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Ethnic Fanaticism and Ethnic Divide: A Tale of Conflicts in India

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to highlight the instances of ethnic fanaticism in India. Such activities of fanaticism involve linguistic nationalism, communal antagonism, tribal conflicts, etc. India being a diverse country is home to a variety of cultures, people practise different faiths, speak different language and observe various festivities owing to their festivities. No wonder that the diversity of India rests on the buttress of coexistence among various ethnicities, but such presence of multiculturalism has time and again led to skirmishes within the country. Such hostilities can be traced to the pervading fanaticism in the Indian society. Fanaticism among a group of people, more often than not, causes antagonism in the minds of that group members towards people of other groups. Incidents involving communal violence or afay can usually be traced to fanaticism. Such incidents have caused destruction within the social fabric. This article aims to explore such instances having their roots in ethnic fanaticism.

In the words of Milton Gordon, the term ‘ethnicity’ comes from the Greek ‘ethnos’, which means people or nation. Ethnicity is a sense of peoplehood or nationhood. The members of an ethnic group share a fraternal feeling with one another, owing to the common customs, language and beliefs. Therefore, there can be a number of cultural features which signify ethnicity – language, religion, national origin, dietary practices, common historical heritage are some of them. Horton and Hunt defined ethnic group as one which is socially identified as different and has developed its own subculture. On the other hand, fanaticism indicates an unquestionable zeal or passion for something, usually pertaining to religion, language or other significant cultural traits. Fanaticism among a group of people, more often than not, causes antagonism in the minds of that group members towards people of other groups. Incidents involving communal violence or afay can usually be traced to fanaticism. Such acts of violence erupting from communal tensions, efforts to secede from the Indian Union and in trying to champion the need for a separate state within the country owing to differences in language, are no alien to the people of India. In appreciation of the diversity in this country, Romain Rolland

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had said – “If there is one place on the face of Earth where all the dreams of living men have found a home from the very earliest days when man began the dream of existence, it is India”. No wonder that the diversity of India rests on the buttress of coexistence among various ethnicities, but such presence of multiculturalism has time and again led to skirmishes within the country. This article aims to explore such instances having their roots in ethnic fanaticism. One such arena has been language. The Census Commissioner of India has reported that there are about 19,500 languages and dialects spoken in India. The Constitutional Assembly debates illustrate that the framers of the Constitution had considerable difficulty in ascertaining any language as the national language. In the work of A. Aneesh, it has been mentioned that the assembly was faced with three major questions, while they were deliberating on the issue of national language – first, that this should be a language which would accomplish the growing nationalist aspirations, secondly it should emerge as a language that would be able to shoulder and bind together hundreds of other languages spoken throughout the nation and thirdly, such language has to perform the above tasks without coercing the speakers of other languages within the country. In a nutshell, the national language in addition to serving as a lingua franca, should also serve as a common mode of self-expression (Aneesh, 2009)². The assembly also thought of devising a formula concerning the language to be used in inter-governmental communications. Hindi was obviated by some as the language that would serve all the purposes, however owing to many dissenting opinions, a compromise was reached on the existence of an official language rather than a national language via the Munshi-Ayyangar formula and the same has been reflected in part XVII of the Indian Constitution. Hindi in Devanagari Script, therefore, enjoys the status of being the official language of the Union, as reflected by Article 343. However declaring Hindi as an official language couldn't come any close to solving the linguistic issues cropping up on many parts of the country. Linguistic fanaticism often decries other's languages, the language of the minorities or it might refer to the supremisation of one's dialects so much that it triggers off secessionist movements. As discussed by Shahid Parvez in his article, even after deciding the boundaries of the states in closer conformity with traditional linguistic regions through the States Reorganisation Act of 1956, there were a number of incidents where there was division of the state territories based on linguistic strifes. The initial demands came from the people of Andhra Pradesh who in addition to the State of Mysore also demanded the prioritisation of Telegu. Bifurcation of Bombay into Gujarat and Maharashtra in 1960, reorganisation of Punjab into the core of

² A. Aneesh, “Bloody Language: Clashes and Constructions of Linguistic Nationalism in India”, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2020.

Punjabi Suba, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh in 1966, creation of the state of Telangana from Andhra Pradesh, Uttarakhand from Uttar Pradesh are examples of the said instances. In addition to these, certain secessive movements have also emanated from the brewing of linguistic fanaticism. These occurrences are illustrative of the sad but persisting fact that the people of India are still interested in fanning their primary loyalties and loyalties to their kinship instead of proceeding to celebrate homogenous nationalism that would better portray the composite culture. Even government's resolution – demands for a separate state would only be entertained when there is existence of an objective ground, wasn't qualified in the skirmish initiated by the elite Maithili speakers of Bihar in their demand for separate state. This eventually got subsided. Parvez mentions that such fanaticism owes its roots to the discontentment among poorer sections who wants to glorify the language of their region. Having become more vigilant they try to hold up the uniqueness of their ethnicity which has been subdued for long under the garb of national interest. This leads to the fanning of the sectarian interests of the masses. So that these smaller groups do not disturb internal peace by calling upon movements demanding for new states every now and then as that would hinder the administrative process, the interests of linguistic minorities have been secured by certain constitutional provisions. While article 29 entrusts them with the right to preserve their distinct language, script and culture, article 30 gives them the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice. Article 350, in addition, gives them the leverage to submit their grievances to any Central or State authority pertaining to their language. An example would be the case of *DAV College Bhatinda v State of Punjab*, wherein the Supreme Court had ordered that the Punjab Government's decision to compulsorily write in Gurmukhi in all colleges affiliated to Punjab University violated the rights of the Arya Samajists to use and write in their own script. However, inspite of all these efforts, Tribeni Mandal³ has pointed out in her article that, there have been conflicts in certain areas between the Marathi and Hindi speakers in areas of Maharashtra (the Shiv Sena – a dominant political party of Maharashtra have been fanatical about the Maratha identity), Bihar-Assam issues, the Koch Rajbongshis in Assam who are also demanding separate state owing to linguistic differences, and the violence against Bengali speaking community in Assam. The Deccan states of peninsular India have also been identified to have vehemently championed their cause of local language prioritisation. However, these acts of superiorising one's own language has not altogether yielded negative results. Identified by Shakuntala Boro⁴ in her article, political ambitions

³ Tribeni Mandal, "*The Present Status, Identity and Identity Crisis Facing by the Ethnic Languages*", *International Journal of Physical and Social Sciences*, Vol 5 Issue 10, 2015.

⁴ Bora, Shakuntala, "*Ethnic struggles in Assam: an Observation*", Prasenjit Biswas and C.Joshua Thomas (ed.)

become stronger at the backdrop of shared cultural interests as collective conscience builds around the group rooting for such cause, thereby evoking mass support. Moreover, in a multicultural country like India, these protests affiliated to regionalism and sub-regionalism reflect the diversity and embolden federalism. Mohan Kishan Vyas⁵ has stated that the balkanisation of the Indian Union is not possible as long as such demands emanating from the local areas of the country are existent, and the otherwise prospective outcome of a tyrannical centre which would have imposed one language on so many major and minor communities of India, has received a setback through such calls of prioritising the local languages and has well preserved the concept of democratic diffusion in India (Parvez, 2009).⁶

Apart from linguistic fanaticism in certain parts of India, there have been a considerable amount of violence in the tribal areas of the country wherein the tribal groups have asked for separate states that would in turn provide them with better political autonomy over their region. Areas of North East India and the areas of Jharkhand, Chattisgarh have been majorly identified as tribal belts. Such has been the extent of the persisting fanaticism, that there have been conflicts between factions of the same tribe, so much so that they have found it difficult to cohabit with one another in a single state. The Bru (also referred to as the 'Reang') have been at loggerheads with the people of Mizoram for a considerably long time now. Scholar Lalengkima, in his article, has intricately detailed out the causes of the Bru-Mizo conflict, mentioned the instances that led to the spike in the hostility, and the prospective solutions to this cycle of violence and despair. The Reang's want of disintegrating Mizoram and acquiring political autonomy extends back to the period of 1994-95, when the Reang Democratic Convention Party (RDCP) and the Bru National Union (BNU) were constituted. On receiving threats from the Mizo student body – Mizo Zirlai Pawl (MZP), many Bru families, extending to almost 200-300 in number had to leave their homes and flee from Mizoram and settle in northern Tripura. There were a number of attempts made by the Mizo government to repatriate the Brus. But due to continuous cycles of violence and killings, this decision continued to be postponed. The people of the Bru community were accused of killing, kidnapping, committing extortion, homicide, snatching money, assassinatin of Lalzawmliana, an employee of the Mizoram Forest Department and the Bru inturn accused the Mizo people of kidnapping their members, raping their women and attacking and destroying their temples. After a number of bipartite and tripartite agreements

Peace in India's North-East, Meaning, metaphor and Method, Essays of Concern and Commitment, New Delhi: Regency Publications, 2006.

⁵ Mohan Kishan Vyas, "National Integration and the Law- Burning issues and Challenges" Deep and Deep publications, New Delhi, at 112-114.

⁶ Shahid Parvez, "Linguistic States & the Language Policy in India", Social Science Research Network, 2009.

involving the Mizoram Government and the Mizoram Bru Displaced People's Forum (MBDPF), it was decided that "Refugees should not be taken back unless and until Brus shun violence" (Fresh Exodus Deepens Bru Crisis, *The Sentinel*, p.14, 2009). The Bru Revolutionary Union (BRU) were also charged with the killing of a Mizo 17-year old boy, Zartzokioma, an incident which had further infuriated the Mizo community; it was further reiterated that repatriation arrangements would not be made unless the Reang tribe do not set aside militant activities. Amidst all the negativities that have erupted due to the persisting cycle of violence and brutalities between the Mizos and the Brus, some social spirited individuals, have however, set aside their personal grievances and ethnic superiorisation and have come forward to collaborate with members of each other's community thereby ensuring peace and progress. Scholar Lalengkima had conducted a quantitative research wherein he had interviewed and observed people of these two ethnicities. According to him, the Mizo and the Bru try to better off their relations by selling and buying the produce of Jhum cultivation and also domestic animals like pigs, dogs, goats and chicken, by digging each other's burial grounds and consuming liquor. In his field interview, the scholar has also recorded the happening of two ceremonies – Sandai (Bru term) and Saphun (Mizo term); the purpose of both is to bring together the members of both the ethnicities and establish a closer and warmer bond, thereby relegating the hostile feelings. The word "Sandai" means 'let us be a friend forever'. In this ceremony, friendship is established by painting the blood of a domestic animal (pig specially) on the neck by a Bru priest called Okchai; the meat of the animal is then shared and distributed among friends and invitees. It is meant to depict the prosperity in the social relations between the Mizos and the Brus. Saphun, on the other hand, is meant to proselytise. It is performed to transform all aspects concerning the life of an individual – in social, religious, political, economic matters. This ceremony is performed in two halves – first in which the Mizos and the Brus, i.e., the participants have to unanimously agree on the happening of such ceremony and thereafter, a date will be fixed when all the necessary rituals would be performed for the successful merger of the individual into the Mizo community. The tales of conflict between the Mizo and the Bru ethnicities weave a sad tale of factionalism and fragmentation, which is however, occasionally punctuated by the happy and merry ceremonies like Sandai and Saphun (Lalengkima, 2020)⁷.

A similar situation of divide between two tribal communities exists in the state of Jharkhand. As pointed out by Anant Kumar and Pramil K Panda in their article, the tribes of Jharkhand

⁷ Lalengkima, "*Ethnic Tension and Conflict in North East India : Bru Crisis in Mizoram*", *Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol 11 Issue 4, 2020.

have been divided for a considerable amount of time on the ground of religion. The Christian tribals of Jharkhand have been at loggerheads with the Sarna tribals. Claims of existing unity among the tribal groups under the common identity of Jharkhand haven't been supported by any evidence either. The Sarna tribals do not look upon the Christian tribal leaders as members of their own fraternity. In fact, those tribals who have converted from their native faith to Christianity have either fled or have returned back to their previous faith in fear of subjugation, persecution and even the fact that they might be disowned. Such has been the hostility in the minds of the two groups that even if there are some Christian tribal leaders who want to assert their tribal origin, irrespective of their religion, the Sarnas have asserted that inclusion in the tribal group would require from them a clarification on their exact religious affiliation – as to whether they are a Sarna or a Christian. However, the malevolence isn't limited to just excluding the Christian tribals and stripping them from their ethnic identity. The Sarna tribals have charged their Christian counter-parts with the taking of double advantages – being 'Christians', they can call themselves a part of the otherwise recognised minority community of India and avail all the facilities hence available as provided by the legislations under the head of 'protective discrimination'. On the other hand, by vouching on their tribal origins, the Christian tribals can acquire representations in many areas by calling themselves as STs (Scheduled Tribes). Another accusation was that the Christians were enjoying an unfair monopoly over jobs. This is in accordance to the article by P. Pandey – "Jharkhand Cabinet Approves Anti-Conversion Bill; To Be Introduced in State Assembly This Month" (1st August, 2017). According to another article written by A. Kumar – "Tribals in Jharkhand : Religion and Identity Politics", *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol 49 No. 5, 2014, the Sarnas have opined that the Christians have little affiliation to their tribal identity owing to the differences in their faith and hence, should not be allowed to take advantage of the same. Some Sarnas even accuse the Christian tribal leaders of proselytising members from their indigenous faith to the Abrahamic faith. The title of "Adivasi" was deemed by some to be of some effect in bringing people of both the communities together, but in reality it didn't yield much success. The trouble that the tribals are destined to face, because of the fanning of ethnic hostility, is the problem of inadequate representation in political bodies. As it is, the tribal representation is fairly low because they form a minority in proportion to the total population of the State. Creating this divide and stripping off the Christian tribals from their tribal ethnicity due to their affiliation to another religion will cause the population count among the tribals to further go down. This will in turn cause them grave trouble as the significant reduction in their populace would affect their voice in political forums and their bargaining power and political position

would turn disfavoured (Kumar, 2018)⁸.

In addition to the linguistic and tribal conflicts that feed into fanaticism, India being home to a various number of religions, faces communal antagonism on a regular basis. The ills of communalism, and fundamentalism by prioritising one's religion and belittling others have plagued the Indian society for aeons. The Indian diaspora is aware of the sickening but persisting acts of communal intolerance, the barbarity of which is enough to destroy the social fabric. Practising open aggression towards minority communities, devising legislations to prejudice them, abruptly charging them on the grounds of sedition or treason under the garb of national security, badmouthing their rituals to serve political vendettas have been regularised. When a panacea to such evils is almost unfetchable, the political parties have been intent on provoking the hostility even more to fill in their votebanks. This paired with cultural attacks in North East India has emboldened the lust of divisiveness even further. Fragmentation and factionalism are so hugely prevalent in today's India that any attempt to unify seems to be just a fancy. In-fights among small tribal groups, drifting away from centric policies to champion the cause of one's ethnic identities and threats to secede from India if they are not given enough political autonomy are looming large and all that these incidents have done is bring despair on the aspects wherein otherwise development ideas could have been sought. Stated by Violet Hazarika in her article, the in-fightings among tribal groups in North East India have almost paralysed their provisions for security – economic, educational, personal, environmental, community, food and political security (Hazarika, 2016)⁹. Thousands have been rendered homeless and the administration's apathy towards the plight of the refugees have worsened their conditions even further. A feeling of relegation and of not being able to voice one's opinion to the fullest leads to anguish. Sharing of common anguish leads to fraternal feeling and as the sense of belongingness and solidarity to that group creeps in, the xenophobia in the minds of its members stems up. William Crowne has pointed out that these refugees who have been victims of intolerance gather around slums to carry on with their livelihood. These impoverished slums play a vital role in ethnic violence as the areas that get divided on ethnic lines, turn out to be violent and they rely on resource network (Crowne, 2013)¹⁰. What is hence desired is the giving up of such primary loyalties which leads to the practice of divisiveness. All should in turn embrace harmony. Not only would that aid in the better functioning of the

⁸ Anant Kumar & Pramil K Panda, "Ethnicity, Religion, and Identity Politics Among Tribes in Jharkhand", Economic & Political Weekly, Vol 53, Issue No. 39, 2018.

⁹ Violet Hazarika, "Ethnic Movement in North East India and Its Effect in Human Security of the Region", The Clarion, Vol 5 No. 1, 2016.

¹⁰ William Crowne, "Ethnicity as a Source of Conflict in India", E-IR Essay, 2013.

administration and help the nation to progress but also cater to the problems of the members of each ethnicity. Only then would this country emerge as one envisioned by American author Will Durant – “India will teach us the tolerance and gentleness of mature mind, understanding spirit and a unifying, pacifying love for all human beings”.
