

End of an Illusion

No social upheaval, either progressive or regressive, ever took place without the existence of a great mass of disinherited people. In minorities, ethnic or religious, there lies one of the greatest masses of disinherited human beings the world over. Minorities are always treated as minorities even in constitutionally advanced democracies. And there is the real problem. Then constitutional rights for ethnic minorities are fine so long as they provide staple for constitutional experts and legal luminaries. India's northeast is more like an ethnic cauldron as numerous ethnic groups have long been trying to assert their own identity only to see more dispossession in the process. Right now one ethnic group is being pitted against another to complicate the northeastern situation further much to the advantage of the ruling circles. Northeast is a virtual prison house of nationalities. They cannot be assimilated with the so-called mainstream because of their distinct linguistic and cultural peculiarities. Nor will they get what is called right to self-determination because the absence of limited parameters that are required to make self-determination meaningful, makes it difficult.

Ethnic groups throughout the world are at a crossroads. Faced with the unprecedented bulldozing by market forces they can no longer buy peace even by sacrificing some of their traditional rights. Conflict that centres around ethnicity is essentially a contradiction between assimilation drive and resistance to thwart that drive.

What is true of multi-party 'democratic' India is equally true for one-party authoritarian China. How China has assimilated numerous ethnic minority groups into the main social stream over the years merits critical assessment for more than one reason. That Communist rulers are no less ruthless than their anti-communist counterparts in suppressing self-rule demand by nationalities is a fact of life. The former Soviet Union was dubbed by the Chinese communists as a prison of nationalities as Russians were forcibly destroying ethnic identities. Now the Russians can equally blame it on the Chinese for taking identical measures to impose their majoritarian authority on the unwilling ethnic groups. China is dotted with several autonomous units guaranteeing special protection to ethnic minorities. These autonomous regions are unique in the sense that ethnic people do enjoy little autonomy in real terms. The system in China is so unitary and centralised that federalism does hardly exist. The essence of what exists in China is one party dictatorship dominated by the Han Chinese.

The recent riot in Urumqi, capital city of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region in North West China has been in the news for some time. As it shakes the Beijing authority it has drawn attention from much of the international community.

Ethnic unrest in Uygur region is no new thing. That Uygur autonomous region covers about 1.66 million sq km, accounting for one sixth of Chinese territory itself suggests it matters a lot in Chinese strategic calculation. Of the 21 million population, 60 percent are said to be ethnic groups, major and minor, as per official Chinese statement. Also, 'the region has five autonomous prefectures for ethnic groups, six ethnic autonomous counties and 43 ethnic autonomous townships.' A scenario of wheels within wheels. That is not the real issue. The point at issue, however, is 'since the Han Dynasty established the Western

Regions Frontier Command in Xinjiang in 60 BC, the Chinese Governments [including the present communist government] of all historical periods has exercised military and administrative jurisdiction over the region'. What does not get much currency is how Uygurs have long been fighting against the central government of Beijing for freedom.

Meanwhile the Chinese Government accused Rebiya Kadeer, leader of the World Uygur Congress (WUC), an overseas Turkestan Organisation of instigating riots to make their point heard across the globe.

WUC is likely to convene its third conference this year, hopefully to highlight their woes under Han domination, on the eve of 60th anniversary of the People's Republic of China. So the torch-bearers of Deng legacy in Beijing could not tolerate even any talk of national separatism. They have stepped up their propaganda against Uygur secessionism by implicating the Dalai Lama's office in the present imbroglio. In a way the Chinese admit by default that Tibet Autonomous Region is a mockery of granting autonomy rule to the Tibetans. They say Kadeer, originally a successful business woman, was once the richest woman in Xinjiang and was named by Forbes in 1995 as the eighth richest person on the Chinese mainland. But the post-Mao communists in China think 'to be rich is glorious.'

Being on the backfoot on the Uygur question, China is now showing photographs of smiling Uygur girls in their propaganda journals the way once the former Soviet Union used to exhibit happy ethnic minority people enjoying life in 'Soviet Land' type magazines. □□□