

## Ethnic mobilization and conflict in Assam

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### *Introduction*

In order to get a grasp over the contemporary political landscape of Assam, it is pertinent to look back at its complex history. Present day Assam has received successive arrival of Mongolian immigrants from China, Tibet and Burma<sup>1</sup>. In terms of ethnic composition of Assam, large sections belong to mixed origins as also those who have a dominant mongoloid physiognomy<sup>2</sup>. Assam has never been a 'monolingual or a single nationality region at any point of time'<sup>3</sup>. None of these groups can claim racial or ethnic purity due to their migration and settlement in different times<sup>4</sup>. The medieval period has witnessed the rise of several political formations namely, Koch, Cachar, Jayintia, Manipur and Tripura and Ahom kingdoms. Besides, there existed at the time many independent hill tribes in the region, such as Daflas, Miris, Nagas, Khamptis, Singphos and Mishmis who maintained their political independence<sup>5</sup>.

### *Colonial legacy*

From the mass of literature on colonial Assam, three major themes have emerged - changes in the economy, cultural and ideological changes and geographical and demographic changes. The relatively autarchic Assamese economy was integrated into the global market with the establishment of tea plantations, cash crops, and oil and coal industry. On the eve of independence Assam had a pattern of dual economy wherein a modern industry coexisted, along with, and to the detriment of the traditional semi-tribal/ agrarian society. Second, due to partial exposure to western education and Christian missionary influence, there emerged a small elite not only among the tribal groups but Assamese-speaking people as well. Third a peculiar geographic knowledge of the colonial administration about Assam not only sharpened the differences between the hill tribes and plains people but also led to an upsurge of government induced immigration of land hungry Bengali peasants (predominantly, Bengali Muslims), which changed the demographics of Assam permanently. The last development has gone a long way in shaping the politics of contemporary Assam and is the driving force behind the Assam movement.

### *Assam after independence*

Sanjib Baruah in his book *India Against Itself* argues that the history of conflicts in Assam began with its incorporation into British India and continued after independence in the form of an 'unresolved national question' due to India's formally federal but actually centralized government structure. First, the domination of Hindu Bengalis in jobs in the modern sector and use of Bengali as the court language/language of instruction in government schools of Assam became a perpetual source of conflict in the colonial period. Further in the case of Assamese people, language emerged not only as an index of identity but also a marker of a nationality. Ideas of modernization shaped a notion among the Assamese elite that a developed language is a sign of a developed people. Baruah contends that

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<sup>1</sup> see Baruah ed. 2005; Hussain 1993; Chaube 1973

<sup>2</sup> see Wilcox 1832;; Mackenzie 1884; Gait 1905

<sup>3</sup> Srikanth 2000

<sup>4</sup> Chaube 1973

<sup>5</sup> Barua 2005, pp. 93

this notion engendered a process of standardization of the language, a process that would identify the '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'. Immediately after independence, the demand for formalizing an Assamese public identity for Assam became more assertive. These were of course opposed by Bengali organisations in Cachar, who argued for Bengali being accorded the status of an official language of Assam along with Assamese. Contestations over language culminated into the violent language riots of Assam in 1960-61 and later in 1971, killing many people on both sides<sup>6</sup>.

In the three decades after independence, colonial Assam was divided into five states and this reorganization has led the Assamese to feel that they have no control over their own destinies. Baruah contends that the contradiction between the Assamese subnationalist demands of an Assamese territory and the ethno-political reality of Assam has greatly exacerbated the breakup of Assam. The multi-ethnic nature 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, makes it unsuitable to be a language based province, a model followed on a pan-India basis. The responsibility of being the prime mover in this breakup in the central government and its strategy of creating new states in a bid to contain and even preempt the various insurgencies in the northeast <sup>7</sup>.

#### *Immigration and land alienation as a cause of ethnic conflict*

The issue of the migration of Muslim peasants from East Bengal started gaining momentum in Assam politics in 1930s and 40s. The figures of Census 1921 suggest that the population growth of Assam by migration in the period between 1911-1921 was 44.3%. By this time, Indian National Congress had made inroads into Assam but was not enthusiastic about Assamese subnationalist demands; its attitudes are best reflected by Nehru's response during an Assam tour in 1937, 'the question of Sylhet's separation and immigration may be very important to you but in comparison with other big problems that are facing us today, they are very small'. In the post-independence period, though Congress came to power in Assam by rallying around these sentiments, large-scale immigration into Assam continued, first from what came to be known as East Pakistan after partition and Bangladesh after 1971. The figures on immigrants in Assam have been at the center of intense political contestation. Though the question of how many 'foreigners' are there in Assam is at the crux of the political turmoil in the region, it is an extremely difficult question to answer. The Assam movement triggered in 1979 after a bye-election to the Mangaldoi parliamentary constituency, with a heavy concentration of East Bengali immigrants, drew public attention to a rapid expansion of voters since the elections two years earlier<sup>8</sup>. Thus he claims that the issue of immigration, which falls under the jurisdiction of the central government, has been completely ignored by the Centre and the non-resolution of this crucial issue has contributed significantly to the political turmoil in Assam. The central government has given low priority to these demographic changes though these have destabilized Assam leading to political and ethnic violence, even ethnic cleansing and two insurgencies<sup>9</sup>.

Bhaumik has highlighted an important perspective about land alienation as a driving force of the movement. As migration to Assam continued on an increasing trend, the state's demography began to

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<sup>6</sup> Baruah 1999

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Baruah 1986

<sup>9</sup> Baruah 1999

undergo an unprecedented change, which in turn affected the land ownership patterns in the state. He further argues that in agrarian societies like the northeastern region, land is not merely an economic asset but also has symbolic meaning of the collective identity and loss of land is often seen as the beginning of a process of disempowerment. Before partition, landlessness was practically non-existent in Assam but the situation started changing sharply after independence. Bhaumik quotes that the per-capita agricultural holdings in Assam declined by 26 percent against the national average of 16.3 percent during 1961-71 alone. At the same time, the percentage of landless peasants had shot up to 27.77 percent of the total population. More importantly, he argues that 'it was the land question that invested the Assam agitation with a measure of legitimacy'. He claims that alienation of land in this region has led to serious ethnic tensions. The violent ethnic clashes in Assam, before and during the agitation, had extensive participation of the local peasantry, who resent the historical loss of land to 'settlers'. Bhaumik suggests that in these clashes, armed members of various ethnic groups such as Bodos, Assamese, Lalungs, Kuki, Nagas, Mishings, Karbi, Dimasas, have all attacked communities that they considered 'encroachers' and could eventually upset their vision of a homeland<sup>10</sup>. As land was part of the collective identity in Assam, increasing rates of immigration began to be seen as a threat to the Assamese cultural identity. The Assamese elite was anxious that in a democratic system, increasing numbers in a group could alienate the Assamese from power. After independence Nehru had pressurized Bordoloi, Assam's first CM to share 'India's refugee burden' as a condition to continue receiving federal development funds. Thus the middle class as well as the peasantry was immensely resentful of the state's changing demographic patterns, loss of land to Bengali 'migrants' and 'colonial exploitation' by the Indian state.

Hiren Gohain, a prominent literary figure of Assam, has been a staunch critic of the Assam movement. In his writings, Gohain continued to entertain fears about the fascist leanings of the movement wherein he highlights the oppressive nature of the leadership in curbing any voices of dissent through a multiple means of pressure, muscle power or social ostracism. He also observes that the caste-Hindu composition of the Assamese middle class managed to alienate many tribes and backward castes as well. Besides, he claims that the agenda of the movement was neither revolutionary nor secessionist in nature but rather seeking accommodation of the interests of Assamese middle class<sup>11</sup>.

Having said that, Gohain does not shy away from asserting the increasing threat of unchecked immigration to Assam. Though he considered the demands of the movement rather irrational, he believes that they derive their strength from genuine historical urges and grievances. Thus the stunted growth of native capitalism hindered the forces that would allow assimilation of different ethnic elements (including immigrants) of Assam.

#### *The Bodo ethno-national movement for autonomy*

While the Axomiya narrative seemed more predominant in the public realm, there were parallel developments of consciousness among the plain and the hill tribes as well. The Bodos are the largest plain tribe in Assam and in the northeast with about 2 million members<sup>12</sup>. The earliest demands by the Bodo people for some form of autonomy were made to the British government in 1929. Moreover the British plan to reorganize India on the basis of provincial autonomy encouraged the Bodos to found the

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<sup>10</sup> Bhaumik 2009

<sup>11</sup> Gohain 1985

<sup>12</sup> 2001 Census.

All Assam Tribal League as a central organization representing tribal interests. In 1960, the declaration of Assamese as the official language, after the violent language conflict, was seen as a threat to the interests of the plain tribes. In 1967, the Plain Tribal Council of Assam (hereafter PTCA) formally demanded autonomy for the plain tribes in the form of a Union Territory called Udayachal. Around the same time in 1969, the All Bodo Student Union (ABSU hereafter) began agitating against the loss of Bodo language and culture in public domain of Assam and land alienation attributed mainly to continued immigration of 'foreigners' to Bodo inhabited areas<sup>13</sup>. In keeping with the latter concern, the Bodo leaders plunged into the Assam agitation to support the demands of the AASU. They were further disillusioned in the post Assam-Accord period when it came to fore that the new AGP government stance on plain tribes did not differ substantially from the Congress. 1986 onwards the Bodos under the ABSU leadership demanded a full-fledged state Bodoland, outside of Assam.

The serious fallout of this phase was the rebel group organized by militant Bodo youth, the Bodo Security Force (Bd.SF) that was increasingly wedded to violent tactics for the realization of their goal<sup>14</sup>. After rounds of tripartite talks between the center/state and ABSU/BPAC (Bodo Peoples Action committee), a solution was reached in the form of the Bodo Accord that provided for the Bodo Autonomous Council (BAC), which fell well short of the demand for a separate state. However the Accord was finally rejected by the ABSU/BPAC, as the number of villages to be included within BAC could not be agreed upon by the parties concerned. This rejection led to the development of a new brand of militancy with the formation of the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT hereafter). Another militant faction called the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) had even demanded separation of Bodoland from India. Another round of violence engulfed the Bodo region of Assam bordering Bhutan, which lasted till 2001. In October 2001, under increase pressure from New Delhi, Bhutanese government mobilized its entire army against the BLT and the latter finally abandoned its demands to settle for the Bodo Territorial Autonomous District (BTAD)<sup>15</sup>.

Violence has been integral to the Bodo narrative for a homeland. Misra compares the Bodo movement with the AASU movement to find that unlike the AASU leaders, the ABSU opted for violent tactics at a relatively earlier stage of their struggle (1989). The militant faction launched calculated attacks on other religious, linguistic and ethnic groups in villages, which they felt should come under the Bodoland. Riots have periodically broken out over the years killing many Bodos and non-Bodos, burning down of entire villages and lakhs of people rendered homeless fled to relief camps; Incidents of backlash on those returning home from the camps have also been recorded. The condition for establishment of alternate autonomous unit required at least 50 percent Bodos and ethnically this was not true in many of the villages. Many scholars have called this violence as ethnic cleansing on the part of the Bodo militants to realize their goal of exclusive/compact territory<sup>16</sup>.

### *The problematic Sixth Schedule*

Monirul Hussain suggests that the proliferation of autonomy demands by both plain and hill tribes of Assam are embedded in the constitutional structure of India. He goes back in history to the period immediately after independence, when the new Indian state was confronted with the question of

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<sup>13</sup> See Roy 1995; Benedikter (ed.) 2009.

<sup>14</sup> George 1994

<sup>15</sup> Hussain 2007

<sup>16</sup> Recurring inter-ethnic group clashes in Assam in 1992-93, 1998, 2005, 2010, 2012. See Baruah 1999; Saikia 2010; Prabhakara 2012

reorganization of Assam. Both the center as well as the Bordoloi government in Assam were opposed to the balkanization of Assam and assured the tribal leaders that fruits of progress of India would also reach them. He further argues that at the same time Assam had broadly inherited the provisions of the Government of India Act 1935 which had divided the hill region into 'excluded' and partially excluded' areas; in independent India each of the hill district was provided with a Autonomous District Council under the 6<sup>th</sup> Schedule of the constitution. However as is evident from history, that the autonomy stipulated in these units were not considered to be enough by most tribal leaders and continuous confrontation with the Center ultimately resulted in the creation of the states of Nagaland, and later Meghalaya and Mizoram. Hussain notes that most of the states carved out of Assam had a population far below than an average Indian district implying that the viability of creating states in India did not necessarily depend on population but on the question of a distinctive identity. Six decades later, it can be safely concluded that this temporary measure has not only survived but is increasingly spreading to plain areas of Assam as well<sup>17</sup>.

There are huge problems with the design and the working of the various innovative autonomy arrangements under the Schedule. The Indian state maintains that these arrangements seek to devolve the process of decision-making to the tribes while preserving their cultural and demographic uniqueness. In effect, these concessions are usually doled out to those groups who are successful in sustaining a violent movement. Amendments to the Schedule now gives the district councils extensive powers on legislation and administration of justice, establish primary schools, assess and collect land revenue and impose taxes, issue leases for prospecting or extracting minerals and so on. However, as Kolas points out, 'with development schemes and public works weakly monitored and funds poorly accounted for, the powers of the district council and the funds that go with them have become stakes in homeland politics'<sup>18</sup>. Besides, the successful signatories of peace settlements with the State are entering party politics thereby creating 'fertile soil for fresh power contestations'<sup>19</sup>.

### *Conclusion*

In July last year, more than 80 people were killed and about 4 lakhs rendered homeless when violent clashes erupted in western Assam. The epicenter of the clashes was Kokrajhar, the headquarters of the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Council (BTAD). The violence was sparked off by killings of two Muslim student leaders by suspected Bodo militants. Yet the root of these incidents is much deeper in the Bodo perception of loss of their land to the 'illegal' Bangladeshi immigrants. The latter is also accused of overpopulating the region in order to change the demographic pattern and increase political influence in Assam. In a similar vein, disruptive incidents occurred in Goalpara and Kamrup districts ahead of the Panchayat polls February this year. The All Rabha Students' Union (ARSU) wanted the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council (RHAC) polls while non-Rabha groups do not want the Council elections in the 382 villages under the RHAC in which the Rabha are in a minority.

A particular kind of politics has developed among the smaller groups in Assam to demarcate a territory and political space for themselves to the exclusion of the 'other' living in the space, what may be called

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<sup>17</sup> Hussain 1987

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

as irredentist claims<sup>20</sup>. This continuous process of construction and re-invention of identities is a marked feature of identity politics in Assam today. While Karbis, Misings, Rabhas and other smaller tribes are demanding political and territorial autonomy, other groups that have historically shared the same social and political space but are not enumerated as 'tribes' are seeking the status of 'Scheduled Tribe' pre-empting such possible exclusion from political and economic privileges (Prabhakara in Baruah ed. 2010). We are witnessing the unfolding of an insidious kind of ethnic politics where ethnic groups have become highly assertive in their demands for a separate identity as well as a separate territory. The notion of spatially and historically fixed, territorially rooted collectivities living in their supposedly traditional national homelands is in stark contrast to the discourse of overlapping frontiers and pluralistic societies. The balkanization of Assam is taking a dangerous turn given its multiethnic realities. There is thus a serious collision between competing projects of identity assertions in Assam today. Such a collision is manifest in the incessant ethnic clashes, often violent and destructive, in the political landscape of the region.

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<sup>20</sup> "The Naga demand for Nagalim (greater Nagaland) can also be seen as the irredentist face of the contested nature of the region', (Baruah in Jayal and Mehta ed. 2010).