

# Ethnic Groups in Assam: A question of Identity

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**ABSTRACT**--Northeast India, comprising eight states, is a landlocked region and is surrounded by hills and mountains on three sides and the western side is bordered by plains. The region is located in the foothills of the Himalaya, the major part of which consist of the Arunachal Himalaya, the Mishimi and Miju hills, the Patkai hills, the Naga hills, the North Cachar hills, the Karbi hills, the Khasi hills, the Jaintia hills and the Garo hills. This vast foothill region is inhabited by a large number of tribal and ethnic communities, such as Hrusso, Sherdukpens, Khowas, Apatanis, Nissis, Adis, Mishimis, Khamptis, Noctes, Wanchos, Khasis, Syntengs, Jaintias, Garos, Lushais, Kukis, Nagas, Mikirs, Singphos, Abors, Dafalas, Deuries, Karbis, Meitheis, Santhals etc. The different ethnic groups have been bearing varied and colourful customs and traditions, speaking different languages and dialects, many scholars consider it the melting pot of diverse races, castes, religions, languages and cultures. Inter-ethnic conflicts and struggle for identity among these ethnic groups too are not new but a frequently occurring phenomenon. However, such conflicts have become more common and all-pervading at present. It is to a great extent, due to over politicisation of the factors composing the ethnic identities. This paper tries to put in perspective the newly emerging patterns of ethnicity and demands for separate imaginary homelands in variegated paradigms and configurations.

**Keywords** – Ethnicity, Politicisation, Identities, Assam

## I INTRODUCTION

Northeast India, comprising eight states, is a landlocked region and is surrounded by hills and mountains on three sides and the western side is bordered by plains. The region is located in the foothills of the Himalaya, the major part of which consist of the Arunachal Himalaya, the Mishimi and Miju hills, the Patkai hills, the Naga hills, the North Cachar hills, the Karbi hills, the Khasi hills, the Jaintia hills and the Garo hills. This vast foothill region is inhabited by a large number of tribal and ethnic communities, such as Hrusso, Sherdukpens, Khowas, Apatanis, Nissis, Adis, Mishimis, Khamptis, Noctes, Wanchos, Khasis, Syntengs, Jaintias, Garos, Lushais, Kukis, Nagas, Mikirs, Singphos, Abors, Dafalas, Deuries, Karbis, Meitheis, Santhals etc. The different ethnic groups have been bearing varied and colourful customs and traditions, speaking different languages and dialects, many scholars consider it the melting pot of diverse races, castes, religions, languages and cultures. Inter-ethnic conflicts and struggle for identity among these ethnic groups too are not new but a frequently occurring phenomenon. However, such conflicts have become more common and all-pervading at present. It is to a great extent, due to over politicisation of the factors composing the ethnic identities. This paper tries to examine the ethnic identity crises and conflicts as an enduring phenomenon in Assam.

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## II ETHNICITY AND IDENTITY

The word “ethnic” stands derived from the Latin Word “ethnic” which means common identity. In this way ethnicity means an awareness of a common identity among the members of a particular social group. It denotes a sense of common identity consisting of subjective use by a group for believing and demonstrating its separate identity from other group. Ethnicity is a new concept in social science. Though the term ethnicity is of recent origin, its idea has been present since long. Its probable first use by David Riesman in 1953 only renamed an already existing and recognized phenomenon. The term Ethnicity refers to a common tradition, a system of shared values and culture by a group of people who identify themselves as a distinct entity different from other group in terms of race, kinship, and language, customary mode of livelihood, culture and religion.

Identity reflects both likeness and uniqueness. It relates to the members of a group which share a certain culture in common, at the same time which differentiates it from others. Such attributes not only distinguish a group from other group but also contribute to the sameness and oneness among its members for identification. Expression of identity by various groups of people based on language, territory, religion, common origin and host of other culture elements are all comparatively more ephemeral than societies. While ethnicity and ethnic movements are processes dependent to know and understand the societies and the social formations to come to grip with issues of ethnicity and the rising tide of identity movements among tribal and non-tribal communities. As is well known, consolidation of identities along the lines of tribe and community has become increasingly manifest in the recent years in the region. The growth of the spirit of ethnicity or ethnic self-assertion among various groups leads to the aspiration for a distinct identity for themselves.

## III IDENTITY CRISIS AMONG THE ETHNIC GROUPS IN ASSAM

The North-East India especially Assam is one of the most interesting parts of India from the ethnological point of view. With more than 200 ethnic groups in the region, each asserting its “unique” identity and claim for political space conflicts are inevitable. Identity formation is a complex process. Even before the days of Indian Statutory Commission (Simon Commission) in 1930, different ethnic groups in Assam were fighting for identity. This consciousness for identity among various ethnic groups in Assam is nothing new. It is a well-known fact that hill men always reported higher degree of consciousness than their counterparts in the plains. But that does not mean that the plainsmen lacked identity consciousness. The hills and plains of the region have been occupied by different streams of Mongoloid people who came from the north and the east at different periods well before the onset of colonial rule. The diverse Mongoloid groups which eventually settled in different habitats and ecological settings crystallized into distinct tribal societies. Even in the case of Assam plains, the early rules were Indo-Mongoloids of various dynasties spanning a time period from fifth to mid-eleventh century. The local dynasties had contacts with Hindu states of India. While the hills and mountains of north-east India remained outside the orbit of Hindu influence and caste-based social formation, the history of Assam plains (the Brahmaputra Valley) shows that by the twelfth century local kings of Mongoloid origin become Hindus. Then, there is the classic example of social transformation and subsequent contribution in shaping the regional society by the *Ahoms* who ruled over Assam for merely 600 years, from 1228 A.D. till the advent of the British in 1826.

The *Ahom* period is of considerable significance. Their rules established a well-integrated administrative system in Assam and they also patronized the Hindu religious institutions. In pre- *Ahom* period, the social formations in Assam were predominantly tribal in nature. But through the development of a centralised power and state religion, the different ethnic groups were united and the Assamese as a wider social formation crystallized in the Brahmaputra plains. In this, the Neo-Vaishnava religious movement under the leadership of Shankaradeva in the sixteenth century also played a significant role.

In the post-colonial era we can recognize five different parameters of identity consolidation. These are tribe, caste, language, territory and religion. These often work in combination with one another. Emergence of tribal social formations, often with demand for specified territories as politico-administrative units are feature common enough in Assam these days. The concept of smooth integration of tribal and non-tribal's of various language groups of local and immigrants and of various religious communities appears to be fraught with many huedles. The post-colonial Indian state is structurally a federal one but it contains strong unitary elements in many spheres. The state policy vis-à-vis the tribal peoples of North East India were initially to provide some opportunities for self-rule at district level. Later in response to continued agitations and movements of tribal peoples more autonomy was given at the state level for which purpose Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh created separate states of princely states, were also elevated to the status of full-fledged statehood.

In Assam, the "Asomiyas", as distinct from the plains and hill tribes, have held sway over the government ever since India becomes a nation. The Asomiyas who today broadly constitute a mix of the Hindus who migrated from the northern provinces of India and the Ahoms who came from Southeast Asia consider themselves the natural rulers as they are from the perspective of civilisation more advanced and even more sophisticated in managing the tools of governance. The very word "Assamese" which include the entire population of Assam is today a hotly contested by those are aggressively asserting their ethnic sub-nationalism. The bodos say they are not Assamese and wish to be called Bodos of Bodoland in Assam. This is because the very word "Assamese" has over the year been identified with a particular ruling and dominant economic elite.

Smaller tribes like the Karbis and Dimasas are being politically mobilised to demand greater political and economic autonomy so that they attain the status of a state within a state. In 1986, the Autonomous State Demand Committee emerged as political party of Karbi-Anglong and N.C. hills districts enjoying massive popular support for ending the hegemony of Dispur and demanding separate autonomous state within India. The birth of ASDC can definitely be said to be the turning point because for the first time a mass-based movement was attempted to be organized in Karbi-Anglong, which was not an elite oriented. The Bodoland Territorial Council model is covered by every ethnic community that has the political resources to whip up a fremzy. Violence has been used as the tool of choice since governments, both at the state and Centre, respond to such tactics.

Not much of substance has been done towards the holistic development of the Misings who are concentrated in Upper Assam notable Dhemaji and North Lakhimpur. On the surface, the Misings appear docile and well integrated into the Assamese template. Hence they hardly feature in our political discourses. Of course they are proudly featured in Assamese literature as being culturally very versatile, great artists and weavers. The Mishing Language Movement in Assam appears to be a symbol of assertion of awareness of their heritage consciousness

and self-development. Mishing claims their district identity from the linguistic point of view. But if successive governments continue to ignore the plight of the Mising, than they remain a subdued people. Whether these are the features that embody the probable reasons of the conflict asserting in a lukewarm manner need to be properly attended to.

The Koch-Rajbongshis of Assam have also been suffering identity crisis. Although most of the people of North-East having Mongoloid connection were included in the first list of Scheduled tribe in free India but the Koch-Rajbongshis of undivided India could not find any place in that. In 1953, the Backward Class commission, headed by Kaka Saheb Kalelkar, declared them as OBC, which aggravated the dilemma of the Koch-Rajbongshis of undivided Goalpara district were categorised as MOBC while the the rest of them in other district of Assam remained OBC. However because of their inclusion in the Scheduled Caste list, the Koch-Rajbongshis in North-Bengal district secured some special protection. Thus the same ethnic group now achieved three statuses- S.C. in North-Bengal, MOBC in Goalpara and OBC in other district of undivided Assam. This status has aggravated the confusion about their ethnic identity. The demand for S.C. status was revised in 1980 and instead a demand for S.T. status put forward. It is apparent that Koch-Rajbongshis of Assam have been suffering identity crisis and their demand and movement for identity is going on. But if the government continue to keep their demand pending for a long time the movement may raise its head in a more asserting and threatening manner.

The Hmar's of N.C. Hills of Assam earlier grouped themselves with old Kuki/Kuki-Lushai group now asserted a separate tribal identity. The higher level of literary added a sense of political awareness amongst them and in spite of having close affinity with Kuki/Lushai group they hankered after an independent identity.

Other ethnic group are still in demand mode and currently holding talks with the Central interlocutor as to what would be the best arrangement for them under the circumstances. Besides attempting to improve their social, economic and political status while retaining tradition and relative prestige they attempted to bolster ethnic identities. The aspiration for a distinct identity among the ethnic groups resulted in a number of movements demanding autonomy. As a result, at present there are 8 Autonomous Councils in the state. Today in Assam, there are either movements for separate states or autonomy on the part of different ethnic groups. These groups had come together during the Assam Movement 1979-85 but the Assam Accord 1985 mentioned only the ethnic Assamese. That alienated the groups that had identified themselves with a common Assamese identity. Slowly the non-Assamese groups developed a desire to be separate and hence have come up with a struggle for a separate identity.

#### **IV CONCLUSION**

A crisis in multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies may result from suppression or exploitation of any group. In the era of imperialism-colonialism, the majority community and ethnic minorities in a particular colony joined hands to secure freedom from the alien rulers. But once independence was secured, the ethnic minorities become increasingly conscious of their ethnic identities and began clamouring for separate statehood. The principle of national self-determination impelled them to to justify their struggle for securing this objective. The spread of the ideas of democracy, liberalism, equality and liberty encouraged them to challenge

their subordination to the majority community. The existence of conflict among district ethnic groups in the territory of Assam also acted as a key source of ethnic tension and violence, which very often gradually developed into an ethnic civil war.

It may be said that the ethnic conflicts in Assam were due to the repressive attitude of the Government of Assam from time to time. To prevent it from blowing into a full-fledged conflict, we need policies that prevent polarization and encourage integration. Politicization of ethnicity rapidly transforms into ethnic conflict. Without effective solution the situation can only lead to insurgency and militancy as observed in Northeast India for the last many decades.

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