Migration and the Problematic of Identity Formation in the North East India

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Abstract

In the recent times, the question of identity has gained prominence, especially in the North Eastern region of the country. This is more so because of the changing / evolving demography of the states of the region due to intra-national/inter-national migration of people from neighbouring states/countries, emergence of hybrid cultures with the advent of globalisation and the tenets of counter-culture voicing its presence on the face of social and cultural de-territoriality. This phenomenon is increasingly leading to a feeling of socio-cultural insecurity, particularly amongst the indigenous people of the region as they feel that their traditional practices, age-old conventions and rituals are threatened by the onslaught of an alien culture to which they cannot relate themselves. The picture becomes more acute if we take into account the vociferous protests and demands raised by various non-political organizations of the region as against the conspicuous apathy and lack of a strong political will to solve the problem. Against such a backdrop of cultural flux, there have been attempts at defining/re-defining, positioning/re-positioning, protecting/’shielding’ their identity (-ies) through a host of societal, organizational and in some cases, governmental initiatives. However, this emerging trend has resulted in fashioning some uncomfortable binaries as xenophobia as against acculturation, cultural and linguistic purity as against cultural and linguistic dynamicity, et al. As there cannot be any definite or stable marker to delineate the framing/constituting/ forming/ making of an ‘indigenous identity,’ a viable option could be to explore various possibilities to protect and preserve the indigenous elements of a given culture, while making it dynamic by embracing the new and emerging cultures.

The article would aim at addressing some of these issues while attempting to morphicate identity against the backdrop of these parameters.

Introduction

The advent of globalization has, on one hand, ensured an integration of the markets worldwide with an access to hitherto unexplored regions and products, the same, on the other hand has compressed the spatial and geographical dimensions, thereby rendering the fixities of space and place obsolete. This newfound global interconnectedness has challenged the perceived historicities and opened up novel opportunities. The transnational flow of people and commodities has significantly loaded the term glocal with the denotations of synergy and homogeneity.

While globalization is viewed largely as an integrating force of markets and people, it has also raised certain uncomfortable questions pertaining to identity, race, culture, et al. The growing tendencies towards ethnoconvergence has simultaneously placed equal importance on the position of ethnic indigenuity and cultural singularity, as the questions of centrality and marginality, the superior and the subjugated have gained prominence.

Against such a mutually contesting backdrop, defining, presencing and contextualizing identity has become problematic.

The term ‘identity’ can be defined as ‘the search for the meaning of the individual in relation to the self and the society.’ 1 The stated relationship between the individual and the society is manifested within certain essentialist parameters as race, culture, ethnicity, region, religious affiliation, etc., which forms the ‘core’ of the self. 2 These parameters are seen as the attributing factors of certain characteristics which makes an individual ‘belong’ or affiliate to a particular group or negotiate a notion of ‘social and cultural self’ for himself. However, with the emerging local scenario, the concept of identity has become fluid, unstable and incoherent. This crisis of identity is re-presented in the
forms of ‘struggle’ (or ‘unrest’ as interpreted/perceived by different quarters) to preserve the indigenuity of one’s cultural identity as seen, especially amongst the Fourth World communities. Although the spate of such rebellions (which emerged as a reaction against the colonization and subjugation of the native cultures) are primarily concentrated in the Fourth World communities spread across Asia, the Pacific region and Africa, there are, however, multiple attempts at re-interpreting and loading the term ‘culture’ with the reinforced notions of “ways of life.” Such systemic or organizational impositions are apparent in many indigenous American organizations in support of the natives or attempts by Australian Aborigine organizations of 1960s in the defense of their land and culture, or the right wing political organizations advocating Hindutva as ‘the preferred way of life’ in India.

Migration and Cultural Identity
The quest for cultural identity is prominent in the states of the North East India with several organizations pitching in with the demands of ‘preserving’ indigenous culture(s) on the face of ever-increasing migration of “outsiders” into the region. With cultural assimilation and subsequent acculturation being the inevitable results of migration of people from one region to another, defining ‘indigenous identity/-ies’ in the North East in general and Axom in particular has acquired serious portentions. Historically, North East India had witnessed migration right from the ancient times. The annexation of then undivided Axom by the Tai Ahoms has actually contributed in the frammation of the greater Axomiya identity. This was reinforced politically and geographically as the Ahoms ruled Assam for around six hundred years. This has helped in embedding and shaping the Axomiya tradition to a large extent, the remnant of which is still evident in the practice of certain rituals and practices, the titles bestowed upon individuals depending upon the nature of their professional expertise, etc. However, the rigidity of the stated and ‘defended’ position on indigenous identity of the inhabitants of the North East India got its first major challenge with the coming of the Christian Missionaries in order to proselytize the natives. They started with the translation of literary works, both religious and canonical, into native language and gradually, shifted their focus on to religion. The process got a major boost with the introduction of the English Language as a medium of instruction in most of the educational institutions in the region, as there is a conspicuous lack of a common script or language for this predominantly tribal (barring Axom and Manipur) region. This has paved the way for a protracted shift from the age old customs and traditions which are deeply rooted in the practice of religion. This is glaringly evident with the most of the believers and the practitioners of the Donyi Poloism amongst some of the communities in Arunachal Pradesh. While the older generation still believes in the tenets of Donyi Polo, there is, however, an increasing shift towards Christianity amongst the youth. This has resulted in a growth of religious hybridity in families and communities with a few members still sticking to the age old customs on the face of a new religion embraced by the rest. Thus, religion as a marker of identity too has been contested thereby making it unstable and fluid. In the recent times, while there have been the echoing sounds of civilian, market and cultural integration in the name of globalization, the indigenous people of North East India finds such integrative forces challenging the very core of their identity.

The distinction between the “outsiders” and “insiders” as raised by certain organizations of the region are enshrined in the principles of central and marginal/other, emphasized by the policies and agendas practiced and propagated by the government at the “center.” This perceived/practiced “otherization” is rooted in history and politics of the region. Historically, the region was annexed to the Indian Union through various treaties signed during the pre-independence era. Culturally too, the region, though commonly referred to as the Northeast, has a limited commonality in beliefs and customs amongst the people of the region. Due to the communicational inaccessibility and geographical insularity, the entire region remained almost untouched and unaffected by the changes ‘outside’ its geo-political periphery. The last two decades have seen the region opening up to the world, attracting the people to its bountiful natural resources and vast tourism potential. With this began the exotization and commoditization of the North East. The interaction that followed between the natives and visitors have
resulted in a “culture shock” with the natives barely managing to catch up to the level of the “outsiders.”

Migration in the North East is primarily evident in two ways: firstly, there is inward migration with illegal influx of people from Bangladesh providing cheap labour, and displacement of people from other states of the country, primarily to set up business establishment in the region; secondly, displacement with people moving out of the region in search of job and education. Under both circumstances, cultural interaction takes place providing optimum opportunities for assimilation and acculturation, which compounds the problem of delineating indigenuity in terms of host or native culture. For instance, the illegal influx of the Bangladeshis and their settlement in and around Char areas of Axom has resulted in maximum assimilation in terms of their traditional belief and practices with the native inhabitants of the region, starting with the young generation of these migrants having their basic and elementary education in Axomiya medium schools established in the region. Almost similar is the situation with the Chakma and Hajong refugees settled in Changlang and Tirap districts of Arunachal Pradesh bordering Myanmar vis-à-vis the native Arunachalees in the said districts. Similarly, people coming from other parts of the country into the North East to set up business establishments too play a culturally interactive role exemplified through the involvement of the local people in their festivals and vice versa.

Illegal Migration into the North East

The history of the North East India is chequered with migrations and displacement from within the country and outside. While most of these movements originated from the east, but the Hindu Axomiya people traces its origin to the Central India. Apart from the Ahoms, the other notable communities which migrated to the region include the Burmese, Nepalis, Tibetans, Bengalis, Chakma and Hajongs, the Santhals, etc.

The Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaty of 1950, with almost similar agreements signed between the two governments in 1951 and 1956 facilitated the settlement of Nepalis in Axom. However, a majority of Nepalis were brought to India with the purpose of constructing roads and railways into the erstwhile NEFA in the wake of Indo-China War of 1962. Similarly, the Santhals too were brought from the Central India to work in the tea gardens of Axom.

A significant section of the Singpho people too had migrated to the bordering districts of Arunachal Pradesh from the Burmese side. But the majority of the Burmese migration resulted during the post World War- II period into the states of Manipur, Nagaland and Mizoram. However, the problem of migration and refugees compounded with the large scale migration of Tibetans from Tibet after 1959, when the fourteenth Dalai Lama was forced to flee Tibet and seek shelter in the neighbouring India. The 1960s had also witnessed the settlement of the Chakma and Hajong refugees in Arunachal Pradesh from the Chittagong Hill Tracts of the erstwhile East Pakistan.

With no solutions in sight, the problem, however, has been magnified with the illegal influx of the Bangladeshi migrants to the region with Axom providing as the gateway. This has resulted in various organizations across the region demanding immediate identification and deportation of these illegal migrants from the region. The recent scrapping of the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunal) Act, 1983, by the Supreme Court of India is a positive culmination of a long drawn struggle waged by the All Assam Students Union (AASU) against the migrants. These people were initially brought to Axom as peasants as early as in 1837 to cultivate the vast tracts of the fertile land. While these migrants started settling in the available spaces in the present day Axom and nearby areas, the government of the day and the subsequent governments did not take any pertinent step in protecting the indigenous identity of the natives of the region. The problem further compounded with the political parties across the spectrum provided patronage and started ‘using’ the community as a potential vote bank. The problem of Bangladeshi influx was highlighted way back in two memorandums submitted to the Rajya Sabha by Janta Party leader Golap Borbora and noted writer Dr. Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya which states:

“No sovereign nation can permit the influx of foreign nationals into its territory. But the North Eastern region of the country in general and Assam in particular have been experiencing the area being
utilised as the dumping ground for a large numbers of foreigners being vomited out by a neighbouring country since a long time. Besides, a large number of such foreigners were appeased with political rights by entering their names in the voters' list of the state for petty political games at the instance of the vested political forces that were at the helm of affairs since Independence... the problem of infiltration of foreigners in large scale has reached such a stage that unless immediate drastic steps were taken to solve it, the state of Assam, and for that matter, the entire North Eastern Region, faces the danger of being over run by foreigners in the next few years.”

This problem has proved to be an Achilles’ heel for the civil society of the North Eastern states in negotiating with the question of identity.

Conclusion:
Globalization and the processes of migration and displacement have been responsible for making the North Eastern part of India the proverbial ‘melting pot,’ with people subscribing to different cultures, beliefs, customs and traditions co-mingling with the native culture(s) thus, making it vibrant and accommodative. The access to education, technology and communication too has contributed positively in incorporating the changes which comes with the interaction of different cultural traditions. However, while addressing and maintaining the notions of dynamism as associated with the growth and progress of cultures, it needs to be seen that without diluting the root of the native or host culture, the identity of a community is framed by adopting a comprehensive approach which will take into account the changes being effected and the culture progresses in tune with the demands of a fast changing world.

NOTES:


1. ibid.
2. Wade, P., (1999), ‘Cultural Identity: Solution or Problem?’, The Institute for Cultural Research, (Monograph series No. 34), London
3. ibid.
4. ibid.
8. ibid.