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## [North East Page]

### The politics of who's a 'minority'

Rajesh Dev

IT seems the apparent “diversity in our unity” is at the moment being increasingly stressed contrary to the idiom of “unity in diversity” that appears passé. This is not at all incongruous in a context where social and political dialogue emphatically asserts the primacy of “difference” based on one’s ethnicity, gender, religion and caste, as the logic for making political claims and devising policy prescriptions. Of course, it is of sparse relevance that in this discourse, each one of us thoughtfully disregards differences resulting from class and its consequences.

As such, when the Union cabinet appears to be considering the introduction of the proposed 103rd amendment to the Constitution that would debar Christians from enjoying the legal status of “minority” in many states of eastern India we can hear voices of dissent against such a move. Such dissenting reactions are only natural since such an amendment would result in disruptions that not only has legal import but would also cause disadvantages to groups which derive recompense for being granted such “recognition”. Interestingly, this debate about “who are India’s minorities?” is as old as the nation itself and scholars have argued that to declare one group a minority is a political act since such definition entails the enjoyment of numerous endowments. Being defined as a “minority”, therefore, has advantages that groups would not like to forego and given the fact that the contemporary social context and political institutions consign a premium on such a group identity, it becomes politically and socially naïve to surrender such “recognition”.

The government of India has been repeatedly


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obligating itself towards defining the character of the nation in religious terms by consistently recognising “minority/minorities” only in religious terms. In numerous notifications, it defined Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists and Zoroastrians/Parsis as minority communities in India. Such recognition in religious terms may result in a callous identification of India as a Hindu state by fringe radicals as also effect a peripheralisation of other religions that, too, have their roots in India. Yet, such recognition may not be wholly unjustified given the macro national context in which such taxonomy of minority/ies is being devised. Though such acts effectively erase the nuances of recognition in a country where linguistic states are an established fact. Such attempts also undermine the federal character of the country and surreptitiously introduce commanding control of the Central government.

The federal and linguistic component to determining a “minority” has been effectively underscored by the Supreme Court of India in the TMA Pai case in 2002 and reiterated in the PA Inamdar case in 2005. Accordingly “a minority, whether linguistic or religious, is determinable only by reference to the demography of a State and not by taking into consideration the population of the country as a whole”. Yet interestingly, what is of significance is the fact that despite legal attempts to provide a layered and contextual foundation for defining minority/minorities, the definition and recognition of whom constitutes a “minority” will always be determined by the vagaries of ethno-regional politics. We perceive a similar condition in the context of the “North-eastern” states of India, where the recent move is being passionately opposed by individuals, civil society and political groups in some states.

In most of these states, the dominant ethno-linguistic group(s) has been accorded statehood in deference to claims of their subaltern and minority status. Such recognitions have assured the security of the collective life-world for many small ethno-linguistic groups. The dominant groups in these states effectively control the decision-making institutions, structure their lives and determine the fate of their societies according to “their own genius” without ambiguity.

As a matter of fact, dominant groups control

institutions so abrasively that even indigenous non-dominant groups have become marginal to the social and political dialogue in most of these states. The denial of “indigenous” and “minority” status to the Bru and Hmar communities in Mizoram or opposition to the proposal for notifying some non-dominant tribes in Meghalaya as “indigenous” are only reflective instances of denial of such recognition by states and societies in the region. Ironically in one of the states of this region, recently the government obliquely declined to endorse claims of minority status by a Christian educational institute, by unofficially observing that such claim to minority status is untenable in a Christian majority state. In this region the identification of “minority/disempowered/indigenous” is inflexibly ethnocentric to the extent that any legal or political recognition of the marginality or qualitative disempowerment of a group or redress of the same is considered a political game that would undermine the claims of the dominant ethnic group. Groups in the region assert that denial of minority status on the basis of their religious dominance would be unconstitutional and socially retrogressive since the vulnerability that justifies their recognition as minorities still perpetuates. This assertion, however, censors facts like the introduction of absentee landlordism in many of the tribal communities of the region as well as the emergence of a creamy layer that can measure up to the dominant bourgeoisie of the nation and are therefore outside the scope of vulnerability. The truth is that national minorities are regional majorities and vice-versa, so the identification of who is a “minority” must take layered conception of the reality into consideration.

It is essentially imperative that identification of “minority” status be done on objective rationale and as such it requires proper assessment of the vulnerability condition of groups claiming such status. It is morally depraved and politically unfair to deny genuine vulnerable disempowered groups such recognition and consequent endowments, but it is also unprincipled, if it is possible, to have the cake and eat it too.

(The author is a lecturer in Political Science at Women’s College, Shillong; the executive secretary of the Advanced Research Group for

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