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North East India: Framing a Region

Хасанова Алия Мулжибаевна

Казахский национальный университет имени аль-Фараби, Факультет востоковедения,
Алматы, Казахстан

E-mail: aliya_mukatova@mail.ru

North East India is a region consisting of the Seven Sister states: Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland, and a recently added Sikkim. It is an utmost eastern part of India, connected with the rest of the country through a 22 kilometer stretch of land known as the Siliguri corridor or the "Chicken neck". It is noteworthy that only 2% of the region's border is with the rest of India while 98% of its border is international - with China, Myanmar and Bangladesh [4]. North East India constructs a single region when opposed to the rest of India which can boast extreme cultural and ethnic diversity. There are at least three distinctive features which make this region special and outstanding: its separate geographical location, its specific history and its culture. However, when we look at North East India itself, unwrapping the concept of a region and revealing its own peculiarities, we can see that it is also a highly heterogeneous, versatile and eclectic mosaic of peoples, cultures and locations, a so-called "mini India" [6]

Thus, to think of North East as a single unit or a combination of states depends merely on the problem researched and answers sought. Though nowadays the complexity of discussed issues and the overall turn to interdisciplinary approach implies multidimensional insight into the problem which means that we need to consider North East India both as a solid single unit and a combination of various units.

In this paper an attempt is made to trace the formation process of the region of North East India, through geographical, historical and cultural lens, and define its present-day position in the national Indian milieu.

Historically, the constructing of the region was not a one-day and simple process. It happened in the conditions of colonial and postcolonial development, when to the initial three states, Manipur, Tripura and Assam, were gradually added four others, carved out of Assam: Nagaland (1963), Meghalaya (1972), Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram (1987) [6]. It so happened that before British rule, North East India was an independent and self-sufficient region, with a century-old tradition of scattered hill and plain tribes existence. Even during the British period, most of the areas remained relatively untouched by the colonial rule and retained their spirit of freedom and independence. Hence, no wonder, that after the partition, being claimed a region within the Indian-nation fold, Northeast did not at once accept this idea. The situation worsened by the consequent economic stagnation, lack of connectivity with the mainland, constant flows of land-hungry immigrants from East Bengal, negligence from the government regarding socio-economic needs of the population [4]. Eventually, the growing alienation and dissatisfaction of the people resulted in various autonomist, separatist and insurgent movements, such as the United Liberation Front of Assam, Naga Nationalist Council, Mizo National Front, etc.

The historical formation of the region was significantly influenced by its cultural specificity and variety. If, geographically and politically, through a challenging process of political integration, the North Eastern states came to be one region, it is still a misapprehension to put it under a single cultural label [3]. Each and every state of North East India has a different ethnic division, which in turn divides into tribals-non tribals, peoples of the hills and the plains, Christians, Hindus, Muslims, etc. For instance, in the state of Meghalaya the majority people is Khasi, which also divides into Pnars, Bhois, Wars and Lyngngams [2]. The Khasis are unique with their matrilineal system, which deserves a separate study. The linguistic composition is mainly

Tibeto-Burman and Sino-Tibetan. As F. Rajkumar writes in his book, "North East India is tectonically and morphologically part of East Asia, but politically it is part of South Asia. The Indo-Aryan civilizational influence ends in the Northeast region and Southeast culture and ethos begin" [Rajkumar 2011, 64, 66].

Therefore, taking into account the abovementioned aspects, framing the Northeastern region of India still leaves some tasks for the future. Theoretically, for a certain area to frame a region, it should possess certain features, id est. "social-spatial totality"; history, constructed over a span of time; uniformity of multiplicity; and identity through which a region "instills a sense of longing for and belonging among people, who through generations were involved in its gradual, collaborative yet often contestatious construction" [Aloysius 2014, 33]. North East India lived a long and enduring process of framing as a region, its people struggling for their rightful place in the national milieu, trying to preserve their identity and voice their political and economic interests.

Источники и литература

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