

Resolving Immigration and Transforming Ethnic Conflicts: With Special Reference to North-East India

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Abstract: One of the common forms of conflict, especially in underdeveloped and developing countries had occurred on the basis of ethnicity. Northeast India witnessed a number of ethnic conflicts since India's independence. One of the major reasons for ethnic conflicts in the Northeast could be the increasing number of illegal immigration to the region that threatens the identity and the very existence of the local population. A huge influx of immigrants from neighboring countries makes it difficult for the indigenous people to preserve their distinct identity and as a result they began to revolt. So the paper would try to analyze some of the issues related to immigration leading to ethnic conflicts and the measures to resolve those issues so as to transform those conflicts for a peaceful co-existence.

Keywords: Conflict, Deprivation, Ethnic, Identity, Immigration, Indigenous.

1. INTRODUCTION

Conflicts over ethnicity have been part of human civilization since time immemorial and this will continue as long as humans exist. Ethnic conflicts take place when personal differences affecting not only the individual persons but also the groups and community as well. One of the core issues related to ethnic conflicts is insecurity leading to identity crisis. The people of the region began to fight not only to uplift their socio-economic status, but for their distinct identity as well. One of the major threats experienced by the people of northeast is from the huge influx of immigrants from neighboring countries. It is estimated that there are more than 10 million immigrants in India of which majority of them are seen in the North-East. The large number of immigrants disturb the northeast economically, culturally, politically, and socially apart from being a threat to national security. Hence, the region is today infamous for intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic conflicts adversely affecting the peace and tranquility of the nation. Since conflict is part of human civilization and migration is a natural phenomenon, what is important is to take appropriate measures to prevent illegal immigration and transform these issues to bring constructive change.

2. ETHNICITY AND ETHNIC CONFLICTS IN NORTHEAST INDIA

Ethnicity can be referred to a common tradition, a system of shared values and culture by a group of people who identify themselves as a distinct entity different from other cultures and traditions (Rizvi, 2006). Ethnic groups are differentiated from other groups as they identify themselves with some distinct characteristics and way of living (Palanithurai, 1993). Ethnic conflict arises when groups with a separate sense of identity feel that they are incapable of addressing their basic needs through their governing structure. When such needs are denied or are not met, grievances are formed, and they begin to retaliate and revolt. Perceived deprivation and the desire to overcome it are characteristic of the development and conduct of ethnic conflict (Bercovitch, 2009). It is to be noted that when people's basic needs are met and are satisfied, conflict seldom occurs. Therefore conflict, particularly ethnic conflicts are seen mostly in underdeveloped and developing countries as compared to the developed countries.

The people of northeast India are of Mangaloid race who trace their origin to central and south-east Asia. They are a very small population when compared with the rest of India. Apart from this, the region shares about 98 per cent of its boundaries with foreign countries and just two per cent with the Indian Union (Mukhim, 2007). Except the states of Assam and Tripura, the rest of the six states in the northeast region are dominated by tribal people. All these tribes of this region maintained their distinct identity and in order to do so, they had, from time to time, even fought against the other communities that were considered to be raising any threat towards them. (Bhattacharjee, 1996). Tribal ethnicity is very much on the upswing in the northeast, with each ethnic community asserting its unique identity (Singh, 1992). Every group and every community wants to prove a point to others that they exist with dignity and identity. When their dignity is questioned and their identity is threatened, they react, even in a violent manner.

Ever since India became independent in 1947, the region has experienced high intensity of conflict. There has not been a single decade of calmness in the political atmosphere. The conflict dynamics ranges from struggle for secession to struggle for autonomy, from sponsored terrorism to ethnic clashes, generated as a result of a continuous inflow of immigrants from across the border as well as from other states of the country (Kabi, 2012). "The post- 1976 situation in the northeast India is marked by the continuing process of political integration, the changing dimension of the geopolitical factors, the problem of foreigners and the spread and control of insurgency. A section of the Nagas chose the path of insurgency followed by the Mizos, Meiteis and Tripuris" (Rizvi, 2006: 23). Hence in the opinion of Borgohain and Sinha (2014: 13), "ethnic conflict in northeast region has become endemic since independence. Here ethnic conflict includes the inter-ethnic, intra-ethnic and the conflict between various insurgent groups or their involvement in the conflict".

In northeast India, the desire for ethnic exclusiveness and ethno-centralism has created a tussle between the state and community on the one hand and the community-community on the other. The clash over 'greater Nagaland' and the reaction by the ethnic groups in Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, the reaction of the non-Bodos like the Koch-Rajbangshi, and the Rabhas in the Bodo territorial council, the Kharbi-Dimasa clash in Kharbi Anglong are a few examples of such demand for exclusive homeland (Mahanta, 2007). In fact, other northeastern states are also not freed from ethnic conflicts. Khasi Versus Garo, Khasi Versus Jaintia, Khasi Versus Non- tribals like Bengalis, Nepalese, and Marwaris in Meghalaya, Tribals Vs Bengalis from East Pakistan (Bangladesh) in Tripura are some of the examples of ethnic conflicts in the region. According to Prakash (2011), the Naga insurgence which started in the 1950s, known as the mother of all insurgencies, is considered to be one of the oldest unresolved armed conflicts in the world. At present, most of the states in the region are affected by some sort of conflict, except the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Sikkim. The reasons for the respective conflicts vary from separatist movements to inter community, communal and inter-ethnic conflicts.

3. IMMIGRATION AS A SOURCE OF CONFLICT

Migration has been a universal phenomenon. It has been a cause of concern for many countries around the globe and India is no exception to that. After India's independence a lot of migrants from East Pakistan and from neighboring states came to the northeast, especially in Assam and Tripura and occupied the vacant land. When the immigrants began to occupy the land the indigenous people lost their land and some of them even were evicted. Thus the outsiders became insiders and insiders became outsiders. Mostly the immigrants enter a region as refugees or in search of better job opportunities. But once they establish themselves in the new place, they begin to control over the resources that had been enjoying by the indigenous people for centuries. Conflict also takes place when the migrants control the business community and occupy the prominent government jobs. As a result the unemployed locals become frustrated and retaliate.

After India's independence in 1947, a lot of migrants came to northeast especially from our neighbouring countries mainly for better economic opportunities. They came to settle in different parts of northeast for cultivation, business and as daily labourers. However they settled not only in the barren land but also in the tribal inhabited areas. Some of the well-to-do immigrants bought land from the locals and the indigenous people became landless. When the locals felt that the very presence of the 'outsiders' are a threat to their existence they began to revolt. Thus conflict began between the so called 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. According to Banerjee (2006: 55-56), "in our country, over centuries different flows of migration, invasion and forced settlement took place. Old and new settlement got mixed up leaving a legacy of

heterogeneous components of religious and cultural remnants. This had developed into conflict of identity and crises for preserving secluded virtues of primitive egotism".

According to Chakraborty (2006), the huge influx of immigrants from neighbouring countries and regions has drawn a change in the demographic line of North Cachar Hills of Assam. It has divided the local population along communal lines and has been the major cause of increasing tension between the outsiders and the locals. A similar opinion is being expressed by Priyadarshini (2006) that ethnic conflict takes a violent turn when the tribals feel that they have been exploited or deprived of their privileges and rights by the non-tribals or outsiders. This was the beginning of the conflicts between some of the ethnic groups like Bodos and Bengalis. A similar situation remains in Tripura as well.

Due to the excess number of the immigrants, the so called outsiders outnumber the insiders that really threaten the identity of the locals. When the immigrants' culture got mixed up with the indigenous people, the indigenous linguistic, religious, and traditional practices and values merged with the foreign culture. Identity crisis could be considered as one of the major reasons for ethnic conflict which has its origin in immigration. In some of the northeastern states 'foreign' festivals are celebrated with more enthusiasm and vigor than the local festivals. As Chakraborty (2006) points out, a huge influx of immigrants from neighboring states make it difficult for the tribals in the region to preserve their distinct identity and as a result they began to revolt. Therefore immigration can cause socio-cultural, political, and economic disintegration leading to identity crisis and conflicts.

4. IMPACT OF IMMIGRATION

The unchecked and large scale illegal immigration over the years to northeast, particularly to Assam, changed the demographic, linguistic and socio-cultural composition of the region (Bhan, 1999). The areas where the indigenous people were in majority have become minority. As a result there emerges a feeling of majority- minority, and insider- outsider. The majority wants to take control over the minority and the minority feels threatened of the majority's dominance. This can result into ethnic polarization and movements. This might also cause a sort of fear psychosis among both the communities. The excess of immigration can cause population explosion in the country in which the immigration takes place. If the country is not in a position to accommodate the immigrants, this might lead to poverty, unemployment, poor medical, educational and sanitation facilities.

When the immigrants are in large numbers and do not find enough employment there is all the possibility that both locals and foreigners may engage in insurgent activities. The foreign elements may manipulate the innocent locals to engage in anti-social activities to make easy money. The outcome would be increase in the number of crimes and atrocities. This can create perennial tension between the state and the non state actors and the poor civilians will be at the receiving end. Apart from this if the locals and the immigrants belong to different religions, there is a possibility of developing communal violence. Any tension that creeps can be manipulated and interpreted as communal. Ultimately the peace and tranquility of the region is affected.

Excess of immigration can disturb the unity and integrity of the nation thus leading to national insecurity. People from other countries will have a natural inclination towards their own country of origin, rather than towards the country to which they migrate. In case if there is any tension between two countries, they might support their own country of origin leading to mistrust and prejudice. Another important impact of immigration is the loss of land for the indigenous people. The ambitious and skilled immigrants occupy and buy land from the locals for cultivation and business purposes by paying handsome amount of money. In the long run many locals become landless and will be at the mercy of the outsiders. This can also lead to cultural disintegration and lose of identity for the indigenous people. Many times the locals forgo their traditions and cultures and are forced to adopt the 'new way of life' introduced by the 'outsiders thereby an identity crisis emerges among the indigenous people.

5. RESOLVING IMMIGRATION AND TRANSFORMING ETHNIC CONFLICTS

If immigration is a source of conflict, the best way to avoid conflict is to prevent immigration. However, since it is a universal phenomenon and has been happening since the beginning of human history, it is not easy to stop immigration completely overnight. It is also not easy to expel practically all the immigrants, legal or illegal once and for all. However

administrative measures can be strengthened to block the influx of illegal immigration. It is advisable to introduce identity card system for the citizens so as to enjoy the full citizenship including the right to vote and acquire land. The government can construct border fencing and appoint security personnel to guard the borders to prevent illegal immigration.

The issue that is more serious is how to deal with the existing immigrants. It won't be an easy task to identify whether an immigrant is legal or illegal, mainly because many of them have already acquired Indian citizenship by hook or crook. Many of the immigrants are poor people with families living for years in the region. Therefore denying them a place to stay would be against humanitarian consideration. This can also affect the bilateral ties between the two nations. However if it is found that they are illegal immigrants they can be send back step by step in collaboration with the migrant nation by special court trial. In case if it is doubtful whether they are really the citizens or immigrants, they could be given working visa for a stipulated period that can be renewed year after year.

International law does not provide the provision for unilateral deportation in defiance of the views of the county to which deportation is to take place. At present as the stand taken by the government of Bangladesh, it is impossible to deport millions of Bangladeshis back to their homeland. In fact the former prime minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Haseena asserted 'that no Bangladeshi is illegally in India' (Sinha, 1998). The same view is expressed by the commerce minister of Bangladesh Tofail Ahmed, on May 6, 2014 who said that 'any hasty steps taken by the new government will hit the bilateral ties, and stressed that there are no illegal immigrants in India from Bangladesh'. He made this remark in response to the statement made by BJP's prime ministerial candidate and the present Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who said during his election campaign that 'all illegal Bangladeshis should pack and leave on May 16, when the result is declared (Srivastava, 2014).

If immigration is a source of ethnic conflict, it is better to prevent people migrating to other countries and prevent people coming from other countries. Hence the best way to resolve immigration is to find out the reasons for it and address them in a non-violent manner. It is here that the concept of conflict transformation has to play its role. In conflict transformation we are not suppressing the conflict, but transform it for a constructive change so as to find positive peace. According to Lederach (2003), the primary task of conflict transformation is not to find quick solutions to immediate problems, but rather to generate creative platforms that can simultaneously address the peripheral issues and change underlying social structures and restore broken relationships.

Since many of the immigrants do come from underdeveloped and developing countries in search of better economic facilities, it is important that the government concerned help the migrant nation to raise the economic standard. This can be facilitated through bi-lateral cooperation by starting industries, sharing technologies and resources, investing on education and health care etc. Immigration becomes a problem when the locals feel that they are deprived of their facilities and are being exploited by the so called 'foreigners'. Therefore it is imperative that nations raise the standard of living of the people and provide adequate facilities and employment for both insiders and outsiders. In the opinion of Priyadarshini (2006), steps should be taken to improve the economic well being of the deprived ethnic groups as well as their emotional integration.

6. CONCLUSION

Ethnic conflicts arising out of immigration is a perennial problem faced by many nations around the globe. Since immigration is a serious issue affecting the political, cultural, social and economic ambience of a nation, it is important to give top most priority to resolve these issues for a better future. The immigrant nation looks for ways and means to prevent the excess of immigration and the issues related to immigration like ethnic violence and insurgency. Northeast India has been facing the problem of immigration; both legal and illegal, even before the independence and it got only intensified after India became independent due to the pull and push factors. On the one hand, the external factors such as poverty, unemployment, natural calamities, and communal violence encouraged people to migrate, and on the other hand, internal factors such as availability of land, better job opportunities, corruption, poor law enforcing agencies, and reluctance of the locals to engage in cheap labour etc, facilitated immigration. Immigration becomes a problem when the immigrant nation is not in a position to accommodate the immigrants and provide adequate facilities for both the locals and the immigrants.

It is indeed doubtful that India will be able to stop immigration completely and deport all the immigrants who are already settled within the state. What can be done is to prevent illegal immigration through various administrative and popular means. It is also advisable to deport illegal immigrants through proper court trial and through bilateral co-operation. In order to prevent illegal immigration, what is required is bilateral cooperation, neutral law enforcing agencies, impartial politicians, and co-operation from NGOs, religious leaders, civil society, and pressure groups; but above all there is a need to address the root causes of immigration. Therefore it is imperative to raise the standard of living of the people of both the migrant and immigrant nation by bilateral co-operation and agreement. Conflicts can be minimized if people are willing to respect other cultures while preserving their own culture. This requires proper orientation through right education that can facilitate people the art of tolerance and mutual respect.

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