Comment on

"Conflict and Development- Implications for Democracy and Governance"

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Sujata Dutta Hazarika's paper on *'Conflict and Development- Implications for Democracy and Governance*' addresses one of the well-known but complex questions raised in the development studies literature. While it is well-known that underdevelopment, mass poverty, lack of access to institutions of governance and command over essential livelihoods resources fuel dissent and act as catalysts for violent conflict, it has also been argued that economic deprivation, in itself, is neither necessary nor sufficient for generating or sustaining conflicts. Nevertheless, posing economic development as a panacea for addressing popular discontents of all kinds has been part of the 'anti-insurgency' strategy in the north-east at least since the 1980s. This has led to a situation where special economic packages, in the absence of democratic accountability, have led to large-scale corruption and elite capture. Ultimately, such a strategy has weakened democratic processes and has also eroded the (already low) legitimacy of the state. Dutta Hazarika argues that decentralised governance through Panchyati Raj Institutions (PRIs) holds the key to the solution of this seemingly intractable vicious cycle of underdevelopment and conflict in north-east India.

Early in the paper the author rightly notes one of the fundamental paradoxes that the Indian state faces in this conflict-ridden region. In order to prevent, contain and ultimately resolve conflicts, the state has to act as an arbiter among parties in a conflict and its capacity to do so critically depends on the extent to which it is and is perceived to be neutral. What if the state itself is (or is believed to be) a party to the conflicts? The author argues that in order to implement 'good governance', the Indian state 'has to first locate itself outside the realm of ethnic politics as a neutral agent of conflict resolution'. This paradox has also been noted by Baruah, when he commented that there is a 'crisis of citizenship' in north-east India, because the civic rule of governance has been replaced by the rules of ethnic difference, where the state treats individuals unequally and differently based on their position in the ethnic order. The ethnicisation of politics in northeast India, however, is not simply the inevitable outcome of state-making in an ethnically diverse region; it is as much the result of the state-induced processes of modernisation, development and governance. Ethnic politics is deeply entrenched in many parts of the region within the state structures, institutional practices and governing principles. In terms of development policy, at times it is explicit and is subject to public scrutiny, but more often than not it acts as the less-publicly articulated framework in which apparently neutral development priorities are contested and are agreed upon. The influence of ethnicisation is, however, not limited to the activities and inactions of the state alone; its influence is visible within the civil society as well. Even the politics of resistance is often framed through the lenses of ethnicity[1]. In this context, the author's argument that panchayats as institutions of grassroots democracy have the capacity to overcome the weaknesses of the state structures is interesting but it raises many more questions than it answers.

The author has argued that the institutions of grassroots democracy, 'being more representative... would be more responsive to the urges and aspirations of the people below', which is a standard argument in favour of decentralised governance of all kinds. The complexities of this argument is clear from the author's description that '[p]romotion of gender balance, strengthening of indigenous mechanisms, efficient and effective use of resources, services and welfare orientation, innovation, tolerance and acceptance of diverse perspectives are some other important functions for governance to be effective in conflicts zone'. Such generalised expectations do not match with the ground realities of the north-eastern States, precisely because 'strengthening of indigenous mechanisms' do not necessarily promote gender balance. Or, to cite another example, 'efficient use of resources' is often used as a euphemism to subvert the control of traditional community institutions over local resources. The challenges of democratic and decentralised governance in this conflict-prone region is not limited to a linear journey from 'bad' to 'good' governance, more importantly, it also involves recognising and reconciling the inherent contradictions among different dimensions of 'good governance'.

Evidences from the region suggest that because of the small size of the electorate, dispersed nature of the settlements, effective segmentation of the marginalised groups, decentralised institutions of governance are more prone to elite capture. Not only that migrant tenants and labourers denied any voice in village panchayats in Arunachal Pradesh, even in multi-ethnic contexts such as in Upper Assam, persons belonging to tea garden labour communities have been marginalised in gram sabhas. In other words, while decentralised governance has a number of distinct advantages over 'top-down' governance, simply because these are relatively small scale institutions, it is not necessary that these institutions can overcome ethnic polarisation and reach out to the *locally* marginalised sections. Secondly, while considering panchayati raj system as an example of 'bottom-up' governance, we must remember that in many hill states characterised by multiple institutional structures of local governance, PRIs themselves are seen as 'one-size-fits-all' interventions from above.

The author has rightly emphasized two significant aspects of local governance, which may act as the basis for hope in the democratic content of these institutions. Firstly, these institutions ensure political participation of the masses through elections as well as through gram sabhas. Secondly, there is constitutional provision for representation of marginalised groups such as STs and women in these institutions, which is expected to be a mechanism for social and political inclusion. The author has put particular emphasis on the fact that women, because they have a different set of priorities based on their experience as women, tend to make the process of local governance more pro-people. She has also brought in the evidence that women in conflict situations have worked as a bridge across deeply divided communities in the region, and hence their presence in the PRIs is likely to enhance their capabilities as voices of reconciliation and peace. It is true that both these constitutional provisions- electoral process and the mandatory reservations for women candidates- have been widely abused in many parts of the country including the NER, but still there is widespread belief that at least in an incremental sense such provisions could provide a robust basis for deepening democracy in India. In the turbulent polity of north-east the autonomy of women groups have been severely curtailed not only by militarisation of the society and the consequential denial of basic human rights, but also by the politics of identity and difference. While there is enough evidence of the strength and vitality of various women groups in the face of extreme hostility by powerful groups, in a generalised sense the capacity of women to

withstand the pressures of ethnic politics is limited, mainly because women groups also operate within the rubric of the general political climate of the region. Notwithstanding some exceptions, women groups, like many other civil society groups, have also been accused of following a hierarchical categorisation of victims of violence unleashed by state and non-state agencies. They have been far less successful in addressing and questioning the violence unleashed by members of their own community than while protesting those by 'outsider' agencies (such as the military) or rival ethnic militias[2].

The key to the role of decentralised governance as a means of bringing peace through participatory democracy ultimately depends on their ability to act and function as democratic institutions. While recognising the essentially participatory nature of these institutions, it is important to remember the limits within which such institutions operate. There is always the danger of reducing 'democratic governance' to one or some of its constitutive elements such as 'electoral democracy' or 'representation of women' in the formal sense. True democratisation, unfortunately, is much more difficult and messier as well. While analysing the potentials of PRIs in northeast India, it is important to avoid the pitfalls of treating grassroots democracy as a depoliticised/ sanitised space for action by micro-entrepreneurs for collective benefit. The paper has listed several important ways through which interventions by the PRIs could be more effective in such a complex and difficult situation.

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[1] To what extent it has been a unique feature of the politics of development in the 'north-eastern region' and to what extent this is comparable to similar processes elsewhere in the country, of course, is a separate question. What makes ethnicisation of politics so central to understand the politics of development in the 'north-eastern region' is the fact that economy of these States are more heavily dependent on central funding and hence capturing state power through ethnic mobilisation has distinct developmental outcomes in this context.

[2] For example, All Arunachal Women Welfare Society, which is a state level organization of women in Arunachal Pradesh, which has been at the forefront of many agitations demanding gender justice in the State, does not allow non-tribal women to be member of the organization. While women groups have led many protests against custodial killings and excessive use of force by the military against the insurgents and innocent people, the voices of protests tend to be subdued and low-key, when the victims are considered to be from outside the community (such as migrant labourers from elsewhere).