



Research Paper

Un-reconciled Citizenship and a Community: The Trauma of the Bengali Hindus in the Brahmaputra Valley

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ABSTRACT:

The end of Colonial regime and the departure of the British Imperial State in 1947 left behind a Partitioned country of India and Pakistan. Interprovincial borders of Colonial era became international boundaries. It introduced the 'foreigner's' dimension into the Indian political situation. The critical political state of affairs in East Pakistan led to the migration of a large group of population across the borders of Bengal, Punjab and Assam. This displacement of population from their home and hearth contributed to the heightening of insecurities and apprehension within them. It also led to the dilemma of Citizenship for this large group of migrant population in their country of settlement.

My paper proposes to study the Citizenship imbroglio in post-colonial State of Assam and more specifically Brahmaputra Valley. I intend to concentrate my work within the Bengali Hindu refugees who have trickled in large numbers from the Bengali speaking district of Sylhet in erstwhile East Pakistan in consequence to the Sylhet Referendum and other parts of East Pakistan. The predicament of the citizenship question of these Bengali Hindu refugees was reflected through the various disturbances that engulfed the post-colonial State since the partition in consequence of the legislative enactments. But very unfortunately the politics over migration and citizenship continues till today. Citizenship had remained a contested site in Assam politics and the debate over the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 had only but conflagrated the issue. The community of the Bengali Hindus had remained un-reconciled to the situation for years together. Their trauma of being partition victims had continued to move onto as victims of the citizenship question. The hostility towards the 'outsider' and the anti-outsiders movement persists till today in Assam since colonial times.

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I. Introduction

The Colonialist regime lasted in this country of India for about two hundred years till 1947 and it was then that the country gained independence. Simultaneous to the granting of independence to the realm, came forth the decision of the British to Partition India. With the de-colonisation of the sub-continent of India emerged two independent states of India and Pakistan. Assam was one constituent unit of India connected to the mainstream of the country through a 22 km long chicken neck corridor in the aftermath of independence and partition. Geographically, the province of Assam here connotes the territory comprising of the Brahmaputra Valley and the Surma Valley, the hills of North Cachar, Karbi Anglong, the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Mizoram and Nagaland as what existed prior to the Partition of 1947 and thereafter, with the consequent redistribution of territories that took place in the aftermath of independence.

Historical Geographical Background:

The Assam districts since its annexation in 1826 to the British administered territories had been a part of the Presidency of Bengal, which comprised besides Bengal proper, Bihar, Orissa, the whole of the United Province including Delhi, portions of Central Province and Chotanagpur. The inconvenience of governing such an "unwieldy Bengal Presidency" with an "enormous population and area..." had been long recognised (Barpujari ed.1977:176). The creation of a new province was a simple expedient used for the convenience of

administration. Accordingly, Assam proper, together with Cachar, Goalpara, Garo Hills and other districts, for the first time after colonial annexation, were Partitioned out of Bengal to form into a Chief Commissioner's province on the 6th of February 1874. But the new province was felt to have been lacking in revenue potentialities. The colonial authorities, for maximum utilisation of resources for the fulfilment of their economic interest, decided to incorporate the Bengali speaking district of Sylhet, an integral part of Bengal historically, linguistically, geographically and ethnically, into the new province of Assam. Much controversy and agitation centred round the question of inclusion of Sylhet to Assam. But paying no heed to the growing Bengali sentiment of being curbed off their right, the district was ultimately handed over to carve out the new Chief Commissioner's province on 12th September 1874. Along with Sylhet, the Bengali speaking district of Goalpara too, was transferred from Bengal to Assam. Thus the province that emerged in 1874 was an amalgam of four disparate elements: (i) the pre-literate hill districts speaking diverse tongues, (ii) the five Assamese speaking districts of the Brahmaputra Valley together known as Assam proper, (iii) Goalpara of the same Valley where the Bengali and Assamese cultures overlapped and (iv) Sylhet and Cachar- the two Bengali speaking districts of the Surma Valley. The transfer of Sylhet and Goalpara was crucial for Assam, mainly for the reason that the population in Sylhet was primarily Bengali speaking whereas the majority in Goalpara too spoke Bengali (Guha 1988:28). Thus, the two valleys of Assam, Brahmaputra and the Barak / Surma, henceforth Surma Valley, were neatly divided by the hill districts into two distinct linguistic and cultural zones.

Assam that was identified in 1874 was given a wider significance to denote the newly emerged plural province in which no single linguistic group commanded a clear majority (Dasgupta 2001A:34). With the incorporation of Sylhet, a reasonable number of Sylheti Bengali clerks poured into Assam to seek employment in the newly established government offices that came up with the restructuring of the province (Misra 1988:149). The creation of this new province of Assam in 1874 amalgamating the Bengali speaking district of Sylhet, Cachar and Goalpara promoted continuous round of agitations in the Brahmaputra Valley. It was largely a follow-up of the apprehension of Bengali dominance that had invaded the Assamese mind with the introduction of the Bengali language in the courts and schools of Assam in 1836. Finally, this union came to be argued on the ground that the *zamindari* system as prevailed in Sylhet did not well-nigh match with Assam's land tenure arrangements so as to be amalgamated thus (Barooah 1990:91).

The formation of the Chief Commissionership of the Province of Assam in 1874, wresting out of the erstwhile Bengal Presidency was to be regarded as the first attempt to Partition by the British colonialists. The argument rested upon the fact that historically perceived this administrative change of territories was brought about by the British colonial administrators to map out a new province for their own convenience. This endeavours of the colonial rulers resulted in a consequent chain of events that perhaps was to culminate to the Partition of India in 1947. It was the restructuring of the territorial boundaries of the erstwhile Bengal Presidency and Assam since 1874 to 1905 by the British Government, according to its convenience that was responsible for the consequent political and social events (Phukan 1996:24). They were ultimately responsible for the Partition of India in 1947. The administrative changes that were brought about in 1874, to form the Chief Commissioner's Province of Assam with the incorporation of Sylhet may be described as the first Partition in the history of British India. The creation of the province of Eastern Bengal and Assam in 1905 could therefore be historically referred as the second Partition of British India.

Pre-Colonial, Colonial and Post-Colonial Migration:

Historian H .K. Barpujari attributes the geographical location of Assam to be the prime factor responsible for the migration of various groups from different directions to Assam since the ancient period. In the Introduction of his book titled *The Comprehensive History of Assam Vol. 1*, Barpujari had mentioned the different connecting routes that linked Assam with the neighbouring countries such as the Assam-Burma route and the Patkai route. These routes were responsible for the coming of the various racial elements from South-East Asia, the Ahoms and other Tibeto- Burmans from the north-east. The hill passes of Bhutan, Tibet and Nepal were also probably used by certain waves of the Tibeto-Burman migrants. On the west, the valleys of the Ganges and the Brahmaputra were used by the Indo-Aryans to penetrate into *Pragjyotish-Kamarupa*. Thus 'Assam being located in one of the great migration routes of mankind' these migrants successfully entered the region to contribute to the moulding of the culture and ethnic composition of the people of the region (Barpujari ed. 1990:2-3).

To speak of the communities who have migrated into the region, we can refer to the Australoid, Caucasoid and Mongoloid etc. Rajmohan Nath in his book *The Background of Assamese Culture* referred to the various races of people brought in from different parts of India by the Varmana and 'Mleccha' line of Kings. The people of Deccan were also brought into Assam during the Pala period either as temple labourers, job seekers or retinue to the Hoihoya princess. All of them were gradually naturalised to become Assamese (Nath 1978: 45).

Migration to the pre-colonial society of Assam was encouraged by the ruling classes. It indicates their interest of substantiating the dearth of available skilled manpower in the region. Moreover, the migrants in the pre-colonial phase, perhaps because of the geographical location of the host state and poor transportation facilities of commutation were unable to hold back or cling to their place of origin. Therefore they were under the circumstances compelled to assimilate with the place of migration. Even a ruling community, like that of the Ahoms in the pre-colonial phase who belonged to a different race somewhat gave up its original ethnic identity and adopted the Assamese culture (Nag1990:26). Incorporation of the different group of migrants made Assam a multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi-lingual society.

Following the British annexation of the Brahmaputra Valley in 1826, the process of gradual incorporation of the hills and plains of the north-eastern region started. It took more than a century for the colonial administrators to bring all the areas of the region under the British Indian politico-economic and administrative system. The colonial province of Assam significantly was larger and heterogeneous than the pre-colonial days. Unlike the pre-colonial Ahom kingdom that consisted of the Brahmaputra Valley alone, the traditional homeland of the Assamese speaking population, the colonial province embraced almost all of the north-east as we know it now, including the Bengali-speaking districts of Cachar, Sylhet, Goalpara and the hills of the Nagas, Khasis, Lushais, Garos and Jaintiyas (Dasgupta 2001A:35). However, with the incorporation of the Brahmaputra Valley into the colonial British Indian Empire, the region was gradually moulded in the colonial interest that aimed at opening up its insular economy. The fundamental intention of the colonialists lay in channelizing the resources of the region to suit their economic interest. Colonial officials perceiving the need of maximising the revenue growth of the region for economic purpose felt that the land abundant economy of Assam was a fertile pasture to welcome migrants to the region. The erstwhile, uninhabited land frontier was made to be gradually attracted by both labour and enterprise from the neighbouring province of the *Raj*, to meet the economic demands of the 'infant' colonial administration. All this happened basically in the interest of colonialism (Hussain1993:221). Even the Assamese middle class that correspondingly emerged in colonial Assam initially welcomed migration. Assamese Renaissance that grew under the impact of Bengal Renaissance and colonial patronage, had torchbearers like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua, Bolinarayan Bora etc. They through their pleas and memorandums implored the British government for the promotion of migration for the economic progress of the province i.e. Assam (Guha 1988: 68; Nag1990: 87).

In categorising the major migrant communities to the Brahmaputra Valley, we have listed the Muslims of East Bengal origin, the tea labour community, the Marwaris, Nepalis and the Hindu Bengalis who were responsible for the marked socio-economic transformations that were brought about in colonial and post-colonial Assam. They left a deep impact on the future politics of the region. It is however necessary to understand the social transformations that came about in the colonial period through migration and which led to crystallisation of forces to leave an impact upon the question of future migrations into the Assamese society.

Bengali: Hindus and Muslims

The Bengali Hindus who migrated in the colonial period were an important segment of population flow to Assam. They were brought into the region to man the administrative bureaucratic structure of the incipient colonial economy. Historically, however the Bengali Hindu migration could date back to pre-colonial times when groups of people came to satisfy the need of the King and the state in accordance to the skill and labour they rendered.

With the colonisation of Assam by the British, what came to the notice of the colonial bureaucratic order was the land abundant revenue short economy of the state. To mobilise the economy of the region in the interest of British colonialism, the traditionally isolated low-density populated area with its vast tract of wastelands was made open to migration. The Muslim peasants from the East Bengal districts of Mymensingh, Rangpur and Pabna in easy access to the river belt of the Brahmaputra opted to the taking up the task of cultivation of these areas. It was again with the need of augmenting the land revenue of the area, which was very meagre, compared to the other Indian provinces that made colonialists patronise peasant migrants. Unlike the Muslim migrants between the 13th and 17th century who assimilated with the host society and came to be known as Assamese Muslims, this group came to be referred as the Bengali Muslims (Singh 1997:157). More than 85 percent of this class of peasants had come from the district of Mymensingh and were mainly referred as 'Mymensinghias' (Davis 1949:254-264). Besides, there were other push factors which seem to have operated in encouraging the migration of the East Bengal peasants or the so called *Pamua* cultivators to the wastelands of Assam. The population density of the East Bengal districts had put pressure on the land, leading to a disproportionate land-man ratio, fragmentation of landholdings, famine and poverty in the region. Besides, the feudal oppression by the landlords under the prevalent *zamindari* system of Bengal had coerced the migration of the East Bengal peasantry to use the abundant waste and *char* lands in Assam (ibid.1949: 254-264). Moreover, the migration of tea-plantation labourers into the Assam Valley brought as a part of the colonial process and the correspondingly expanding population necessitated the increasing of food production. In order to overcome the

food deficit and producing the deficit crops so as to equate the ratio, more lands were brought under cultivation and the pauperised cultivating classes of Bengal were invited to settle in the wastelands and thereby improve the food supply (Nag1990:89). Initially, these 'land hungry' peasant migrants were welcomed both by the colonial government and the Assamese landholders for the increase in cultivation and simultaneous increase of revenue. With their arrival, cash crops like jute and tobacco and a pulse known as '*mung*' came to be introduced in the region. But with the gradual pressure on land, the land-abundant economy came to be a land-scarce economy. The occupation of large cultivable lands yielded produce no doubt but this unrestricted migration instilled into the Assamese mind a sense of fear of their identity being endangered. This made them demand for an administrative measure to limit the same. The colonial rulers devised the Line system in 1916 and implemented it in 1920 by which a line was drawn in the districts under migratory pressure, where migrants were allowed to settle only in specified segregated areas. The system was attempted to be brought to an end by Premier Mohammad Saadulla under the garb of 'Grow More Food' and 'Land Development Scheme'. What initially started as an economic drive, no sooner turned into a communal one and unbridled Bengali Muslim migration came to be considered an unwelcome phenomenon. With the gradual growth of identity consciousness and the feel of saturation of resources among the emerging Assamese middle class that has supposed to have brought them into conflict with this group of new settlers. It surfaced with the floating of institutions like the *Asamiya Sangrakshini Sabha* and the *Asam Jatiya Mahasabha* under the leadership of Ambikagiri Raychaudhury since 1926, which saw the relative scarcity of land to be a potent factor for protest against migrants. The social tensions and evolution of social movements are the manifestation of the competition for state resources (Das 1998:307).

Prosenjit Chowdhury speaks of a process of 'Bengalisation' to have set into the Assamese society in the initial years of the British rule, wherein the tendency to regard the Bengali intelligentsia as a model of imitation in the spheres of language, literature, political ideas, reformative ideals became prominent (Chowdhury 1994:71). Gunabhiram Barua in his *Assam Bandhu* writes about the introduction of Bengali delicacies and dresses with the coming in of the Bengali Hindu migrants (Barua 1885:84). Even Lakshminath Bezbarooah spoke of the Assamese looking for upward social mobility towards the Bengalis and imitating their language, Bengali songs, Bengali hair cut, considering them to be 'positive reference' group. (Hazarika ed.1988: 19).

The gradual cultural influence of the Bengalis began to reflect upon the Assamese mind. With the introduction of English education, development of the communication network and the impact of the Bengali Renaissance there gradually evolved an Assamese middle class who instilled in a reasonable linguistic and cultural awareness in the Assamese mind. From a 'positive reference group' the Bengalis came to be considered a 'negative reference' group. With the essence of job-centred conflicts, and apprehension of the linguistic and cultural superiority of the Bengalis that pervade the Assamese mind, "the de-Bengalisation process came to be welcomed and encouraged by the colonial intellectuals of Assam" (Chowdhury1994:76). It was since that period despite support systems, the Assamese were averse to the admission of 'foreigners' into their country and in common parlance they identified foreigners as 'Bangals', a possible reference to those people who migrated into the Brahmaputra Valley from the plains of eastern Bengal. The dominant notion of the Assamese for the Bengalis were a group of people from the land located in the west of Assam and who were termed as 'foreigners' un-civilized and impure and by clear logic an 'un-welcome group in Assam'(Dutta From Borderland to Borders:105).

With migration of different communities into Assam in the colonial period itself, a perception about the 'bideshi' or foreigners began to take shape in the colonial documents. The Census Reports of 1901, 1911 and 1931 testify the existence of different varied groups of migrants. It provided a detailed statistics and a map depicting currents of migration into Assam. Large volumes of literature were published by literary luminaries like Jnananath Bora and Ambikagiri Roy Choudury stating the presence of migrants within the Assamese society and their dominance over the economy of Assam. In Assam, the Government of India Act 1935 introduced a significant amount of excitement in terms of provincial citizenship. The political dynamic in Assam centred round an intense conflict between the Assamese and Bengali speakers. Meanwhile, the Assam Domiciled and Settler's Association that was established in 1935 aimed to bring all Bengali speakers irrespective to the religion that they belong, into one fold. The urban Bengali Hindus urged for provincial citizenship (The Assam Tribune, 8th September,1939)

With the emergence of the nation-state of India and Pakistan in the post-partition period, the question of citizenship erupted again. The provisions of citizenship were adopted and came into force with the adoption of the constitution on 26th November,1949. Of these, the provisions drafted in Part II of the Constitution i.e Clause 5 to 8 that covered the Partition –induced migrants and clause 11 bestowed the plenary power on Parliament to decide on citizenship laws. The first law of Citizenship that evolved in post-independent India was the Citizenship Act of 1955 which defined five ways of conferring citizenship in India i.e by birth, by descent, by registration, by naturalization and by the incorporation of territory. The Citizenship Amendment Act of 1986

effectively gave de-facto amnesty to all those who had crossed the border into Assam in the quarter century following partition irrespective of whether they were Hindus or Muslims (Baruah 2014)

The vexed question of citizenship had always rocked the State of Assam. A debate of whom to recognise as citizens in the State had remained prime. The issue had also led to consequential protests and agitation in the State more primarily the Assam Movement to speak of. A deep seated antagonism in the state of Assam, led the government to design and develop an authentic record to untangle the crisis of citizenship. Under the aegis of the order of the Supreme court of the country, the then Assam government under Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi, began this vast exercise of 'drawing out the National register of Citizens (NRC). Hazarika(2018) mentions that there is an absence of 'political contestation in Assam over the NRC, and the approval it has among people across Assam, is symptomatic of the continuing appeal for identification of citizens'. NRC is a humongous bureaucratic exercise to identify and enumerate the citizens, updating of which depends on NRC of 1951 and any other valid documentation till 24th March 1971. With the NRC final list declared in August 2019, Assam became the residence to 19 lakh stateless people, depriving them of social, political and economic rights. This has led to a political imbroglio in the state, mostly intimidating the minorities, thereby creating an organised platform for injustices towards marginalised social groups of the state. These 19 lakh stateless people are not considered as citizens of India, and in absence of any bilateral treaty between Bangladesh and India about deportation, they are not considered citizens by Bangladesh. NRC thus created a new term of non-citizens to the discourse of citizenship in India. Their cases are being tried in the foreigners' tribunal and many of them incarcerated in undemocratic set-up called detention centres, often charged under an act like the IMDT(Illegal Migrant Determination(by Tribunals), that's no longer there

But till date the issue of Citizenship in Assam has remained unresolved. Multiple protests in the form of Assam Movement in 1979-85 to CAA protests in 2019 have swept through Assam. Unfortunately, the Bengali Hindu migrants have been at the brunt of the wrath of the Assamese middle class throughout. The middle class's apprehension is because of their competition with the migrants for resources. They had always been identified as 'bideshi', foreigners, outsiders. Simultaneously, the trauma and insecurity of this group of migrants persists.

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