

# *INSTITUTIONAL DESIGNS AND ETHNOPOLITICAL CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION*

## *Assessing peace-building initiatives in Northeast India*

*Rajesh Dev*

### *Context & Contest:*

The seven states in the eastern most portion of India is often generically referred to as the “Northeast”. Though the underlying stresses of such a collective designation has been analysed and interrogated by numerous scholars<sup>1</sup>, the term has nevertheless acquired a cognitive and politico-legal legitimacy and conjures an image of a “regional ethnic identity”—northeast—that collectively perceives a unity of “shared ethnicity”. Though scholars like Baruah argue that the collective designation was primarily an outcome of the need for a “set of national security considerations”<sup>2</sup> in an area that collectively shared ninety-nine percent of its borders with hostile neighbours, this collective designation may also considered to be guided by certain commonly shared codes that knit the region to a collective selfhood revealed habitually in its sharing of a popular collective hesitancy in its political relationship with the Indian state. Not denying its historical references, this collective unsettled relationship in the contemporary times has acquired strategic suggestions and is frequently utilised as a bargaining tool for securing state patronage<sup>3</sup> and transform the collective term into a significant political symbol for regional mobilisation.

Besides, the region that provides anchorage to a large number of ethnic groups with heightened ethno-political identity also shares a common pattern of protracted and proliferating inter-group conflicts as well as forms of political violence that has analogous connotations. What is more, this common cognitive-locational frame is buttressed by the legal and political recognition of a “collective selfhood” when common collective strategies of governance and development are adopted by the state and its institutions for the region.

It would be important, therefore, to note in this context that despite the incidence of ethnic diversity and inter-ethnic contests within the region, there is a palpable “regional identity” that often asserts its “collective cultural distinctiveness” vis-à-vis the rest of the nation-state, especially during moments of bargaining for resources and resource-sharing<sup>4</sup> and therefore, regardless of the internal differences and discontinuities we have habitually sought to comprehend them under the generic discourse of “problems of the Northeast”.

Though most of the antagonisms and conflicts in the region are focussed towards the attainment of more political power, control over land or other resources, the constitutive element for such claims-making is through the evocation of group-identities. Therefore, though the primary objective is ‘redistribution’<sup>5</sup>, most of the conflicts are simply designated as ‘recognition’ contests due to the salience accorded to ethnic identity and cultural distinctiveness as the natural and unchanging feature of all political mobilisations and claims. Certainly, elements of conflicts and antagonisms are not new in an area where “head-hunting”, “inter-tribal warfare” and “tribal raids” were not an unknown phenomenon. Yet, the constitutive content of such conflicts have undergone a significant variation under the post-independent liberal-democratic state apparatus. As Benedict Kingsbury observes in a slightly different context but that helps explain our reality also, is that ethnic identity has transformed from being a “prosaic description without much ... significance [into a] concept with considerable power as a basis for group mobilisation”<sup>6</sup>. This is to say that the consciousness of cohesive group solidarity is a peculiarly modern phenomenon that has become “an appealing form of self-expression and potentially an attractive and effective strategy” for claims-making in the modern world. The result is that the imbrications of group identity with allocative policies of the state has furnished group identities with a salience that helps derive group-oriented benefits in the modern world. Therefore, recovery of apparently

alienated group identity has got transformed into significant political claim under conditions of industrial modernity in many parts of the contemporary world.

In the context of the Northeast region of India, the political template for the inter-group play of identities is paradoxically being provided by a variety of 'politics of recognition' and institutional engineering that devolves "segmental autonomy"<sup>7</sup> to ethnic groups in deference to ethnic claims and ethnic blueprints for indigenous homelands. Sanjib Baruah with a slightly different adaptation makes a similar argument when he says that "ethnic mobilisations in Northeast India are responses to, and artefacts of, official policy"<sup>8</sup>. What we mean is that the variety of 'politics of recognition'<sup>9</sup> or the initiatives of "political containment" that the state is adopting in the conversion of all these intractable and spiralling contests into 'manageable' political issues in the region is ironically providing an incentive to the entrenchment of bounded identities in a socio-political matrix where competitive ethnic contests have merely become an element in the broader strategies of legitimisation.

This segmental autonomy while allowing a cultural community, social and political control over its destiny by prioritising the distinctiveness of culture of a 'recognised' group, however, also inadvertently insulates the 'recognised' group from engaging in any dialogic interaction with other proximate groups. The proximate 'unrecognised' groups who are often conceived in highly denigrative<sup>10</sup> terms are transformed into an adversarial 'Other' and relegated to the margins of the new institutional arrangements. In other words, the institutional templates designed to cauterise conflicts that results from the politicised diversities and plurality of the region, assign an "ontological foundation" to ethnic difference in its negotiating strategies resulting in an ethnic hierarchy that makes post-conflict ethnic reconciliation arduous. In such an institutional setup the identity of the dominant ethnic groups and the political institutions merge to reflect a subtle yet poignant ethnic character of the political society and deployment of a profligate premium upon ethnic identity as the

source of all social and political entitlements<sup>11</sup>. For that reason as many critics of consociationalism would argue, though in a slightly different context, that ethnic imaginings have frozen around spatial, territorial [and even institutional] boundaries that were often the outcome of colonial and post-colonial state crafting strategies<sup>12</sup>. Interestingly a converse process of such fracturing and freezing of ethnic identities is also being simultaneously pursued by groups who feel a strategic need for a more collective designation. As an instance we may cite the case of “*Manipuris*” or “*Assamese*”, terms that are attributed with a collective ethnic consciousness yet was basically an identification that followed from being member of the specific states of Manipur and Assam fashioned by the post-colonial Indian state. Interestingly, in recent times when these terms are being challenged by a number of forces who do not want to be so identified and insist on crafting self-conscious identity designations, the revival of these challenged collective designations is being attempted in order to reclaim and recover the fractured collective identity of “*Manipuri*” or “*Assamese*” in a strategic repositioning effort that will establish the claims of certain ethnic categories to counter-balance other opposing ethnic actors<sup>13</sup>.

Even so the operational upshot of all these processes have been that territorial spaces<sup>14</sup> have become the most prized element of identity and groups that possess existent ‘homelands’ are raucously defending its purity and attempting to consolidate its margins while groups that ‘imagine homelands’ are making competitive bids to present historical blueprints for ‘recognition’ of such claims. Now in a socio-political condition where ethnic identity becomes the primary and singular source of awarding entitlements, the “repertoire of possible identities” that one can adopt to qualify as a beneficiary is indeed limited. Fittingly, the most effective, advantageous and proximate available tool for collective mobilisation and action is simply ones’ ethnic identity and therefore, activation and consolidation of groups identities to “attain group aims” through contesting presentation of blueprints for ethnic

homelands has become a typical feature of political mobilisation and consequent inter-group conflicts in this region.

Of course, critics of such a fore grounded problematisation would deservedly draw attention to an apparent inherent contradiction, and ask as to why when such “politics of recognition” seem necessary for extenuating conflicts resulting from ethnic diversity, how they could possibly be responsible for embellishing claims of primordial nature. The answer may possibly lie in the fact that the “politics of recognition” pursued through the institutional arrangements designed to extenuate ethno-political conflicts is based on a recognition principle that “cultural groups in their distinctiveness are to be recognised”<sup>15</sup> in a manner that assigns an a priori significance to certain “core” ethno-cultural markers as the constituents of identity. As a result, the recognition principle is based more on “needs” of ethnopolitical considerations rather than on the “presumption of cultural equality”<sup>16</sup>, and the exclusions released by such a process of conflict transformation obscures the possible “context of choice”<sup>17</sup> that such recognition mechanisms was intended to possibly introduce. In a deeply plural society, such institutional mechanisms generate alienation among opposite ethnic groups who feel no stake in such an ethnically-derived institutional structure, leaving the ethnic fracture open to reconstruction, aggregation and mobilisation. This possibly indicates as to why, groups that once considered themselves part of an ethnic group or formed a coalition start to fragment subsequently. The *Bodos* or *Ahoms* who once claimed themselves a part of the Assamese community today assert their ‘indigenous’ identity and make claims to autonomy or even the *Garos*, *Khasis* and *Jaintias* who formed a coalition to form a separate state are today in the midst of a churning where the *Garos* and the *Jaintias* are blaming the *Khasis* for the denial of legitimate entitlements<sup>18</sup> and dominance of institutional mechanisms indicates to the deep-seated problems of identity [re]construction in the region. We may not be wrong in arguing that the exclusionary processes of identity [re]construction

in the region are embedded in the very nature of the institutional structures that are being crafted as post-conflict peace-building institutional initiatives.

While it is true that a common collective selfhood often seems visible in the region, at the meso-level inter-group contests are also a common characteristic among all the states of the region. Ethnonational groups that fashioned common fronts, and even today often do so, to achieve their ethnopolitical strategies and goals subsequently began contesting the very groups they had aligned with. The foregoing illustrations of the *Bodos* or the *Ahoms*; the *Garos* and the *Khasis* highlight the current predicament of a region where inter-ethnic contests seem paradigmatic.

Commencing with the movement by the Nagas and followed by that of the Mizos, ethnic identity assertions and antagonisms, especially since the “end of 1970s”<sup>19</sup>, have become the most definitive form of ethnopolitical mobilisation and claims-making in the region. Numerous groups, large and small are engaged in ethnoterritorial movements and contests that often involve direct confrontations with the State, and many a times involve fractious inter-ethnic contests where the state acts as a “third party” mediator or arbitrator that negotiates a possible ethnoterritorial fragmentation through ‘accommodation/recognition’.

Most of these contests are also crystallised into ethnic insurgencies that violently reinforce claims made by a group. There are at least twelve major [and numerous minor] armed groups engaged in these struggles not only against the state but in most cases simultaneously with ethnic groups they consider as ‘outsiders/competitors’. These internal conflict induced violence in the region has produced 177,000<sup>20</sup> Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).

Notwithstanding the scholarly farming of these inter-ethnic confrontations along “instrumentalist” or “primordialist” variables, the assertions made by the groups suggest the

possibility of an apparent “patron-client” relationship that develops between the ‘institution-controlling’ and the ‘institution-non controlling’ ethnic groups especially with regard to the distribution of economic and political entitlements. The hierarchisation of ethnic group relations that results from such a polarised institutionalisation in the region not only spawns ethnic competition but the militarised nature of the competition draws ethnic groups into a “security-dilemma paradigm” where need for “preventive self-defence”<sup>21</sup> justifies armed resistance by an increasing number of ethnic groups and escalatory ethnic conflicts ensue. This ethnic inequity resulting from the control of the institutions would be remedied, it is believed, only through self-rule and control of political institutions and since they involve continuous fracturing of an existing multi-ethnic state, violent resistance follows. Instances like the formation of an armed group by the *Zeliangrong* Nagas in Manipur<sup>22</sup> that advocates the restructuring of development initiatives to recognise the needs and aspirations of the group is not only an indicator of the fractured and polarised society but also exposes the ethnic exclusions engendered by the contemporary institutional mechanisms.

Along these lines, all the states of the region are confronting theatres of ethnic assertions and inter-ethnic conflicts with differing degrees of intensity and penetration. While some of the perceived, intractable contests, like the Naga movement are evincing signs of resolution, others, like the Mizo conflict, have manifestly responded favourably to conflict management strategies initiated by the state. Yet even in these instances, simmering ethno-cultural splits are evident sometimes intra-ethnic, as in the case of the Nagas where fear of domination by one “tribal group” exposes the alleged ethnonational solidarity; or inter-ethnic as in the case of the Mizos who continue to counter insistence by the *Brus* or *Reangs*<sup>23</sup> for political participation and voice.

Even if a large number of scholars are focusing their attention towards this rising spectre of ethnicity-based antagonisms and conflicts in the region, very few attempts have

been made to analyse the consequences and ramifications of the resolution strategies adopted by the state to accommodate and manage such conflicts and contests, in a region typifying extensive ethnic heterogeneity, as the possible source of the proliferating contests.

The resonance of group-based conflicts is, therefore, being increasingly experienced in this region where more than 250 ethnic groups share differential socio-economic, cultural and political spaces. As numerous cultural groups with relatively self-governing histories, cultural distinctiveness and conflicting claims constitute the ethnic mosaic of the region, we increasingly encounter competitive claims and conflicts that are invariably constituted and legitimated through an “over-determined objectification”<sup>24</sup> of the ‘Other’ and despite varying rationalization regarding their claims, all of them share this similarity in constituting and legitimising their claims. Besides, since such processes of constructing a “community-self” and homeland claim is exclusively dependent on a territorial constitution, such a “community-self” is “other-dependent” and, therefore, negative images of the other are a functional imperative.

This aspect of “aliens/oppressors/other” as the pivot for the recognition and need for ‘self-rule’ is most agonizingly reflected in the “homeland Claims” that ethnic groups in the region are engaged in presenting. The “homelands claims” are the most potent and manifest strain of conflicts in the region that has resulted in the displacement of a large number of people. For instance, one estimate puts the number of displaced *Santhals* due to the *Bodo-Santhal* conflict in Assam as 87,000; in Tripura the inter-ethnic contests has displaced 19,468 families; recently in Meghalaya 5000 *Khasis* were displaced “by fear” of retaliation by insurgents from the *Karbi* community from neighbouring *Karbi Anglong* in Assam, who are seeking recognition for a *Karbi*<sup>25</sup> homeland. Obviously, these figures are merely a descriptive indication of the magnitude and dimension of the conflicts and it fails to reveal the latent

“grievances and underlying vexations” that periodically activate sporadic violence and contests between the ethnic groups.

Most of these group-contests, as we have already expressed, have become virulent and are crystallised into ethnic insurgencies that often engage in violent reorganisation of the spatial boundaries of an ethnic group through “ethnic cleansing”. This cleansing is justified by the need to establish “kin-group” dominance in territories claimed as part of the “homeland” that become a reference point for any future claims to ‘recognition’. The counter-offensive retaliation that results from such processes of ethnic cleansing by the victimised ethnic groups often triggers a spiralling inter-ethnic conflict. In other words, while the essence of all these “homeland” claims is basically to establish a political space for ‘self-rule’, the logic and dynamics of such a process of ‘recognition’ for the establishment of the “self-rule” requires also reinforcing of spatial dominance by one ethnic group, which inevitably results in amplification of ethnic wars.

The foregoing, apparently theoretical, assumptions are empirically buttressed by evidences from the region, as for instance in the case of the *Bodos* in Asom. While it was true, “there are areas where Bodo speakers are relatively concentrated, [but] they do not constitute a relatively contiguous area”<sup>26</sup> that could support their claim to a *Bodo* homeland. They were merely “11.5% of the total population”<sup>27</sup> in the north bank of the river Brahmaputra, which they claim as their homeland, and as such the extermination of the *Santhals* and other non-Bodo communities were a logical need to justify claims to indiginity and a *Bodo* homeland. Similar is the case with the Nagas who do not wish to allow the *Kukis*<sup>28</sup> a space of their own within a claimed ‘*Nagalim*’ or ‘Naga homeland’, because acknowledging the presence of groups other than the Nagas in the areas claimed as belonging only to the Nagas would undermine their justification for the integration of Naga-inhabited

areas for the creation of “*Nagalim*”. In such a context inter-ethnic clashes and ethnic cleansing essentially become a political imperative.

***Causes & Consequences:***

The theories seeking an explanation to the root causes of the ethnic contests in the region are varied: some attribute the phenomenon as emerging out of the “tradition/modern” dichotomy<sup>29</sup> and the entrenched sense of ‘tribalism’ in a region with 250 of the 400 tribal groups existing in India; some others stress the “in-between-ness”<sup>30</sup> of the ethnic groups in the region which leads to a crisis of identity and its non-recognition results in identity-based conflicts; others emphasise the stresses resulting from the post-independent “nation-building”<sup>31</sup> processes; still others argue that “relative deprivation” and “competition for scarce resources” among ethnic groups stir ethnic disputes and some others attribute it simply to the rational choice<sup>32</sup> of emerging actors among the different communities in the region. Therefore, we find that scholarly interpretations of the ethnic contests in the region consolidate around two broad themes: one that emphasises the “primordialist” condition as the source, the other that stresses the “instrumentalist” motivations of the elites with only passing references to the other components and dimensions of the conflict.

It is interesting to observe, however, that with subtle deviations, majority of these analytical explanations swerve towards attributing the major cause for the ethnic contests in the region to the instrumentality of a rising indigenous middle-class<sup>33</sup> among the ethnically assertive groups. Scholars from this school believe that ethnic assertions in the region are merely hegemonic representations of the claims of the emerging middle-class that organise group-claims on objectified notions of identity. While it is factual that indigenous entrepreneurs do use ethnic identity as a source of political mobilisation and assertion and, therefore, an amount of relative instrumentality does exist, but these analysts do not attempt

to explain why and how these emerging entrepreneurs play the ethnic card and why they are effective, and conversely, why “entrepreneurs” drawing on other cleavages like class fail to derive similar sufficient support. This school tends to down play the agency of the group concerned by highlighting simply the “hegemony of the middle-class”<sup>34</sup>, making the process of ethnic-identity assertion a derivative of the intentionality of an elite class. Since, there is a “limit to the plasticity of ethnic identity”<sup>35</sup> and the role of the elites in proffering ethnic antagonism and ethnic wars this cannot be sufficient reason for the escalating ethnic crisis in eastern India and can simply be attributed as a contingent condition.

As such, though many of these analytical frames have their relative explanatory potential and helps provide a partial comprehension of the problem yet because of their over-determined emphasis upon either socio-cultural or rational causes they unconsciously dispense with the more structural and institutional causes wherein may be located the crux of the north-eastern predicament.

This presentation intends to understand and analyse the nature and structure of a variety of “institutional engineering” that in the post-colonial period serves as the structural template for escalating armed resistance and claims of ethnic nature in the region. And as we have already expressed, the objective conditions for group-based antagonisms and conflicts probably is inherent in these very post-conflict institutions designed to moderate ethnic antagonism and conflict. While we agree that rearranging constitutional and institutional arrangements to meet aspirations for autonomy and democratisation do have their justifications for ethnic equity and democratic integration, especially for attenuating violent armed conflicts through institutionalised settings, yet since such institutional restructuring is “open to political determination” they also supply the “recipe for ethno-regional friction and convulsion”.<sup>36</sup> This is to say that though the ‘accommodating’ institutions that follow such “differential fact”<sup>37</sup> of ethno-cultural claims provide embedded groups with culture-

protective institutional advantage it has nonetheless institutionalised a perception that receiving a fair share of entitlements are the results of ones' ethnic identity, and therefore, '*recognition*'<sup>38</sup> of ethno-cultural difference is the key to resource-pie distribution. This perception is being increasingly experienced by numerous 'non-dominant' groups in the region and as such it may not be wrong for us to assert that the institutions designed merely reflect an exclusivism that engenders subsequent inter-ethnic schisms and contests.

My argument is, therefore, that the structures established in post-conflict scenarios provide an impetus, in a region of dense ethnic heterogeneity, for groups to pursue 'recognition' strategies that are shaped by the consolidation of a group-identity. Since the structural imperatives of such a process of institutional building require a "core" group within a well defined "territory", group-identity consolidation around ethno-cultural traits and territorial boundaries becomes the chosen idiom of political mobilisation and claims. This polarisation has become evident in electoral results as well where the ethnic fragmentation of the electorate is actually deepening and political agenda is being increasingly ethnically polarised resulting in an ethnification of even purported national political parties<sup>39</sup> and political agendas.

Such process of group-identity consolidation "revolves around exclusive symbols" that enhances in-group pride and reinforces the "differential fact" of their ethnic identity. Therefore, such processes of in-group consolidation within a well-defined territory in a multi-ethnic and ethnically charged setting invariably motivates "ethnic cleansing" that not only purges the "homeland" of out-group elements but inversely justifies claims to future ethnoterritorial autonomy by an ethnic group. The need to create an ethnically homogenous territorial space must therefore begin with a disparaging conceptualisation of ethnic others and end in ethnic cleansing because its serves the functional purpose of not only activating an ethno-political identity but provide a group with self-definition and in-group consolidation.

The hostility and inter-group schism that follows from such processes intensifies inter-group alienation and groups get activated to control or frustrate the actions of other groups adversarially and antagonistically<sup>40</sup>, exacerbating inter-group conflict.

Of course historically all the movements and contests in the region cannot be classified under one general rubric, because of internal differences in history and socio-political development, yet many of the post seventies' contests in the region do reveal similar mobilisation patterns and claims-making. In other words the underlying pathology of all these conflicts are comparable to the fact that they share a hatred for the Other and engage in the perpetration of violence upon them by "drawing on [a shared] primordial sociality". As we have observed earlier, many of these contests are "homeland claims" that seek to constitute 'one-ethnic-dominant' enclaves where a particular ethnic group would possess remarkable dominance in resource management and political decision-making. As such most of these movements often surreptitiously, often unambiguously engage in systematic exclusion and extermination of the perceived Other<sup>41</sup>.

The stimuli for such hostile ethnic relations are, therefore, to be found in the structural makeups constituted in pursuance of a particular variety of 'recognition politics' that annuls multi-ethnic and cohesive political structures. Therefore, this "objectification of Others" is actually engendered by a 'politics of recognition' which releases a series of structural inequities due to an inbuilt bias in favour of the 'recognised' categories, "concurrently developing externalised Others"<sup>42</sup>. This recognition politics during the post-independent period was pursued through the establishment of ethnofederal states and segmental autonomy organised on the effective ties of an ethnic group, and other policy prescriptions, the organising logic of all was ethnic indigeneity.

The model was supposed to be a syncretistic integration of two differing visions of socio-political life—the simultaneous recognition of a "universalist inclusion" through

common citizenship criteria for political membership and “systemic exclusion” by recognising ethnic autonomy as the organising principle for these institutions. The institutional structures established under such regimes placed premium on ethnic identity and became the effective source for deriving state entitlements, since the “recognised core” ethnic groups sought to augment their influence and control over the other non-dominant ethnic groups within an institutional and territorial setting. And in a condition of “finite resource” availability, groups approached any “distributive situation with a fixed-pie assumption” that resulted in a perception that “what one [ethnic group] gains, the other [ethnic group] loses”<sup>43</sup> thus hardening ethnic boundaries and amplifying competitive claims and contests. While it may look like that the conflicts are apparently “distributive conflicts” engendered by an exclusive structural logic, it is not simply so since there is a cultural basis to the contest as well that strategically imbricates with the distributive lapses.

The stratagem that the state has adopted for resolution of inter-group conflicts in the region is thus centred on a form of instituted peace that circuitously acknowledges arbitrary “group categorisations, which exaggerate the differences between groups and the homogeneity”<sup>44</sup> of the in-group. The state in order to transform conflicts that has distressing effects for inter-ethnic relations, ‘recognised’ the *a priori* indiginity of groups presenting “historical blue-prints” for relative autonomy, by instituting ethnic homelands that establish dominance of a single or temporarily an assortment of ethnic groups within a territory. The consequent institutions are based on the logic of a ‘differentiated citizenship’<sup>45</sup> that have normalised the notion of exclusive homelands where ethnically defined groups are privileged<sup>46</sup>. Incontestably, this allows the transformation of “enemies into adversaries” but the salience it attributes to a cultural community makes it difficult to establish a consensual and integrative political community. This is because the redistribution of power consequent to the creation of post-conflict institutions manifestly redistributes power only in favour of

the 'recognised' groups marginalising other groups thereby leaving a potential threat for subsequent contests. They become like "winner-takes-all" structures wherein no reconciliation or accommodation is possible and all commitments for ethnic equity are reneged when concerns of ethnic homogeneity and exclusive rights of the indigenous groups become the adopted political idiom<sup>47</sup>. This is evident in most of the institutions and states in the region where such exclusive policy prescriptions transform "citizens into denizens".<sup>48</sup>

Therefore a primary aspect of this strategy of peace-building is that it engenders a differential allocative policy and restricts access to key resources by pursuing the constitution of an institutional grid that is ethnically designed. Of course, as I proposed earlier, such a model of peace-building efforts may have its rationale; it inevitably imposes serious disadvantages<sup>49</sup> on those who are not 'recognised' in a similar manner but share the territory of those who have been 'recognised'. Such a policy is conflictual since it strengthens some ethnic groups while weakening others, necessitating claims-making on ethnic terms and encouraging potential ethnic fractures and inevitable counter-mobilisations by such 'non-recognised' aggrieved groups who develop ethnic fears about security and survival. In a social condition thus generated where ethnic identity becomes not only a source of entitlements but also security and survival, ethnic groups often mobilise around their own 'nationalist' forces as a mechanism for self-defence, as I have proposed in the foregoing paragraphs. Therefore, the establishment of currently accepted paradigms of instituted peace in a region where social relations are so operationalised that an identity and identity-based claims, can only be validated and even constituted by suppression of another, effectively breeds incessant exclusivist agendas where ethnic goals are considered mutually hostile.

Another aspect of such a process of conflict transformation is that it treads a thin line between justice and reconciliation when such resolution strategies compelled by the requirement for peace secures immunity to sections of insurgent leaders, besides authorising

unlawful operations of rehabilitated members of erstwhile ethnic militias<sup>50</sup>. This dimension of the post-conflict scenario reveals not only the disadvantages and distortions of currently entertained strategies of ‘instituted peace’, but also impacts upon the legitimacy and legality of a democratic political system and efforts at reconciliation between ethnic adversaries. Such a process of peace resolution that authorises the one-time oppressor morally invalidates the peaceful resolution because mere structural changes do not entail ideational change in the oppressor, despite commitments towards<sup>51</sup> such protection of the marginalised groups.

Evidently a significant concern of this form of ‘instituted peace’ has been to not only accept ethnicity as instrumental to the debilitating conflicts in the region but *ipso facto* consider ethnic heterogeneity as the prime cause for conflicts in the region<sup>52</sup>. As such the policy mechanisms are as if fine-tuned to prohibit structured interaction among polarised communities in any meaningful way. Rather the institutional structures implicitly recognise the authoritative supremacy of the dominant ‘core’ ethnic group leaving embedded negative social images unresolved and also space to flourish<sup>53</sup> as well as deliberately shape “ethnic citizens”. Therefore, the internal political dynamics that motivate such antagonisms and contests largely remain outside the ambit of the strategies of instituted peace. Oddly enough, institutional mechanisms and policy prescriptions instituted through this kind of ‘recognition politics’ not only reinforce the symbolic repertoire that form the political capital for emergence of the conflicts in the first place but also provide structural impetus to its reification. This in turn has a ‘demonstration effect’ on other identity forming groups and provides them with requisite arsenal for future claims-making on similar patterns. In short such instituted peace strategies merely restructure conflicts in such a manner that conflicts are bound to recur, though the actors may be altered.

Since the strategies of such instituted peace are not transformative they are unable to change the ideologies and belief systems that motivate the dynamics of these conflicts and

have also failed to forge a political template of inclusion, tolerance and participation of various ethnic groups within a multicultural paradigm. The technique merely caps manifest antagonisms between ethnic groups without any mechanisms for cross-cultural conciliation and cooperation and as such merely transforms “public domain contests” into “private domain discontent”. The consequent schisms between ethnic groups deflate the “trust” among communities in a specific state or area and the casualty is the notion of shared democratic governance. For instance the distrust and ethnic antagonism between the *Bodos* and the *Santhals* that constituted the movement and assertions of both the groups have simply been veiled by the establishment of a territorial council for the *Bodos*. Many *Santhals* this author spoke to express the fear that now in a Bodo-dominated council they will be democratically marginalised from decision-making and resource distribution, in a condition where the state and its auxiliary institutions are the primary means for such distribution. This perception is deeply entrenched even though the Bodo Territorial Council makes passable provisions for protection of non-Bodo groups residing within the area of the territorial council. Procedurally speaking these protection provisions of the territorial council are inspired by the condition of minorities in other autonomous council ruled areas of the region, yet it can be said that such protection mechanisms were earlier included in the provisions of other councils as well, for instance, the Khasi Hills District council. Nevertheless, such protection mechanisms were diluted often surreptitiously<sup>54</sup> in other parts of the region and as such fears of their dilution along with the consolidation of ethnic control will remain a concern.

In other words, these institutions, entrench the belief that “far from reflecting ancient ethnic and tribal loyalties their cohesion and action are products of the modern state’s demand that people make themselves heard as powerful groups, or else risk suffering severe disadvantages”.<sup>55</sup> Additionally as we have also expressed before, the failure to endorse any

restorative or transitional justice mechanisms that establishes accountability processes where past perpetrators are held responsible for human rights violations and genocide-related crimes, will subsequently challenge the qualitative shift attempted by such resolution techniques.

We may, therefore, argue that such strategies of 'instituted peace' initiated through the logic of 'recognition politics' for the resolution of conflicts and antagonisms in the region almost seem like "nationalist inversion of colonial" practices and processes of divide and rule. This process "relies on a hardened and [often] artificial notion of ethnic boundaries"<sup>56</sup> to achieve a "political identity" that reflects a consensus of shared norms and values. Yet the consensual convergence is more often than not tenuous since the legitimacy of the shared norms and values are derived from apparently divergent sources. The attempts thus succeed in evolving a strategic balance between the political nation and a cultural community momentarily. Of course such resolution techniques may be able to distance potential conflicts by instituting peace deals with the dominant 'core' ethnic groups yet they circuitously reinforce the same strategies and tactics of identity-politics that it attempts to transform.

## Endnotes:

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- <sup>1</sup> Udayon Misra. *The Periphery Strikes Back*. IAS. Shimla. 2000. pp. 1-10; Sanjib Baruah. *Durable Disorder*. Oxford University Press. N.Delhi. 2005. pp.4-5; Rajesh Dev. "Ethnic Identity, Regionalism and Political Mobilisation: An analysis of the political discourse in the tribal state of Meghalaya" in Paul Wallace et.al (ed.) *India's 2004 Elections: Grass-Roots and National Perspectives*. Sage. N.Delhi. 2006
- <sup>2</sup> Sanjib Baruah. "All that is in the name". *The Telegraph*. Kolkata. May 10, 2006.
- <sup>3</sup> Dev. 2006. *ibid*.
- <sup>4</sup> *ibid*.
- <sup>5</sup> See Transforming the Northeast, High Level Commission Report to the Prime Minister. Government of India. Planning Commission. N.Delhi. March 7, 1997. (Also Called Sukla Commission Report)
- <sup>6</sup> Benedict Kindsbury. "The Applicability of the International Legal Concept of "Indigenous Peoples" in Asia" in Joanne R.Bauer & Daniel A. Bell (eds.) *The East Asian Challenge for Human Rights*. Cambridge University Press. U.K. 1999. pp.336-377
- <sup>7</sup> For an indication of how structural designs provides the template for the initiation of such assertions and claims see, Rajesh Dev. "Human Rights, Relativism & Minorities in North East India." *Economic & Political Weekly*. October 23, 2004.
- <sup>8</sup> Sanjib Baruah. "*Historicizing Ethnic Politics in Northeast India*" in Girin Phukan (ed.) *Inter-ethnic conflict in Northeast India*. South Asian Publishers. 2005. p.13
- <sup>9</sup> This "politics of recognition" is primarily what Charles Taylor would refer implicitly to recognition of the cultural distinctiveness of a group or simply to a recognition of difference. For a critique see Lawrence Blum "*Recognition, Value, and Equality: A Critique of Charles Taylor's and Nancy Fraser's Accounts of Multiculturalism*" in *Theorizing Multiculturalism: A Guide to the Current Debate*. Cynthia Willet (ed.) Blackwell Publishing Co. USA. 1998.
- <sup>10</sup> In most of these states the "other" is identified through terms such as *Dakhar* in Khasi Hills, *Mayang* in Manipur, *Bangal* in Garo Hills, etc. These terms are often loaded with pejorative implications.
- <sup>11</sup> *ibid*
- <sup>12</sup> In a slightly different context Yash Ghai makes a similar argument when he says that case studies show how identities are forced upon the people of by the state. See Yash Ghai. "Ethnicity and Autonomy: A Framework for Analysis" in Yash Ghai (ed.) *Autonomy and Ethnicity. Negotiating Competing Claims in Multi-ethnic States*. Cambridge Press. Cambridge. U.K. 2000. p.5
- <sup>13</sup> For a more detailed analysis see Rajesh Dev. "Expanding Identity Strategies". *The Statesman*. (Kolkata). January 14, 2006.
- <sup>14</sup> Rajesh Dev "Polyethnicity, Ethnoterritorial Claims and the Politics of Ethnic Positioning". Unpublished 2006
- <sup>15</sup> Lawrence Blum. "Recognition, Value, and Equality: A Critique of Charles Taylor and Nancy Fraser's Accounts of Multiculturalism", in Cynthia Willet (ed.) *Theorising Multiculturalism*. Blackwell. USA. 1998. p.74
- <sup>16</sup> Charles Taylor. "The Politics of Recognition" in Amy Gutman (ed.) *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*. Princeton University Press. Princeton. NJ. 1994 pp. 66-67

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- 17 Will Kymlicka. *Multicultural Citizenship: a Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*. Clarendon Press: Oxford. 1995
- 18 See. "Threat to the city" Letters to the Editor. *The Shillong Times* (Shillong) May 11, 2006 and May 17, 2006.
- 19 Girin Phukan. *Inter-ethnic Conflicts in Northeast India*. P.2. South Asian Publishers. N.Delhi. 2005
- 20 This data seems to be fluctuating according to the groups and organizations who are engaged in their enumeration and such there are no agreed record of such IDPs and they therefore, vary.
- 21 The idea is drawn from Barry R Posen, "The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict". *Survival*. 35, Spring 1993. pp. 27-47, but does not agree with the argument provided by Posen as the source of conflict. Also see. Sanjib Baruah. *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India*. Oxford University Press. N. Delhi. 2005. p.16
- 22 "Grenade Attack on MP House" *The Telegraph* (Kolkata). April 12, 2006.
- 23 See Syed Sajjad Ali. "The Reang Refugees", *The Frontline* (Chennai) vol. 15, July 31, 1998.
- 24 Idea derived from Sonia Kruks. "Fanon, Sartre, and Identity Politics" in Lewis R. Gordon et.al. (eds.) *Fanon: A Critical Reader*. Blackwell Publishers. Oxford. 1996. p. 125
- 25 For an elaboration see Prasenjit Biswas "The Khasi-Pnar and Karbi Conflict: A Study of Displacement in the context of Khasi Hills" in Girin Phukan (ed.) *Inter-Ethnic Conflict in Northeast India*. South Asian Publishers. N.Delhi. 2005. pp102-110.
- 26 Sanjib Baruah. *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India*. Oxford University Press. N. Delhi. 2005. p.200
- 27 *ibid.*
- 28 See Gangmumei Kamei. "Ethnicity and Politics in Manipur". *The Sangai Express*. Imphal. Manipur. November 22, 2003 and November 24, 2003.
- 29 Myron Weiner. "Some Hypothesis on the Politics of Modernisation" in R L Park and Irene Tinker (eds.) *Leadership and Political Institutions in India*. Oxford University Press. Delhi. 1960
- 30 See <http://www.martynmission.cam.ac.uk/Cidentitypage2.htm>
- 31 See Udayon Misra.*op.cit.* 2000. Also see. Rajesh Dev. "Indian Federal Dialectics: The Naga Crisis" in Kousar J.Azam (ed.) *Federalism and Good Governance: Issues Across Cultures*. South Asian Publishers. N.Delhi. 1998. p. 257.
- 32 S.K.Chaube. *Hill Politics in Northeast India*. Orient Longman. Hyderabad. 1999, reprint. P. 245.
- 33 Apurba K.Baruah. "Conflicts and Communities: A Northeast Indian Perspective". In Girin Phukan (ed.) *Inter-Ethnic Conflict in Northeast India*. South Asian Publishers. N.Delhi. 2005. pp. 25-39
- 34 A. K. Baruah, "Middle Class Hegemony & the National Question in Assam" in Milton Sangma (ed), *Essays on the North East India* (Indus Publishing House. N.Delhi. 1994).
- 35 Stuart J.Kaufman. "Peace-building and Conflict Resolution". <http://www.cgsd.rutgers.edu/Documents/skaufman--full.pdf>
- 36 Rotimi Suberu and Larry Diamond. "Institutional Design, Ethnic Conflict-Management and Democracy in Nigeria". <http://www.nd.edu/~kellogg/pdfs/Suberu.pdf>

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- <sup>37</sup> See Luis Moreno. "Ethnoterritorial concurrence in multinational societies: the Spanish *comunidades autonomas*" in Alain-G. Gagnon & James Tully (eds.) *Multinational Democracies*. Cambridge University Press. UK. 2001. pp. 201-221.
- <sup>38</sup> See Dev. *op.cit* 2004. p.4750
- <sup>39</sup> See Yogendra Yadav. "A story of political and ethnic fragmentation". *The Hindu*, (Chennai) May 18, 2006
- <sup>40</sup> See Ronald J.Fisher. "Intergroup Conflict" in Morton Deutsch & Peters T. Coleman (eds.) *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution. Theory & Practice*. Jossey-Bass Inc. Pub. San Francisco. 2000. pp. 166-184.
- <sup>41</sup> For a subtle indication of such phenomenon see, T.T.Haokip. "Ethnic Conflicts and Internal Displacement in Manipur" in C.J.Thomas (ed.) *Dimensions of Displaced People in North-East India*. Regency Publications. N.Dehi. 2002. p.226
- <sup>42</sup> Rajesh Dev. "Identity Claims: Paradox of Recognition and Redistribution in North-east India" in Kousar J.Azam. (ed.) *Ethnicity, Identity and the State in South Asia*. South Asian Publishers. N.Delhi. 2001. p.223
- <sup>43</sup> Ronald J.Fisher. *op.cit*. 2000. p 169
- <sup>44</sup> *ibid*.
- <sup>45</sup> Dev. *op.cit*. 2004 p 4750
- <sup>46</sup> Baruah. 2005. *op.cit*. p 184
- <sup>47</sup> See Rajesh Dev. "Narrative Claims and Identity Impasse: The Experiences of the Nowhere People" in Sukalpa Bhattacharjee & Rajesh Dev (ed.) *Ethnonarratives. Identity and Experience in North East India*. Anshah Publications. N.Delhi. 2006 pp. 79-91
- <sup>48</sup> Baruah. *op.cit*. 2005. pp 184
- <sup>49</sup> See Rajesh Dev. *op.cit*. 2004. p. 4750; Sanjib Baruah. 2005. *op.cit*. p. 10;
- <sup>50</sup> See Nandana Dutta. "Identities in the Wake of Militancy", in Kailash C. Baral and Prafulla C. Kar (eds.) *Identities: Local and Global*. Delhi. Pencraft International. pp. 144-153
- <sup>51</sup> Dev. *op.cit*. 2006. p
- <sup>52</sup> Sam G. Amoo. *The Challenge of Ethnicity and Conflicts in Africa: The Need for a New Paradigm*. Emergency Response Division. UNDP. New York. 1997
- <sup>53</sup> Dev. *op.cit*. 2004. p.4750
- <sup>54</sup> For instance, names of non-tribal voters from the Khasi Hills District Council were summarily deleted by authorities of the government. A copy of the electoral roll of the Khasi Hills District Council available with the author clearly shows this.
- <sup>55</sup> John R. Bowen. "The Myth of Global Ethnic Conflict". *Journal of Democracy*. No.74. 1996. pp. 3-14
- <sup>56</sup> Stanley J. Tambiah. *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy*. University of Chicago Press. Chicago. 1986.