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Real agenda shrouded in ethnicity

Guest Column / Rajesh Dev

It is egalitarian share of the economic booty rather than ethnic authenticity that remains the prime concern. This must be brought back as the focal point

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People from Hindi-speaking community take part in a peace march in Guwahati on November 22, 2003. Picture by Eastern Projections

The scorching flames of conflicts have once again engulfed the region. We are again caught in the merciless web of violence that has its inspiration in the insular principle of organising our collective life-worlds. These ethnic conflicts that confront the inhabitants of the region will only ricochet into a never-ending phenomenon unless we renegotiate the terms of organising our life-worlds on the primal issues of bread and butter. The increase in the presentation of historical blueprints for homelands will only complicate the search for an otherwise simple egalitarian sharing of the economic pie.

Rather than make pretentious claims based on pseudo-rational and non-secular principles, we should unhesitatingly admit that the problem of the region basically is a problem rooted in reality to the sharing of the pie of prosperity rather than from non-recognition of autonomous life-worlds.

The conflicts between the Dimasa-Kuki, Kuki-Hmar, Pnar-Karbi, Assamese-Bihari, Koch-Bodo, Bodo-Santhal and many many others are merely symptomatic reflections of a deep physiological ailment affecting the region that has its roots in the alienation of the communities from an egalitarian share of the material prosperity.

Ironically, the norms of social and political discourse have been so deeply influenced by the ethnic principles that solutions are also being sought in ethnic terms through the unmediated recognition of niches of ethnic autonomy without any concrete blueprints for enhanced economic prosperity.

The result is that every conscious ethnic group that asserts indignity as its claim to autonomy are being provided with institutional structures through which they seek to organise their political life. But most of these institutions merely seem like "elite accommodation" enterprises that seem prone in temporarily shelving assertions for radical restructuring of disadvantageous economic relationship even within a concerned ethnic group.

The assertions of pressure groups working in many of the states of the region exploit a deep sense of agony about the lack of development activities. However, the members of these very groups, often after being accommodated in political decision-making structures, fail to reorganise the prosperity in tune with their erstwhile radical assertions prior to assumption of power.

Instances of such groups abound in this region where bodies known for leading political movements on the slogan of "sons of the soil", once in political power, have indulged in activities that rather reinforce disadvantageous economic relationships.

If we assess the development graph of most of these states or autonomous areas, it will become evident that there is no obvious statistics to highlight the fact that ethnic states or autonomous institutions have enhanced economic prosperity of any concerned group. In fact, many of these hitherto youth leaders and now-the-new-elite show signs of sudden prosperity that raise doubts in the minds of the citizenry, who, often unfortunately, fail to link this sudden prosperity of their leaders with their own deprivation.

Given this reality of the state of affairs, why is it always ethnicity, or rather ethnocentrism, that seems to become the guiding inspiration for political mobilisation, political change or even economic advantage in the region? The answer to this perhaps lies in the fact that the pattern of institutional and structural response to these claims has placed pseudo-rational premium on ethnic identity as the source of all rational political, economic and social entitlements.

There is no doubt that stronger kinship bonds based on ethnicity, religion or tribe allow an individual a sense of community belonging in an otherwise anonymous modern world. Their institutionalisation in public structures in pluri-cultural societies, however, is destined to give rise to situations we face in the northeastern region of India today.

The region, as we are all aware, is a complex ethnic cauldron where more than 400 language communities reside in almost overlapping proximity. Therefore, recognition policies and politics of the governing elite that derive their legitimacy from claims to indignity will only intensify efforts to assert and claim recognition and redistribution along ethnic contours.

Already, the recognition policies that have institutionalised ethnic identities around state boundaries and autonomous councils have given primacy to only dominant groups and since the principle followed is "indigenous claims" these states, not being mono-ethnic, will have to probably bear the consequences of future conflicts and balkanisation.

This is all the more possible because in most states of the region, dominant cultural codes have been encoded into the legal and institutional structures that tacitly seek to rationalise unequal status of citizenship and ultimately force even rational groups and individual to retreat to ethnic grooves and ghettos.

In such a social and political scenario, the economic distress of the region is further aggravated by the lack of sufficient infrastructure. The only infrastructure available here are jobs in the government and its sponsored enterprises and, by any standard, they fall far short of the demand for an accommodation in this category.

The complication involving the scenario is further compounded due to the in-group essentialism complemented by the ethnic state structures, making it obvious for ethnic conflicts as the instantaneous technique to settle the sharing of economic advantages.

But for a non-egalitarian distribution, often shrouded by ethnic differences, it is otherwise incomprehensible why in a region that has a high per capita income compared to states like West Bengal and Tamil Nadu, lesser population density and higher rate of urbanisation than the national average and many more positive indicators, the people should remain economically so deprived. It cannot and must not be simplistically linked only to the pressure of influx.

The fact, however, is that it is an egalitarian share of the economic booty rather than ethnic authenticity or autonomy that remains the prime concern of all assertions of the region and must, therefore, be brought back as the real agenda.





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