

Northeast identity: an artificial construct



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Kamaljit_Deka 1 December 2009 Updated 21 Jun 10009 views

This is in reference to the article titled "Flexibility Needed to Solve Militancy" (The Sentinel, November 25, 2009) written by Shibdas Bhattacharjee in which it was rightly pointed out that the term "northeast" has no viable meaning as there are "apparent traits that mark a clean-cut distinction between them" and therefore should not be portrayed as a homogeneous entity.

For a long time now, I have been unhappy about the "Northeast" fixation, a lot of Indians exhibit. For some reasons, these people cannot conceive of anything "Assamese" or "Khasis" --- it has to be 'Northeasterners'. I disqualify the term "Northeast" as it is a meaningless neologism. Simply put, the Northeast consist of seven different states (now gone up to eight with the inclusion of Sikkim), distinguished by different characteristics. So why put in "Northeast" qualification? Fact is, the "Northeast" category is an artificial construct, drawn up by the British as an artifact of convenience to lump the disparate groups. The "Northeast", by all means, is a geographic concept and nothing more.

There is a vacuous assumption of commonality among the people of the Northeastern states of India. What exactly does the average Assamese have in common with a Mizo, Naga or Arunachali? Very little. There is nothing that makes one feel kinship with other apart from the small matter of their sitting adjacent to each other. There are few cultural bonds between the various Northeastern states and the region does not share a common language or religious heritage, which can sometimes form the basis of cross national identity.

The idea of some sort of broader "Northeast" identity is probably alien not just to most Assamese but I suspect other groups of the region as well. The people of this region have far greater travel linkage with the "mainland" India than they do among themselves. Ironically, an Assamese, who wish to visit certain states of the region, must obtain special permit to do so!

There have been well-meaning attempts by socially conscious groups to bridge different Northeastern communities, who by happenchance discover themselves lumped together. But these smattering of efforts, driven often by emotional or political expediency have received only tepid response within different Northeastern communities.

Identity cannot be imposed. It is not some artificial construct that can be willed. It has to be felt and shared. Its rhythms are found in the music we strum to, in the jokes that we erupt at, in the fashion trends that we emulate, in the food we lap up. It is constructed in the mundane business of life. The encounter that has taken place within the people of this region may have transformed many in some ways, but expanding it to a "Northeast" identity is not one of them.

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