

RECOGNITION OF IDENTITIES: A PATH TO REASONABLE RECONCILIATION

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Abstract

*What is wrong with the monolithic nation-state building projects in multi-ethnic South Asian states? The states often, suffer from paranoia regarding the recognition of the minority ethnic identities. Most of the time states fail to acknowledge minority identities based on the principle of self-identification¹. What it does is some sort of imposition of identities upon the minority sections of the society. This causes discontent among the minority ethnic communities; because recognition and identity are basic human needs which are non-negotiable.² Recognition of identities seems to be a stepping stone towards managing ethnic conflict. The issue of recognition of identity of the peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts is a case in point. The paper searches for a *rahi aql*³ or a reasonable path to reconciliation among the conflicting groups in a multi-ethnic state. The conflict that is examined here is predominantly ethnic conflict between the majority and the ethnic minority communities.*

Introduction

The monolithic nation state-building project in the decolonised South Asian states is an endeavour to construct single “imagined community”⁴ in the newly emerged states. When a majority community promotes a single ethnic identity in a multi-ethnic state in order to make a unified nation-state it becomes exclusionary; it devaluates different ethnic identities of the peripheral minority people or marginalised ethnic communities within the state. Conflict becomes inevitable between the majority community and the minority ethnic communities. Both engage in a cold war of identity assertion. This kind of conflict of interests may lead to religious radicalization of some communities while others adopt linguistic fundamentalism as the instrument of their identity

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¹ The concept of identities based on principle of self-identification is derived from ILO Convention 169 Article 1(2).

² J. W Burton, *Conflict: Human Needs Theory*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), cited in Dennis J.D. Sandole, Sean Byrne, Ingrid Sandole-staroste and Jessica Senehi (eds.), *Handbook of Conflict Analysis and Resolution*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).

³ The phrase *rahi aql* (the path of reason) was advocated by Mughal emperor Akbar for a tolerant pluralist society. The phrase has been derived from Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, (UK: Penguin Books Ltd., 2005).

⁴ See, Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Community*, (UK: Verso, 1983).

assertion. Post-colonial South Asia has been diagnosed with such problems. The ethnic conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh is one of the cases in point. The present study attempts to address the problem of identity conflict between the majority and minority ethnic communities. It will discuss how perception of power in realist term leads to state's paranoia about recognising the minority communities at the periphery. The study will also discuss the CHT issue along the line of ILO convention 169. The objective of the study is to find out a reasonable path to reconcile the majority and the minority within a post-colonial state, and in doing so it will try to find out tools of recognition of identities.

The rationale of the study comes from the unwillingness of the Bangladeshi state to give right to self-identification to the CHT tribal communities. The ethnic conflict centres on the issues of devolution and autonomy. Initially, the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samiti (PCJSS) sought to achieve greater autonomy for the CHT. However, the 1997 peace accord has failed to satisfy the tribal minorities' aspirations; instead it has given limited autonomy under the Regional Council system. Even this promise has not been fulfilled as successive governments have failed to implement the accord in letter and spirit. This indicates that there is a wide gap between what is promised under the accord and what is offered now, and a mismatch between what the tribal communities have aspired (greater autonomy) and what they have achieved.

Methodology

The study is based on both primary and secondary sources. The primary data have been collected from international human rights organizations, and political organizations in the CHT. In this context, speeches, media statements of leaders from both the government and CHT organizations have proved to be useful. The secondary data have been collected from books, published articles, news papers and websites. The conceptual framework has been designed on the basis of the concept of minority, ethnic conflict, ILO Convention 107 and 169, concept of power of possession and power of union and lastly tools of recognition.

Conceptual Framework

Minority

Here the concept of minority is broadly derived from the definition provided by The UN Sub-committee on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities. The Minority here is:

A group of citizens of a state, constituting a numerical minority and in a non-dominant position in that state is endowed with ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics, which are different from those of the majority of the population. They have a sense of solidarity

with one another, and are motivated by a collective will to survive; their aim is to achieve equality with the majority community. (UN Doc.E/CN.4/Sub.2/1985/31, para 181)

According to Czarnecka⁵ ethnic minority communities are numerically small and politically marginal groups who contest with majority over strategic cultural and economic resources. Numerical size is one of the elements of ethnicity which helps to define it in terms of majority and minority. Schermerhorn⁶ defines the minority and the majority in terms of size and power. Schermerhorn combines characteristics of ethnicity with power and size. According to him, minority groups are subordinate to a dominant majority and each society has only one dominant group but a plurality of subordinate groups. In his view, the majority has both larger size and power while minority is small in size and less powerful. He defines ethnic minority as a significant sub-system, which forms less than half the population of a society and which has limited access to economic and political institutions.

According to Czarnecka In the context of state-building and centralization process, indigenous peoples' rights movements also result in ethnic mobilization, which reinforces the process of ethnicity formation. This is evident in the claim of CHT minority communities that are asserting their indigenous identities, culture and land rights based on the principle of self-identification. Therefore, ethnicity also encompasses indigenous peoples. According to the United Nations, 'indigenous communities, peoples and nations' are those:

Which have a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, and consider themselves as distinct from other sections of the societies. They form non-dominant sections of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories and ethnic identity as the basis of their continued existence as peoples in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal system. (UN Doc.E/CN.4/Sub.2/1986/7)

Both the UN definitions of minority and indigenous peoples are relevant in the CHT context as CHT minority communities have distinct ethnic, religious

⁵ Joanna-Pfaffa Czarnecka and Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake, "Introduction" in Joahha Pfaff-Czarnecka, Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake, Ashis Nandy and Edmund Terence Gomez (eds.) *Ethnic Futures: the State and Identity Politics in Asia*, (New Delhi, Thousand Oaks and London: Sage, 1999).

⁶ Richard Schermerhorn, "Ethnicity and minority groups" in John and Anthony D. Smith (eds.) *Ethnicity*, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).