

Demographic Changes And Identity Crisis of Ethnic Groups In Assam: An Analysis

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Abstract

Assam is the native land for many races and communities and own a rich ethnic diversity. The ethnic diversity of the state represents a complex mosaic nature of the social set up with both tribal and non-tribal population. Immigration from different region to Assam has been transformed the demographic structure and it creates a gloomy situation in the region at one hand and on the other side ethnic communities are facing a crisis situation for which ethnic groups try to protect and promote their own unique identity and culture. In many spheres, the situation of crisis leads ethnic conflict amongst the different groups. For promoting a stable environment the Government of India, on many occasions, had conceived various strategies and structural adjustments to meet the aspirations of the competing ethnic communities in the state. The influx of immigration from East Bengal to Assam creates a severe demographic changes in Assam and it leads an ethnic conflict in many spheres. In this backdrop, the present paper tries to elaborate the pros and cons of demographic changes along with the ethnic identity crisis cum conflict.

Keywords: Demographic, Ethnic, Conflict, Immigration, Crisis, Government, Identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Assam represents one of the eight states in India's Northeast Region. Like the rest of Northeast India, Assam has a rich ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic diversity. The natural growth rates of Muslim population is higher than that of non Muslim population. However increasing pressure on land resources for production purpose creates disguised unemployment, poverty and negative marginal production. Due to socio-economic -political factors immigration took place from East Bengal to Assam and it created a severe demographic changes in Assam. In many cases, influx of immigration leads ethnic conflict. However, break up of epidemic like KAAL-AZAR, Burmese invasion to Assam were associated with population explosion in mainstream Indian Districts and cheap labour for tea cultivation were the initial cause of increasing demographic changes of Assam. It is remarkable that though Assam has rich ethnic culture with diversity, but

today diverse ethnic communities instead of assimilating with each other are facing a situation of alienation and isolation. In this juncture, the ethnic communities eager to protect their respective identity, political space and to have control over resources. In many occasion these kinds of situation creates violent ethnic clashes and conflict. Assam with an area of 78,438 sq. Km represents 2.39 percent of the total land area and also accounts for up to 3,200 km of India's International boundaries, with Bangladesh and Bhutan. The state acts as a gateway to the other Northeastern states as it is surrounded by the state boundary of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura as well as West Bengal. Assam's physiography is dominated by two major riverine systems – the mighty Brahmaputra and its tributaries; and the Barak River and its tributaries. These two rivers have the valleys that are separated by the Karbi Hills and North Cachar Hills, both of which are an extension of the Shillong Plateau. In terms of

demographic composition the state has a population of 3.12 core, with the religious break up- 61.47% Hindu, 34.22% Muslim, 3.74% Christian (Government of India 2011). The living people of this region are different races, castes, tribes and speak multiple languages. The major dominant languages that are spoken in the state are Assamese, Bengali, Hindi and Bodo. At present scenario, the population of Assam can be distinctly classified as 'the tribes of the Hills, the tribes of the Plains, and the nontribal inhabitants of the Plains'. It is remarkable that history says demographic changes of the state of Assam was started with Muslim invasion to Ahom kingdom during 16th century. A sizeable portion of Muslim population left as failure of their expeditions. With their growing involvement with Assamese culture created their identity as more Assamese than Muslim. Since then a composite Assamese identity was made up with cast Hindus, the plain tribals and the small section of Muslim began to emerged.

2. Objectives of the Study:

The present study focus on demographic changes and ethnic conflict in Assam. Following are the main objectives of this study –

- To understand the cause and effect of demographic changes and ethnic identity crisis-conflict of Assam and their background.
- To find out the harmonious relationship amongst the different groups.
- To find out the government's various policies to address the issue of conflict.

3. Methodology:

With a view to pursuing the above objectives, historical and analytical method are adopted. The data relevant for the present study are collected from secondary sources such as relevant book, journals, census and other reports.

4. Major Findings and Discussion:

A) Different Groups of Immigrants and Major Demographic Changes in Assam :

Initially major demographic changes in the soil of Assam is due to large numbers of barren land with wide vegetation stayed idle land after famine like KAAL-AZAR, Malaria and invasion of Burmese. After Yandaboo Treaty (signed on 24th February 1826), Administration of Assam goes to the hand of British and gradually British invited Bengali Muslims from highly populated East Bengal and stayed in Assam in those barren fertile land. In this regard, British did not wanted to loss the land revenue by keeping the fertile land idle. They first provided incentives to those immigrant Muslim peasants by waving Tax as a measure to inspire them to settle here, who were also efficient in the production of jute, which had great demand in British industries. Later on British brought tea workers for tea cultivation from states of mainstream Indian provinces like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa etc. Though for the first time those labours came to Assam as temporary labour, but due course of time they settled here permanently. At that time, with the population explosion in Chapra district of Bihar also motivated a section of workers to settle in the state of Assam. At that time, some Congress leaders like Rajendra Prasad inspired those workers to settle in Assam, which will be lessen the population pressure in Bihar on the one hand and on the other side it will help Assam from making it a Muslim majority state and it will help Muslim league leaders to merge Assam with proposed Pakistan. Some people of Assamese middle class likes Barpetiya Mahajans, traders smuggled land by occupying land first and then sold it to Bengali Muslims and after that they occupied another portion of land. On the other hand, a section of Assamese people opposed only the Bengali Hindus for their adverse attitude towards Assamese language and culture.

B) Hindu Immigrants: Nepali people migrated to Assam as semi-permanent and migratory in nature since 1891 as a result of Indo- Nepalese relationship and religious oneness with Hindus, mostly stayed in areas with high altitude and hilly slopes. They engaged mostly in Dairy farming, wood cutting, darwan, army personal etc. Some of indigenous people of Assam inspired Nepalese to stay in Assam as a counter protective demographic balance with Bengali Muslims in Assam. A section of Hindu migrants (Hindu Bengali) entered in Assam as Administrative Assistant to

British. They were chosen by the British mainly for their administrative efficiency and high educational status and due to it they were capable of holding top-most posts of Administration in Assam. They tried a lot to take advantage in different spheres in the offices of Assam. For those Bengali Babus, Bengali language was implemented as Government language in all schools and offices during the period 1836 to 1873. These long tenure of 37 year was the darkest time for Assamese language, literature and culture including other indigenous languages. Later on another portion of Bengali Hindus migrated to Assam during partition of India in the year of 1947 and settled permanently in every districts of Assam mainly in Cachar, Kamrup, Nagaon, Goalpara etc. Without absorbing in the Assamese society and culture. Percentage of total migrated Hindus were 15 percent whereas other 85 percent were Bengali Muslims migrated to Assam. Marwaries and a portion of Biharies entered in Assam in search of business opportunities and operated big industries and commerce with monopoly power, who were basically migrated from Rajasthan and other mainstream Indian provinces.

C) Line- System, Tribal Identity, Provincial Government and Muslim Immigrants:

Though British Government inspired Muslim Immigrants to settle in Assam to increase their finance from land revenue on the one hand; but on the other side they appease the indigenous people of Assam by implementing Line System in 1920 as a protective measure. Through the purview of Line System, within the line no Non-Tribals are allowed to possess land. Tribal leaders were very conscious for their identity and they gave utmost importance on socio-economic and political rights with demand to improve the socio-economic- political conditions for tribal peoples. Popular tribal leaders likes Samson Ingti, Kalicharan Brahma, Sitaram Brahma Choudhuri etc forwarded their grievances to Simon Commission in the year of 1929. All Tribal Societies and Organisations also demanded government to establish Schools in every villages for improvement of Education for Tribal people of Assam. For the first time Line system imposed at Nagaon district only but later on (1930) the system spread to all districts of Assam as a response to grievances from tribal

organisations. In the Population Census Report (1931), Census Superintendent of Assam M. Mullan clearly mentioned about the demographic changes and ethnic identity crisis of Assamese indigenous people in his report and regarded it as a result of rapid increasing population pattern of Muslim Immigrants. It is remarkable that Census Commissioner (1931) J.H. Hutton also warned that, "The immigrants, who are prolific breeders and industrious cultivators are unruly and uncomfortable neighbours, these immigrants threaten to swap entirely indigenous inhabitants and in the course of two or three decades to change the whole nature, language and religion of the Brahmaputra valley".

The Line System to protect the Tribals come under crisis after Provincial Government was formed by "Muslim League" under the leadership of Syed Muhammad Saadulla. The Ministers from Muslim League Government, majority of whom were from Sylhet District opposed the Line System. Instead of Line System they preferred on all round development and settlement of Immigrant Muslim population in Assam. Tribal leaders likes Rupnath Brahma and Congress leaders like Mahi Chandra Bora, Naba Kumar Dutta opposed the government decision in the Assembly floor and alleged government had been trying to turn Assam into a Muslim majority province. In 1939 Gopinath Bordoloi formed government through an action plan for protection of Tribal and Line System. But the said government was unable to implement the system. In 1939 Syed Muhammad Saadulla again formed government and assumed till 1946. These days were the most black days for Assamese including indigenous people. In 1941 Census, government manipulated the census operations and left no lacunas to separate tribal from Assamese with bringing a break up in tribal unity too. As a result intra- tribal including other indigenous people faced difference from each others.

D) Post Independent Identity Crisis and Attempt to Survive:

After independent Gopinath Bordoloi lead Congress government implemented "Tribal Belt and Block" and gave the final shape by Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act-1947". As per this act villages with 50 percent tribal population came under the jurisdiction of the Act. Villages without 50 percent of Tribal

population will also come under the jurisdiction, if the villages clubbed with 50 percent Tribal dominated villages. But in practice, even after the implementation of the Act, large scale encroachment on tribal land continuing by tacking the lacunas of existing laws. It is remarkable, in the post independent period the ethnic identity crisis, ethnic conflict and influx of immigration have been increasing rather than decrease. The government of Assam, under the then Chief Minister Bimala Prasad Chaliha proposed the Assamese Official Language Bill in the Assembly on 10th October, 1960. It was passed on 24th October, 1960. The Act declared Assamese as a single Official Language all over Assam. A large scale agitation took place in Barak Valley including Tribal dominated areas and Hill districts of Assam. Dissatisfaction and discontent amongst the Tribals increased, as they never wanted to assign Assamese as Official Language. After sixties onward demand for statehood started from Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and Meghalaya; finally these were ceded by Government of India.

E) Nature of Ethnic Conflict In Assam:

Assam having a complex social set up comprising of various ethnic groups has occasionally witnessed various social unrests and turmoil in the form of inter- ethnic conflicts. Notable among them are- the Nellie Massacre between Assamese (mostly Tiwas and Lalungs categorized as Scheduled Tribe [plain]) and Bengali speaking immigrants; Bodo and non-Bodos in the areas of Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD) under the jurisdiction of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC); also including the Karbi and Dimas conflicts in the Karbi Anglong and N.C. Hills District. The famous Nellie Massacre took place on February 18, 1983, lasting about six hours. Reportedly armed mobs (ethnic Assamese) attacked and killed as many as 1,800 Muslims across fourteen villages in the undivided Nagaon district of Central Assam, on the pretext that they were illegal migrants from Bangladesh. The ethnic conflict between Bodos and non-Bodos in the BTC is another major instance. The ethnic violence took place very severely in this area between Bodos and Adivasis (consisting mainly tribes of Central India like Santhal, Munda and others who were brought by the British to work on the Tea Estates) in the late 1990s and recently in 2014. Also, the conflict between

Bodos and Muslims in the year 2008 and 2012 are the notable instances. The ethnic conflict in Assam has been associated with an inter- group phenomenon, it also has a manifestation in the form of sub-nationalistic or ethno-nationalistic aspirations. From above observations, we may say that the ethnic crisis cum conflict in Assam is dynamic in nature.

F) Assam Agitation (1979-1985) and Development of Pro- Bangladeshi Political Party:

With the demise of MP Hiralal Patowary of Mangaldoi Parliamentary Constituency in 1978, the Election Commission of India prepared by-poll. It is remarkable, the Election Commission of India confirmed about the huge increase of voters in the Electoral List. The All Assam Students Union (AASU) and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad took up the matter seriously and demanded re-draft of voters list by removing the suspected immigrants and warned all political parties not to participate in the Election and also file nomination. All Assam Student Union called picketing in the government offices and the movement engulfed the whole Assam within a short span. Hundreds of agitators killed in police custody due to severe atrocities. Instead of removing those immigrants from voters list, Indira Gandhi lead Central Government tried to provide all round protection to them and passed the “ Illegal Migrants (Determination Through Tribunal) Act- 1983”. The IMDT Act- 1983 provided legal protection to immigrants and made it tougher to detect and deport them. It is remarkable that the historic Assam movement was started in 1979 and officially ended on 15th August 1985 after coming of an understanding with the Government of India which found official expression in the memorandum of understanding popularly known as the Assam Accord 1985. During this period of six long years of the historic movement as reported 855 (later on 860 as submitted by AASU) numbers of peoples sacrificed their lives in the hope of an “ Infiltration Free Assam” in the 1979-1985 Assam Agitation. As a result of Assam Agitation, for protection of Muslim Immigrants, Pro-Bangladeshi Political Party ‘United Minorities Front Of Assam (UMFA) formed with the direct initiative of ‘ All Assam Minority Students Union (AAMSU)’ and owned seventeen Legislative Assembly Constituencies

and one Member of Parliament seat in 1985 Election. Later on under the leadership of Maulana Badruddin Ajmal, Assam United Democratic Front (AUDF) was formed in the year of 2005. At present, the party has taken an important role in the state politics of Assam by owning one seat in Lok Sabha and fourteen seats in the Assam Legislative Assembly.

G) The Conflict for Creating 'Homeland':

Many of the communities in Assam have been indulged in violent activities seen in terms of their armed struggle for the creation of separate 'homeland'. The concept of homeland here depicts the demands – for the creation of separate statehood, for autonomy as well as for secession from the Indian union. Bodos are the largest dominant plain tribal communities of Assam with comparatively developed in Educational and Socio-Economic ground with other plain tribal communities of Bodo-Kachari origin. So the Bodo middle class elite group had the dominant rule to lead all plain tribal organisations and units. Plain tribal's had long standing demand for separate identity and special provisions and autonomy in political field with protection to their language, tradition and culture since pre-independence period under the leadership from Kalicharan Brahma, Rupnath Brahma to Binoi Khungur Basumatary, U.N. Brahma. The Plain Tribal Council of Assam (1967) demanded for creation of separate state of Udayachal for Plain tribal of Assam including the North bank of Brahmaputra river. But unfortunately lack of mutual understanding and leadership failure, PTCA was not able influence the government. After the PTCA, with sub-nationalistic feelings All Bodo Student Union (ABSU) demanded the separate state of Bodoland with the slogan of "Divide Assam Fifty- Fifty" in the year of 1987 and considered it as Union Territory to preserve the Ethnic Identity of Bodos. The Government of India (1993) formed Bodo Autonomous Council (BAC) under the leadership of Sansuma Khungur Bwiswutiary in response to repeated agitation of Bodo organisation to create a separate state. Most of the Bodo extremist groups surrendered except the Bodo Security Force. But BAC was not successful in practice due to financial shortage and misconception on different terms. A numbers of Bodo groups like National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), Bodo Liberation Tiger

(BLT) was still active with arm struggle and militancy with money demand, abduction atrocities on non-Bodo and minority people. Finally in the year of 2003 Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) was signed in a tripartite agreement between Government of India-Government of Assam on one side and Bodo Liberation Tiger (BLT). Recently a new peace agreement was signed on 27th January 2020 between the Government of India and the Government of Assam on one side and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland, (NDFB) the All Bodo Students' Union and United Bodo People's Organisation on the other. Under the terms of this agreement, a Bodoland Territorial Region was formed with enhanced executive and legislative powers.

It is remarkable, All Koch- Rajbongshi Students' Union (AKRSU) also demanding separate state of Kamatapur and Scheduled Tribe (ST) status to the Koch-Rajbongshi community. They have been demanding recreation of Kamatapur state based on historical Princely state of Kamatapur, which was finally merged with Union of India on 28th of August, 1949. Historically Koch are also a tribe under greater Bodo Community and Mongoloid origin. The Kamatapur state was an independent state including some areas of present West- Bengal and more than 15 districts of Assam, ruled by king Naranarayan and his brother Chilarai. At present, they are protesting to protect their ethnic identity, socio-economic and cultural heritage.

H) Granting of the Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) :

Granting of autonomy and statehood in the Northeast India has been one of the most significant structural changes in the administration. The concept of Autonomous District Councils has been introduced in by the Government of India to ascertain the representative structures at the local level to the tribal population of the region. The Sixth Schedule enshrined under the Article 244 of the Indian Constitution grants local autonomy towards governance and rights for natural resources. The arrangement is meant to protect and privilege the local residents over and above the outsiders in matters of land and resources. Under this arrangement, there are ADCs are Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), Dima Hasao District Autonomous Council

(DHDAC) and aforesaid Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC).

Apart from the Autonomous Councils mandated in the Sixth Schedule, six other statutory autonomous councils were constituted to meet the demands of the small ethnic communities. These non-Sixth Schedule Autonomous Councils are the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council, the Missing Autonomous Council, the Deori Autonomous Council, the Sonowal Kachari Autonomous Council and the Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council. These are set up on the basis of ethnic identity, its protection and development.

5. Conclusion:

Immigration in Assam has been an emotive issue and over a period of time, it has caused various social unrests many of which have been violent. The illegal immigration has been affecting the state of Assam and its indigenous people in various aspects. It tremendously has been changed the demographic set up of Assam. Ethnic identity of Assamese communities including tribals are a burning issue of Assam. Due to rapid changes of demography of Assam with immigration from different regions, particularly from East Bengal made it a serious concern for identity seekers. This crisis leads to intra-ethnic conflict and extremism with different demands and prevents the indigenous communities from fighting against the aggressive immigrants and preserving their own identity. The paper has probed the issue of ethnic conflict in Assam. As a response to the ethnic conflicts in the state, the Government of India has followed multidimensional policies based on the spirit of accommodation. Such policies could be observed in the form of creation of statehood and granting of Autonomous District Councils. However, the policies have not been adequate to meet all the aspirations of the ethnic groups which is an indispensable part of any diverse society. From the foregoing account we come to the conclusion that rapid change of identity is neither desirable nor considerable for a Civil Society. So preservation of own ethnic identity is important with respect to others' ethnicity.

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