

The Crisis of Identity: Who is an Assamese?

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Through this limited analysis, we will attempt to think of an Assamese identity that is more inclusive with very broad parameters for rules of membership and its contents drawing from ancient and modern liberal traditions. We should reiterate that by doing so, we are not diluting a 'pure' culture or identity rather enriching it by opening its folds to various peoples and cultures. Assam has always been a poly-ethnic region and this should be an abiding feature of our identity and existence in present times and in future. This paper does not necessarily give ready-made solutions, rather attempts to tease out a normative framework for what the potential of an Assamese identity could be.

Introduction

Who is an Assamese today? Is she one who speaks the Assamese language? Is she also one who claims to be a 'first' among natives, a 'tribal'; can my Santhali friend, whose great grandparents recruited by the colonial government to work in tea-plantations, claim to be Assamese? We can't leave the Ahom out either; how about those, whose forefathers were brought in as farmers from East Bengal? Further still, why are we asking these questions? Are these too lofty, emotive questions given Assam is plagued by more serious problems of underdevelopment, poverty and stagnation? But then, these questions linger- can all those residing in Assam and respecting a heterogeneous culture be the ultimate litmus test for this identity? This paper seeks to tease out some of these questions, highlights lessons from history, and attempt to think of an Assamese identity that is more inclusive with very broad parameters for rules of membership.

Every few years, the question 'Who is Assamese' does the rounds in the political and intellectual life of Assam. It is sort of a subnational hobby, rather an obsession which began during the freedom struggle and reached a crescendo during the Assam movement of 1979-85. Though the Assam Accord was seen as a logical culmination of the agitation, it has made matters more complex and politicized than ever before. With the benefit of hindsight, it can now be argued that the Accord represented a hegemonic social contract that gave moral and legal sanction to a parochial 'sons of the soil' politics. Under this socio-legal contract, all benefits-economic and political- would accrue to individuals by virtue of their 'Assamese' identity. However, as history is witness, not only has the Accord -and its rather lackadaisical implementation - aggravated problems but it has also caused the unraveling of a process of somewhat assimilative and composite Assamese identity leading to complete fragmentation

in the society. This political project was fraught with immense difficulties from the very beginning. The question ‘Who is an Assamese?’ is a complex issue as the Assamese identity is not a primordial, socially fixed one; rather, like all other social identities, it is a result of historical processes and a result of multitude identities fusing together.

In Social Sciences, there is now a scholarly agreement that identities are socially constructed. The constructivist view rejects the position that ethnic ties are inherent in humans and sees ethnicity as a social category with two main features: (1) rules of membership that decide who is to be included and excluded; and (2) content i.e. sets of characteristics such as beliefs, language, customs, shared historical myths which are thought to be typical of members of that category (Fearon and Laitin 2000). In other words, to say that identities are socially constructed is to suggest that the membership rules, content and valuation are the products of human action and hence are subject to change.

Since identities are a combined product of human actions and structural changes, we need to acknowledge that the nature of the Assamese identity is political. It is associated with a certain ‘spatial imaginary’ and with a certain standardized language. But were these geographical and linguistic boundaries always constitutive of this Assamese identity? Has this identity prevailed from time immemorial? This is of course not the case. What we now know as Assam has been a land of fluid boundaries- both ethnic and geographical- where numerous polities coexisted in peace and war; the Kachari/Dimasa kingdom, the Sootiya kingdom, the Kamata kingdom under the Koch and later from 12th century onwards the Ahom kingdom. There were trade links with Tibet, Nepal and tribal groups in the east, conducted through the ‘Duars’.¹ Moreover, the present region of Assam has received successive arrival of immigrants from different directions. In the plains of Assam, large sections belong to mixed origins as also those who have a so-called mongoloid trait/physiognomy (Gait 1905). Thus Assam has never been a ‘monolingual or a single nationality region at any point of time. None of these groups can claim ‘racial or ethnic purity’ due to their migration and settlement in various spatial and temporal contexts of the region (Chaube 1973). This point has an important bearing in understanding the futility of constructing the Assamese identity through narrow and exclusive blinkers.

¹ are the floodplains and foothills of the eastern Himalayas in North-East India around Bhutan. The Dooars region politically constitutes the plains of Darjeeling District, the whole of Jalpaiguri district and Alipurduar district and the upper region of Cooch Behar district in West Bengal and the districts of Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Barpeta, Goalpara and Bongaigaon in Assam.

From Assimilation to Difference- Politics of Language

The limits of my language are the limits of my world

Ludwig Wittgenstein

This section mainly traces the changing nature of the Assamese identity in terms of its contents and the boundaries which defines an ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’. Fredrick Barth has made a seminal argument about how it is possible to see ethnic claim not just as claims about cultural characteristic of group members; but also that these claims are about differences that distinguishes one group from another (Barth . The modern Assamese identity with language as the main cultural marker was politicized and mobilized at different points in history. This process gained more traction when it was posited against the ‘Other’ – Bengali Hindus, Bangladeshi immigrant etc. However, the process of othering is usually fraught with inherent contradictions. For instance, while on the one hand, the Assamese middle class reiterates a multi-ethnic nature of the Assamese society, on the other, it is also obsessed with a unilingual/homogenous identity. The crisis of the modern Assamese identity, the one that we seek to address in this paper, is a manifestation of this contradiction embedded in this political project.

Historically, the Ahom policy vis-à-vis the population in the Brahmaputra valley was predominantly one of appeasement and conciliation. Ahoms were pragmatic in their social outlook and they avoided forcing their way of life on their subjects. There were seldom any disabilities attached to non-Ahom families in their prospect of holding offices of rank as well as in their enjoyment of privileges. The first Ahom ruler of Assam, Sukapha, and his followers married native women of Assam leading to an admixture of blood. As an eminent historian points out, the principle factors that may be attributed to the consolidation and maintenance of power by the Ahoms were their ‘militaristic cult, their highly developed political sense, and their religious tolerance, detachment and neutrality’ (Bhuyan 1949).

The Ahom rulers also invited scholars, religious persons and people of different occupations such as artisans from the sub-continent. Muslim prisoners of war married and settled in Assam (Srikanth 2000). A large number of Muslims were appointed in various departments of the Ahom state and state patronage to Muslim Pirs (religious leaders) to settle in Assam in revenue-free lands, known as Pir-pal lands. It has been further established that similarity

between the Ahom khel system² and the Mughal mansabdari system could not be a mere coincidence (Bhuyan *ibid*). There was hardly any evidence to suggest communal tensions between Muslims and Hindus in Assam. Prolonged contact and proximity gave rise, to a great extent, to a shared culture (Barpujari 1963).

The earlier Buranjis were written their language that was similar to other Shan tribes, derived from the Pali script. The more recent Buranjis were written in Assamese, which was gradually adopted by the Ahoms after their conversion to Hinduism. The adoption of the Hindu faith by Ahom rulers and their patronage of Hinduism in the 17th century during the rule of Rudra Singha (1696-1714) and Siva Singha (1714- 44) hastened the assimilation of a large population into the Hindu fold and the idea of a composite Assamese identity made up of caste Hindus, tribal groups of the Brahmaputra valley and Assamese Muslims began to emerge. Furthermore, Sankardeva's reformist Vaishnavism had already prepared the ground for bringing large sections of tribal groups, such as Bodo-Kacharis, Sootiya, Koch, within the Hindu fold.³

As pointed out by the 19th century Assamese writer, Padmanath Gohain Baruah, the social divisions of Assamese society at the advent of the British rule consisted of the following groups constitutive of the umbrella connotation of Assamese:

- a. Assamese Hindu caste groups like Brahmins, Goswamis/ Gosains, Ahoms, Baisyas, Mahantas (Mahajans), Kalitas, Kayasthas, Keots
- b. Assamese Muslims called Marias
- c. Hinduized tribal groups such as Bodo-Kachari, Koch, Sootiya

In the late 18th - early 19th century, a series of rebellions, civil wars and continuous acts of plunder had rendered Assam into a state of anarchy with failed economy and agriculture, bloodshed and mass emigration. At this point of social and historical flux, inhabitants of this region heralded the British take over as a beginning of a new era of peace and prosperity. As a noted Assamese historian remarks, 'the period from 1826 to 1858 is a formative epoch in the history of Assam' as it not only 'marked the end of the independent powerful Ahom

² The population of Assam was divided into khels, sometimes territorially, that had the function of rendering specific services to the state.

³ His Bhakti movement, denounced elaborate and esoteric rites, idol and image worshipping and asserted that the dignity of human soul was independent of the accident of birth or social rank.

monarchy in the valley of the Brahmaputra for over six centuries, but ushered in a new regime of foreign domination having radical changes' (Barpujari *ibid*). Two factors in the colonial era that were instrumental in first, bringing different segments of the Assamese society closer, and then causing a rapid fragmentation were,

- a. the struggle to regain the status of the Assamese language
- b. increasing pressure on cultivable land as a result of government induced immigration.

The first was a struggle led primarily by the emerging Assamese middle class (henceforth 'Axamiya'), that would eventually play a dominant role in politics of Assam; the second factor affected both tribal and non-tribal Assamese peasants. It is important to underscore the point that it was middle class interests that was not only steering the political agenda in the province but also shaping the modern Assamese identity. The rise of a nativist Assamese sentiment was not a direct result of the movement and settlement of Mymensinghians into the wastelands of Assam; rather it was a protest against dominance of Bengali Hindu migrants, who came to occupy offices in Government and other middle class occupations in the province. Bengali was the court language as well as medium of instruction in new government schools of Assam from 1837 to 1873 (Baruah 1999). From 1905 to 1912, when Assam and East Bengal were clubbed together into one province with its capital in Dacca, intra-provincial movement became even wider in scope. Even British loyalist Maniram Dewan, who had the remarkable achievement of being the first Indian to grow tea commercially, submitted a petition on behalf of a number of members of royalty and aristocracy, complaining how in the present system of revenue collection, Marwaris and Bengalees were appointed as Mouzadars and 'for us respectable Assamese to become ryots of such *foreigners* is a source of deep mortification' (emphasis added) (*ibid*). Far from being against immigration, the Axamiya community, as early as 1874, expressed a desire in increasing the population of Assam by importing people from outside to Viceroy Lord Northbrook (Rafiabadi 1998). Evidently, the Assamese landed gentry stood to gain from immigration as it promised more income and hence it even supported British policies of settling Bengali Muslim peasants in Assam (Gohain 1985).

My main argument here is that the modern Assamese identity, being forged in the early 20th century, was different from a historically assimilative/ composite identity in that it was exclusively defined on the basis of a standardized language. As with other nationalist movements, ideas of modernity shaped a notion among the Assamese elite that a developed language is a sign of a developed people. This notion engendered a process of standardization

of the language, thereby marking ‘natives’ of the Assamese nation. Thus ‘who would and who would not become part of this nation became a central theme in the cultural politics of Assam’. The over-arching sentiment of the Assamese elite before independence was that ‘unless the province of Assam is organized based on Assamese language and Assamese culture, the survival of the Assamese nationality will become impossible’ (Baruah 1999). The cultural elite through organizations such like the Assam Association and the Assam Sahitya Sabha gave an impetus to the language movement. In fact the Sahitya Sabha was formed with the aim of development of the Assamese literature, culture and the Assamese Nation.

However the multi-ethnic demography of Assam, as a result of years of migration and settlement of various groups in pre-colonial times and immigration during and after colonial period, obviously made it unsuitable to be a ‘language based province’, a model otherwise relatively successful on a pan-India level. Scholars working on language and power have argued that language becomes a cultural capital, which reproduces social hierarchies and inequalities (Sarangi 2009). Multi-lingual societies need to be cautious while framing policies for language planning as it requires taking into consideration of issues like minority rights, representation, redistribution of resources and national integration. Policies related to language as single or multiple languages for official or educational purposes ‘has consequences for the equalization or not of life chances, and for the empowerment or disempowerment of speakers of different languages (ibid, 2009). Exclusive language demands of the Assamese ruling class have managed to alienate not only the migrant communities but indigenous groups as well.

The fallout of this struggle spilled over to politics in Assam after independence. From 1950, the Assam Sahitya Sabha relentlessly got involved in the campaign for adopting Assamese as the official language of Assam. The Sabha mobilized the people in creating public pressure on the Assam government in implementing its demand. The Assam Congress passed a resolution supporting the demand in 1960. Consequently, the Assam Assembly passed the Official Language Bill and Assamese was adopted as the official language of Assam in the same year.

The language movement of 1960 saw some of the worst form of communal rioting in the state and drove a major wedge between the Assamese and other linguistic groups of the state.

The violent Axomiya- Bengali language conflict, was seen as a threat to the interests of the plain tribes. The Axomiya people had taken for granted that all the constituent groups under

the umbrella 'Assamese' category would 'naturally' assimilate into it. This was the expectation despite the fact that the Bodos had made demands for some form of autonomy as early as 1929 when the Simon Commission arrived in India. The declaration of Assamese as the official language of the state in 1961 caused much disaffection among not only the Bodos but all tribes in the region. There were vehement protests against this policy from various non-Assamese speaking linguistics groups as it was apparent that those without a sufficient knowledge of the language would be at a disadvantage in regard to government jobs (Roy 1995). Bodos adopted the same cultural symbol as the Assamese to represent their desire to differentiate- i.e. language and script (Baruah 1999). The Bodo Sahitya Sabha, modeled on its Assamese counterpart and patronized by the state, launched a movement in 1974-75 for the adoption of the Roman script for the Bodo language, which till now was being written in the Assamese script. The movement for a separate Plain Tribes state/ Union territory, led by the Plain Tribal Council of Assam, a party dominated by Bodos, was already brewing. These developments made it amply clear that Bodos were not eager in the process of 'Assamisation' (Choudhury 2007). Their main aim was to challenge the 'unequal assimilation' and 'seek differentiation from, and equality with' the Axomiya (Baruah 1999). As for the Axomiya, the rejection of the Assamese nationality by the Bodos was a rejection much greater than that of the Khasis and the Nagas for the Axomiya assumed that Bodos would be an integral part of the Assamese identity. What was problematic was that the Axomiya were expecting the Bodos and other communities to accept the Assamese language at the cost of their own language and culture (Prabhakara 1974).

Thus, all the rhetoric about tribal- nontribal unity notwithstanding, the Assamese middle class's attempts to resolve the Assamese identity crisis remained the primary issue during the first half of the 20th century and took precedence over the other important issue of tribal land alienation. This hegemonic disposition ended up alienating the composite elements of the Assamese umbrella identity and became a primary cause of social balkanization of Assam. It is not surprising that in contemporary Assam, six other communities (Koch Rajbongshi, Tea plantation tribes, Matak, Moran and Sootia and Ahoms) are clamouring for the Scheduled Tribe status to differentiate themselves from caste-Hindu Assamese. The All Assam Koch Rangbongshi Student Union is gradually gaining momentum in its movement for a separate state of Kamatapur, a demand that overlaps with some of the areas of the current BTAD.

A search for a Definition

The ongoing NRC update process in Assam has thrown back into the ring questions that have occupied the political narrative of the state in contemporary times. The process is being touted to be a method of identifying ‘Bangladeshi infiltrators’ in the state as the updated NRC is expected to be a reference point against which an individual can check her citizenship status. As discussed earlier, after independence, the ‘Language movement’ overshadowed the problem of illegal immigration into Assam. In fact, in the first two decades after independence, the Bengali Muslims were politically allied with the Aomiyas against Bengali Hindus. Bengali Muslims even returned Assamese as their language in the Census and sent their children to Assamese-medium schools (Baruah, 1999). It was only in the late 1970s that the issue of illegal immigration and inclusion of aliens in electoral rolls began to gain traction- the kind that was seen in 1930s-40s, in the polarized/ communalized context of Partition. Through the six-year agitation, AASU sought a resolution of the foreigners’ problem triggered by revelations that more than 60,000 names of recently registered people who could not prove their Indian identity were detected in the electoral lists for the Mangaldoi Parliamentary constituency. After 27 rounds of talks, the Assam Accord was signed in 1985, which determined 1st January 1966 as the cut-off date for the purpose of detection and deletion of foreigners and allowed for citizenship for all persons coming to Assam from “Specified Territory” before the cut-off date. It further specifies that all persons who came to Assam prior to 1st January 1966 (inclusive) and up to 24th March 1971 (midnight) shall be detected (in accordance with the provisions of the Foreigners Act, 1946 and the Foreigners (Tribunals) Order, 1939) and their name will be deleted from the Electoral Rolls in force. ‘Foreigners’ who came to Assam on or after 25th March 1971 shall continue to be detected, deleted and expelled in accordance with law. Furthermore, Clause 6 of the Accord reads thus ‘constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards, as may be appropriate shall be provided to protect, preserve and promote the culture, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people’.

Dispur set up a Cabinet sub-committee of ministers in 2005 under Bhumidhar Barman, now Assam Accord implementation minister, to define who is an Assamese for implementing this above-mentioned clause. The sub-committee has held a number of meetings, seeking the views of political parties, sahitya sabhas, youth and student organisations, among others to reach on a definition. Several attempts have been made in the past to define the term ‘Assamese’ though no acceptable definition could be arrived at. In 1989, the Assam Cabinet defined it as,

The term Assamese people shall include all indigenous tribal, non-tribal and local linguistic population living permanently within the geographical boundaries of Assam and the people, who are at present residing within these boundaries or all genuine citizens who have accepted the local language and culture of Assam as their own.

The entire exercise of defining identity is about describing the contents or the cultural markers that are associated with or attributed to that particular identity. So the definition quoted above is merely an attempt to describe what constitutes the Assamese identity.

Deriving from the above, there are four ways of looking at what qualifies as Assamese,

- a. Residents of Assam and their descendants
- b. Linguistic group who speak the language Assamese
- c. Ethnic Assamese, who in addition to speaking Assamese, are descendants and have some shared cultural norms and
- d. Bhumiputras or 'indigenous' people like Bodos.

Each of these criteria has been subject to vigorous political contestations. We have had intense debate and agitation on the issue of who should be regarded as a legitimate resident of Assam. Cut off dates have been agreed upon to decide this. The Assam Accord laid down that 'foreigners' who came to Assam after 25th March 1971 will be detected, deleted from the electoral roll and expelled in accordance with law. All foreigners who entered Assam prior to (and including) 1st January 1966 will be entered in the electoral rolls. Nevertheless, all foreigners who came to Assam after 1st January 1966 but before 24th March 1971 will be detected and deleted from the electoral rolls, but after a period of 10 years following the detection, the names of all such persons will be included in the electoral rolls. Of course the state has failed to carry out this ambitious task due to various reasons, politicking and inept administrative machinery and lack of an appropriate treaty with Bangladesh being few important ones. However, even though detection and deletion is theoretically possible, it would not be feasible to deport millions of people. To quote a scholar, 'Bangladeshis who have lived here, say, from 1971, have children who are now adults. They are born and brought up in Assam, and these children are Indian citizens. Eviction of such families, although they entered Assam after 1971, will fall foul of human rights' (Borkakoti 2013). For how long then, in a bid to root out those that qualify as illegal immigrants, deny genuine citizens, born in Assam, a right to be part of the Assamese society?

The criteria of language and common ethnicity have also been rejected by groups, that were hitherto part of a more fluid, composite Assamese identity. These two qualifications for identity are derived from the principle of *jus sanguinis* i.e. descent from a person of that nationality. But the population of Assam consists of different nationalities, and no single group has an absolute majority. In fact the related idea of a nation-province for the ethnic Assamese is basically an untenable goal within the present political boundary of Assam primarily because of the fact that these two boundaries, viz., ethnic and political, do not coincide. The political boundary of Assam not only includes the ethnic Assamese but also the Dimasas of N C Hills, Karbis of Karbi Anglong, Bodos, Koches, Chutias, Kacharis, Deoris, Rabhas, Lalungs, Morans, and other indigenous populations and Muslims, Hindu Bengalis and tea tribes in Brahmaputra Valley (Das 2012).

The criterion of indigeneity, as a prime determinant of identity, is also highly problematic. World over, the discourse on ‘who is an indigene and who an interloper’ has led to bloody unrest. Civil war between Tamils and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka, ethnic cleansing as a result of Hutu-Tutsi rivalries are all instances of conflict based on questions of indigeneity. A similar discourse on group rights in the Northeast has also resulted in claims to political power being made in the form of a demand for a ‘homeland’. Different groups are making competing claims on overlapping territories and demanding an autonomous council/ union territory/ state to protect legitimate interests of their community. However, the flip side is that this brand of ethnic politics has a much higher propensity of reducing politics to a zero-sum game, cascading into bloody riots, a scenario we are all familiar with in Assam.

Assamese as a civic, composite identity

The crisis of identity in Assam manifested more sharply with the articulation of constitutional safeguards for ‘Assamese’ people in Clause 6 of the Assam Accord. The question that really needs to be posed here is what is it that needs to be safeguarded and from whom? For decades, the political rhetoric has been informing us that Assamese identity is in danger of being inundated by ‘immigrants’ or a foreign culture. This fear has no real basis, as the Bengali Muslim community has never made exclusive cultural claims; rather, it’s the ‘native’ communities who are in a race to prove how ‘indigenous’ and ‘distinct’ they are.

Further, there is a fear that ‘illegal’ immigrants would numerically and hence politically come to dominate Assam. It is unlikely to happen in the future, as Barkakoti argues succinctly, ‘empirical evidence reveals that the flow from Bangladesh has somewhat slowed

down. With accelerating economic growth in Bangladesh and increase in land to population ratio in Assam, the inward flow of migration from Bangladesh will naturally end (Borkakoti, 2013). In fact, the greater danger is not from an immigrant culture, rather it is from a systemic marginalization and ghettoization of the legal citizens of this community in Assam. This has also led to the rise of a more conservative force, the AIUDF, which has emerged as the second largest party in Assam. It is time we turn this around and accept the reality that the community is an inevitable part of the Assamese polity. To avert the dangers of a polarized, deeply divided society, the approach should be a conciliatory one, with a focus to integrate them into the composite Assamese identity rather than demonize them.

We can begin this process of gradual integration by acknowledging that this community, in a process similar to tea garden tribes, has contributed to the rise of agricultural productivity by introducing better techniques, crop diversity, and multiple cropping. They have also provided cheap labor in the informal labor market where most 'indigenous' communities consider it below their dignity to work. Further, they have historically not competed with the Assamese or other 'indigenous' tribes who have sought employment in the formal labor market or government jobs. Because of systemic discrimination and a vicious anti-immigrant campaign, ties of trust and interdependence have been ruptured. No doubt there has been continued, albeit much reduced, movement of people into Assam across the international border; however, the Accord itself marks that only those who came after a cut-off would be counted as illegal and the detect-delete-deport policy would apply only to them. If we want to resolve this crisis, we have to take into confidence those members of this community who are legal citizens rather than painting everyone as 'Bangladeshi'.

So where do we go from here? How do we define the Assamese identity, which seems to have been mired in a protracted crisis? Previous attempts to find a resolution have only led to more fragmentation than consolidation. As evident from the Assam case, the project of creating an 'absolute definition' of identity/ nationality is a specious one. The process of defining involves creating fixed, indisputable entities whereas identities are inherently fluid and products of cultural osmosis. Social/cultural identity such as Assamese is different from a civil/ legal identity as Indian citizen. Unlike a social identity, it is possible to exactly define a citizenship of an individual. This could be done on the basis of the principle of *jus soli* meaning 'right of the soil', is the right of anyone born in the territory of a state to nationality or citizenship or the principle of *jus sanguine* meaning 'right of blood or

descent' by which citizenship determined by having one or both parents who are citizens of the state.

In other words, we should abandon this obsession with trying to define our identity, which is one of the main causes for the crisis of identity itself. Instead what we could do is to shift our focus to creating a 'consensus-identity' or a civic Assamese identity, one that recognizes that individuals have multiple identities and each can coexist with the other. This civic identity could be derived from the *jus soli* principle i.e. anyone who is born in Assam can claim this civic identity of Assamese, while maintaining a host of other identities. This would make even what seems to be a parochial Clause 6 inclusive and all encompassing. What then would be needed protection under this clause of the Accord are ideas of diversity, inclusiveness and coexistence. We need to build a social contract based on the principle of proximity which suggests an alternative approach to the formation of political communities in that people have a paramount duty to come to terms with, and to deal justly with those with whom, they are 'unavoidably side by side' in a given territory, irrespective of cultural or national affinity, irrespective of issues about whose ancestors were here first, irrespective of any history of injustice that may have attached to the process by which these people came to be side by side in that territory (Waldron, 2011).

Amartya Sen (2007) articulates it even better,

"A strong and exclusive sense of belonging to one group can in many cases carry with it the perception of distance and divergence from other groups. Within-group solidarity can help to feed between-group discord. We may suddenly be informed we are not just Rwandians but specifically Hutus ("we hate Tutsis"), or that we are not really mere Yugoslavs but actually Serbs ("we absolutely don't like Muslims"). From my childhood memory of Hindu-Muslim riots in the 1940s, linked with the politics of partition, I recollect the speed with which the broad human beings of January were suddenly transformed into the ruthless Hindus and fierce Muslims of July. Hundreds of thousands of people perished at the hands of people who, led by the commanders of carnage, killed others on behalf of their own people".

The need of the hour is to create a new narrative, which recognizes that an individual can be a Bodo, a Hindu, an Assamese, a tribal, a woman and an Indian. We need to move away from the imposition of singular, belligerent identity that aims to 'define' us exclusively in opposition to another individual or community. This can perhaps happen if we detach from

the Assamese identity its exclusive/singular ethnic marker of language and return to a more composite identity that encompasses languages and dialects spoken in the state. We have to learn from the historical blunder of “emotionally imposing” the Assamese language as the state language onto a diverse people. Furthermore, the onus really lies with the influential/dominant elite and communities of Assam to replace their hegemonic role in building a ‘top-down’ identity and purge the xenophobic attitudes that have become commonsensical in Assam. Surely we can show a cultural maturity that our heritage of hundreds of years cannot be wiped away by opening our folds to others.

More importantly, it is time we accept that the Clause 6 of the Assam Accord is premised on an outdated and untenable principle of exclusion and discrimination. It is time that we think about whether we really need such namesake constitutional safeguards to ‘protect’ a group of people. It is time that Assam debates the relevance of this Clause itself. Perhaps it is time we scrap it totally as it has achieved even an ounce what it was set up for.

Instead, it would do us good to look for other ways of preserving our identities and cultures. Civil society in Assam would have to lobby for extension of state patronage towards preservation of languages and cultures of all groups that constituted the composite Assamese identity Assamese organisations such AASU and Assam Sahitya Sabha would have to campaign for a multicultural and cosmopolitan polity i.e. coexistence and tolerance of existing diversity rather than homogenization or forceful integration/assimilation. Civil society in Assam would have to lobby for extension of state patronage towards preservation of languages and cultures of all groups that constituted the composite Assamese identity. If there is any danger to Assamese culture, it is from the failings of the Axomiya middle class and their political representatives to lend institutional support to the rich diversity of culture and art form that exist in the state. The correct way to preserve cultural mores is not to demonize other cultures; rather it has to be a systematic attempt to study, archive and preserve the cultural heritage, a movement that has to be fueled and sustained by the cultural and intellectual elite of the society. If the Sahitya Sabhas and Student Unions could divert their efforts from parochial ethnic politics to a more sophisticated intellectual debate, a new commonsense can be forged.

We urgently need to shift focus to issues that actually cut across all communities in Assam i.e. the question of an inclusive economic and human development. Assam ranks 16 out of 23 states in the Human Development Index and is lagging behind the national average in the education index. All is not bleak though. Assam has achieved the third-highest rate of

progress in Human Development Index (HDI) among all major states in India, according to India Human Development Report, 2011 of the Planning Commission. Assam registered 32 per cent progress in HDI for 1999-2000 and 2007-08 and if it maintains the current rate of progress for another decade it was likely that its overall human development would be ahead of other states. But in order to lead in these development indices, we urgently need to create an environment that is conducive for growth. Unfortunately it wouldn't be possible if we constantly keep bickering on narrow ethnic loyalties. Chauvinistic and exclusionary politics has made Assam behave like a tinderbox, that is waiting to explode at the slightest instance of political contestations. In fact the point that is worth emphasizing in the Assam Accord is Clause 7 which says, 'The Government take this opportunity to renew their commitment for the speedy all round economic development of Assam, so as to improve the standard of living of the people. Special emphasis will be placed on education and science and technology through establishment of national institutions.' It is through fast economic development and material welfare with rising standards of living, the people of Assam can move forward with confidence to build an inclusive society.

The suggestions in this paper are neither too radical nor unfeasible. We only have to look back into our intellectual history at its pinnacle during the lifetime of Srimanta Sankardev who envisioned an egalitarian society unmarked by caste, status and honour. In the 19th-20th century we have had a number of progressive intellectuals including Jyoti Prasad Agarwala and Bishnu Prasad Rabha and later Bhupen Hazarika, who labored for a more equal and non-hegemonic society. They were at the forefront of the IPTA movement in Assam and lent a modern sensibility that wasn't seen before in Assam. If we could trust individuals belonging to diverse ethnic backgrounds to lead Assam back then, surely it is not an impossible prospect today.

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