



The Intricate Relationship Between Citizenship And Indigenous Identity In Assam

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Abstract: This article explores the issue of citizenship and its linkage to the question of indigenous rights in the context of Assam. The main focus is on understanding the layered history of Assam from colonial time till contemporary period. The complex history of migration into Assam since ancient period and the socio political process during the colonial and post-colonial periods have homogenized different culture and shaped the indigenous identity. The trajectory with references to the growing agony of the native people towards their indigenous identity is also an area of focus. The issues of citizenship in the public discourse in Assam is different from the mainland India, which can be taken in reference to CAA and nationwide implementation of NRC. The unrest is due to the fear that if Bangla speaking illegal immigrants are granted citizenship may outnumbered the local population since the amendment act will nullify the Assam Accord which was signed with a consensus among the government and the civil society organisations to deport all illegal immigrants from Assam along with the promise of providing constitutional safeguard to indigenous communities to protect the Assamese identity or indigenous culture.

Keywords: Citizenship, Indigenous Rights, Unrest, Immigrants

The idea of citizenship is a contested one from time of framing Indian constitution. The debates of citizenship began with the question of defining citizen in Indian context since partition that led to territorial change which caused communal violence and unprecedented migration from the border line area. The diverse ethnic character of Assamese society evolving through complex socio-political and historical processes has led to the contested ideas of the indigenous identity. The identity crisis is in the limelight because of the continuous inflow of people or illegal migration which has created a question for the existing majority of losing their status and hence there is consciousness among the indigenous people to safeguard their rights. There is a fear among the ethnic and the caste Hindus people towards the influx of people in Assam, which might outnumbered the existing population. The language movement and Assam movement brings new dynamics to the question of indigenous identity happened in the post-independence period. The fragmentation of Assam during the post-colonial period and the ongoing identity assertion movement reflects the contradictions and contestations inherent in indigenous identity. In this context the indigenous identity of Assamese people is at a risk therefore there is a serious concern about preserving their unique cultural identities and protecting their rights and privileges. Along with that there is a greater concern about

the demographic pattern being changed drastically due to the continuous immigration, which will ultimately affect the political participation of the local people.

Objective of the study :

The main objective of the present study is to interrogate the contested issues of identity of the indigenous people. It attempts to go beyond the essentialist assumption of identity and tries to see the processes of history of migration during colonial and post-colonial era. As such the objectives which are formulated are as follows:

- 1) To get an idea about the contested issues of identity.
- 2) To find out the causes responsible for the identity crisis.
- 3) To examine the social tensions and political debate in relation to political representation and access to resources

Methodology :

The present study is prepared by using the descriptive and analytical method. The study is mainly going to be based on secondary sources of data such as journals, articles, newspaper etc. Therefore the methodology of this paper is descriptive in nature which is going to cater information from related literature on this subject.

Results and discussion :

While understanding the idea of citizenship and the indigenous rights, it would be necessary to look into various factors which are the key in understanding the enduring conflicts regarding Assamese identity or indigenous rights and the contested idea of citizenship. The roots could be found entangled in the colonial history about ethnic identity and which are ultimately related to the controlling over the resources in Assam. The question of citizenship brings with it the idea of binary opposition like insider and outsider, native or alien, citizen and non citizen etc (Gogoi, Kukil 2020). The history could be traceable to the signing of the Treaty of Yandaboo between the Burmese army and British which made the Britishers step into the lands of Assam. The arrival of the Britishers in Assam led to accrue more of the natural resources since the prime motive behind the Britishers was to mint profit. They were astonished by the resources present in the lands of Assam. After which they started their expansionist policies which prime motive was to transfer the resources like raw materials to the far industries of England. Before the Britishers came to India, the monetary transaction was also new to many tribal populations. Today we see the conflict between who is local and who is outsider which has its roots in the colonial era. During the second world war the low lying areas next to rivers were abundant and the agricultural practices in that area was meagre in Assam. But in present day Bangladesh the demographic pattern of the neighbouring areas was densely populated. Because of the fertile land and having big rivers in Bangladesh population pressure was much higher and during the first and second world war when the Britishers needed more food to supply to the British army engaged in the war, they started the operation called grow more crops to supply the soldiers engaged in war. Now they

had lands in this part of the country but there were lack of good farmers so people from there specially from the Mymensing district of Bangladesh brought to the low laying areas of Assam. They were brought in and settled here for doing cultivation to grow more food crops because the people who were residing here were doing cultivation only for subsistence and the Britishers wanted food that could be exported. Alongside there was a change in the cropping pattern, new crops were introduced, tea garden, cash crops etc were introduced with the objective to supply. And thus the settling of those people for agricultural practices raised concerns among the native people if they got outnumbered in the process. Along with that for the fulfilment of the people in the administration and industries there was a large scale migration from people from Bengal, Jharkhand, Orissa etc.

Alongwith that the imposition of the Bengali language in 1826 as the official language also created discontent among the people of Assam, which led to the resistance and anger amongst the people. Since the Britishers were looking Indian society from the indological or bookish perspective they failed to properly understand the Indian people. The indological perspective or the bookish perspective which tries to see society from the elitist perspective failed to see the people who were outside the Varna system. There was understanding of the society through the varna hierarchy, since the tribal people were not in the varna hierarchy there was a consciousness among the Britishers to study the Indian society. However, the sepoy mutiny of 1857 had made them realised that there were another aspects they had to look into for proper administration or smooth administration of the Indian society for a longer period of time. By the second half of the 19th century the colonial state in India was about to undergo major transformation. Land and the revenue and authority that accrued from the relationship between it and the state, had been fundamental to the formation of the early colonial state, eclipsing the formation of company's rule in that combination of private and formal trade that itself marked the formidable state-like function of the country. The important event that take place in 1857 simply reflect that they didn't have any proper understanding of the folkways and customs of the Indian society, or the large masses of the Indian society. The aftermath of the 1857 gave rise to the ethnographic studies in India. For example the ethnographic details of Naga, the ethnographic details of Bodos etc. The policy of non-interference in the private domains and an attempt to preserve the culture and traditions and create new political identities by the British Government. Accordingly, a progressive policy was implemented in 1866 by the colonial administrators, recognizing the distinct characteristics of hill tribes compared to plain tribes and thus the Naga Hills District came in the administrative parlance. As a consequence of the colonial policy, the inner line permit gained prominence, aiming to segregate the tribal population. Nevertheless, there has been an increased demand for the implementation of the Inner Line Permit (ILP) in states such as Meghalaya, Tripura, and Assam. The primary motivation behind this demand is the desire to utilize the ILP as a protective measure against the influx of illegal immigrants. The division of the Bengal province during the colonial era led to heightened tensions between the Hindu and Muslim communities. This partition resulted in the creation of two separate entities: East Bengal and West Bengal. The aforementioned scenario, despite Assam having a predominantly non-Muslim population, its geographical location resulted in its inclusion within East Bengal. However, Assam was subsequently carved out of Eastern Bengal and established as a separate province. In this

context, the influential figure of Gopinath Bordoloi played a crucial role in facilitating Assam's separation from the Bengal province. To further impede the nationalist sentiments of the Assamese population, the British administration additionally emphasized the necessity of segregating the hill and plain communities through the enactment of the Government of India Act, 1935. The act classified the hill areas into two zones: excluded and partially excluded areas, with an explicit purpose of preventing them from developing a unified national consciousness. (Gogoi, Kukil,2020).

Over time, the focus of the discourse shifted from language to religion. In this context, it is important to note that the 1971 India-Pakistan war, which resulted in the formation of Bangladesh, is often cited as a significant event that altered the demographic landscape of Assam. This was due to the influx of millions of illegal immigrants who fled to and settled in Assam. Hence, there was a concern that the indigenous people might be outnumbered in political participation. Consequently, the Asom Andolan movement took place from 1979 to 1985, demanding that the Assam government take action to address the issue of illegal migrants. In response, the Assam Accord was signed between the Government of India, the Assam Government, and the All Assam Students' Union (AASU).

But in 2019, the controversial citizenship Amendment Act rightly opines that those illegal migrants who have come to India from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan prior to 31st December, 2014 and if that migrants belong to the other major religious communities except for Muslim who had faced religion persecution than they will be entitled to take Indian citizenship, which violate the Assam Accord itself.

CONCLUSION:

The intricate issue of citizenship and indigenous rights in Assam encompasses various historical, cultural, and political dimensions. This complex phenomenon periodically resurfaces, posing challenges for the citizens of the region. Even the sixth clause of the Assam Accord, which promised to provide constitutional safeguards for cultural, linguistic, political, and land rights, has not been implemented. The National Registrar of Citizenship (NRC) was intended to identify legal residents, but it raised concerns about the potential inclusion of illegal individuals on the list. Consequently, there has been an ongoing challenge related to Assamese identity and the protection of the indigenous rights and privileges of the people of Assam.

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