

THE ASSAMESE IDENTITY QUESTION

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Abstract- Assam is a multi-ethnically rich state of India. The only linking element among these diverse groups of population is the Assamese identity that derived from the Assamese language and culture. Among these diversities, the celebrated commonness of being Assamese has a cultural and political importance, and preserving the same is the role of the government. This paper studies how the concern over security of Assamese identity has been a major cause of turmoil in Assam and the attitude of the Government towards providing safeguard to the indigenous Assamese people. The paper also checks the link that exists between social insecurity and political and economic instability prevalent in the region.

Key words: Assamese identity, language, illegal immigrants, diversity, government

I. INTRODUCTION

With authority of India transferred into the hands of Indians in 1947, the expectation of the Indians from their own sovereign government increased. Their expectation from the government inspired the Indians to democratically put up their demands and grievances before the people's representatives. The Indian government aims for a welfare state and with passing years from the year of independence, the government is striving more and more for better governance.

The Bharatiya Janata Party in its Lok Sabha election, 2014 had a slogan- 'Minimum Government, Maximum Governance'. So, what does governance means? In the article *Governance- Experience from Karbi Anglong, Assam* Alaka Sarmah and Chucheng Fa Gogoi defined governance in the simplest term as "the decision making process as well as the process of implementation of those decisions. This process also identifies involvement of different structures from different walks of life, signifying both the formal as well as informal actors". Further, Francis Fukuyama in his article titled *What is Governance?* has laid down two dimensions of governance, namely- capacity and autonomy. According to him, "quality of governance is ultimately a function of the interaction of capacity and autonomy, and that either one independently will be inadequate as a measure of government quality also suggested that states need to be disaggregated into their component parts, by function, region, and level of government, and that we need both capacity and autonomy measures for all of these components (Fukuyama 2013)." But have we reached to that stage of governance where the government involves its public in the decision-making process or provide proper heed to their demands and aspirations? Let us understand it through the context of Assamese identity question.

Attachment to objects or subjects over time make difficult for an individual to loss it, instead each day s/he tries harder to secure and preserve the same. The love and attachment to one's mother-tongue or the language, the land, culture are kinds of it. In post-independence India, states were created on linguistic lines as per suggestion of the State Reorganisation Commission (1953). This linguistic basis of division and creation of states created the urge among other linguistic groups who were in minority to safeguard their language and if need arises to demand separate statehood. Ever since India's independence, the building up of a pan-Assamese community have always remained a challenging job due to the differences. But the recognition of being Assamese based on living in Assam with Assamese language as the linking language has been the major common identity of the inhabitants of this region. Apart from different ethnic groups, Assam has been a favourable land for immigrants from other states of

India during colonial period and after independence for illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. The problem lies with the later influx to Assam in the form of Bengali speaking illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.

This paper studies the different phases of politics which is centered around the threat to Assamese identity, language and culture. The language has been the main element to mobilise the residents of Assam against illegal immigration to Assam which have over time become a threat to Assamese language by pushing the Assamese community to the margin to become minority in its own state with the fall of Assamese speakers from 61-62 percentage in 1960s to 48 percentage in 2019 (as telecasted in the news readings during the protest against Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019). The paper is based upon secondary sources of data with a few inputs from primary sources like newspaper, census reports etc. It is analytical and historical in nature, with setting up the time period of 1947 to 2015 for the study as - materials and resources were feasible. Also, because during this phase states were carved out on the linguistic lines, there had been Assam movement against the illegal immigrants in Assam due to threat posed on Assamese identity and this period saw inhabitants of Assam uniting together as 'Assamese' to fight against illegally residing foreigners.

II. OBJECTIVES

1. To understand how the Assamese society is bonded together and their mobilisation pattern against illegal immigrants.
2. To find out the causes underlying and result of the increasing number of illegal immigrants in Assam.
3. To view the role of the Government in securing the trust of the citizens and in solving the immigration issue of Assam.

III. RESEARCH QUESTION

What is the response of the Government of the India against the threat from the increasing illegal exodus to Assam on the Assamese community and Assam as a whole?

IV. ANALYSIS

The present-day Assam comprises of the territorial kingdom of the Ahoms, the Koch and the Bodos. Along with these major ethnic tribal groups Assam is also home to numerous small groups like the Karbis, the Misings, the Chutias, the Morans, the Borohis, the Brahmins, the Kalitas and many others who owe their origin here or have migrated from elsewhere but have over time assimilated with the culture of the Assam. All these groups together formed the Assamese community. Though the tribal groups have their own dialects, many like the Ahoms, the Kochs, the Chutiyas etc have abandoned it slowly, making Assamese as their day to day common language. The need of a common language became a necessity as each have their own dialect and in such situation a communication without a common dialect or language among different groups seemed difficult. Therefore, Assamese language that developed under the patronage of the Koch and the Ahom kings, got well developed into printed form during the British colonial rule in Assam. Through the following points the paper deals with contested creation of legal and illegal citizens in Assam and the role of the government in solving the issue-

- 4.1. Consolidation of Assamese Sub-nationalism**
- 4.2. Threat to Assam and Assamese with illegal influx**
- 4.3. Role of the Government**

4.1. Consolidation of Assamese Sub-nationalism-

With the urge to create a pan-Assamese speaking community for the state of undivided Assam, the Assam government adopted Assamese as the state language of Assam in 1960. The same was unacceptable to many other tribal groups who never identified with the Assamese community. Love for their own languages led to resignation of elected hill leaders from the Assam legislative assembly and soon the demand for separate state aroused independent states (*Bhuyan 2006: 51*). In other words, a sub-nationalism wave developed out of their love towards their own languages leading to separation and hence formed the states- Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and Mizoram. North Cachar and Karbi Anglong hill districts were given the option of joining the state of Meghalaya in 1970s. But they opted to stay with Assam as Assam government promised them with special provisions to

safeguard their language, culture and tradition. Here again the special protection of language provided a sense of relief in continuing further with their own identity. But once again the Assam government's Policy of 1986 to introduce Assamese as a compulsory Third Language in schools and mandatory knowledge of Assamese for recruitment into government services created resentment among those communities who could not diffuse into the Assamese community like the Ahoms, the Kochs and the like. The central government stood against the initiative of the State government. The then Union Minister for State for Communication, Santosh Mohan Deb stated that "*all the people of Assam should learn the Assamese Language but it should not be imposed upon the non-Assamese speaking people*" (Bhuyan 2006: 87). The state government was under a regional party, Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) and hence they were on an inclined mood to create a state of citizens with Assamese sentiments, where the language's safeguard seemed favourable against the illegal immigrants from Bangladesh who were creating a threat to the Assamese community with their huge population growth.

Within Assam, among the citizens of India comprising of various tribes, the language issue in making Assamese language a compulsory to build a pan-Assamese community created chaos and hence to solve the issue Brindaban Goswami, the then Education Minister of Assam clarified that in implementing the Secondary Education Board of Assam (SEBA) circular on the compulsory Assamese language, '*care would be taken to see that the other languages of Assam i.e., Bodo, Mising would also be developed, while providing the status of link language to Assamese for cultural and linguistic assimilation* (Bhuyan 2006: 88).' As of now the Government of Assam has taken initiative like using of Assamese language in official orders in governmental offices and institutions except in Barak valley where the Bengali population is in majority, and in the autonomous councils of the tribes of Assam. Thus, a common link between the various communities is being tried to build upon.

4.2. Threat to Assam and Assamese with illegal influx-

In the book *A History of Assam*, Sir Edward Gait historically traced the origins of the tribes and other communities living in Assam. It shows migration as a part of Assam history but unlike those communities who valued giving up something of their own and acquire something of else's to form the pan-Assamese community, there were also those who lately migrated to India like the tea garden labourers from Orissa and Jharkhand, river devastated peasants of East Bengal during colonial rule, out of whom, the East Bengal originated immigrants became a threat to the Assamese community as even after independence the flow of the immigrants continued. India's militarily support in creation of a separate Bangladesh, independent of Pakistan, led Indian Government to shut their voice on the illegal immigration from Bangladesh and hence even after carrying a movement for six years in Assam against illegal influx, the central government provided legal Indian citizenship to all those immigrants who migrated to Assam on or before 1971 when in rest of India 1951 was the cut-off year to count as Indian citizens. The huge number of influx to Assam came to light after the 1971 census which showed abnormally high population growth rate when compared to the average population growth rate in India.

Sanjib Baruah in his article *Immigration, Ethnic Conflict and Political Turmoil* states that the issue of immigration in Assam even though was present since 1947, the Congress used them for political support and on the other hand Assam was undergoing conflicts on redefining state territory through the centrality of language. Moreover, these immigrants had given Assamese as their mother-tongue in the 1971 census, hence Assamese community at large was undermining the issue of illegal immigrants. But the population census of 1971 showed the danger of undermining the issue further as fresh illegal immigrants were continuously entering, changing the demography of Assam and were putting cultural, political and economic threats on the original inhabitants of Assam. As the Bangladeshi immigrants were Bengali speakers, the Assam Movement sought to protect the rights of Assamese speakers from being overshadowed by Bengali speakers. Except regions encompassing Barak Valley where Bengali speakers are basically concentrated, the rest of Assam had no special concession for allowing Hindu Bangladeshi to migrate into Assam. During partition of India a section of Hindu Bengali speakers fell within the territory that was to go with Pakistan, hence Bengali speaking group have a soft corner for this section. On the other, the Assamese community have no such history and hence illegal immigrants- Hindus or Muslims meant the same for them.

Referring to the reasons for immigration to Assam, the writer of the article *The Partition's long shadow: the ambiguities of citizenship in Assam, India* (2009) states that migration from Bangladesh has been 'self-rescuing migration'. In search of space, freedom from flood and for better economic options, the Bangladeshi Muslims migrate to Assam. On the other hand, the Bangladeshi Hindus' migration is looked upon by the Hindutva political force as 'home-coming' which is linked with the effects of the partition of 1947. Hence, the counting of the Hindu immigrants is less thought of.

Irrespective of these differences in the Assamese and Bengalis, the leaders of Assam Movement tried to put up an inclusive definition of Assamese as those communities who ruled over the region is some part of the time as well as all other residents of Assam, except the illegal immigrants who entered Assam after 1971 against whom they were mobilising. Sanjib Baruah in the article *Immigration, Ethnic Conflict, and Political Turmoil--Assam, 1979-1985* (1986) writes,

"In the course of the Assam movement, the leaders constantly confronted the problem of political management of the coalition in support of their demands. The task was only partly a matter of reproduction of Assamese ethnic identity through manipulation of Assamese cultural and historical symbols" (Baruah 1986).

4.3.Role of the Government-

After independence, the task to prepare citizenship laws for Indians was laid upon the Indian Parliament and they too tried to follow the 'spirit of the Nehru–Liaquat pact of 1950' without being skeptical to any particular religious groups. In the words of Sanjib Baruah, *"The legal definition of Indian citizenship rejects the idea that Hindus and Muslims are separate nations. Yet in political terms, post-Partition India is not in a position to close its doors to Hindus coming in from East Pakistan/Bangladesh. For whatever the legal position, many in India believe that Hindus have an implicit right of return. The continued migration of Muslims – aside from the Partition-induced migration of Hindus – made the issue even more complicated"* (Baruah 2009).

The Government of India does not have the exact number of Illegal immigrants in Assam. The number itself is debatable but if one digs deeper the numbers may be accessed, as confidential estimates based on reports by intelligence of police agencies are usually kept by the state. Moreover, these immigrants have a major role in setting up political parties in the government. Sanjib Baruah writes-

"The state of Assam, said the Indian Supreme Court in 2005, faces 'external aggression and internal disturbance' because of large-scale 'illegal immigration' from Bangladesh (Supreme Court of India 2005). In July 2008 the Gauhati High Court said that a 'large number of Bangladeshis' in Assam play 'a major role in electing the representatives both to the Legislative Assembly and Parliament and consequently, in the decision-making process towards building the nation'" (Baruah 2009).

It is very easy for illegal immigrants to acquire legal documents in order to legitimize their stay. Each piece of documentation – plastic or paper – brings an additional layer of legitimacy until, finally, the illegal immigrant becomes 'visible' as a citizen of India. Moreover, Indian citizenship laws lack to take up the cross-border immigration continuing till today. National leaders from the time of Nehru itself were in support of incorporating more non-Indians into Assam stating that Assam has enough space to include. However, the legacy to settle non-Assamese in Assam dates back to the colonial time when British settled down labourers from rest of India and Bengali speaking Bangladeshi to turn 'wastelands' of Assam into productive use from where the British can earn tax. In the year 1978, the then Chief Election Commissioner publicly spoke about the 'large-scale inclusions of foreign nationals in the electoral rolls' and showed concern over the issue as Assamese soon were going to be minority in their own land. This was enough to lit up the spirit for the Assam Movement (1979-1985) against the illegal immigrants. But even after a bloodshed movement, the results were unsatisfactory as Assam had to make lots of compromises on the cut-off dates of entry of immigrants into India. Entry after 25 March 1971 was made illegal and to was to detect each of them, remove their names from electoral rolls and to expel them from Assam. However, it was never done. Instead the Indian parliament went ahead with passing of the Illegal Migrants (Determinations by Tribunals) (IMDT) law in 1983, restraining the role of the new Assam state government, Assam Gana Parisad (elected on a mandate of implementing the Assam Accord) to do on the question of foreigners; as now it became the role of the complainer to prove the illegal citizenship of a doubtful and questionable resident of Assam(Baruah 2009). In 2005, the Supreme Court nullified the IMDT act, but again in 2006, the Congress led government tried to bring it through two notification from a back door. And it was enough for them to win the election, until those two notifications were again nullified by the Supreme Court by the end of 2006.

During the present party's government, neither the illegal immigration issue is solved nor is the government ever thinking of putting an end to it. Instead, discussions are made to include all Bangladeshi Hindus as Indian citizens where the most effected will be the Assamese, as Assam has been dumping ground of illegal immigrants-whose human resource value is questionable, and the Assamese speaking community is becoming meagre in quantity. It can be well analysed that by giving citizenship rights and protection to stay in Assam, the illegal immigrants have become vote-banks to the various parties forming government. For government too it seems an easy task to gain their vote by simple providing them safe ground to reside than to gain votes for the indigenous Assamese legal citizens as this category have developmental demands from government and the functions of a welfare oriented democratic state is well under scrutiny of this section. This immigration issue has been a matter of protest resulting in social insecurity and stability for the Assamese ever since 1971 census reports.

V. CONCLUSION

The Bangladesh government have always rejected the notion of unauthorized Bangladeshi immigrant in India. As such, the demand for an agreement between the two nations on the deportation of illegal immigrants will be a difficult one but is need of the hour. As of now, when Indian law-enforcement officials deport an alleged illegal immigrant to Bangladesh, they have little alternative to dropping him or her in the no-man's land between the two countries.. No sovereign country likes to accept a person unilaterally deported by another country. Sanjib Baruah proposes 'for post-national or transnational citizenship for instance, are mostly about extending limited rights and entitlements of citizenship, to non-citizens'. Unless the Government of India stops thinking for political vote bank in the illegal immigrants, the rights of the indigenous over their space, land, culture and language can never be secured.

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