what they called "naked imposition", which they were not prepared to tolerate and to lose their distinct tribal identity. To them, the Assamese people had gone too far, so the only solution for the hill people was the separation from Assam and to have their own state at whatever price. Thus, it is obvious that the medium movement greatly articulated the people of the Karbi and N.C. Hills to demand for an autonomous state under Article 244 of the constitution.

The Misings, previously known as Miris, who constitute a major fraction of the tribal population also demanded the recognition of their language as medium of instruction. In fact, the introduction of the Bodo and the Karbi languages as medium of instruction at the primary school level inspired the Misings to demand recognition of their language as medium of instruction. The medium movement of 1972, further reinforced the linguistic demand of the Misings. Besides the Misings, the Rabhas, the Lalungs, the Tiwas also started demanding recognition of their language as the medium of instruction. Thus, the Assamese urge for linguistic identity not only expedited the demands of the tribals for either separate or autonomous states but also different non-tribal groups to raise voices for recognition of their language for the purpose of maintaining their respective distinct identities. In fact, most of the ethnic elite believe that maintenance of distinct identity is necessary for all round development of their communities. Hence, as a measure of maintaining their distinct identity, they want to preserve and protect their language and culture as a distinctive mark of making identification as well as distinction. When such desire of small group remains unfulfilled because of the dominance of bigger linguistic groups, the former naturally develop a sense of alienation leading to a demand of either a separate or autonomous state. However, the demands of the tribals, ethnic and minority groups in Assam are not the direct offshoot of the linguistic chauvinism of the Assamese but it undoubtedly contributed a lot in reinforcing such demands. Anyway, in order to get rid of lingo-cultural hegemony of the Assamese, the diverse groups residing within the state of Assam are revitalizing their movement of separate or autonomous state than ever before. In this way, linguistic based nationalism and keeping certain ethnic groups away from mainstream way of development led to the effect of social exclusion as well as the disintegration of the state of Assam in the post-independent period.

III. SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND ETHNIC MOBILISATION: UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF ELITES

The ethnic assertion of the Nagas, Mizos, Tripura tribals, Meities of Manipur, the Assamese movement on the issue of infiltration, the assertion of the Khasis, Garos, Karbis in the hills, the Bodos, Kacharies, Tiwas, Rabhas, Misings, Ahoms, Chutias, Deories, Koch Rajbanshis, Moran, Matak in the plains are the manifestation of the urges and aspirations of these ethnic communities against exclusion and for their all round development. These assertions may be understood as a form of elite conflict (Phukon 2003: 35). As a result of exposure to Christianity and western education, there emerged articulate tribal elites in the hills. They

acted as opinion builders and motivators of socio-political awareness among the hill tribal. At the advent of independence, they even laboured under a suspicion that the rule of 'white people' in the hitherto 'excluded areas' would be replaced by their 'more advanced' neighbours of the plains in free India (CAD, Vo. XI, p. 711). By and large, the hill elite believed that in a free India the plainsmen would be in an advantageous position to exploit them on a more permanent basis. This feeling of the hills was mainly shared by the newly emerged western educated hill elite and the tribal chiefs. They thought that if the hill areas were completely integrated with the plains, they would lose their traditional privileges and socio-political dominance in the hills. As a measure of meeting the aspiration of the hill people, the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution was introduced to create an Autonomous District Council in addition to other measures for protecting their interest. As such, the Nagas, Mizos, Khasis, Jaintias, Karbis and Dimas Kacharis enjoyed autonomy in respect of managing their affairs. But gradually they started realising that the autonomy accorded to them through this statutory provision was not adequate to safeguard their interest under the Assamese elite dominated Assam administration (Memorandum of UMFO, 28 May, 1954). The language policy of Assam Government (1960) making the Assamese as the Official Language of the state further alienated the hill tribal from the Assamese. In fact, they became concerned with their oppressed status in the Assamese elite dominated undivided Assam. As a matter of fact, there was a compulsion on the part of the hill elite to agitate not primarily because of threat to their own ethnic identity, language, tradition and culture but because they felt that their individual right in the political sphere was virtually threatened. Indeed, the personal ambition of the hill elite was very much involved in the Hill State movement in the sixties which aroused the tribal sentiment in the hills against the Assamese (Phukon 2003: 40). Subsequently, therefore, the demand for creating new hill states in the North East had to be conceded.

After independence of India, the Assamese ruling class use the state machinery for their interest and try to establish their socio-cultural hegemony over the entire Assamese society. Further, it has always been reluctant to share power and benefits even with the other oppressed and backward section of the Assamese nationality. As a result, the ethnic communities, who once considered themselves as a component of the larger Assamese society and had assimilated with the Assamese, are now trying to revive their own identity and demand for political autonomy because of their oppressed status and hatred against the caste Hindu dominated Assamese ruling class (Hussain, 1997). The autochthon tribals and other ethnic groups are not prepared to accept the dominance of the Assamese caste Hindu elite. This feeling manifests in the movements for distinct identity launched by the ethnic groups under the leadership of their respective emerging educated elite. The intolerant attitude of the Assamese ruling class and opinion builders of Assam to the movements further deteriorates the situation.

It may be noted that the tribals remained much more backward socially, economically and even politically than other sections of the Assamese society, in spite of being the first natives of Assam. In the post-colonial Assam the Assamese ruling class were not much concerned with the problem faced by the plains tribals. They were experiencing the problem of land alienation, poverty, indebtedness, unemployment and political oppression. The hill tribes were given autonomy in managing their own affairs under the provision of Sixth Schedule but similar facilities were not extended to the plain tribals. Although, the plain tribals dominated areas were classified as 'Tribal Blocks' and 'Tribal Belt' to protect the tribals from the encroachment of non-tribals into their areas, the non-tribals were allowed to acquire land and settle in the tribal areas. In view of this, since the late sixties of the last century, the plains tribals became more conscious and articulate about distinct ethnic identity and started utilising their distinctness as a measure of gaining political power and removing their socio-economic backwardness. The issues of language and culture and other primordial factors came to be articulated in the wake of emerging conflict between the elites at various levels because of clash of interest. The conflict of interest generated by a sense of deprivation and negligence motivates the elites of the ethnic communities to bring about emotional integration in their respective communities so that they can fight against the dominant community. Thus the elite tend to generalise their conflicts and build up movements mobilising their respective communities politically.

It is worthwhile to mention that upper caste dominant Assamese middle class acquired the hegemonic position not only in Assam but also in the entire North East. The nationalism developed in Assam under the leadership of this class and therefore it became the dominant nationality in the region. As a result, the ideas, values and culture of this class came to be imposed on other ethnic communities. This generated considerable resentment among the non-dominant ethnic groups which culminated in the formation of different organisations among them. Initially the dominant Assamese elite did not show much interest in the cultures of the ethnic groups. But when the emerging educated elite of these groups began to assert their distinctness, the Assamese ruling class wanted them to be assimilated with the so called main-stream Assamese culture. Therefore, they started pressing for recognition of Assamese as the official language of the state. To counteract this move the emerging elite of these communities started mobilising their respective communities in a bid to resist the cultural expansionism of the dominant section of the Assamese (Baruah and Sarmah, 1991: 20). The Bodo elite were the first to resist the Assamese hegemony. They considered the dominant Assamese elite as their

immediate enemy and the big brotherly attitude of the later further added fuel to the fire. As such a similar situation arose even in the case of other tribal and non-tribal ethnic groups such as the Misings, Karbis, Tiwas, Rabhas, Deoris, Chutias and Ahoms and so on. However, under the present leadership of either dominant Assamese elite or of the ethnic elite a drastic change of the basic socio-economic structure of the country is not possible because of their bourgeoisie class character (Phukon, 2003: 46). They mobilise the people of their respective communities with emotive slogan mainly for the purpose of their own interest. In fact, they project their interest as the interest of the entire community. Nevertheless, the existing exclusion and conflict among the diverse communities of North East India may be removed to some extent by mobilisation of the masses of all sections of people far beyond the interest of dominant Assamese elite and the elite of the ethnic communities as well as to end exploitation of the Indian State.

IV. CONCLUSION

In North East India, social exclusion and ethnicity reinforce each other in many contexts. The prevailing exclusionary tendencies show that most of the institutional means of accommodation such as granting autonomy to particular ethnic groups in a particular region and even the formation of separate state for some communities would not yield desired results. The exclusionary tendencies created by both the state and the dominant community lead to the ethnic assertion of specific ethnic communities. However, such exclusionary practices cannot be tackled by mobilization of ethnic communities and identity politics but 'recognizing' the specificities and material needs of community through the mechanism of the state. The state needs to adopt more conciliatory path and bring the alienated sections into the mainstream. Peace, development and proper linkages are bound together and are intrinsic to harmony in the region. It is to be noted that resurgence of ethnic identity and persistence of ethnic politics should be seen as prerequisites for distributive justice, to which no nation state can neglect. Indian path of institutional adjustments aimed at winning over and changing the opinion of hostile ethnic groups and extending special safeguards to these ethnic groups can help in solving the problems of social exclusion to a great extent.

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