

Book Review

The Problematic Relationship between Culture and Ethnicity

Dwijen Sharma*

Culture, Ethnicity and Identity: A Reader, (2014), Jyotirmoy Prodhani and R. S. Thakur, (eds.) DVS Publishers, Guwahati. pp 308. Rs. 850/-

This volume is a welcome addition to the already existing corpus of research on the issues relating to culture, ethnicity and identity. It addresses these issues from theoretical and analytical perspectives. Though the emphasis in this volume is on India's North-East, a section is fully devoted to the precarious issue of identity of other peripheral groups from the mainstream India that include the *Sindhis*, the *Dalits* and the *Adivasis*. The purpose of bringing out this volume as stated in the 'Foreword' is to "facilitate meaningful dialogues" and "for greater inter-cultural and inter-ethnic understanding and provide a foundation for mutual interactions and exchanges among communities". Overall, it is an exercise to devise new idioms and ideas concerning the geo-cultural and politico-historical realities of India's North-East. The informative Introduction to the volume highlights various definitions of ethnicity and how those definitions have emerged in the academic discourse. The editors have taken recourse to Dipesh Chakrabarty to argue that the 'Enlightenment' rationality introduced by the British in colonial India led to the emergence of ethnic consciousness in the people. The question, therefore, this volume tries to examine is whether the ethnic consciousness that was derived from foreign political exigency frames the governing logic of ethnicity and its exclusivist ideology. It also examines whether the idea of ethnicity so disseminated was purportedly aimed at gaining greater control over the differentiated. The volume also deliberates how ethnicity emerges as an ideological proposition and how by resisting absorption into the 'moral' ambit of homogenising meta-discourse, this cultural idiom turns into a political utterance. It raises certain pertinent questions regarding the received practices of locating the ethnic in an attempt to understand the construction of identity, its assertions and the resulting rupture in the society.

The papers of the book unfolded in six sections theorise and analyse the constructed nature of ethno-cultural identities while tracing the legacies and the historico-cultural trajectories of this heteromorphic region. The papers explore the people and their

* Dwijen Sharma (diju1@rediffmail.com) teaches in the Department of English, North-Eastern Hill University, Tura Campus, Meghalaya.

habitats, their writings and translations, politics and practices as well as their folklore and ethnic world-views. The first section titled “Ethnicity, Identity, and Destiny” theorises ethnicity and identity from different theoretical positions. One of the papers in this section titled “Culture, Ethnicity and Identities” draws on Gadamer and the concept of ‘cultural embeddedness’ to build a discourse on identity. It also draws on Robert Scruton’s observations of the retreat of the sacred in the wake of ‘Enlightenment’ to argue how the cultural practices were ethnicised. It argues how the idea of identity has been distorted and redefined as ethnicity minus culture in the wake of the identity politics. While the paper titled “Identity and Invisibility” looks at identity as a historical construct and defines ethnic identity in terms of perceived differences between any two groups, the paper titled “Ethnicity and Individual Identity: A textual Overview” defines ethnic identity in terms of collective ideal of the group. Another paper titled “Variation, Ethnic Identity and Historical Discourse” deals with the nature and role of cultural markers in the construction of identities. It also looks at the notion of ethnicity by placing it in a complicated relationship with oral history, folklore and public sphere.

The second section titled “Ethnicity and the North-East: Constructions and Representations” provides critical insights to understand ethnic assertions and anxieties, ambivalences and negotiations as well as its celebrations and trepidations that have abidingly characterized the realities of the region. One of the papers in this section titled “Postcolonial Modernity and Identity Politics in North-East India” explores the complex dynamics of Identity construction and its representation within the ‘aporetic’ discourse of North-East India. Taking recourse to Agamben and Derrida, the paper maintains that the only way out from this ‘aporetic’ situation is recognising the perishable present and to rethink and recreate a sustainable diversity discourse that strengthens multiculturalism and democracy. It also contends that militancy and autonomy movements that challenge the Indian nation-state are a product of (post)colonial modernity. The paper titled “Understanding Ethnic Persistence: A Phenomenology of Otherness” raises a pertinent question that accounts for practices of a community that do not adhere to Anthropological-Philosophical sources. It argues that the state and the market collaborate in developing a new language of representation and description to disrupt the language of imagination that shifts and widens imagined spaces beyond boundaries. The paper titled “Validation of Selves in Ethnic Narratives of the North-East” argues that identity formation in the North-East occurs in the ‘transactive domain’ where ethnic communities not only engage in a struggle for dominion but also involve in a process of negotiation and re-negotiation. It also illustrates how the works in Assamese written by writers of diverse ethnic communities legitimise the inclusive and plural ethos of the North-East.

The third section titled “The North-East Spectrum: Cultures, Identities, and Histories” deals with the diversity in literature, folklore and history of various ethnic communities of the region, and builds a discourse of micro-narratives from the margin. One of the papers in this section titled “Writing as Sacrilege: An Assessment of the Act of Translating Folk Tales of the Hills of Tripura” makes a critical assessment on the potentialities and politics of translating oral literature into mainstream languages. The

paper titled “The Koches in Ancient Literature” problematises the Koch historiography in an attempt to illustrate the possibility of writing alternative history from the margin. The paper titled “Songs of Desire and Deprivation: Women in Rajbanshi Folk Songs” locates the alternative realities of an ethnic community by exploring the folksongs of and by women.

The fourth section titled “Ethnicity, Multiculturalism and the Dalit Discourses” makes perceptive observations on the legacies and the constructions of ethno-cultural identities ranging from the socially marginalized entities like the Dalits to the apparently mainstream, the Sindhis, and to the socio-economically marginalised, the Adivasis. One of the papers in this section titled “Language: Preserver and Nourisher of Ethnic Self” posits the importance of language in preserving and nourishing ethnic identity of a community.

The fifth section titled “The Ethnic Resonance: An Accent on the Garo Hills” is devoted to the cultural historiography of A`chik (Garo). The papers in this section discuss and explore the folk literary traditions, oral narratives, folk-beliefs, myths, rituals, folk-festivals, and world-views of the A`chiks.

The sixth section titled “The Transcendence” locates ethnic discourse in imperial enterprise and colonial hegemony. One of the papers in this section titled “Anthropology, Colonialism, and Postmodern Anthropology: A Saidian Study” questions the establishment of anthropology as a discipline by the colonial rulers. It also problematises the question of ethnicity in relation to postcolonial politics and postmodern ambivalence.

The volume is a significant contribution to the study of Ethnicity and Identity particularly of the India’s North-East. It brings to the comfort of readers the various models of ethnicity— Constructivist, Primordial, Circumstantial, Relational and Processual. The significant contribution of this volume lies in its attempt to understand how the various ethnic groups of the North-East create their boundaries while constantly negotiating the contested territory. This book would immensely help the students, researchers, policy makers and those who want to understand the complex dynamics of Culture, Ethnicity and Identity that are at work in the region. However, a couple of papers are found wanting in establishing its proposed objectives.