UNIT 15: IDENTITY MOVEMENT IN NORTHEAST INDIA

UNIT STRUCTURE

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15.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to –

- know the emergence of identity movement in North East India
- understand the key concerns of identity movement in and it's implications

15.2 INTRODUCTION

The North-eastern part of India to the home of several ethnic groups with their specific identities. There are more than 200 ethnic groups and sub-groups found in the North-eastern Region. North East India is a politically vibrant region of India which consists of eight states namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura and Sikkim. This region is surrounded by four countries, namely China, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Bhutan. The region is land-locked and is connected with the rest of India through a narrow, thirty-kilometre corridor of foot hills land of West Bengal. The population in Northeast is heterogeneous in nature. It consists of many different castes, classes, race, language, religion etc. In North East India, many a times, various ethnic,

linguistic groups have asserted their identities as being different and separate from the rest of India. These groups have taken resort to different kinds of identity movements, autonomy movements, secessionist movements etc.

Identity is defined with the help of sameness and difference. Sameness focuses on the 'self of identity, whereas the difference focuses on the 'others' of identity. This perception helps to distinguish one group from another and stratifies the society. To have an identity, a thing must have features that are both relevant and enduring. In short, some of these relevant features build the notion of identity. Culture is considered as the most relevant feature in the construction of sameness and difference with the others. Identity is not inherent, fixed or determined structure.

It is rather, open and fluid. Identity is constructed through close interaction between the individual, the society and history. As a social construct, every type of identity undergoes changes, as changes take place in society, culture, technology and political system, thereby acquiring it's own style, organization, substance and legitimacy over time and space.

In this unit, we shall know about the identity movement in Northeast India.

15.3 EMERGENCE OF IDENTITY MOVEMENT

Identity movement in Northeast India is a post-colonial scenario. The assertion of identity among various communities in the region started during colonial period but it turned into the shape of movement during the post-colonial period. Post-colonial period saw various changes in the case of identity construction. India's independence and the formation of nation state paved the way to understand one's identity in boarder perspective. Understanding and interpreting history, ethnicity, and identity became an important concern for many communities in the region. The political dimension of identity is very complex. Northeast India is a multi-ethnic region with complex identity issues. Here, the political conflicts around identities assume different forms and versions at various times due to divergence of regions and its people. Moreover, there are differences in people's expression

of their community identities at the local, state and national levels. Among all, linguistic identity has caught the political limelight in Northeast India. Politics of identity in India is deeply connected with democracy and the changes that came along with independence. In post-independence India, the ongoing process of modernization and development nurtured the growth of ethnic identification and conflict. The ethnic groups vary in size from region to region on the basis of linguistic and religious groups. The ethnic variations and regional imbalances very often overlap the ethnic identity politics. It is seen that most of the identity assertions are regional. The 'victimization' of specific groups by the state machinery has been considered to be a significant issue in the region. The effect of globalization has of late encouraged the proliferation of identities on a large scale. Improved means of communication and globalization have tremendously changed the perception of local, sub-regional and regional social identities. Globalization has exposed them to the forces of market and finances which in turn have made them understand their identities.

The tribal demographic situation has transformed over the last century. Some of the tribal communities have been seen to have given up many cultural traits in the process of change. Roughly one out of three tribal person does not speak his/her own tribal language. It is one of the reasons of rising identity crisis. The emergence of middle class and the coming of Evanlogical Christianity in pre-independence era played a vital role. Administrative protection and Christianity appear to be the common denominators of the new identities that grow in northeast India in British period. The historical experiences of the tribal communities helped in the identity formation among them because of the inter-tribal communication. During the colonial period Northeast India has experienced the divide and rule policy of British in various instances. The British had divided the hill areas into two categories based on their levels of development: Excluded Areas and Partially Excluded Areas. The British wanted to keep the tribal people under the Excluded Areas segregated from the influence of the people in the plains of Assam and their hidden motive was to reduce the risks to their lives from the attacks by the tribal people. The identity politics in

Northeast India have taken shape of identity movements. One such move was the Naga movement. The primary objective of the Naga movement was sovereignty. Manipur, a state of 2.7 million people, is home to three major ethnic groups, namely the Kuki, Naga, and Meitei. While the Meiteis, who are primarily settled in four valley districts, clamour for the territorial integrity of the state, the Kukis and the Nagas call for separate administrative arrangements in the hill areas. The identity movement in Northeast India is a product of historical experiences of various communities.

15.4 ISSUES OF IDENTITY MOVEMENT

There are many issues that are based on the identity movement in Northeast India. As we know, North-east is a home to many ethnic groups and communities and all the communities have their own way of living in the region. The circumstances changed after the coming of the colonial government. The major factors responsible for politics of identity movement in North East India can be discussed as follows.

1. **Diverse ethnic Groups:** North-east India is full of diversified ethnic groups living together generation after generation having distinctive historical and structural setting. As a result, they have been struggling for upliftment on the basis of their ethnic distinctiveness and for this reason, they indulge in identity movement. They try to be distinct from other communities and the concept of others came up with it.

2. **Economic underdevelopment:** Northeast India is one of the underdeveloped regions of the country. Economic underdevelopment as well as uneven pace of development is considered to be one of the root causes of the resurgence of ethnic groups in the Northeast region of India. It is alleged that mainstream India deprives the North-east from adequate economic resources needed for development. Many ethnic groups such as Karbi, Dimasa, Kuki, Bodo,Naga, Mizo and many others are in constant conflict with the national mainstream for their economic deprivation.

3. **Perception of Hill Tribes towards people of plain areas:** The hill tribes of erstwhile Assam have developed a perception that not only the national mainstream has discriminated against them but also the big

brotherly attitude and treatment of plain dwellers of Assam also contributed in this respect. Such perceptions led to the conflict between plains people and the hill's people on the basis of lingo-cultural distinctiveness. This ended with the formation of separate states like Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya etc.

4. Imposition of Assamese Language on the tribal people of Assam: In 1960 Assamese as official language was introduced in Assam. It created a sense of ethnic identity consciousness among the tribal communities. It affected the tribal people as they were now afraid of domination and of losing their distinctive linguistic identity. For example, united Mizo Freedom Organization while submitting a memorandum to the State Reorganization Commission at New Delh, it strongly asserted that the domination of Assamese language would divide the people of Assam into many and in this way the dominant community would carry on their hegemonic policies over the Non -Assamese people. This language bill disturbed various tribal communities. It led to the separation of Nagaland in 1963, thereby also reducing the territorial size and reach of Assam. Similarly, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh also got separated in order to maintain their linguistic identity, amongst other concerns.

5. Immigration of foreigner: The presence of outsider or the flow of foreigners to the North-east India is another major factor responsible for politics of identity movement in the region. Migration to North-east started in the colonial period and it is still continuing. Such unchecked population to the North East India is a great threat to demographic balance, scarce economic resources, political stability, employment, socio-cultural and linguistic status of the people of North-east India. As a result, various ethnic groups of North-east India have become conscious for losing their own distinctive lingo-cultural and ethnic identity and many have asserted through identity movements.

6. Spread of Education and Democratization of Indian Policy: Education plays the role of mobilising the people and make them conscious of their situation which also often leads to identity consciousness. To protect their own distinctive socio-cultural linguistic identity, a sense of ethnic

consciousness emerged among them that led to the growth of identity movement in North East India.

7. Displacement of Tribal People: Displacement of tribal People is one of the burning issues in the politics of North East India. It is also responsible for the growth of politics of identity movement in North East India. The land is their way of expressing their way of living. Tribal communities are very much emotionally attached to nature and every custom and tradition is directly or indirectly attached to nature. Therefore, when an industry is set up in a tribal area, and consequently the people are evicted from their land, it results in the formulation of a sense of injustice towards them. Such actions further stimulate the notions of identity assertion amongst people.

15.5 IMPLICATIONS OF IDENTITY MOVEMENT

The identity movement in North East India has directly or indirectly affected the larger society, polity and economy of the region. This account shall emphasise on some of the prominent aspects of the region, the birth of which have been contributed to by the identity movements in the region. Northeast India is known as the hotspot of various ethnic violence, extremism and insurgency. As a result of various identity movements, the region witnessed the emergence of a number of extremist organizations challenging the sovereignty and integrity of the Indian state. These include United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), National Democratic Front of Bodoland, National Socialist Council of Nagalim, Kuki National Army, Garo Liberation Front, National Liberation Front of Tripura, Hmar People's Convention (Democratic), Zomi Revolutionary Army, All Tripura Tigers Force, Liberation Tigers of Arunachal, National Liberation Army of Arunachal, United Liberation Tigers of Arunachal, Revolutionary Army of Arunachal Pradesh, etc.

The extremist groups have had different kind of demands, from autonomy to secessionism and sovereignty. For example, the Assam Movement of 1979-84 was against illegal migration and for protection of Assamese identity, the Naga movement can be seen in the context of crisis

of Naga identity and the Mizo movement was the outcome of the neglect of Central and state governments during the famine. India adopted liberal democracy with inherent institutional safeguards for the protection of the interest of various communities and groups. But those safeguards were not taken very positively by the extremist groups. In this context, it is pertinent to ask the question as to why extremist trends are developing in a liberal democracy. Ethnic mobilisation led to ethnic movement and it often turns into extremism and violence in a society. Various groups allege that they have adopted the path of extremism to achieve their goals which, they argue, cannot be achieved through normal channels of liberal democracy. This is an impact of identity consciousness among various communities. It further got aggregated by the regional consciousness by elites and middle-class group. Another dimension is that the dominant communities allied with state power exclude certain groups from accessing resources, institutions and opportunities, generating a feeling of exclusion of other groups. In such situation, smaller ethnic communities assert for resources and opportunities. The assertion of marginalized identities and its extremist posture are giving a new direction to the politics in the region.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. What is meant by identity?

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Q2. State the relation between culture and identity.

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Q3. Name the states that North-east India comprises of?

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15.6 LET US SUM UP

- The North-eastern part of India is home to several ethnic groups with their specific identities. There are more than 200 ethnic groups and sub-groups found in the North-eastern Region.
- North-east India is a politically vibrant region of India which consists of eight states namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura and Sikkim.
- The population in Northeast is heterogeneous in nature. It consists of many different castes, classes, race, language, religion etc. Various ethnic, linguistic and religious groups demand their separate identity and they are opting for identity movements, autonomy movements, secessionist movements etc in the region.
- Identity is defined with the help of sameness and difference. Sameness focuses on the 'self of identity whereas the difference focuses on the 'others' of identity. This perception helps to distinguish one group from another and stratifies the society. To have an identity, a thing must have features that are both relevant and enduring
- Identity movement in Northeast India is a post-colonial scenario. The assertion of identity among various communities in the region started during colonial period but it turned into the shape of movement during the post-colonial period.
- In post-independence India, the ongoing process of modernization and development nurtured the growth of ethnic identification and conflict.
- It is seen that most of the identity assertions are sub-national or regional. 'Victimization' of specific groups by the state machinery has emerged as an important reason behind the rise of identity assertion movements.
- The British had divided the hill areas into two categories based on their levels of development: Excluded Areas and Partially Excluded Areas. The British wanted to keep the tribal people under the

Excluded Areas segregated from the influence of the people in the plains of Assam, and their hidden motive was to reduce the risks to their lives from the attacks by the tribal people.

- The identity movement in Northeast India is a product of historical experiences of various communities.
- Northeast India is one of the underdeveloped regions of the country. Economic underdevelopment as well as uneven pace of development, are some of the root causes behind the resurgence of ethnic groups in the Northeast region of India.
- The hill tribes of erstwhile Assam have developed a perception that not only the national mainstream has discriminated against them, but also the big brotherly attitude and treatment of plain men of Assam also contributed in this respect.
- In 1960, Assamese as official language was introduced in Assam. It created a sense of ethnic identity consciousness among the tribal communities.
- The presence of outsider or the flow of foreigners to the North East India is another major factor responsible for politics of identity movemen tin the region.
- Education played an important role in mobilising the people and making them conscious of their situation, which further led to identity consciousness.
- Displacement of tribal people is one of the burning issues in the politics of North-east India. It is also responsible for the growth of politics of identity movement in North East India.
- As a result of various identity movements, the region witnessed the emergence of a number of extremist organizations challenging the sovereignty and integrity of the Indian state.



15.7 FURTHER READING

1. Misra, Udayon (2014), *India's North-East:Identity Movements, State and Civil society*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

15.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No1. Identity is defined with the help of sameness and difference. Sameness focuses on the 'self of identity whereas the difference focuses on the 'others' of identity. This perception helps to distinguish one group from another and stratifies the society. To have an identity, a thing must have features that are both relevant and enduring

Ans to Q No2. Culture is considered as the most relevant feature in the construction of sameness and difference with the others. Identity is not an inherent, fixed or determined structure.

Ans to Q No3. North East India is a politically vibrant region of India which consists of eight states namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura and Sikkim.

15.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Short Questions (Answer each question within 150 words)

Q1. What is meant by identity movement?

Q2. Identify different identity movements in Northeast India.

Long Questions (Answer each question within 300-500 words)

Q1. Explain the issues of identity movement in Northeast India.

Q2. What are the implications of identity movement in Northeast India?



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