

Ethnic Boundaries During And After The Assam Agitation Of 1979-1985

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Abstract: The Assam Agitation against alleged foreigners in Assam raised identity questions amongst the diverse ethnic groups living in the state. The Agitation showed dominance of a middle-class Assamese speaking group of people. The eulogy of "mother Assam" brought a short-lived sense of unity amongst the people. The demand for Udayachal during the Agitation and Bodoland afterwards shows growing ethnic boundaries in the region. This paper is an attempt to find the roots of ethnicity based autonomy demands in the Assam Agitation. The Agitation, irrespective of the validity of its aspirations, reflected unparalleled unity of people. It also showed an ugly facet of communal clashes at the same time.

Index Terms: Bodo, movement, Assam Accord, Assamese, ethnic groups.

1. INTRODUCTION

Assam is home to people of different racial and linguistic groups. Migration happened to Assam in different periods of time from different places. The Assamese identity has been created by assimilation of people belonging to different ethnic groups. The Ahoms who reached the Brahmaputra valley in the 13th century adopted Assamese language. This incident was marked a milestone in the process of Assamese identity formation. The Neo-Vaisnavite movement under Sankardev was another step in the direction as it tied the diverse population of the region into a coherent social order. The advent of the British power in the early 19th century gave the identity of Assamese a concrete form. Introduction of printing press and the publication of first Assamese language newspaper Orunodoi by Christian missionaries in 1846 helped in the rise of the idea of Assamese identity. The different ethnic groups living in the Brahmaputra Valley played a crucial role in the creation of Assamese identity. The different ethnic groups includes Bodo—Bodokachari, Deuri, Dimasa-Kachari, Karbi, Lalung (Tiwa), Mishing (Miri), Rabha, Barmans of Cachar, Hmars, Kukis, Rengma Nagas, Sonowal Kacharis, Zeme Nagas, Hajongs, Garo, Khasi, Jaintia and Mech etc.. Most of these communities belong to the great Bodo tribe and trace their origin to Tibet.¹ Of the fourteen different tribal groups only five groups had their population above one lakh and three had their numbers in thousands in the 1970s.² They are mostly concentrated in the Brahmaputra Valley districts of Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang.

The term ethnicity is derived from Latin word *ethnos* which implies various large, undifferentiated groups. Frederic Barth connects ethnicity with decent. Max Weber looks at ethnic groups as aggregation of people who share a subjective belief in their community of decent.³ He also says that this belief normally rest on the idea of cultural and /or phenotypic similarity. Barth says that each individual has only one primary group identity. Importance of origin helps in differentiating between class and ethnicity. Barth in the introduction of *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* argues that there is no hard and fast rule to define ethnic boundaries, and the boundaries that exist

among different ethnic groups are fluid in nature.⁴ Interaction goes on among different ethnic groups but it could not change distinct ethnic identities. He says that ethnic groups could be molded and remolded according to the needs of prevailing socio-cultural system. It is the actors who define the features of an ethnic group. Many scholars saw ethnicity as some kind of intermediate groups, larger than local communities but smaller than a nation. Just like the concept of nation, ethnicity is clearly imaginary and like nationalism it is a modern concept. Ethnic groups undergo vital process of social changes and in the 20th century more and more ethnic identities took the form of nation. Ethnic identities are always context dependent and situational.⁵ Myron Weiner talks about three concepts associated with the study of ethnic demography—territorial ethnicity, notion of dual labor market and ethnic division of labor. Weiner says that in a multi—ethnic society dual labor market is associated with ethnic division of labour and it could lead to uneven development between people and places. Weiner argues that migration within a multi—ethnic society could lead to intense destabilization and conflicts.⁶ In Assam the agitation was against alleged illegal immigrants, which destabilized population structure and resources of Assam. As argued by Weiner, migration leads to growing scarcity of labour market or land which leads to competition and as a result uneven economic development among the different ethnic groups that becomes the main reason why people agitate.⁷ Conflict can become ethnic problem because of existence of ethnic division of labour, or refusal to accept the prevailing ethnic division of labour or a change in power structure resulting in change in the ethnic division of labor.⁸ Weiner said that in the hill districts of post—partition Assam the demand for autonomy was very similar to the notion of territorial ethnicity.⁹ While on one hand migrants had created solidarity among Assamese speaking people, it had also created cleavages on the line of ethnic identity. During freedom struggle, the tribal/non-tribal divisions in Assam remained partially submerged against a common enemy — the British — though many ethnic groups desired to see an Assam independent of India or Pakistan.¹⁰ Udayan Misra says that the perception of Assam in the imagination of Assamese people, in post-independence period was limited to the Assamese speaking areas of the Brahmaputra Valley and there was no space for other communities. The new found hegemony of the Assamese people made them increasingly insensitive to the smaller communities living in Assam. The ethnic tribal groups were already disturbed over the issues of poverty, unemployment and increasing pressure on land. After

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the accord was signed, the 6th and 10th clause of the accord became a bone of contention. And the question arose: who is an 'Assamese'?¹¹ During the anti—foreigners' agitation, the call for protection of Assamese identity was not only to save the 'indigenous' people of Assam from encroachment from foreigners but also to establish Assamese as sole identity.¹² There was a demand for a separate Udayachal for all plain tribes of Assam by some ethnic groups when the agitation was going on. People in general were participating in the agitation following All Assam Students' Union's call, besides there were several students' unions, representing different ethnic groups and they were offering moral support to the agitation. There were some simultaneous developments associated with identity were going on, and people were responding to whichever they found profitable. There was not a homogenous line of imagination in search of identity.

2 LAND AND ETHNICITY

Soon after independence tribal belts and blocks were created by amending the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act 1886, by adding chapter X in 1947.¹³ It was with the purpose of protecting and safe guarding the people of Assam from increasing immigration from then East Pakistan. In 1976, the advisory council for welfare of scheduled tribes (plains) formed a committee to enquire into the issue of land transfer in tribal belts and blocks. The committee observed that there was lack of implementation of the regulations. In several instances, non-tribal residents acquired land in belts and blocks protected by clause X of the regulation. Non—inclusion of plain tribes in schedule six of Indian constitution was another grievance that the committee observed.¹⁴ Of the total land mass of 78.52 lakh hector, only 33.10 lakh hector were under plow. Still a large area of land was uncultivable. The forest area is 20.08 hector and it was 26.6% of total land area in 1971. In the state, the area of total land under cultivation decreased from 1.47 hector in 1971 to 1.37 hector in 1976. As a result, land area per head had declined.¹⁵ Line system (1920) and blocks (1947) were created to protect land of the tribal people. In 1974 report of a subcommittee of Tribal Welfare committee said that the large scale encroachment on tribal belts is going on. 11,464 people were illegally living in 8233 hector land of tribal belts.¹⁶ The clash in Gohpur on the eve of 1983 Nellie violence also emphasises the issues of land attached to the agitation. In Gohpur the fight was not between local people and 'foreigners' but between tribal and non—tribal Assamese people. Since 1972 the Bodo people were living in forest reserves of Gohpur, due to border conflicts with neighbouring state of Nagaland. Bodos were followed by Mishings, Assamese speaking people, other Indian migrants and the suspected foreigners who squatted in forest areas. Government tried to free the forest land from squatting by the said groups of people.¹⁷ Amidst such situation of landlessness, in 1981 the Assam Plain Tribal People's Council demanded a separate state Udayachal and drew the desired boundary for their state.¹⁸ The demand for Udayachal comprised the areas covering parts of Goalpara district (present-day Kokrajhar District), parts of Kamrup district and Darrang district in north Assam. This geographical division is very close to the Bodoland Territorial Council that exists today. Ethnic unrests during the agitation ignited the demand for a separate tribal state to a large extent. The separate demand for Udayachal, and need for separate agenda were part of assertion of territorial ethnicity.¹⁹

3 ETHNIC GROUPS DURING THE AGITATION

There were numerous groups, such as, Pragatishil Vhoiyam Janajatiya Parishad (Progressive Plain Tribal Conference), Vhoiyam Janajatiya Parishad (Plain Tribal Conference), All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU), Rabha Student's Union, All Assam Tribal Sangha, Progressive Tribal People Development Council, Mishings Students' Union, Sonowal—Cachari Student's Union, Janajatiya Yuva League (National Youth League), Assam Tribal Women's League, Assam Janajatiya Yuva Kalyan Parishad (Assam Tribal Youth Welfare League), Assam Janajatiya Yuva Chatra Parishad (Assam Tribal Youth Students' League) and Janajatiya Chatra Sangram Committee (Tribal Student Struggle Committee) etc. to provide representation during the agitation. There were associations at village, district and regional level to represent the ethnic aspirations. These associations confirmed their support to the agitation but at the same time did not hesitate to point out flaws of the AASU led movement. Any threat to the nation (here Assam), was braved by all ethnic groups together, be it the grouping system of 1945-46 or the issues of illegal immigration. But the slow growth rate after independence, made the people disillusioned. During the agitation, the identity of Assamese became strong. Despite whole hearted support to the AASU led agitation, there were anti-tribal incidents and in 1983 the tribal people were the worst sufferer of violence. The anti-tribal incidents made the ethnic tribal people realize that the agitation could not bring prosperity to them. After the signing of the accord the ethnic people became vocal against the sixth and tenth clause of the Accord.²⁰ The memorandum of settlement signed between Central Government and agitation leaders on 15 August 1985. It made 1st January 1966 the base date and year to deport the foreigners and all those who came to Assam before this particular date and were enlisted in the voter list of 1967 were regularized as citizen.²¹ Those who came from 1966 to 1971 shall be disenfranchised for ten years and those who came after 25 March 1971 will be deported.²² There was no mention of what shall be done with tribal belts and blocks. The creation of Axom Gana Parishad in December 1985 and their victory in the state legislative election was in fact, victory of Assamese language-based nationalism. The failure of the Accord was visible in 1987 when the Bodo people started a bloody movement for a separate state with the status of union territory. A movement was launched and in a letter dated 22 January 1987 to the Prime Minister, they spelt out their grievances and said that they have been totally neglected in all spheres of life either by the state or by the central government.²³ They demanded a separate state for the plain tribal people according to the provisions of articles 2 and 3 of the Indian constitution for the purpose of all round development of the ethnic tribal people.²⁴ The Charter further demanded northern valley of the Brahmaputra River for the plain tribal people so that tribal people could follow their rich cultural linguistic traditions, could take part in political activities and prosper. In clause number two, the Charter demanded extension of sixth schedule of Indian constitution to those areas of southern Brahmaputra valley which will come into Assam after creation of a new state.²⁵ The Charter stated that by misusing 6th clause of the Assam Accord against the interest of ethnic people, especially against the Bodo people, Assamese language has been imposed upon non-Assamese indigenous people and this clause is meant only for Assamisation and assimilation. The charter also opposed 10th clause of the Assam Accord, as it

was with the purpose to evict tribal people from forest areas. The charter demanded the scrapping of the 10th clause of the accord and the Assam Forest Protection Force.²⁶

4 CONCLUSION

Two observations can be made from the discussion on the anti-foreigners' agitation in the multi-ethnic state of Assam. The numerous groups of people supported the agitation with enthusiasm, though their small number and low level of literacy and habitation in interior places of Assam rendered them less visible in the public arena. Secondly, in the 1970s and the 1980s the clashes in Assam were centered on the issue of land. It was the assertion of Assamese identity over any other possible identities that led to revival of ethnic identities after the agitation. Dissatisfactions existed around the issues of underdevelopment, poverty and land alienation, and the demand for a tribal state for Assam plain tribes was a reflection of such grievances. The violence in 1983 and the Assam accord became two crucial issues that further dissatisfied the diverse groups of people. One of the outcomes was the violent movement launched by the Bodo people in 1987 for separate Bodoland.

5. REFERENCES

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