

Multiculturalism: Challenges of Ethnic Diversities and Groupthink in North-East India

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Abstract: Multiculturalism recognizes diversities in terms of ethnicity- where every individual share a common culture and heritage within a group. However, due to the multiple complexities of diverse heterogeneous ethnic groups in the region of North-east India, the question of dominance and ethnic hierarchy emerges in order to usurp control over the other ethnic groups. It has also led to the formation of ‘in-groups’ and ‘out- groups’. The weaker groups have been compelled to conform and assimilate into the mainstream culture. The non-conformist groups then resort to demand self-determination and autonomy with the use of force and other extreme measures for attaining recognition or representation in the political power structure of the state. Hence, this paper aims to highlight the above issues of groupthink where individuals have been bounded to conform into their culture’s ideological structure marked by stereotypes, aggressiveness and self-censorship.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, Ethnic, Diversity, Conflict, Groupthink

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I. INTRODUCTION

Multiculturalism is a policy of recognition of diversity of distinct cultures and ethnicities. Liberal multiculturalism guarantees certain generic minority rights to all ethnocultural groups, but it also elaborates a number of targeted categories of minority rights (Kymlicka, 2007: p.77). Multiculturalism is a cultural and political platform for various principles, concepts and guidelines, with the aim of promoting that fair and equal appearance of all cultural groups in public and private institutional environment and of creating a balance between races or languages (Roach, 2005: p.36). The ideals of justice, liberty and equality in the Constitution of India aims to protect the rights of these diverse groups. Every Indian citizen are granted and given equal status and opportunities irrespective of race, caste, creed, gender, religion, sex, place of birth, etc. Article 29 of the Constitution of India provides protection of the interest of these minorities and that every Indian citizen are granted the right to conserve their distinct language, script or culture.

Bijeta (2021) argues that the term “northeast India” had been considered an illusive construct because the eight states namely Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya and Sikkim would likely to get secluded from the rest of the nation. The ethnic communities within this region share no commonality in terms history, culture, language, customs, values, traditions, etc. These groups are sub-national in nature. The exclusion policy of the Government of India from mainstream politics led to sub-national movements and demand for autonomy in the region. Those mentioned full-fledged hill states were created with the idea that it would resolve the economic disparities, remove backwardness, improve their standard of living and develop those ethnic groups into a civilized one. Granting them representation and reservation in the public sphere have, yet, not been solve their issue and in turn backfired as more autonomy demands arise from the other ethnic minority groups. Claims for minority autonomy are often defended precisely in the name of protecting communities, so as to enable group members to maintain their languages and cultural traditions, honour their gods, respect their elders and ancestors, and so on (Kymlicka, 2007: p. 253)

Methodology:

This paper is a qualitative analysis based on descriptive and comparative approach with the help of secondary sources. Datas will be collected from both primary and secondary sources. Secondary data have been collected from books, articles, journals, documents, reports, newspapers, etc. As it is a qualitative research, convenience sampling has been done. The focused groups are the Dimasa ethnic group from Assam, the Zo ethnic group from Manipur and the Hmar ethnic group from Mizoram.

II. DISCUSSION

Post-colonial India witnessed a serious of chaotic turbulence in the region of North-east India. Dutta (2015) explains that diversity is a self-construct manifestation of the colonial legacies in British India. "Unity in Diversity" is an essential feature of the Constitution of India which accommodates diverse communities into the Indian culture. However, this 'salad bowl' soon transformed in to a 'melting pot'. Ethnic diversity is an assimilationist discourse which have been believed to eliminate smaller ethnicities either by force or influence. This often resulted in creating hostility and suspicions of one ethnic group by another that could endanger their existence and identity. One ethnic group believe in maintaining hegemony and subjugate other groups while the latter refuses to submit (Pakhuongte, 2021: p. 110-111). So they often resort to insurgency and demand autonomy for self-determination and protection of their pride.

Politics of diversity and autonomy movements:

Dena, L. (2008) in his work "In Search of Identity: The Hmars of North-East India" like Thiek (2013) had discussed about the origin, ancestral heritage and genealogical history of the Hmars in North-east India through their oral traditions. He discussed about the social and political institutions of this ethnic group. He discussed about the special role played by the Hmars in assisting the Mizo National Front for self-determination and independence. But he mentioned that later when the Mizo accord was signed with the Government of India in 1986, the issue of a Greater Mizoram which aims to reunite and recognize the geographically dispersed Hmar inhabitant areas with the North-East region was ignored and forgotten. Therefore, the Hmars had formed various political organisations, such as, the Hmar Mongolian Federation, Hmar National Congress, Hmar Nation Union, Hmar People's Convention, Hmar People's Convention- Democracy and so on. He had also the Hmar struggle for identity due to the social and political exclusion by other ethnic groups for which they had demanded a separate Autonomous District Council in Mizoram known as Sinlung Hills Development Council. This movement later turned sour and formed unrest in the region. Therefore, after several talks with the Central Government and the Government of Mizoram, a Memorandum of Settlement was signed on 1994 that led to formation of the Sinlung Hills Development Council in Mizoram.

Barman, B. (2014) in his work "Assertion of Dimasa Identity: A case Study of Assam" had given a brief historical background of the Dimasa ethnic groups along with their cultural affinities and similarities towards other ethnic groups known as Bodos, Rabhas, Kacharis, Mech, etc. He also gave a brief idea on how the Dimasa inhabited areas were to the British East India's Company's territory in 1832. The manner in which the old Dimasa territories were redistributed and divided between Cachar and North cachar Hills in 1881 were explained. He had discussed that the Assamese struggle for monopoly of power had led to marginalisation of tribal groups in Assam. The Dimasas in Cachar and the two hill districts- North Cachar Hills (Dima Hasao) and Karbi Anglong formed various organisations like All Dimasa Students' Union (ADSU). Dimasa National Security Force (DNSF) and Dima Halam Daogah (DHD) later divided into two factions known as DHD (Nunisa) and DHD (Jowel) in order to create a 'Dimaraji state' for maintaining their identity, protect their political rights and improvement of economic conditions of the members of the ethnic group. Thereafter, both the factions of DHD surrendered and entered peace agreements with the Government of India. But this agreement had led to more instability in the region rather than peace as the other ethnic groups like Hmars and Karbis opposed in the belief that they would be marginalized and outcasted by the Dimasas.

Kipgen, N. (2018) in his work "Land Laws Ownership and Tribal Identity: The Manipur Experience" in edited book *Marginalities in India: Themes and Perspectives* had written about the issues of land and identity in the hills of Manipur. He gave a brief account in the relationship between hill tribes consisting of 35% of the total population and the monarchical state of Manipur in terms of economy, administration and politics. Details on the event of the Anglo-Kuki War (1917-19) for independence that marked an innovative era in reforming the administrative system of Manipur was accounted. This led to the removal of the hill areas from the Maharaja's jurisdiction and the President of India became responsible for it. The Manipur Hills People Regulation Act (1947) extends to the whole of Manipur except the hills areas and it recognised the village chiefs as an officio-chairman of the village authority. Zipao (2020) claimed that Thadou Kuki and Paite share a common ethnicity and heritage. Diplomatic negotiations were made to unite Kuki and Zomi people in Manipur which led to ethnic clash in 1993 and 1997-98 over the use of nomenclature concerning its legitimacy. The ethnic groups like Zous, Simtes, Vaipheis, Paites, Ralte, Suhtes, Gangte, and Tedim-Chin identify themselves with the nomenclature Zomi established Zomi Re-Unification Organization (ZRO), disowning the Kuki. They demanded an autonomous hills state by forming a militant outfit called Zomi Revolutionary army (ZRA). The Kuki groups like the Haokip, Kipgen who speak Thadou maintains the Kuki identity and demanded a Kuki state through Kuki National Front (P) (KNF-P). The armed factions of the KNF (P) forces the Zomi to accept the name Kuki, justifying this by stating that the term Zomi is inappropriate. Therefore, the Zomi and Kuki leaders had peace talks with the Government of India and signed the Suspension of Operations in August 2008.

Challenges of Multiculturalism:

The paradoxes of multiculturalism have been analysed in the above narratives where rights and privileges are regarded as “constructs” for an ulterior motive by the representatives of both the ethnic groups and state political structure. Its absurdity could be emphasised in the manner when a majority group imposes its ideology over the minority groups which often led to the contestation for power, control and dominance amongst themselves. Individuals are dragged into the political arena where they have been bound to conform to the group’s system of stereotypical beliefs. Groupthink refers to the mode of thinking that persons engage in when concurrence-seeking becomes so dominant in a cohesive ingroup that it tends to override realistic appraisal of alternative courses of action (Janis, 1971: p.84). This implies that groupthink reduces the cognitive capability of reality and moral judgements due to the invulnerable group’s pressures or shared illusions. In the name of commitment and loyalty to the ingroup individuals ignore their misgivings and doubts which itself is self-censorship in nature. Ethnic hierarchy led to competition among different ethnicities in North-east India. The problem of ethical relativism arises as moral obligations and destructive prejudices reside distinctly from culture to culture. Due to the diversity of normative social approach of these ethnicities have divided the society into ‘in-groups and ‘outgroups’, ‘majority and minority’, etc. Irrational and dehumanising actions have been directed against the outgroups

The Report on the “Study of the Problem of Discrimination Against Indigenous Populations” in the thirty-sixth session of United Nations Economic and Social Council on 17th June, 1985 records about the protection of the rights, cultures, traditions and norms of the indigenous people and the Scheduled Tribes. As hindu-isation has already put a lot of strain in the customs of these groups, the customs of other cultures should not be imposed on them. These social groups should be given time to adapt into the dynamism of the changing society, and, if violated, it will be considered ‘cultural genocide’ or ‘ethnocide’ or ‘ecocide’ which is considered as serious violation of human rights. Kymlicka (2007) emphasizes that claims of territorial autonomy pluralise the state increasing the risk of local tyranny, establishing authoritarian regimes based on religious fundamentalism or ethnic intolerance, stripped of residency rights of the minority rights, etc. It could be observed that the protest for autonomy and self-determination is a harbinger of destabilised state and encourages armed insurrection.

III. CONCLUSION

Diversity in north-east India developed intercultural competition and other complexities. Multiculturalism as a liberal policy recognizes minority rights and at the same time protects the destructives dogmas that have been under the veil of cultures and traditions. The decision-making bodies in both the political and social structures impose their ideologies towards members of the group either by control or manipulation. As a result, it has been analysed that groupthink and ethical relativism produces conflict among different ethnic groups. Therefore, this study is limited as it looks forward for an innovative opportunity that could redress the claims- making ethnic minority groups to not resort to violence repressive measure that threatens peace and human rights norms.

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