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Growth Of Multi-Ethnic Based Identity In Assam: A Historical Overview

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Abstract: Assam is land of diversities where various ethnic groups reside together .Assam is enriched with different culture and natural resources as well as its natural beauty .Assam had a history of immigration from different part of region. People of different religious faiths and languages have settled in the region for centuries. Different migrant groups at different periods of times had come to Assam and changed the society of Assam. They had constituted a separate class of identity, a new identity to the larger population of the state. The paper tries to analyse how had been the Assamese society changed gradually in the Pre-colonial period, Colonial –period and Post-colonial period.

Keywords: Assamese Society, Multi-Ethnicity, Ethnic-Diversities, Ethnic Pluralism, Cultural Assimilation, Ethnic Conflict.

I. Introduction

Historically, Society in Assam has been a multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-ethnic .multi-caste, multi-class multi-lingual based in composition wherein the Assamese people have constituted the majority national group. Assamese society has been mainly plural in its composition and highly uneven in structure. Assam has been a melting pot of diverse ethnic groups that included the Austric , Mongoloid , Dravidian and Aryan who entered Assam in different period of history carrying diversities in respect of language , culture , customs , traditions , historical background and so on (Chetia, 2018). In the pre-colonial period, different ethnic groups migrated to Assam and constituted a composite culture. Though migrants were few in number and they had to assimilate with the Assamese population and culture in order to survive .As a result of integration with Assamese society, they lost their identities and contributed to the emergence of a common Assamese identity. The pre-colonial society in Assam was not monolithic; rather it was multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-lingual in social composition. It was plural and diverse society. But colonization had made the Assamese society more heterogeneous. As a result of colonization, the Britishers encouraged huge immigration of different people from different parts of the country as well as from the foreign country .The post-colonial Assam had been transformed qualitatively due to introduction of democratic federal set up .During this entire period, Assam had been experienced a series of social and political movements mainly based on ethnicity which are sometimes peaceful political mobilization and sometimes by means of violence.

II. The Pre-colonial Period

The process of fusion to make the modern Assamese identity started 750 years ago since the days of Sukapha (1228), the first king of Ahom (Das G, 2012). Through a long period of history, different ethnic groups migrated to Assam and constituted a multi-ethnic cultural society. Though migrants were few in number and they had no choice but had to assimilate with the Assamese population and its culture in order to survive. As a result of integration with the Assamese society, they lost their separate identities and contributed to the emergence of a common Assamese culture (Borah, 2016).

A process of inclusion of different ethnic identities such as Bodos, Chutiyas, Khacharis, Marans, Moamarias and Koches through conquest or through crosses cultural social bonding like marriage during the time of rising of Ahoms in Brahmaputra valley. As a result of territorial expansion of the Ahom Kingdom over the time, Ahom identity became weak gradually. While the process of integration was going on, the shifting of Ahom identity into Assamese identity was also happening especially under the influence of the Brahmins who had been brought into the region by the rulers of Assam particularly from Navadweep, the cultural heritage of the erstwhile Bengal. Brahminical customs constantly got prominence in the courts of the Ahom kings and even in the tribal belief system (Das G, 2012).

Bhakti Movement led by Shankardev had created the cultural life and heritage of the Assamese identity. It was the rise of Shankardev's neo-Vaishnavite movement during the period of 16th century, which integrated the different social identities into a singular Assamese identity. It is noted that initially the neo-Vaishnavite were rejected by the Ahom kings but finally got recognition from the royal authority. The movement had obtained so much popularity that some of the Ahom kings later used the Vaishnavite institutions as cultural ambassadors of the royal court. Thus, the various Brahminical varieties of Hinduism and neo-Vaishnavism together based in Aryan religious scriptures such as Bhagbat Gita, Ramayan, Mahabharata, Upanishads and Purans formed the belief system of the Assamese identity which is primarily rooted in Hindu heritage. The neo-Vaishnavite movement was so strong that the Ahom nobility embraced it in order to legitimize their rule (Das G, 2012).

When the Ahoms invaded the territory of the Morans, Bodos and Chutiyas during the 13th century and extended their rule in the eastern part of the Brahmaputra valley and Northern part of Bengal acted as the buffer between the Sultanate of Bengal and the Ahom kingdom. Muslim invaders from Bengal under the leadership of Ikhtiar Uddin Mohammad Bakhtiar Khilji, Giasuddin Bakhtiar and Ikhtiar Uddin Malik Ujbeq Tugrilkha had tried to invade Kamatapur but they were in vain. However, at last, Hussain Shah had defeated the last Kamata king Nilambar in 1498 and occupied Kamatapur. Shah's son had ruled the country for some time concentrating Hajo before being defeated by war with the Ahom kings. The void that had been created out of the defeat of the Muslim ruler was filled later by the rise of the Koch kingdom. There had been several hostilities between the Ahoms and the Koch kingdom and the Koch kingdom as well as between Muslim invaders from Bengal and the Koch kingdom of western Assam during the 16th century. Once again, for a long time, western Assam was under the control of the Muslims. This eastern thirst of the Muslim invaders gained strength during the 17th century when the Mughal came to power in Delhi. The Mughal invader, Mir Jumlah had succeeded to capture Garhgaon; the capital of the Ahoms during the period of second half of 17th century. By the end of the 17th century, with the capture of Gauhati by the Ahom king Gadadhar Singh in 1682, the Mughal interest in the western Assam had been completely ended. Aurangzeb's preoccupation in the south India and the weakening of the Mughal empires and his demise in 1707 had caused to end the interest in eastern India (Das G, 2012).

There is no doubt that the Mughal empire during their regime had left some legacies in terms of some Muslim population by way of war captives, engaging in trade and commerce and settling down in the valley of the western Assam. During the Kamatapur regime, Hussain Shah inspired many Muslim warriors to settle down at Hajo and built the first Masjid at Rangamati. The Muslim population who settled down in the Brahmaputra

valley either by compulsion or by choice was gradually assimilated with the multi-ethnic social base of the erstwhile Assam. Muslim settlers were engaged by the Ahom kings as security guards, worker in kings' fire arms production and minting workshops. Some of the Muslim settlers also worked as musicians, shoe makers and japi manufacturer. They were also employed to do in artistic work and tailoring work in which they were good in performance. It is very significant to note that before the arrival of Marwari traders during the colonial period, Muslim traders had played important role in trade and commerce sector (Das G, 2012).

Besides the Sultanate and Mughal invaders, preacher of Islam and Sufism in had also visited the Brahmaputra valley during the medieval period. The activities of different peers and fakirs like Jamaluddin Tabriji during the 13th century, Giasuddin Aulia during the 14th century and the 17th century Azan Fakir during had led to the internationalization of Islam which was one of the components of medieval culture. Although Ahom kings strongly fought against the Muslim invasion all through their regime during till the end of 17th century, but there are no instances of against Islam. It is noted that Sufism and Sankardev's neo-Vaishnavite movement had led to progress in medieval Assam (Das G, 2012).

In fact, the pre-colonial society in feudal Assam was not a monolithic; rather it was a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-lingual. The multi-ethnic social composition was caused by migration of the different races at different periods of time from different regions. It was plural and diverse society. The Ahom was the ruling social group of pre-colonial Assam. There were other social groups like Koch, Chutiyas, Bodo-Kacharies, Kalitas, Keots, Muslims, Sikhs who adjusted themselves in the pre-colonial social order of Assam (Borah, 2016).

III.The Colonial Period

The history of Assam states that during the latter part of their rule in feudal era, the Ahom rulers had to face some internal problems. They had to face internal conflicts caused by different social groups, particularly by Mowa, Morias and external aggression by the Burmese in 1817 to 1822. The continuous internal disorder and external aggression led to the annexation of Assam by the East India Company in 1826. As a result of victory in the first Anglo-Burmese war in 1826, Western Assam was immediately annexed to the British India; Eastern Assam was later brought only under the colonial rule in 1839. As a result of colonization, about 35 years Assam remained under the control of Bengal presidency till 1874 when Assam was made as Chief Commissioners Province. Extension of territory ultimately led to the inclusion of population of different race and culture. It also resulted in change in the demographic composition of colonial Assam. It caused making Assamese society more plural in colonial period. Another important factor that caused the demographic changes in the colonial period in Assam was British policy of migration. Colonization made the Assamese society more heterogeneous. As a result of colonization, the Britishers encouraged huge migration of different people from different parts of the country as well as from foreign country. The colonial Assam had experienced certain new social groups like the Americans, the Hindu Bengalis, the Marwari's, the Nepalis, the Biharis, the tea garden Labourers and the Muslim Peasants during the colonial period. The Britishers dominated and influenced over the new social groups in colonial period. In the colonial period, the social group of European origin was the Americans. They belonged to the members of the Christian Missionary. Their main aim was to spread Christianity. Beside this they also helped to promote Assamese language and literature. There was another new social group – the Hindu Bengalis. They were known as 'Baboos' to the local people. They migrated from Bengal. They served the middle-class jobs in colonial administration (Borah, 2016).

During the early period of colonial rule, Britishers introduced Bengali as the court language of Assam which sowed the seeds of Assamese- Bengali inter –ethnic conflict till the restoration of Assamese language in 1874. Although the Assamese language was restored in 1874 but the inter-ethnic conflict had continued throughout the colonial and even in the post –colonial period. However, the restoration of Assamese as the official language was failed due to the addition of three Bengali –dominated areas of Goalpara, Sylhet and Cachar as a result of reorganization of Assam in 1874. In this reorganized Assam, Assamese became the

minority 38.30% (1871 Census) of the total population in the province. The districts – Sylhet, Cachar and Goalpara had huge Muslim Bengali settlers, which led to the rise of Muslim population in the colonial Assam. In fact, while Muslim constituted only around 6% of the total population in the five districts of the Brahmaputra valley (Darang, Kamrup, Lakhimpur, Nowgong and Shibsagar), the inclusion of Sylhet, Cachar and Goalpara, their number had risen five –fold and constituted 30% of the total population in the province (1871 Census) (Das G, 2012).

As a result, the Assamese sub –nationalism began to grow in the middle of the 19th century as an assertion of the autonomy and distinctiveness of Assamese language and culture against the British colonial view of Assam as a periphery of Bengal. Another small and business class group migrated to Assam during colonial period were known as Marwari's. The main task of the Marwari's was to act as bankers and commercial activities for the tea planters and also for the peasants. It is noted that this groups played important role in Assam's transition from non –monetized economy to a market economy in the 19th century. The Nepalese were another small labour class community who migrated into Assam during the colonial period. The migration of Nepalis was encouraged by the Britishers because as they would serve in British Army named as Gorkha Regiment. The Nepalis were also involved in the business of milk by rearing cattle in the grazing areas. Another new social group that emerged in Assam during the colonial period was Biharis. They generally migrated from undivided Bihar. They were very small group and economically a very poor class. They were involved in the working of road – construction, houses and building construction. Beside this, some of them were working as rickshaw puller, thela puller, barber, washman etc. (Borah, 2016).

In the early period of 19th century, tea plantation was started in Assam. Due to unwillingness of Assamese people towards tea cultivation, the Britisher's started to import workers from central provinces particularly from Chotanagpur region. Thus, the tea tribes got settled in Assam and assimilated with the Assamese society and enriched Assamese culture (Sarma M, 2018).

Assamese identity was further endangered with the reorganization of the province of East Bengal and Assam in 1905 due to the partition of Bengal which was a colonial policy to break the growth of nationalism in Bengal. As Eastern Bengal was dominated by the Muslim Bengalis, Assamese people became minority in this newly reconstructed province. But this reorganization was only for a short time. In 1912 Assam got pre-1905 status with the cancellation of partition of Bengal. Though Assam was made a Governor's province in the year of 1921 and continued till the Independence, but no new territories were included to it during the period. As per provision of the Sylhet referendum (1946), Assam got relief of the Bengali dominated Sylhet which significantly paved way for the claim to make Assamese a nation province of the Assamese, then becoming the single largest community. However, Goalpara and Cachar remained as a part of Assam and that's why both the Hindu and Muslim Bengalis formed the polity of Assam. In this way, the territorial reorganization of Assam during the colonial period had ultimately expanded the political boundary and multi –ethnic social basis of the province. (Sarma M, 2018).

In fact, colonial Assam was no longer the homeland for the Assamese only. Though tea-tribes were isolated and did not transform themselves into political community, but Muslim Bengalis under the control of Muslim League contested for political power against the Assamese Hindus who were organized under the banner of National congress in the colonial Assam. The singular Assamese identity was threatened by the British colonialism, Muslim political and territorial interest and the Hindu Bengali domination in cultural and professional spheres, in colonial Assam.

IV. The Post –Colonial Period

The year 1947 was considered as a watershed in the political history of Assam. Due to the introduction of democratic federal set up, politics of Assam had transformed qualitatively during the post –colonial period. The partition led to reorganize the territorial boundary of the country. It also impacted on the demographic transformation of Assam. The transfer of Sylhet to East Pakistan had led to demographic and political changes in Assam. It is notable that the Assamese speaker's people in post-colonial period had raised to 56.7% in 1951 from 31% in 1931, on the other hand the Bengali speakers people decreased to 13% in 1951 while it was 23% in 1931. This reorganization ultimately led to the domination of Asamiya Caste Hindu elites in social and political sphere. The Asamiyas became the single largest group in the post- colonial period. On the other hand, as a result of partition, the Bengali lost their majority while the Muslim lost their political relevance and suffered from being minority in Assam. However, Cachar, a predominantly Bengali-speaking district remained in Assam. Moreover, Except the North Eastern Frontier Agency (presently Arunachal Pradesh), Tripura and Manipur also remained with Assam in addition to the Brahmaputra valley. Thus, the Brahmaputra valley had become the traditional homeland of the Asamiyas which was inhabited by tribals such as the Bodos, Ravas, Mishings, Tiwas and Deuris etc. (Das J. K, 2005).

As a result of separation of Sylhet, Assam had lost the Eastern Duars and was taken over by Bhutan, which was included totally as a Bhutanese area. Besides this Naga Hills District was separated from Assam and got a status of full-fledged state in 1963. However, the demand of secession of Nagaland has not still died down. On the other hand, the Mizo National Front under the leadership of LalDenga demanded independence for Mizoram. The Mizo Hills District was separated from Assam and constituted into a Union Territory in 1972. The union territory of Mizoram was transformed into a state in 1987. The autonomous state of Meghalaya consisting of United Khasi and Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills was formed in 1970. However, the autonomous state of Meghalaya was transformed into a status of full-fledged state in 1972. Manipur and Tripura both belonged to union territory and later transformed as full-fledged state in 1972. Arunachal Pradesh (formerly known as NEFA) belonged to Union territory, became a full –fledged state in 1987. Thus, the process of state reorganization that began in 1947 had completed by 1987 which resulted in the formation of seven North Eastern States. But two hill districts - Karbi-Anglong and N.C Hills together with Bengali dominated Cachar district of Barak valley remained in Assam. It is noted that the demand for separation of hills tribes from Assam was mainly due to their hatred and mistrusts towards the hegemonic Asamiya ruling class. It was also reflection of their democratic consciousness. As a result, the Karbi people of Karbi-Anglong and Dimasas-Kacharis of N. C. Hills are raising demands and building up a movement for autonomous state within Assam. On their hand, the Bodos have been demanding for a separate state namely Udayachal and later Bodoland in the Northern parts of the Brahmaputra valley. As a result, a new political arrangement in motion in Assam with the leaders of the Bodoland movement signing a memorandum of understanding with the Union and state government for the creation of a Bodoland Autonomous Council in 1993 within western parts of Assam. But a section of people were not satisfied with this type of arrangement. As a result, they again started movement violently under the leadership of BLT and ABSU for the creation of a separate Bodoland state. In this perspective and different pressure in the form of bloodshed in this region compelled NDA government to sign another memorandum of understanding with the Bodo leaders on 10th February, 2003, to create Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) by dissolving former BAC (Das J. K, 2005).

The Rabha is another significant ethnic group of tribal. They had also demanded for a separate Rabha Autonomous Council – Rabha Hasong with headquarter at Dudhnoi in the South bank of the Brahmaputra valley and Goalpara district to fulfill their aspirations. A section of the Rabha community had prepared a map of the Rabha Hasong dominated regions of Goalpara and the Southern part of undivided Kamrup district and included 8 assembly constituencies. The demand for creating a Rabha homeland was mainly raised by a non-political organisation namely the Nilachal Autonomous District Demand Committee (NADDC). The organisation started peaceful democratic movement since 1988 for the creation of the Nilachal Autonomous District comprising of the regions of south Kamrup Tribal Belts (Guwahati, Chhayagaon), Bardamal Tribal Block and

Bandahapur Tribal Block along with other adjacent tribal dominated areas of South Goalpara and South Kamrup district of Assam with a total population of 5, 44,732, out of which 4, 48,989 were tribal consisting of 82.42% of the total population. The leaders of the Nilachal Movement also agitated for the native Bodos and other plain tribes of Assam. The NADDC had organized the movement with the co-operation of the ABSU. But while the ABSU leader had entered into an agreement with the Union government for the creation of the BAC by signing the memorandum of settlement in 1993, a section of the Rabha community by coming out of the NADDC, raised a separate demand for the creation of the Rabha Hasong Council which was opposed by many of the NADDC leaders. As a result, government of Assam under the leadership of Chief Minister H. Saikia had accepted the demand of the Hasong agitators by signing a memorandum of understanding for the creation of Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council in 22nd July 1995. However, a large section of the Rabha community opposed the creation of the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council and continued to pressurize upon government to create Nilachal Autonomous Council in the south bank of Brahmaputra. In fact, by creation the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council, the aspirations of the Rabha had not fulfilled and therefore in the later period All Rabha Students' Union raised demand for the inclusion of the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council into the Sixth Schedule for greater autonomy and threatened to start a strong movement in Assam (Das J. K, 2005).

The Mishing Community and Lalung Community also raised the same demand for the creation of Mishing Land and an Autonomous Council for the Lalungs (Tiwa community). As a result, the government of Assam had signed a separate agreement with the Mishing and Lalung communities with a proposal of autonomy. But this type of autonomy had failed to fulfill their hopes and aspirations. The Mishings and the Lalung had also raised demand to include them in the Sixth schedule. The government of Assam had formed a cabinet sub-committee to study the matter in 2003, but still the report is awaited. In the same way the Ameri- Karbies, the Deuris, Morans and Motaks are also experiencing identity crisis and raising similar demands for autonomy (Das J. K, 2005).

Moreover, the problem of Cachar of Barak valley is still going. There is a possibility of bifurcation of the Cachar district from Assam. Cachar is predominantly a Bengali dominated area and geographically it is separated from the Assam proper particularly from Brahmaputra valley. North Cachar and Karbi-Anglong are still burning issues with ethnic conflict between the Dimasa and the Hmar Tribes (Das J. K, 2005).

Another important issue of post-colonial Assam was the rise of and growth of the extremist group United Liberation Front of Assam, an offshoot of the Assam movement. The ULFA was established on 7th April at Sivasagar and upon the places of historic Ranghar (An entertainment centre) founded by the ancient Ahom rulers. It is noted that 7th April is celebrated as the New Years' Day in the Asamiya calendar. The ULFA members launched a silent propaganda campaign to wear away mass support from the AAGSP and established an organisation structure in upper Assam by way of foreign fraternal contracts with various guerrilla and underground organizations operating mainly in the North East. They took-up guerrilla warfare training mainly in Kochin in Indo – Burma border. They were trained by the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN). It is important to note that Assam's socio –economic underdevelopment, backwardness and unemployment resulted in frustration among the Asamiyas which led to follow the extremist path. In fact, the ULFA movement had brought a new dimension in political and social spheres of Assam (Das J. K, 2005). Beside this, Assam witnessed another challenge in the post –colonial period that was the issue of foreign infiltration particularly from neighbouring Bangladesh. It was the one the important existential crisis of Assam after independence. Assam has both land and riverine border with Bangladesh on the frontier district of Karimganj (84 km) and Dhubri (14km). The border is more or less open. There is no physical border between the two countries. As a result, Assam movement started to stop the inflow of Bangladeshi immigrant into Assam. The problem left unresolved causing existential concern for both the majority and minority community. At present, the greatest obstacles faced by Assam is explosion of population by the influx of illegal immigrants from neighbouring Bangladesh (Das J. K, 2005).

The post-colonial Assam had been transformed qualitatively due to introduction of democratic and federal set up. During this entire period Assam experienced a series of social and political movements mainly based on ethnicity which were sometimes peaceful political mobilization and sometimes by means of violence.

V. Conclusion

Ethnic pluralism is one of the main characteristics of Assam, comprising variety of life styles, cultures, religions, languages, beliefs and traditions. Different ethnic groups at different period of time had been come to Assam and changed the society of Assam. They had been constituted a separate class of identity, added a new identity to the larger population of the state. From the pre-colonial period to post-colonial period, a number of ethnic communities had been migrated to Assam and constituted a multi-ethnic based society of Assam.

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