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[North East Page]

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Settlers & natives ~ the deep divide

Rajesh Dev

The “North-east” is often portrayed either as a “paradise unexplored” or as “conflict-ridden”. It is either of these two categories through which we often gaze at this region in order to comprehend and interpret it and its socio-political abnormalities. Both these perceptions seek to reinforce the view that this region collectively shares an essential core that also forms the basis of its identity.

The strategy of “incremental policy making” pursued by the state for accommodating this region into the “national imagination” also draws on this perception. Apparently, such a strategy of balancing these dual perceptions for attaining a political consensus does allow the state to attain a modicum of political subversion of the varied conflicts. Yet political subversion notwithstanding, this strategy has not been able to divest the region of its hesitant affiliation with the rest of India or even dilute the inter-ethnic distance between the varied ethnic groups in the region.

Inter-ethnic aggression and lethal assaults on selected ethnic targets are indications of the hostility entrenched in ethnic relations in the region. It is only through the merciless killings of ethnic others that ethnic insurgents and dominant ethnic groups seek to signpost their dominance in these societies. The targets have been varied, according to the needs and circumstances of the time, and the conditions. In Assam it began in the 1960s with the “Bongal Kheda”, followed by “Indians go back” and the “anti-foreigners agitation” and, more recently, the killing of “Hindi-speaking population”. The targets of lethal assaults have narrowed and broadened according to the perceptions and





objective of the dominant communities.

Indeed, while many indigenous scholars and commentators have criticised the racialised attitude of the people of “mainland India” towards the ethnic groups of this region, they have failed to argue against a mirroring politics of race and “stereotyping” of ethnic others by the dominant ethnic groups in the region. The rationale for which is aptly described by scholars when they state that groups often consider only people belonging to one’s own tribe or one’s ethnic community as “sacred” and thus worthy of being considered humans and legitimate bearers of (human) rights. The result being that while some people are considered human and sacred and, therefore, guaranteed human rights, the “others” are denied this “sacredness” and often treated as dispensable. This view is demonstrated in the fact that a large majority in many of the dominant communities of the region do maintain a stoic silence when discrimination and assaults are perpetrated on ethnic others.

The sustained killings of Hindi-speaking people by ethnic insurgents, made more glaring by the very recent carnage, are often cited as signs of such perceptions that ethnic others are non-sacred entities. Contrarily, members of the dominant community counteract the media’s highlighting this ethnic butchery by questioning why the “government of India does not show a similar response when indigenous people are killed”. This attitude evasively condones the killings that merit outright condemnation. The chief minister of the state, who is supposed to spearhead the condemnation, rattles off sadistic and bigoted statistics to oppose allegations of a security lapse for ethnic others in the state. He, in his unrivalled style, enlightens us that merely “188 of the total 1,212 dead are Hindi-speaking”. He pompously also states that the Hindi-speaking people should live in “clusters” for better security, as if living in ethnic ghettos is a better way to leading a respectable and secure life.

The question, however, is why are Hindi-speaking people currently being selected as the targets of ethnic cleansing by ethnic insurgents? They constitute neither a political threat to the indigenous population nor occupy remunerative economic niches. Though the Ulfa argues that these “outsiders” are eating into jobs meant for local youths, the profile of those killed does not substantiate such allegations. Those killed are brick kiln workers, fishermen, daily wage earners and petty traders. None of these economic niches are considered remunerative and respectable enough to be occupied by the “locals”. As such, these incidents cannot be justified as a strategy for regaining control of the resources for the indigenous population. The killings and displacement of these Hindi-speaking people in Karbi Anglong have, on the contrary, merely served to augment the scarcity of essential commodities and close down the weekly markets in the suburbs.

The carnage must, therefore, be seen as a strategy by ethnic insurgents to draw the attention of New Delhi towards



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increasingly despised terrorist insurrections in the region. The Hindi-speaking people are being utilised merely as “message generators” by such illegitimate groups. Apparently the strategy seems to be working as we find a large section of our political representatives, cutting across party affiliations, voicing their concern against the emerging developments in the region. Though such concerns are undeniably legitimate and compassionate, they indirectly reinstate the declining focus of the nation on these failing assertions pursued through terrorist initiatives. They provide renewed national visibility to the objectives and claims of such groups seeking to assert their control. Moreover, given the social disposition towards “outsiders”, these sustained carnages, by teasing and exploiting the dominant social psyche, also attempt to restore the dominant community’s endorsement towards these assertions.

Of course, it may sound cynical and also ethnocentric, therefore, to express the view that it would require more than supporting sensational “Indian idols” to overpass the deep ethnic divide formulated on the apprehensions and anxieties of an “us versus them”.

(The author is a lecturer in political science at Women’s College, Shillong, and the executive secretary of the Advanced Research Group for Understanding Eastern India and can be contacted at [rajesh@argueindia.org](mailto:rajesh@argueindia.org).)

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