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Identity Crisis in Assam: A Colonial Legacy

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North East India, after the independence inherently faced several socio-economic and political problems. The main problems, however, were concentrated around the issues of identity, ethnic security, self-determination, language and migration, both from India and other countries, the roots of which lay behind the colonial structure of the society of North-East India. In case post-colonial Assam, these issues have covered much of the space of the politics of Assam. The Language movement and the Assam Movement brought the issue of identity of the ethnic groups to forefront. These movements, however, have its genesis in the colonial policies of the British. The problem regarding the language of the people of Assam made the ethnic tribes to think about their languages. Besides, the British left behind the problems of migration in Assam. The large scale migration, mainly the East Bengal immigrants, which took place during British rule continued even after independence. The migration from newly formed Pakistan and later from the Bangladesh created a situation of chaos in Assam. People of Assam organized themselves against this 'illegal' migration and the Assam Movement occurred. Simultaneously with these movements the issue of identity among the ethnic groups emerged. Thus, all these problems which have the genesis in colonial Assam continued to cover the space of post-colonial Assam. In these paper attempt will be made to examine how the colonial policies have influenced the politics of post-colonial Assam in particular and North-East India in general and how the issue of identity has become a core issue of politics.

1.0 Introduction

Every postcolonial countries faces some inherent problems left behind by colonialism. Assam, a state of India is no exception of it. Assam as said by many is the 'melting pot of culture of various ethnic groups and tribes'. In the post-colonial Assam, this melting pot however, came in such an environment that the pot is being broken by some external forces. The forces have its genesis in the colonial rule. Regarding the identity crisis in postcolonial Assam Nandana Dutta has given a very useful argument. She argued that 'the identity problem here in Assam, as in many post colonial nations where the structure and imaginative model of the nation-state have been the result of colonialism, lies in the effort to integrate many ethnicities into the homogeneities of the nation-state.'¹ In this paper, therefore, attempt will be made to highlight how the colonial policy later in the post-colonial period helped in arising the questions of identity and ethnicity in Assam.

1.1 Methodology

The paper is mainly based on various books and scholarly articles in journals. The census reports and some other administrative reports are also used for collecting data. The data are, however, analyzed and organized for the purpose of the paper.

2.0 Interethnic Relation during the Ahoms

Ethnic conflict and problems of illegal migration, in Assam, is interlinked. Assam is a plural society which comprises various ethnic groups. Under the Ahom administration a highly feudal society had grown up in Assam and class division became quite distinctive. But in case of conferring offices and responsibilities ethnic or religious divisions were not taken into consideration. People of different religions or community were granted offices and titles without any prejudices. Among these titles many are still in use which has made ready identification of religious, ethnic or caste identities quite difficult unlike other parts of India. Even when they tried to expand their territory, they did it by accommodating ethnic, cultural and religious differences. Many The Ahoms adopted Hindu tradition and practices in their religious beliefs and thus tried to set up an interethnic 'axamiya' identity. The Ahoms tried to assimilate with the local tribes when they tried to occupy their land by intermarriages. Sometimes these intermarriages caused identity transformation and created a new ethnic identities like 'Ahom-Chutiya'. All these ethnic identities then evolved to form the greater 'Axamiya' identity. In such a situation, ethnic conflicts like today would perhaps have been a mere imagination during the Ahom rule.²

3.0 Colonial Legacy and the Crisis of Ethnicity

Ahom rule came to an end after 1842. British started their possession in Assam after the signing of the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826; however, entire Assam i.e. Brahmaputra valley formally came under their possession in 1842.³ The beginning of this colonial administration set up the stage for the fragmentations of the interethnic Assamese society. Various imperialist designs to procure more economic gain were the factors responsible for this.

3.1 Census

The British started the process of Census in 1872 in Assam in which there can be seen a very interesting phenomenon. Different communities and tribes had shown the tendency to change their ethnic identity in the census record. With these census reports there was a noticeable development in social mobility. Many castes tended to be included themselves in a higher rank of caste. 'The census operations were used by the enumerated people as an instrument of social mobility to raise themselves in order to social precedence which itself is reconstructed by colonial ethnographic and census operations.' For example the number of kalita caste increased in 1881 census in comparison to the report of 1872 because a large number of Koch returned themselves as kalita in the census. In the census report of B.C. Allan, it is stated that 'in Assam proper the boundary line between various castes is not clearly defined, and it is quite conceivable that a Kachari family might in course of generations rise through the various stages of Koch, Kewat and Kolita into full blown Kayastha.'⁴

Many scholars have critically examined and analyzed census reports. Among them Bernad Cohn, one of the pioneers in the critical study of the census operations as a tool in the making of the colonial knowledge production and the subsequent transformation of the Indian society due to direct impact of the colonial classification process started.⁵ Identity And Politics In Late Colonial Assam in NEIHA; 2009; p 244) Through asking questions and compilation in categories in the process of census which British ruler could utilize for governing, it provided an arena for Indians to ask question about themselves , and Indians utilized the fact that the British census commissioners tried to order tables on castes in terms of social precedence.⁶ Consequently, census became the single most instrument of social and caste mobility in the early 20th century Assam as in different parts of India.

The listing of the communities in terms of tribe and caste and providing a consistent, uniform definition of caste and tribe was one of the central problematic of the census operations in India. Ethnographers earlier connoted all communities in India as tribes. The distinction between tribe and caste did not fully emerge until the census of 1901.⁷

In most of the census, however, the tribes and caste are discussed in one head.

In the census of 1872, the classifications for enumeration of the identities in Assam were-i)Non-Asiatics, ii)Mixes races(Eurasian)iii)Asiatics-a) other than natives of India and British Burmah, b) natives of India and British Burmah. iv) Aboriginal tribes, v)semi-hinduised aboriginals, vi) Hindus etc.⁸

In 1881 Census, the classification of the people in Assam valley was done in terms of 1.Bodo,2. Shan Tribes, 3.Tribes of Mountain East Of Bhutan, 4. Hindus etc. These are also subdivided. Such as Bodo was divided in following categories- i) Uninfluenced by Hinduism, ii) in the process of conversion, iii) wholly converted. This classification was not in terms of occupation but in terms of religion or ethnicity.

However, the census of 1891 classifies the entire population and different identities in terms of traditional occupations in spite of the fact that the problem of identifying the caste in Assam in terms of traditional occupation was mentioned by Robinson in his account as early as 1842.⁹

The different occupational groups are-

- i) Military and Dominant in which no caste of Assam found a place.
- ii) Minor Agriculture. Here Koch, Kalita, Kewat, Kaivarta, Kewat, rajbansi etc. were included.
- iii) Cattle Breeders and Graziers.
- iv) Field Labourers
- v) Forest and Hill Tribes. In this group Abor, Aka, Dafla, Rabha, kachari, Moran and Nagas. Interestingly Chutias are also included here.
- vi) Priest
- vii) Devotees

- viii) Physicians
- ix) Weavers etc.

As a reaction to census 'in the last decade of the 19th century different caste organizations were formed in different parts of India in response to the census operations and they put forward contesting claims for upward mobility by being enumerated in different caste names and thereby being reorganized in a better order of social preference. The same tendency also replicated in Assam as we see proliferation of caste organizations and continuous demands by organizing meetings and forwarding memorandum to the government to allow themselves to be enumerated in different caste names to enhance their social positions.' This form of social mobility reflects a sort of Sanskritization process. Gradually, this tendency grew up by the 20th century and interestingly after independence a complete reverse tendency is noticed. Now people don't try to put them forward to a higher caste but a backward mobility of being included as lower caste is quite common. Now as a result of this process there emerged a confusion regarding ethnicity and ethnic identity and the colonial understanding of caste and tribes failed to recognize the interethnic character of Assam.

3.2 Migration during British Rule

Migration during the period of British started in form of tea garden labours from other backward regions of the subcontinent since local people, mainly because of self sufficient economy of theirs were not interested in working as tea garden labour and 'the Assamese Peasantry showed very little interest in wage labour.'¹⁰ Therefore, the British tried to bring labours from china in the beginning and then from other parts of India.¹¹ By 1905-1906 adult labour force in plantation of Assam numbered 417,262. Among these the main recruitment areas was Bengal which alone contributed about 64.9% of the total labour.¹²

The East Bengal immigrants received the political support. In the Early years the British mainly encouraged the immigrants and later on when provincial government was formed under Saddullah the immigration from east Bengal grew rapidly. On 8 May, 1885 then Commissioner of the Assam valley made some proposals for encouraging immigration into Assam such as cheaper rate of fare for travel to the 'bonafide' immigrants in the railways and in the steamer, and the settlement of land revenue free for a term of ten years with such immigrants.¹³

Bodhi Sattwa Kar has observed-

'The completion of the Assam Bengal railway facilitated large scale movement of the immigration. The Government now took up the matters seriously and the immigration policies were formulated and it was recognized that the colonization of the wastelands of Assam had to be undertaken with the help of the immigrants from other provinces of India. The stout and hardy Muslim cultivators of East Bengal were considered to be the most eligible for the job.'¹⁴

However, most of the East Bengal immigrants were encouraged to migrate for cultivation in barren lands of Assam. The British authority was even in favor of giving

advertisement on the availability of land in Assam. The main purpose behind it was nothing but the colonial interest of the British i.e. to increase land revenue collection. These immigrant cultivators, however, received immense support not only from the British Government but by some Assamese intellectuals like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan¹⁵ and Gunabhiram Barua.¹⁶ Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, in his "Observation on the Administration of the Province of Assam", submitted to Mills, expressed the hope that 'the Government will be pleased to Bring from Europe and upper India a sufficient number of men well-versed in the art of agriculture...' to Assam.¹⁷ Throughout the history of British rule there had been wave of migration in Assam. 'As a matter of fact, in the first half of the 20th century Assam became the meeting ground of three major streams of Migration viz. Nepali settlers from Nepal, the tea labourers from various parts of British India and the ordinary peasant cultivators from Bengal, mostly East Bengal'.¹⁸

The partition plan of 1903-1905 of Lord Curzon, a politically motivated step of the British to gain support of Muslims in their colonial design, opened a new wave of immigration of Muslim peasants of East Bengal to Assam. The peasants from East Bengal started migrating in large numbers as a response to the plan and Bengal being under Zaminadri system provided them with difficulties in many respect and therefore opted Assam which had the rayotwari system for their economic upliftment. During 1904-19011, a total number of 54,000 people moved out from their homes and hearths in East Bengal district so of Mymensingh, Rangpore and Jalpaiguri and entered Assam. By 1921 there was almost 2, 58,000 East Bengal immigrants into Assam, almost four times more than that of 1904-1911.¹⁹ The following table shows how between 1901 and 1931 the immigrants mostly from Mymensingh district who were born in East Bengal but later settled on then Goalpara, Kamrup Darang and Nowgong district of Assam.

Table-I

District \ Year	1911	1921	1931
Goalpara	77,000	151,000	170,000
Kamrup	4,000	44,000	134,000
Darang	7,000	20,000	41,000
Nowgong	4,000	58,000	120,000
Sibsagar	14,000	14,000	12,000
lakhimpur	14,000	14,000	19,000

1. Source- From *Prabajan Aru Anuprabesh* (Assamese) by Harekrishna Deka²⁰

The immigrants mainly settled in the *Char* and waste-land areas of Assam and carried cultivation of the barren lands. 'The census of 1911 is the first to report of the Bengal immigrants to the Char lands of Goalpara. Soon the immigrants took the form of large scale influx.....The influx was so rapid that within the next two decades these immigrants spread to other districts of Lower Assam, and they formed an important segment of the population'.²¹

This resulted in large scale population growth in Assam. During 1901-1951 the growth rate was 137.80 % which has been second highest in the world, the first being Brazil with 204.00%.²² The Colonial rulers thus opened floodgates of migration into wastelands of Assam. Assamese press demonstrated its disapproval of East Bengali immigrant peasants in Assam and land reclamation to them. The Assamese legislators termed them as trouble-makers and advocated for the safety of the local peasants who according to them were facing a great threat from these immigrants in terms of social and economic security. 'In 1945, the legislator from Barpeta, Kameswar Das, spoke at length about a robbery which had taken place at Baghbar in Barpeta. It was an Assamese village surrounded by East Bengali peasants. A robbery in the house of a prominent villager Nareswar Gaonbura redefined the relationship between the villagers and the East Bengali peasants.'²³ The peasant villagers often complained against the East Bengali immigrant peasants on various issues like molestation of their women by the immigrants, encroachment upon their *patta* lands, stealing of their mustard, and other crops etc.²⁴ Many legislators in 1940s raised their voice against the aggressive East Bengali peasants who very often tried to hold their control over land from the local Assamese peasants, both tribal and non-tribal. Assamese peasants even submitted petitions against the East Bengali immigrant peasants complaining about their folly behavior towards women and their radical and aggressive and dishonest manner. The situation worsened to such extent that many Assamese villagers left their villages for their security only to allow the East Bengali peasants to settle in their villages.²⁵ East Bengali peasants on the other hand complained against the Assamese peasantry and approached the government authority to include their village in land colonization programme. They even managed to get the periodic *patta* in some lands which were reserved for the tribals. Thus, tensions prevailed between the East Bengal immigrant peasants and the local peasants and the elites.

3.3 Question of Language and Migration after Independence: A Continued Process of Colonial Period

This identity crisis, however, emerged immediately after independence but got the momentum during the Language and Assam Movement.

Udayon Mishra argued –

'During this entire period of Assam's pre- and post-independence history, the state's intellectual and political scene was so dominated by the language issue that all other issues were largely overshadowed. Nevertheless, it was from the twenties onwards that some degree of popular awareness seemed to be growing on the question of unabated influx from neighbouring East Bengal and the gradual occupation of the tribal belts and blocks by the land-hungry Bengali peasants.'²⁶

The British government for the safeguard of the tribes of Assam created the some provisions for the interests of the tribes. By the Government of India Act of 1935 several measures were taken e.g. Excluded Areas Act, Partially Excluded Areas Act and the Inner Line regulations. These regulation however put the tribes in isolation from their traditional neighbours.²⁷ This "colonial propensity of fixing tribes to their supposedly 'natural habitats'

has actually triggered exclusive ethnic homeland consciousness among the minds of the tribal people of the region”²⁸ After the independence the tribes gradually tried to acquire more opportunities for their security.

3.4 Language

Assam witnessed a movement of language in Assam in the 60s. Language is major medium of identity in all places. With the beginning of the British rule, the quest for establishing Assamese as the major language of Assam started. The British introduced Bengali as the official language in Assam as well as medium of instruction in school in 1936. Ananda Ram Dhekia Phukan in his ‘Observation on the Administration of the province of Assam’ showed his grievances. He wrote-‘Instruction in these schools are imparted in a foreign language, viz., the Bengalee, which is but imperfectly understood by the teachers themselves, not to speak of the peoples...’²⁹ and demanded for the introduction of Assamese as the language of medium in schools and offices. It was because of the effort of some enterprising learned Assamese people like Ananda Ram Dhekial Phukan that the Assam language was once again introduced in the schools and in judicial proceedings.³⁰ However, while demanding Assamese to be introduced as the language of medium in schools no demand was raised to abolish Bengalee altogether from the schools.³¹ But after the independence there was seen an intolerant attitude of a section of Assamese speaking people to introduce Assamese as the main language of Assam the reason behind this was however purely economic in character. By doing this the Assamese speaking neo-middle class tried to occupied the positions of Bangalee speaking people in offices, schools and kacharis which has hitherto been under the Bangalee speaking population of Assam This attempt to isolate the continued even after independence where a large section of people lived with bangalee as their mother-tongue. This tendency of the Assamese speaking middle class can be termed as the ‘lingua-nationalism’.

In 1951 Census Assamese speaking people was shown as the majority but it was forced attempt to show Assamese language of the majority. Debabrat Sharma writing on the aspiration of the Assamese middle class to establish Assamese as the State language of Assam argued that the attempt of the Assamese middle class not only created mistrust among the Bangalee speaking people of Assam and the Assamese speaking people but it also highly dissatisfied the local tribes or ethnic groups who had a language of their own. This attempt unfolded the desire of the Assamese speaking middle class to establish their domination in the politics as well as on the economy of Assam.³² The language movement of 1960s differs in many directions from the attempt to restore Assamese as the language of the state during 1846-1873 was the legitimate attempt to restore the lost importance of the language but the movement of 1960s was an ill-motivated attempt to control the ‘dominance’ though ‘without hegemony’.³³ This resulted in the growth of ‘micro-nationalism’ which has otherwise been called by social scientist Sanjib Barua as ‘subantionalism’³⁴ in various parts of Assam which led to aspiration of various ethnic groups and tribes for self determination. The leaders of the language movement and Assam Sahitya Sabha demanded strongly that only Assamese can be the state language of Assam. Narrow and aggressive nationalist slogans like ‘Assam belongs

to Asomiya', 'One Nation, one Language one State' were enough in creating barrier in the nation building process.³⁵

The wave of migration which was inaugurated during British rule, however, did not stop even after independence. Immigrants from newly formed East Pakistan and then after 1971, from Bangladesh continued. The protest against this 'illegal' immigration started in 1979 and ended in 1985 by signing of an Accord between the leaders of the movement and the central government. The Assam Movement was the outcome of this 'fear psychosis' of the Assamese people of losing their identity in their homeland.

With the Assam movement, explosives issue of immigration came to forefront which was dormant for nearly four decades after independence. The campaigners argued that the infiltration of the people from foreign countries like Pakistan before 1971 and then from Bangladesh after 1971 was illegal which was somehow legal in the pre-independence period. The All Assam Students Union and the Axom Sahitya Sabha played the central role in the movement in which people of various ethnic groups participated in the movement. But 'during the Assam Movement ties among Assam's many ethnic groups were significantly ruptured. This is the result both of the campaign itself and the government's effort to defeat the campaign.'³⁶ On of the surprising and unwanted effect of the period was the worsening of the relations among the 'indigenous' peoples-the 'ethnic Assamese and the 'tribal' groups, principally the Bodos.

The Assam movement made the people of various tribes and ethnic groups realize that their interests and identity were being sidelined by the leaders the movement for the sake of identity of the Assamese speaking people. The obvious result was that after the movement there emerged various questions of identity among all the communities of Assam, thus preparing the stage ready for a multi-identity crisis in Assam. Even it has become quite difficult to say who is an Assamese! Many social scientists therefore use the term 'Ethnic Assamese'³⁷ 'Axamiya'³⁸ to refer to Assamese. The identity Assamese is itself a fully loaded term with many questions of identity, ethnicity, language, religion, caste, community etc.

4.0 Conclusion

It was obvious that the colonial policies would have impacted the politics of post-colonial period. The process of nation building in this period marked the rise of several questions of identity. Identity once again while helped in constructing the nation itself posed serious questions of integrity of Indian state. It was the over-reactive identity question which led for the destruction of the geographical identity forming several new administrative units e.g. states. However, every time the identity crisis is not fuelled by collective desire of a community or group but in many occasions identity is the capital of politics of power. For example , both the Language ad Assam Movement though was nationalist in appeal to legitimize the actions, was actually a 'middle class opportunism' by which the middle class tried to practice their hegemony over 'others' and to fulfill their political ambition. This 'middle class opportunism' is in fact one of the main the guiding forces behind the politics of

identity and ethnicity. The colonial policies have just prepared the stage to practice this opportunism.

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