

Building Learning Communities among the Unreached: Educational Empowerment among the Marginalized Groups in the Frontiers of North East India

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ABSTRACT

India is a country of diversity. On the one hand it has the nuclear capability in its defence forces and great advancements in the space research and development and on the other hand a majority of its population do not have the basic amenities of life like pure drinking water, electricity and healthcare. Education and literacy is also one such sector, which also has a similar diverse picture. In the metropolitan cities of India there is world-class educational institutes imparting high standard education in technical, management and other sections. But in other places the primary and basic educational systems are non-existent due to different reasons. A country where social, linguistic, ethnic and political inequality is so much obvious it is sure there will be same disturbing pictures in many fields. Spread of education is one thing, which also have been badly affected by these factors. Regional inequality and political interests are also responsible for that. So the spread of education in the North Eastern states of India is not at par with the rest of the country. History is largely responsible for this inequality. Even at the age of distance education, e-learning these states have no difference in getting education. Particularly for some communities it is a very difficult job to get educated due to the above-mentioned causes. Therefore, before going to explore these facts we need to look at their present condition from a historical perspective.

In this paper seven such marginalized groups are identified for studies in this respect. They are the Khamtis, Mishings, Kukis, Hmars, Deoris, immigrant East Bengali Muslims and Nepalis settlers. These groups are marginalized because of different historical, political reasons and present ethnic conflicts, which have plagued the North Eastern states of India. First we look on the Khamtis.

Khamtis also known as the Singphoes are one of the indigenous tribes of North East belonging to Tibetan-Burmese clan of the Mongoloid race. They are very peace loving pleasant people and practice Buddhism with traditional rituals. They have been living in this region for the last one thousand years. They had their Kingdom stretching from the South-eastern part of present day Arunachal Pradesh to the North-eastern borders of Assam. They also kept

goodwill relationships with the Ahom Kings of Assam from 13th century to 19th century and often performed royal marriages between themselves. They spoke Assamese with a slight variation and many of them settled on the plains of Assam particularly in the present Tinsukia district. But the coming of the British Colonial forces in to Assam in 1826 brought unprecedented changes to the Khamtis. The British Administrator and explorer Sir. Robert Bruce met one Khamti Chieftain who presented him a drink prepared from a local herb, which latter identified to be the tea. Thus the discovery and production of tea was associated with the Khamtis. The British began growing tea plantations in large numbers in the North-eastern part of India which resulted in large scale lost of habitation and farming land of the Khamtis and forced them to migrate to the hills. The opium trade operated by the British also further weaken the Khamtis as a new generation of them completely fell victim to its addiction. However it was the great Verrier Elwin from Oxford who explored the unreached world of the Khamtis, like he did to many tribes of North East and brought them to the attention of the outside world. The dignity and authority of the Khamti King, Thagh titular, was restored and medi-care as well as education began to reaching them. By the time, India became independent; the Khamtis were given special reservation as a hill tribe as per the Sixth schedule of the Constitution of India. Some of them governmental jobs but the process of steady development and assimilation eluded them because of regional politics and ethnic hegemony. The main stream politics of Assam ignored their condition as they led to other tribes and the creation of Arunachal Pradesh further alienated them socially, ethnically and politically, the dominant Adi and Nishi tribes of Arunachal Pradesh pushed them to a corner and in Assam they are at no wan's land. Politically and legislatively they are made unrepresentative. Their education was worst hit, as their traditional Buddhist monasteries could not provide modern secular education nor they could attract outside help. As a result, uneducated and unemployed the Khamtis are now facing extinction falling victim to present ethnic turmoils of the reason.

Next we have the Mishings or Miris, the largest tribes of plains in Assam. The Mishings too were originally a hill tribe, latter migrated to the plains and presently living mostly in Dhemaji and Lakhimpur districts of Assam. Their brethren in hills known as the Hill Miris are still surviving in the neighbouring Arunachal Pradesh. It is very interesting to see that the Mishings who were originally highland people are for last three hundred years living in the most low laying areas of Assam. They are ___ as the river side dwellers and very well accustomed to live in the flood affected areas. Worlds second largest river isle – Majuli in Assam is mostly occupied by this tribe. Their lives are very harsh as they always fight against the nature – flood and epidemics for their survival, living in 'Changghars' and using boats as their only means of

communications. This is culturally vibrant tribe has been constantly ignored by the ruling elite of the state and even their reservation as a plain-tribe has not brought any noticeable change. Only a handful of educated professionals and servicemen have been produced after the independence but majority of them are still under object poverty and in backward conditions. Healthcare and education are the worst case. Since they have their own distinctive dialect, their education faces different challenges. Their children finds it difficult to study in Assamese and their own dialect doesn't have its own script. As a result, illiteracy and political as well as ethnic discrimination have been greatly hampering this culturally rich tribe of Assam from getting developed and assimilated. More dangerously a section of them, frustrated of being neglected by all, are talking about armed insurgency. In this context, proper spread of education can play a greater role in restoring harmony and progress among them.

The Kukis are also a Mongoloid tribe scattered in the hills of Manipur, Nagaland and Assam. They are also known to be a violent war loving tribe who has a turbulent history of violent conflict and bloodsheds with other tribes of the region. They have their own dialect without any script and were all Christian converts. The Christian Church and Missionaries are always widely acknowledged as the harbinger of modern education to the North-East. From that point of view the Kukis were previously well educated fluent English Speakers. But at the present situation, their localities are dominated by non-Christian Manipuris and Dimasas of Assam. The Church now no long operate educational service to their locality particularly those which are at remote hill areas. Moreover, for the last two decades the Manipuris and Kukis are fighting each other because of ethnic tension and political instigation. A faction of Kukis also has armed rebels who are further disintegrating them from the others. To add more, for best one year the Kukis are also fighting with the Dimasas of Karbi-Anglong and North-Cachar Hill districts of Assam which even endangers their own survival. Amidst these bloody conflicts their new generation is facing crisis. In spite of being a reserved hill tribe they are least represented in all walks of life and sadly has no any dominant middle class among them. Unlike the Mishings they also do not have a ruling elite among themselves. Educated professionals, service holders and even in trade and business they are poorly represented. The ban on environmentally hazardous farming, the Zhum farming, their traditional one, also further have weakened their condition, linguistic and religious identities are also preventing them to migrate. In this context education can play a major role in restoring order and resolving all these conflicts.

The Hmar tribes are relatively new for the people of North East India in general. Actually they belong to a greater tribal group of Myanmar across the international border. They are mostly found in the state of Mizoram, a

Burmese pocket merged willingly by its people to the British Indian Territory during the early nineteenth century. Hmars constitute a considerable population of Mizoram as well as the Hill district of Cachar of Assam. They are also a very peace loving and progressive tribes enlightened by the Church a century ago. This Christian tribe is also presently facing extinction before the majority Lusai and Bishnupriya Manipuri tribes in these two states. Furthermore a section of this tribe is taking armed insurgency as a policy of getting attention and going importance a case of every tribes of present North East India. Though very liberal and well educated up to its second generation, the present one is sadly deprived of this because of political and social unrest. They are also often dubbed as foreigners or Myanmarese by the other tribes. They had previously their own script in Khmer of a Burmese dialect. But after century old union with India, they have completely lost it and are also now one of the scriptless dialect speaking tribes of the Northeast. The Bengali of Cachar and Mizo of Mizoram is very difficult for them which is also responsible for them to get basic education in this two places. As a result they are getting alienated and marginalized day by day among others.

Deoris are the very earliest dwellers of the plains of Brahamaputra Valley, the heartland of Assam. They belong to the Austric-Tibetan clan of early settlers. In the past Deoris were nature worshipers and very leading group in the practice of occultism and sorcery. They even had rituals of human sacrifice and cannibalism. Latter most of them took Hinduism of the Vaishnavite School but they still maintain some of their earlier heathen practices. But they are very soft speaker and shy people living peacefully on rural area of Assam's plain with other groups. They don't have history of any conflict or hostility with other ethnic groups in the states. However, like the Mishings, they have also been constantly ignored and ill treated by the Ruling class and mainstream politicians yet they are not calling for separationism. Their great leader Late Bhimbar Deori initiated a process by uniting all the tribes of Assam during the first years after India's independence. But because of divisive policies of other groups his great effort did not succeeded. Now this great tribe is very much alienated from the rest of the population of Assam. Their own dialect – the Deori-Chutia dialect is also was in the eye of the storm as another non-tribal group the Chutias are complaining about it because the State Government recognized language in 2003. Thus the Deoris are also facing the problem of alienation and marginalization and their education is now badly hit by this latest controversy.

The East Bengali immigrants are the most obvious group that are marginalized in Assam presently. They began to migrate in large members under a government plan designed to collect revenues in the less populated province of Assam of the British Indian Empire. The then Prime Minister of

Assam Sir Sayed Sadullah planned an ambitious plan called “grow-more food” programme by engaging the cheap, hard working East Bengalis agricultural work in the remote river banks, low-laying areas and govt. grazings. As a result Bengalis of mostly Mymensingh district began migrating and settled in those places of Assam. These groups were all Muslims and were very rustic, backward, illiterate and superstitious and spoke the Mymensingh dialect of Bengali. They came in the early thirties of the last century and continued to live up to India’s independence and participation. It is true that, these East Bengali immigrants contributed immensely towards the growth of Assam’s economy in agricultural and animal husbandry even in post-independence India. But because of their living periphery, they failed to get assimilated into the Assamese mainstream. Their confinement in the far-flung areas resulted in poverty, illiteracy, health problems, mal-nutrition, high birth rate, gender discrimination, religious fundamentalism and political exploitation. Furthermore, the continuous illegal migration of East Pakistanis and Bangladeshis after India’s independence contributed in jeopardizing their already fragile existence in Assam. Persons who began moving towards urban localities in search of work and livelihood are often identified as aliens or foreigners. Linguistically and religiously the early immigrants and settlers and the illegal infiltrators are same – which further makes their condition more complex. Assamese speaking Muslims also do not recognize them as their brethren and do not accept or welcome them socially. Moreover, Assam had witnessed a turbulent six years old agitation from 1979 to 1985 to expel the foreign national, which unfortunately brought communal and ethnic problems. All these resulted in further isolation of these East Bengali immigrant Muslims in Assam. In spite of being the backbone to Assam’s agri-economy and being the main workforce of the state’s labour sector, they are the most deprived and marginalized group of Assam. They are also politically very much exploited. Their vote in the state’s legislative assembly elections and four parliamentary seats are very crucial. Therefore, some political parties always try to use them as vote banks by projecting them as a minority group. Others who oppose this brand as foreigners and wanted their political rights to be curtailed and to be expelled to Bangladesh. This group, mostly known as Miyas (a derogatory word) in Assam only has traditional religious schools called the Madrassa where their male children go for raw and age old teachings of Islam, only memorize the Holy Quran in Arabic and get trainings to lead prayers at Mosques. Thus this education only produces Mollahs or Maulvis without any knowledge of the present day world, technical, vocational or of any professional. In the present environment of international Islamic terrorism, this group are also very much influenced by their diktats. Many of their youth are reported to have been gone to Bangladesh for armed training. Some of them are also plotting to create a separate homeland for them in Assam as to merge with Bangladesh.

Religious fundamentalism is so deep among them that they are very much pre-occupied by religious thoughts, mostly of life after death, participating only in religious gatherings called Tablings or Iztemas. In 1992, a journalist of Nagaon district of Assam was given a fatwa of death sentence by a local ___ belonging to this group. All these are responsible for their alienation from the rest of people of Assam. Though a new generation of men and women are coming out from these shortcomings and getting educated in different higher institutions discrimination are continuing. Some of them also accepted Assamese, the official language of Assam as their mother tongue, which have saved the state from being dominated linguistically by Bengalis. This of course have raised some hopes for their betterment as mainstream Assamese leaders are recognizing their contributions. But still they are the largest group, which are educationally marginalized in the state.

Last among the groups are the Nepalese settlers. These people began to migrate to the North East after 1857, when the Royal Nepali Army and Gorkhas collaborated the British Empire. The Nepalese began moving to Assam and Meghalaya in large numbers in late nineteenth and early twentieth century.. Like the East Bengalis, they too began settling on the river banks and mostly on the northern banks of river Brahmaputra. They are mostly found in the Sonitpur and Darrang districts of Assam and on Khasi Hills of Meghalaya. They also moved to the grassland and Govt, grazings on the present Assam Arunachal Pradesh borders as they are basically animal farmers. The Nepalese settlers are the pioneers of dairy and livestock business of Assam and presently dominates these two sectors in the entire North East. But in spite of having an affluent business, they are very backward in many forms due to different reasons. They are all Hindus and Casteish is very rampant among them. Their upper caste brethren use to flourish and get mingled in the mainstream Assamese society. But their lower castes do not have this feature. Moreover they are divided, as Gorkhas, Newars and Pokhrels. The present political leadership also has plunged this community into further polarization and alienation. As a result their social condition is not yet up to the mark. And so their education. They have a recognized Indian Modern Language the Nepalese with its own Devnagiri script. The State Government of Assam has also included Nepalese language as one of the language papers in the syllabus for its board examination leading to the 10 + 2 level. Even then their educational condition is not so good. The language barrier in the medium of instruction at the educational institutions are one such cause for their uninterest. The present influx of illegal immigrants from Nepal to this region also creating same additional problems for them. All these have made them a marginalized group in the North East of India for which necessary steps must be taken for their empowerment. Education is one such step, which can bring greater success for them.

But reaching all these eight groups of communities is a greater challenge in this age of open and distance education.

Indian constitution makes education as one of the basic rights of its citizens. Yet the spread of education in India is not equal and there are many regional disproportions. In the North Eastern part of India, the picture is all the same. Here modern western secular education came through the Church. The Christian Missionaries, particularly the American Baptist Missionary learnt the local languages and set up schools in vernacular languages, mostly in Assamese in the mid nineteen centuries. Their noble initiative also helped in saving local languages like Assamese, Nagamese etc from being script aside by the dominant Bengali that came with the British administration from Calcutta after 1864 Anglo-Burma war. After independence all government schools were supposed to play a greater role in promoting and spreading education into this region. But it did not happened in reality and due some political and regional social reasons certain groups enjoyed the fruit of education and others were deprived and thus lagged behind and marginalized. These seven groups of people have been the victim of such systems. But in the age of Open and Distance education some hopes are seen for their upliftment. However the present system of ODE learning is insufficient and unable to reach these groups where the Internet, e-learning services fail to reach them.

Though India is a leading figure in the world of IT industry and has a very booming and vibrant economy based on this sector, yet there are some places where basic telephone connections are still a distant dream. So where there are no telephone lines or electricity how Internet or satellite television can reach the people. That is the problem which have been hampering ODE in India which is much visible in these groups of the North East. Though the famous IGNOU (Indira Gandhi National Open Universities) has many of its centers in the region, they could not reach them due to many reasons. The first barrier is that of medium of instruction. The IGNOU imparts its education only either in English or Hindi. But these groups have their own languages and dialects. And to begin with the elementary level the language factor is very important.

In the case of the Khamtis, the education should be imparted in Assamese at the primary level, and then from the middle and secondary level it should be transformed into English. ODE institutes like IGNOU and others should engage local volunteers and social workers to carry their study materials to the interiors of Arunachal Pradesh for the enlightenment of the Khamtis. Their traditional institutes like the Buddhist Monasteries should also be included in their mission as they have a large number of devoted and dedicated disciples who can carry out such tasks. The

Church and the management authorities of the tea-estates nearby also have a greater part to play in this regard. Regular counseling and assessment sessions should be provided in their villages and popular crowd attraction programmes like street plays and puppet shows should be arranged to spread the message of urgency for getting educated. While the Churches and tea-gardens could provide personnel and infrastructure, the ODE organizations should take assistance from the state governments of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh in order to remove the political and social barriers. They should also set up a center for this group in Tinsukia town of Assam from where study materials should be dispatched. The Khamti communities should be given educational access by the ODE organizations by the traditional correspondence and postal system.

For the Mishings the drive should be certain different. The Mishing dialect has already been recognized as a language by Assam State Government for which the ODE organizations should give importance in promoting and developing this language by making study materials in Mishing. Since Roman script is used for Mishing language, it won't be a major difficulty for the ODEs to prepare texts and other materials. The Anglo-Mishing dictionary and grammar is also now available at the market. So the ODE organizations should first go for elementary and secondary section to provide education to the Mishings. Since telephone and Internet services are not so good in Lakhimpur and Dhemaji district of Assam, they should go for the traditional mailing correspondence system and should set up almost school like infrastructures in their localities. They should also make preparations for mobile floating schools or study centers as their areas are constantly affected by floodwater. The political conflict of creating a Mishing autonomous region should also be resolved at the earliest to create conducive atmosphere for spreading education among them. Traditional religious centers like the Satras of Majuli should be engaged to provide teachers as they have a very rich cultural and enlightened foundation.

Similarly Kukis in Manipur could be reached by the Church. Their own dialect along with English should be applied in preparing study materials for them by the ODE. Because of their sensitivity and polarized existence in Manipuri society it is only the Church, which can provide them both protection and guidance. Same is the case for the Hmars. Hmars in Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills district of Assam is facing an ethnic cleansing campaign by other tribes. So in this turbulent situation ODE agencies should take bold steps in spreading education among them. Their almost extinct script of the Hmar School should be developed not only for their education but also for anthropological interests. The armed insurgency, which have been playing this tribe should be brought to the negotiation table to create a conducive atmosphere by the political leaders and government. The ODE agencies

should also approach the insurgent groups politically for the greater cause of educating the masses and the rebels too should reciprocate. ODE operations in these reasons should not be hurdled either by governmental restrictions and insurgent activities.

For the Deories the task before ODE agencies is comparatively easier. Deoris live in comparatively accessible areas and they are not threatened by any armed insurgency or other political disturbances. The main problem for them now is the declaration of Deori language as the same as that of the Chutias – a backward non-tribal community of upper Assam. Both the communities deplore this decision by the state government because as Deori language courses have already being offered by broadcasting by All India Radio – Dibrugarh. So the Chutia inclusion will seriously affect this process for ODE agencies they should take the help of this radio center to provide teaching and learning as the Deories are small in number and they are already a regular listener of Deori language programme by the Dibrugarh AIR center.

Next the biggest challenges comes before the ODE organizations when they takes up the immigrant East Bengali Muslims of Assam. They are politically and communally very sensitive and furthermore are scattered in remote riverbanks and isles of Brahmaputra where no basic modern amenities could reach. Madrassas or the religious Islamic schools are the only means of education where only oratory courses of the Holy Quran is preached in Arabic. This Arabic is only for oration or for readings, and their pupils do not know this language to speak, to write or even the meaning. These people speak a eastern dialect of Bengali called Mymensinghi Bengali. They find it difficult to speak Assamese. Moreover their girl children are not sending to these Madrassas. And the whole community presently is juxtaposed with the illegal infiltrators from Bangladesh who are all similar to them in all aspects. So nationality, religion, language all are the key factors by which this community is falling victim in Assam and therefore much backward in education and literacy. So the ODE agencies along with some social NGOs should come forward for their help. They should go to there interior areas and set up centers to make an awareness of education. They should use the infrastructures of the Madrassas for class sessions and counsellings. As their society is very orthodoxy, the ODEs should arrange separate centres for girls. Side by side they should also set up child and maternity care homes, birth control centres etc. These empowerment schemes for women would definitely create a revolution among this community along with the ODE system. This community is also a traditionally very ardent listener of radio. So ODE agencies should set up some low-powered FM radio stations to reach them. Fortunately these immigrant Muslims of Assam has accepted Assamese to be

their mother tongue for which the ODE agencies find no difficulty in providing education in this language.

The Nepalese settlers also need similar attention. The ODE organizations should set up school like study and counseling centres and take use of AIR's Tezpur center to reach them by broadcasting. They could also take help from Radio Nepal International and AIR's Darjeeling and Kurseong centres where where programmes in Nepali are daily broadcasted and these are easily heard in Assam where Nepali settlers live.

Thus study materials in different local languages and dialect rather than Hindi and English in elementary and secondary level is a much for ODE in North East India. It will help immensely to retain some of the indigenous languages, which are now in the verge of extinction. It will also help for the development of tribal ___ at the higher academic level.

Secondly the ODE could not relay on sophisticated communication systems like Internet, voice-mail or videophone, as the North East India is geographically so adverse that these facilities do not have any infrastructure or ground bases. Moreover poor funding and lack of financial assistance also pose a bar to them. So the only easy available way is the radio in this region. Apart from these the traditional correspondence, mailing and despatching systems should be followed by the ODE agencies in this area. This may these seven marginalized groups of North East India could be well-reached by ODE systems by engaging the Church, the Madrassas, the Satras and the radio services as well as human correspondence.