

Sub-nationalism in Arunachal Pradesh: A Study Of Its Construction & Conceptualization

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Abstract

The Indian nation-state shows a wide variety of Sub-nationalism in its components. There have been different manifestations of the same, and the basis of such sub-nationalism has been the commonality of language, culture or even religion. However, in a society as diverse as Arunachal Pradesh, does a sub-nationalism truly exists has been a pertinent question. Thus, this article would be a study to find this out through the usage of subaltern documentation and politico-historical analysis. The paper will first explore the ethno-cultural dimensions of the state of Arunachal Pradesh, followed by exploring Arunachali history through interviews. Following this, it would elaborate upon AAPSU and its role in the state and finally present a conclusion.

Keywords: Arunachal Pradesh, Sub-nationalism, Subaltern documentation

1. Introduction

In binary terms, if one wishes to classify the many ethnic communities that reside in the state of Arunachal Pradesh, this could be done in the following Bodhic and Non-Bodhic, the former being communities following primarily Buddhism and the latter the rest remaining. The above binary is rather a surface-level understanding which does not capture the true essence of cultural-ethnic diversity in the state. For this, I present a new 4 fold classification; the first one is the Bodhic group, which is composed of both the two major

sects within the religion, Mahayana or, more specifically, one might say Vajrayana Buddhism and Theravada Buddhism; both practice the extreme corners of the state. The second is the Tani group; they are primarily found in the central region of Arunachal Pradesh; the commonality of this group is that the ethnic communities which come under this wider umbrella are said to have descended from a single human being called "Abo/Abu Tani" or "Father Human". The third is the Mishmic group, which comprises three ethnic communities, i.e. Idu Mishmi, Digaru and Miju Mishmi, and finally, there is the TCL group, or the Tirap, Changlang Longding group, communities in the South East region of Arunachal Pradesh, which has the border with Nagaland.

A state with such a wide array of ethnic diversity begs the question, how do people identify themselves? There are obvious reasons to think since there aren't many things that give the people of Arunachal Pradesh a singular shared identity like there is among other North East Indian states, be it Christian identity, linguistic identity or a dominant ethnic identity. The only commonality one sees is the racial feature among the diverse ethnic communities living in the state, but this is superficial as race is not a uniting factor in the shared identity among the people groups of Arunachal Pradesh. This leads us to a pertinent question: what does unite the people? The shared identity as "Indigenous Communities" of the state is the point of reference, which is the uniting point for the people of Arunachal Pradesh. This, in turn, leads to the contention against "The Outsider", who is to be at times deported, fought against, and, in the extremity be, annihilated, this is demonstrated by the border issues with Assam, the protection of Arunachal's territory, her integrity from an encroaching Assam, further movements with pan-Arunachal character against CAA and NRC, which became interwoven with permanent residential certificates for communities like Chakma, Hajongs who have been at the receiving end of ethnic mobilisation for their deportation on their perceived non-indigenous origins, this has been the most prominent form of mobilisation, and thus a sense of "belonging" to a larger group, though which is not homogenous like the construct of Mizo or that of the Naga identity. This belonging is the uniting factor which has created mobilisation against the "outsider", a people united without a common language, ethnic origin, or religion, among others, rather united through the idea of being indigenous and against the outsider. The movement in the early 1970s to replace Assamese in favour of English as the medium of education is to be seen as the first resentment against the outsider, who is the regional centralising force which has a contest over the defined territory of Arunachal Pradesh.

The Arunachal identity, if seen through this belonging, is about being indigenous to the land; the Arunachal identity is not related to a particular religion, ethnic affiliation, or language, among others. This belonging is a thin layer of connection among diverse groups, which only seems to charge up against the perceived threats towards "outsiders". Further, if seen through a critical lens, this belonging is of a transactional character, of a diverse people group, rallying only for their interest of protection against "aliens" who will eat up their resources. In this regard, the emphasis on land is crucial and, above all, political representation. It is this transactional aspect that we find no Pan-Arunachal leader who has inter-ethnic popularity and acceptance and who is charismatic enough to whip up a people for action. These movements have been carried out by Pan-Arunachal organisations like the All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union (AAPSU), which has a multi-ethnic leadership and doesn't possess a charismatic leader which could truly appeal to a large chunk of the Arunachal populace, the strength of many Community Based Organisations or CBOs, who further have Clan Associations makes the conception of belonging without fighting against an outsider wholly impossible to conceptualise and imagine. Even the shared language which acts as the popular lingua franca, as opposed to the formal lingua franca, i.e. English, is astounding; the popular lingua franca is a creolised version of Hindi, Hindi, a language which is often associated with Hindi belt in Northern India. The language of mobilisation is a non-indigenous language which has been altered to match the local context and milieu; leaders often engage in this creole to mobilise people and spread their message; thus, it further begs the question: is the language of Arunachal-belonging this creolised Hindi? And not the wide varieties of languages spoken by the different ethnic communities in the state? Furthermore, the demands of autonomous councils under the 6th schedule in the western and eastern regions of Arunachal Pradesh, inhabited by Bodhic and TCL communities, respectively, will end the apparent Arunachal belonging. But before delving into this and examining the evolution of this Arunachal belonging, one needs to examine the historical origins of this belonging and the creation of Arunachal itself.

The story of the people of Arunachal Pradesh has been of migration; in oral myths of many communities, we see how they have come from an original land of inhabitation to the current land they are staying in and have made it their home. This, in my opinion, makes the idea of the indigenous contentious; the whole idea of the binary which exists between the apparent "Insider" and "Outsider" collapses; who is even an insider or is truly indigenous to Arunachal Pradesh comes up as a daunting question, this is pertinent because it is through

this one can say who belongs here and who doesn't belong here. In our history, there hasn't been a singular Arunachal polity in the past; such a development of the state and people of a united Arunachal Pradesh living together is a rather Post-colonial development; during the colonial period, it was part of the wider province of Assam; like many states that later sprang out of this Greater Assam, such state formation was facilitated by ethnic identity as opposed to linguistic identity in the rest of India and the state formation through the basis of language was not a feature in this corner of the nation.

Arunachal Pradesh is thus to be considered a polity of migration, made gradually through the constant movement of people who have settled here and made it their home. The very notion and idea of indigenous are firmly tied to being tribal in Arunachal Pradesh since, as stated above, there seems to be no original inhabitant of Arunachal Pradesh as a whole. This logic of tribal is the replacement of such an assertion on who is indigenous to Arunachal Pradesh, where we have seen there is no one who claims this. The idea of being tribal has racial elements as well as ethnic elements; the first part of this argument rests in the wider conception of a racial type which is the Mongoloid racial type which is key in identification as a tribal from Arunachal Pradesh; the second and the most important element is ethnicity, which seems to be bigger and more profound in deciding who is "Indigenous" to Arunachal Pradesh, this final requirement sets apart the insider from outsider, this conception is broadcasted in how the state was formed and the problems of refugee settlement that have come about in the state.

In the creation of Us and Them in the development of Arunachali-Subnationalism, the experience with Assam comes as a major factor. Some of the states that we see today in the North East were carved out of what was called "Greater Assam." This has had ramifications in the sense that tensions related to boundary and land are still contested between the carved-out states and Assam, of which they were a part. Contestations about land and its belonging have sparked deadly tussles between Assam and the hill states. Contest with Arunachal Pradesh has existed on 804 km of border that both these states share. In finding out the reasons for conflict and the importance of peripheral land, its belonging, and ownership in the context of territorial integrity internationally and back home in India are important; the fight over Belgaum/Belagavi between Karnataka and Maharashtra, the brutal border clashes between Mizoram and Assam in July of 2021, claims to the Kotia cluster of villages by both Odisha and Andhra Pradesh are many examples of peripheral land and its belonging which spark sub-nationalistic struggle and antagonism.

2. Subaltern Experiences: From The Foothills and the Hills

A study has been done of Ruksin, a village which borders the Dhemaji district of Assam; the village is part of the East Siang district, Arunachal Pradesh, and the Adis form the majority of the population of the district, the oldest living person of Ruksin has been interviewed for the purpose of studying about the past experiences, which have not been documented and the perception of people, their belonging to the land and much more. Mr Tako Tasi (86) came to Ruksin in 1969; the search for Asi Arík (Wet Rice Cultivation Fields) and better economic opportunities drove him from Aalo, a town in the interior of Arunachal Pradesh in West Siang, to Ruksin, this move towards the Yíngkong Among (Plains) was part of a resolution passed by the Bogum-Bokang Kébang, the apex tribal body of the Adis in the year 1954, first at Pasighat, the oldest town in Arunachal Pradesh and then in Likabali another area on the border of Assam, located in the Lower Siang District of Arunachal Pradesh. The resolution was about settling down in the plains with Adi populations to strengthen the numbers for claiming the land in a future event of statehood, which could not be taken by Assam. He states that there was a clash between Mishings and Adis in 1967, a year before he arrived, on the issue of land, to whom it belonged, and where it went; later in the 1970s, there was a much bigger conflict between Nepalis and Adis over territorial claim over Ruksin and surrounding area, this he states was a much bigger clash, in which the Assam police got involved and killed an Adi-Galo¹ man, after this incident no further large conflict occurred, instead individual to individual contestation on land took place and still takes place in intervals. Still, the involvement of state apparatus like the police is not seen, as reported by our interview subject. All of these conflicts were fought for the territory which was part of their area, and the protection of these lands from the "Encroachers" was a prime target. The Mishings and the Adis are similar in many respects. Still, the conflict between the ownership and the area these lands belonged to creates a distinctive political identity, for sub-nationalistic tendency. The main reasons Tako tells for keeping up fighting for the ownership of the land was because they didn't see a political future with Assam; they would have turned into second-class entities in the political reality of Assam, and as such, would be oppressed and their land taken away. Increasingly, as Tako states, people started to see themselves as Arunachal Ami or Arunachal People. This fight to preserve land and its belongings was taking place when the NEFA, later the Arunachal Pradesh administration, didn't provide basic facilities like running water pipes and other crucial infrastructure. Tako recalls that it was because the administration was not sure where the area would go. There were chances that it would be eventually taken by Assam, and as such, providing infrastructure would be a waste of money and crucial resources. Tako states that only during the chief ministership of Gegong Apang that the people of Ruksin start getting government facilities (Tasi. Tako, personal communication, November 5, 2023).

This was an interview of an individual who lives on the periphery of the state, which happens to be contested, but the study of interior districts is equally important for identity development, as the interior would be a sphere of no contest. Mrs Ranya Yomcha Tato (69) was born in the winter of 1954 in the West Siang District of Arunachal Pradesh. Her experiences are greatly different from that of Taki, she is much younger than, and she was born when NEFA had already existed. Her experiences during the Chinese invasion of 1962 are a source of crucial information, though they are quite blurry; she was studying in a residential school in Aalo, the headquarters of West Siang District when the Chinese attacked it was thought that they would invade Aalo and reach the plains, in this panic and airlifts that happened during this traumatic period, she recalls that the Munim² at the shop owned by her father in Aalo, who was an Assamese fled with his Minyong³ Adi wife, whom Ranya called Mamo meaning mother, they were airlifted, and they never returned from Assam. Her elder brother, who was also studying in Aalo, was the person who took her along with his Adi friend, and they went back to their ancestral village, Yomcha, in the Liromoba-Yomcha tehsil of West Siang. She recalls she was carried by her brother and his friend on their backs, the people around her had developed a sense of identity and belonging as Indians belonging to NEFA, her family members and the community at large benefited from the post-colonial administration, and which provided opportunities like education, trade among others. She is part of the transitional generation, she remarks. The time when her political consciousness came, Arunachal Pradesh was born as a state, but she recalls that the contest with Assam for border never arrived in the discourse around her. Growing up in the interior of Arunachal Pradesh, but a sense of being Indians and distinctively NEFA People, whose criterion was that they had a unique culture and their indigenous nature to the land they belonged to, became apparent, especially after the Chinese invasion of 1962 which became a turning point in Arunachal's history (R.Y.Tato, personal communication, November 21, 2023).

3. AAPSU And Its Role

The above two subaltern documentation and the voices they put out offer a unique perspective on the development of Arunachali sub-nationalism, which is surely coming up even in people who are not necessarily part of the elite in the society, people were starting to see themselves in identities that would not have occurred before, the post-colonial experience and other factors are key contributors in the creation of this sub-nationalism it seems. To understand this further, look at the All Arunachal Pradesh Student's Union (AAPSU), which at times acts as the opposition party in Arunachal Pradesh, being one of the most powerful pressure groups within the state and its contribution to causes for Arunachal, and its Pan-Arunachal character without a specific community-based character, makes it the perfect study for sub-nationalistic development in Arunachal Pradesh.

The All Arunachal Pradesh Student's Union acts as the opposition party in the context of Arunachal Pradesh politics at times. The establishment and evolution of the Adi-Mishing Students' Union, later transforming into the All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union (APPSU), unfolded against a backdrop of significant names and crucial events that shaped the educational and social landscape of the region. In its early stages, luminaries like Daying Ering and Matin Dai, both from the Adi community, took prominent roles as the first president and general secretary, respectively, of the Adi-Mishing Students' Union in 1947. Notably, the union contested the colonial-era terms "Abor" and "Miri," deeming them derogatory, and successfully pushed for the adoption of "Adi" and "Mishing" instead.

The union's activism extended beyond nomenclature; it became a catalyst for positive change. Students, led by figures like Oshong Ering, actively participated in compelling school authorities to replace "Abor-Miri" with "Adi-Mishing."

The union, comprising leaders like Tajum Koyu and Susen Pao, not only addressed linguistic concerns but also embarked on a broader mission. Socially, it aimed for the unification of Adis, Galos, and Mishings under a shared socio-cultural identity. Educationally, it sought to raise awareness at the village level, persuading parents to enrol their children in schools. The union organised public meetings, cultural functions, and social services, contributing to the spread of awareness about the ill effects of drugs and the importance of preserving traditional values.

The support garnered by the Adi-Mishing Students' Union propelled it to address developmental issues such as the opening of more schools and health centres and the improvement of communication infrastructure. In the absence of a formal political class, students assumed a crucial advisory role, guiding the NEFA administration to meet the demands for educational improvements in interior areas.

The impact of the union's activities resonated across the Abor Hills, leading to the formation of branch unions. Branches like the Adi-Galo branch Union in the western part and the Adi-Minyong and Adi-Padam branch Unions in the central and eastern parts of Abor Hills showcased the union's expanding influence. In the southern part, the Mishing Students' Union emerged to represent the Mishing community.

As time progressed, the need for a Pan-Arunachal Union emerged to cater to the broader population of the North-East Frontier Agency. The Adi-Mishing Students' Union convened a crucial meeting in December 1959,

resulting in the decision to rebrand as the All NEFA Students' Union. The shift, led by figures like Talom Rukbo and Bakin Pertin, signified a pivotal moment in the union's history.

However, challenges arose as the NEFA Students' Union faced limitations and remained almost defunct until 1967. The context demanded a stronger, more efficient student union capable of addressing pressing issues like the demarcation of the Assam-NEFA boundary and the deportation of refugees. The circumstances led to the reorganisation of the defunct All NEFA Students' Union in December 1967.

Under the leadership of Lummer Dai, a "High Power Committee" consisting of university students at Guwahati University played a crucial role in revitalising the union. This effort resulted in the formation of the All NEFA Students' Union, with elections held in 1967 at the Jawaharlal Nehru College campus, Pasighat. The constitution of the revived union, featuring 16 articles and a federal structure, aimed at promoting unity, fraternity, and the preservation of indigenous culture.

As Arunachal Pradesh underwent political transformations, the union adapted accordingly. The renaming from NEFA Students' Union to All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union in 1972 mirrored the broader political shifts in the region. Yet, challenges persisted, leading to a period of dormancy for the union, as elections were not held for more than five years. In 1972, the political status of NEFA changed with its elevation to a Union Territory, and NEFA was renamed Arunachal Pradesh. The capital shifted from Shillong to Itanagar in 1974. Correspondingly, the NEFA Students' Union changed its name to the All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union. The decision, made during the 8th general conference of the NEFA Students' Union in 1972, aligned with the broader political and geographical transformations.

The journey from the Adi-Mishing Students' Union to the All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union encapsulates a dynamic response to the evolving educational, social, and political landscape of the region. The union's commitment to service, cultural preservation, and unity has positioned it as a transformative force in the collective journey of Arunachal Pradesh.

The AAPSU in 1972 was instrumental in bringing English as a medium of instruction into educational institutes, as well as bringing Hindi and removing Assamese, which at the time was the medium of instruction. Further the successful appeal to move NEFA HQ in 1974 within Arunachal was crucial in its development. Later, being influenced by the churning of the Assam and the election of Jarbom Gamlin as the president in April of 1981 at Tezu brought a sharp attention to the refugee issue, to the old goals of solving boundary issues

with Assam, detection and removal of foreign national, stopping infiltration among others these the old demands which had come after achieving the political status of union territory, new demands like reserving 80% of government jobs for Arunachalis, the stopping contracts to non-Arunachalis.

4. Conclusion

Now, going back to the subalterns, Tako mentions the conflict with Mishings was of self-preservation of one's land, attachment to NEFA/Arunachal Pradesh and general inconvenience with the people of Assam. Still, the later conflict with Nepalis truly cemented their identity as "Arunachal Ami"(Arunachal People); they had become part of a larger whole, they had an entity which was theirs, a Pan-Arunachal identity was achieved by AAPSU in 1972, a pan identity cutting across boundaries of tribe,sub-tribe, region, language and religion. The Arunachali sub-nationalism exists on a vague understanding of native ethnicity in its creation of Us and Them; it is this nativeness to Arunachal Pradesh that is used in the sub-nationalistic understanding to demarcate who is an Arunachali or who is not. It is this native ethnicity which is the foundation of Arunachali Sub-nationalism.

The formation of the Adi-Mishing Student's Union in the 1940s is an indication of how colonial penetration in the case of making of the first urban settlement in Arunachal Pradesh, i.e. Pasighat, which was founded in 1911, after the Anglo-Abor war as a military base for the Raj, this gave access to limited educational opportunities to the Adis, and led to other developments like the AMSU, which later morphed into AAPSU, Pasighat was also the site for further post-colonial development with the presence of the oldest college in the state, the Jawaharlal Nehru College, built-in 1964 along with other infrastructure, this made the town a centre for the growth of "Arunachali Sub-nationalism", and can thus be attributed as the town which birthed such an idea, due to colonial and later postcolonial developments taking place, along with the diaspora of student studying outside the state, who became leaders of these organisations.

Fast forward to today, the social movements and political mobilisation are not only related to the "Other" and to put up a fight against them. The Arunachal Pradesh Public Service Commission's (APPSC) corruption,neo-patrimonial nexus and paper leak were exposed by late Gyamar Padang in 2022; it had a ripple effect on the state and led to the formation of the Pan-Arunachal Joint Steering Committee (PAJSC), this took the imagination of the larger Arunachali society, with a 72-hour bandh called in Itanagar on May 2023, the response by the government was to impose section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, as there had been a tussle between PAJSC associates and police in February 2023, with injuries incurred by both police personnel and the protestors. The movement's success has been attributed to increasing internet penetration and reach to

the youth, and the movement still has an active presence in social media, in particular Facebook, though not at the level when the issue peaked. The movement has been marked by its eclectic collection of different ethnic groups coming together as Arunachalis to fight a system which they feel is broken. The language of the protest has been the creolised Hindi, and the fight as fellows of a singular entity, cutting across ethnic lines and belonging, to another larger belonging as an Arunachali has been the outcome of such a political churning and mobilisation, which has been not the fight against the “Other”, but the fight for “Us”, which has truly displayed that Arunachali sub-nationalism not only exists, and is thriving but it is also evolving.

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