



Politics of immigration, language policy and inter-ethnic conflict in Assam

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Abstract

Assam has been suffering from tensions and cleavages between different ethnic groups. The postcolonial Indian state's management of ethnicity in Assam has been problematic as Assam continues to experience bloody ethnic strife, ruthless insurgencies, and the deaths of civilians. In northeast India, there are indigenous-immigrant tension and clash, sons-of-soil movements, demands for affirmative action for the backward majority indigenous population, primacy of the indigenous language, culture and public symbols, deep-rooted identity issues intertwined with perceptions of socioeconomic domination and discrimination, and so on. Keeping in mind the above facts this paper tries to analyse the issue of immigration and language policy of Assam in the post-independent period which resulted inter-ethnic conflict in Assam. Further, it will try to understand the response of the federal as well as the provincial government to these issues.

Keywords: immigration, language, ethnicity, ethnic conflict

Introduction

In today's world ethnic conflict has become a "shortcut way" to discuss almost all violent confrontation between communities living in the same nation-state. While some of the current conflicts may have overt ethnic or cultural dimensions, the core issues are about gaining more power, land and other resources. There is no consensus on the concept of ethnicity and most common concept is that ethnicity is a modern phenomenon in the colonized South and the nation-building project of its successor postcolonial states and that its various manifestations, including conflict, are related to political power.^[1] Hence, "ethnic conflict" refers to a situation of tension with the potential for civil disorder and violence. Assam has been suffering from tensions and cleavages between different ethnic groups. The postcolonial Indian state's management of ethnicity in Assam has been problematic as Assam continues to experience bloody ethnic strife, ruthless insurgencies, and the deaths of civilians. The modern states, both at the province or federal level, is a critical participant in inter-ethnic affairs as governments reflect the distribution of power and prestige among ethnic communities as well as influence these relationships by the policies they enact and enforce. Moreover, the postcolonial Indian state, committed to upholding territorial integrity and nation-building, has tended to treat regional assertions as "subversive," most of which ironically came to be framed in language and symbols critical of Indian federalism. In north-East India, there are indigenous-immigrant tension and clash, son-of-soil movements, demands for affirmative action for the backward majority indigenous population, primacy of the indigenous language, culture and public symbols, deep-rooted identity issues intertwined with perceptions of socioeconomic domination and discrimination, and so on. Keeping in mind the above facts this paper tries to analyse the issue of immigration and language policy of Assam in the post-independent period which resulted Inter-ethnic conflict in Assam. Further, it will try to understand the

response of the federal as well as the provincial government to these issues and suggestions for solution.

History of Immigration and conflict in Assam

There had been a continuous flow of immigration into Assam ever since the British Occupation. In fact, in order to run the imperialist administration smoothly, clerks and officers familiar with the system of company administration were brought by the British from outside the province. Moreover they imported a large number of working hands to work in tea plantation, transport, road construction, oil field and coal mines. A certain number of other people also came within this flow to fill the various demands of colonial economic development.^[2] Since the late nineteenth century the Assamese middle class elements became unhappy with all these developments and felt anxiety for this unrestricted large-scale immigration. However, up to the end of nineteenth century, despite a conflict of interest between the elite of immigrant communities and the Assamese elite for jobs in the administration, their mutual relations had not as yet been embittered. But since the beginning of the last century, hatred and ill-feeling developed between them. This situation became more critical because of the penetration into Assam by the immigrants from Bengal, particularly from the district of Mymensingh. These immigrants came mainly to settle on agricultural land. For the first time, the Census Report of 1911 mentioned the movement of immigrants from Bengal to Assam. The immigration assumed alarming proportion by the twenties of the last century. The Assamese elite became increasingly concerned with this large-scale immigration which tended to threaten their distinct identity in their homeland by altering its demographic composition. The British Census Commissioner, C.S. Mullan, described this process of immigration as an 'invasion' of Mymensingh.^[3] In any case, it seems that the immigrant question, in its inception, was essentially an economic one, but since the inauguration of the provincial autonomy it had been given a communal

colouring because political power had come to be assessed on the numerical strength of different communities. Obviously, the imperialist power exploited the situation and successfully created a condition for a conflict between the Assamese and the immigrant communities. With the Muslim League's demand for Pakistan, the issue of immigration got highly politicized. The increase of Muslim population in the province gave an edge to the Muslim League to demand for inclusion of Assam in Jinnah's proposed East Pakistan. The Assamese upper caste elite were, however, convinced that the Muslim League Government in Assam under the leadership of Muhammad Saadulla was deliberately welcoming the Muslim element into the province with the introduction of 'Land Development Scheme'. This plan came very close to reality when according to the Cabinet Mission Plan, 1946, India was to be divided into three groups: A. B. C. sub-federations. This Plan was hatched to secure the advantages of a Pakistan for the Muslims without a partition of the country. However, in the long run the Assamese elite succeeded in getting the Cabinet Mission Plan dropped. Nevertheless, the proposed Grouping Plan deepened the Assamese fears about the existence of Assam and consequently it influenced the attitude of the Assamese elite to the question of 'Federalism'. After the partition of India in 1947, following which political boundaries changed and age-old tradition of immigration became 'illegal', stream of Hindu refugees flowed to Assam to escape communal violence. Mahatma Gandhi regarded them as 'guests' of the country. The 1951 census given the number of refugees in Assam as 274,455. ^[4] Amongst the state of India, Assam has got the largest proportion of persons born outside the state. Out of Assam's total population of 9,044,000 in 1951 as many of 1,344,000 or 14 percent were born outside Assam. But the way in which the refugee problem was dealt with by the Central Government created a considerable resentment in the minds of the Assamese elite. They felt that the economic and cultural existence of the Assamese people was being seriously menaced by the 'so called refugee problem' created to cover up the old question of immigration. In view of the gravity of situation and pleas from the Assamese elite, the Indian Parliament passed the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act, 1950, to discourage immigration from the then East Pakistan. Later on the prevention of Infiltration from Pakistan Plan, 1964 known as PIP Plan also worked as a check against infiltration, but due to some opposition within the Congress party it was stopped. ^[5] So infiltration precipitated in a vigorous manner. This flow of refugees was also seen during the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971 in which more than 12 million refugees poured into India. On March 19, 1972 the Indira-Mujib Treaty was signed and accordingly Bangladesh was agreed to accept the immigrants who had entered India after 25th March, 1971. Therefore, the immigrants who entered India prior to 25th March 1971 have become Indian. But it is regrettable that the Indian government did not identify the immigrants to execute the treaty; deportation is a far off matter. The illegal movement of people from Bangladesh to India continues. The issue has been one of the most complex and hotly debated issues between the two neighbours, and also within India. From the evidence examined so far, it appears that throughout the long period, particularly since the beginning of the last century, the Assamese elite had been in constant

fear and anxiety of being gradually dominated by the non-Assamese Indians, particularly the Bengalis, both culturally, economically and even politically. Secondly, the growing demand for Pakistan heightened the Assamese elite's nervous concern over their future political and cultural status. Unrestrained immigration from Bengal was increasingly being viewed as a calculated move to turn Assam into a Muslim majority province, so that she could qualify herself for inclusion into the East Pakistan. Even after the partition, these fears still persisted. The movement on 'foreign national' issue which started in 1979 grew out of an apprehension that the Assamese would be swamped politically, culturally and economically by the immigrants from outside, particularly Bangladesh and Nepal. With the Assam movement that started in 1979 the issue of Assam's demographic transformation as a result of immigration returned to the state's political agenda. It ruptured carefully nurtured ethnic coalitions that were at the foundation of political stability in the state, leading to a prolonged period of political turmoil. Because of the influx of huge number of foreigners to Assam and possible adverse impact of these influx in political, social and economic lives of the people of Assam, the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) started large scale agitation against the foreigners in 1979 with active participation of indigenous people in the movement and with co-operation of other sections of the population. In the month of April, 1979 the foreigners issue got its momentum in Assam when there was the need of holding parliamentary bye-election of Mangaldoi constituency. For the election voters' list was newly examined and in the process the names of many foreigners were found out from the voters' list and out of 70,000 suspected voters, 45,000 voters were declared foreigners by the court in Mangaldoi Parliamentary constituency. That manifested the situation of other constituencies in Assam. During this time Morarzi Desai Government resigned and the President N. Sanjiva Reddy ordered for new election, so the Election Commission was directed not to give up the name of voters from the voters' list as it was a time consuming process. Besides it was suggested to the Election Commission to examine the voters' list only after the completion of election. But AASU, who took the leading part in the anti foreigner movement, declared that 'holding of election cannot be allowed without the correction of voters' list'. The organization demanded the detection and deportation of foreigners before the election in the 14 Lok Sabha constituency of Assam. Under the Presidentship of Mr. Prafulla Kumar Mahanta and Mr. Bhrigu Kumar Phukon, General Secretary, AASU organized a mass rally in Guwahati on 6th November, 1979 to demand solution of foreigners' issue immediately. The All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP), Assam Sahitya Sabha (ASS), Asom Jatiyatabadi Dal (AJD) and Purbanchal Lok Parishad (PLP) offered complete co-operation to AASU in the foreigners issue. As a result week long satyagraha, demonstration, bandh and picketing in the oil industries for twenty four hours were taken up. Due to the movement the transportation of crude oil from Digboi, Guwahati, Bongaigaon and Barauni was stopped. The sentiment of the Assamese people became so high that the popular government of Assam collapsed one after another, the political parties were bifurcated, the educational institutions were closed continuously for several months, the Public Sector industries were closed and the election could not be

held in twelve parliamentary constituencies out of fourteen. [6] The Assam movement disrupted the functioning of the governmental institutions in Assam, including the 1980 parliamentary election and the Assembly election in 1983. The leadership of the movement declared established political parties to be 'irrelevant' to the problems of the state and successfully mobilized campaigns of non-recognition of elected state governments, arguing that they were elected on the basis of invalid electoral rolls that included the names of large numbers of illegal aliens. President's Rule had to be imposed intermittently as elected governments lost their majorities in the State Assembly. Since negotiations appeared unlikely to produce a settlement, the Indian government sought to reassert the legitimacy of the governmental institutions and attempted to cut into the popular base of the Assam movement by seeking to wean away ethnic subgroups that constitute weak links in the Assamese ethnic coalition. [7] These efforts, combined with the strains caused by the movement itself, repeatedly changed the ethnic alignments in the state. However, the political crisis was eventually resolved when the Indian government recognized the power capability of the movement and made important concessions to their demands. This once again altered the conditions of Assam's ethnic politics. The first phase of the Assam movement began with a mood of optimism about a negotiated settlement and ended with considerable pessimism about the prospects of a solution and signs of increasing fissures in the Assamese ethnic coalition. The movement began in the last days of the Janata period in 1979. The first phase began with festive and mostly peaceful protest actions, but with some reports of ethnic violence. Ethnic conflicts and signs of confrontation between the government and the movement began to show by the middle of 1980. The next phase marked a significant accentuation of these trends. With enthusiastic support for the demands of the movement by major sectors of Assamese intellectual and cultural life—for example, literary societies, cultural associations, newspapers, magazines, and school and college teachers associations, apart from the leadership role of the All Assam Students Union—the Assam movement had extremely broad support among the ethnic Assamese. The campaign, in which hundreds of thousands participated with displays of distinctive Assamese cultural and historical symbols, acquired the appearance of a statewide cultural festival. Individuals and organizations with influence among segments of the "plains tribals," a group that had lost significant amounts of cultivable land to East Bengali immigrants over time, and of tea plantation workers also supported the movement. There were, however, some distinguished ethnic Assamese intellectuals and political figures, mostly of the political left, who opposed to the movement. They complained of a suffocating intellectual atmosphere where there was little room for dissent. There were reports of terrorist attacks on opponents of the movement. The ethnic subgroups directly threatened by the demands of the movement were the East Bengali immigrants, both Hindu and Muslim. [8] There were reports of increasing violence against East Bengali immigrants in the atmosphere created by the movement, even though the violence was condemned by the sponsors of the movement. Initially the attitude of most East Bengali immigrants was to lie low, and there were few efforts to present an organized opposition to the Assam movement by groups directly

threatened by its demands. Immigrants from other states of India also felt insecure. The leaders of the movement had to do some careful conflict management to assuage the fears of some of these groups. Despite the support for the movement by important organizations of tea workers, there were reports of clashes between tea workers and student picketers attempting to close down tea plantations. The AASU responded by excluding tea plantations from picketing, and the assistance of tea workers' unions was sought in order to explain to the workers that the agitation was not directed against them. [9] By May 1980 ethnic subgroups directly threatened by the demands of the movement began to form organizations to oppose these demands. In May 1980, a new organization, the All Assam Minority Students' Union (AAMSU), which attempted to include both Muslim and Hindu East Bengali immigrant students, appeared on the scene to rival the AASU. While not disputing the seriousness of the problem of illegal immigration, the AAMSU demanded that all immigrants who came before 1971 be given citizenship status and that harassment against minorities be stopped. The AASU opposed the new organization, and in certain strong immigrant strongholds strike calls on days that AAMSU had called for protest demonstrations led to violent conflicts between AASU and AAMSU. Apart from ethnic violence, a growing number of terrorist attacks on state officials and state property began to be reported in Assam. By September 1980 the immigrant organizations had become a third force in the negotiations on the Assam movement's demands. The government invited AAMSU leaders to Delhi for consultation during the negotiations between the government and the movement leaders. The leader of the Assam Congress (I), Anwara Taimur, who was elected to the state Assembly from a heavily East Bengali immigrant constituency and was seen as a representative of immigrant interests, was also in Delhi during the negotiations. As the negotiations appeared less and less likely to produce an agreement, the movement leaders intensified their protest actions. The government attempted to raise the costs of participation in the movement by using more and more coercion in dealing with protesters and by taking disciplinary actions against state government officials who participated in the movement. The Assamese press that was sympathetic to the demands of the movement came under censorship. In November 1980 the Indian army was used to break the eleven-month-old oil blockade.

The inauguration of a Congress (I) government led by an Assamese Muslim, Anwara Taimur, in December 1980 marked a new phase in the Assam movement. Not unexpectedly, the movement leaders greeted the state government with a call for a general strike. The government, whom the leaders of the movement refused to "recognize" as legitimate, had to rule with maximum police protection and minimal public visibility. The Taimur government took action against ethnic Assamese government officials who were known sympathizers of the movement, including the arrest of one of the top-most police officials of the state. In order to use coercive measures against the movement, Taimur effectively had to transform the state bureaucracy. For instance, her personal secretariat, it was reported, had only Muslim gazetted officers or executives. [10] These measures accentuated the legitimacy crisis in the state, for the process appeared to be one of de-Assamization of the state bureaucracy and it reinforced the fear of Assamese minoritization, the loss of Assamese hegemony to

immigrants. The election of Taimur to the chief ministry of the state itself had ruptured the subtle rules on ethnic accommodation in Assam's politics. ^[11] In the months following the inauguration of the Taimur ministry, there was an increase in the incidence of violence. In April 1981, one of the state's highest-ranking civil servants, who was identified with measures to tighten discipline among state government employees, was killed in a terrorist bomb attack. There were signs of tensions in the Assamese ethnic coalition. However, there was little evidence of any significant erosion of the movement's support base in the ethnic Assamese areas of the Brahmaputra valley. State coercion was a double-edged device. While it was expected to increase the costs of participation in the movement, it also reinforced a sense of justice of the cause, while the erosion of influence of ethnic Assamese officials reinforced the fears of Assamese minoritization. The choice of Keshab Gogoi as chief minister in January 1982 was an attempt to limit the damage. Gogoi, an ethnic Assamese, was Ahom by caste, which was another potential weak link in the Assamese ethnic coalition. While his government survived for only two months, the period was characterized by a somewhat reduced level of coercive actions and the release of the senior ethnic Assamese police official arrested by the Taimur government. The President's Rule regime that was brought in after the collapse of the Gogoi government in March 1982 once again went about the task of cleansing the administration of officials in sympathy with the movement. There was increasing use of coercion. In view of the "presumed unreliability" of the state police forces, paramilitary forces were brought in from the center and from other states. The Republic Day celebration of January 26, 1983, which was boycotted by movement supporters, turned into a "blatant display of military muscle against its citizens." The twenty-third round of negotiations between the government and the movement leaders took place in December 1982 amid reports that the government was determined to hold elections in Assam by March 1983. The State Assembly election of February 1983 marked the breakdown of Assam's framework of ethnic accommodation and of political order. The election was a direct challenge of the central government to the Assam movement. The election was to be held on the basis of the electoral rolls prepared in 1979, which had precipitated the Assam movement. No attempt was made to revise the rolls to incorporate the points of agreement between the movement leaders and the government—that is, to remove the names of post-1971 immigrants from the rolls. Indeed, apart from sidestepping all the thorny questions of illegal aliens that had rocked the state for three years, the use of four-year-old electoral rolls was problematic since it did not include voters who had come of age during the preceding four years. The question in the election was not who would win, but whether there would be an election at all. The holding of the election became the focus of a contest between the Assam movement and the center. An election with a moderate to high turnout would have weakened the movement's claims about its representativeness and its power capability. The movement leaders, as expected, called for a boycott of the elections. They portrayed the election as Assam's "last struggle for survival." The East Bengali immigrants, on the other hand, had few alternatives but to display their appreciation of the center's support for their cause by participating in the voting in large numbers. The breakdown

of the framework of ethnic accommodation was complete. ^[12] Voter participation mostly followed a pattern predictable from the ethnic settlement patterns. In constituencies where Bengalis were predominant, the polling was high; in Assamese strongholds, it was low. The attitude to the election, however, did not vary only across the Assamese-Bengali divide. The developments of the preceding two years had led to fissures in the weak links of the Assamese ethnic coalition. Moreover, apart from the Congress (I), some opposition parties also contested the election. In areas where there were significant numbers of both pro-election and anti-election ethnic subgroups, violent confrontations took place. In a detailed investigative report, the Indian journalist Arun Shourie called the violence a "Hobbesian war of all against all": "They testified not so much to "communalism" as to the total breakdown of governance: in Nellie Lalung tribals killed Bengali Muslims, in Kokrajhar sub-division Boro Kacharis fought Bengali Hindus and Muslims; in Goreswar and Khairabari Boro Kacharis fought Bengali Hindus; in Gohpur Boros fought Assamese Hindus; in Dhemaji and Jonai Mishing tribals fought Bengali Hindus and Muslims; in Samaguri Muslims killed Hindus; in Dhaila and Thekrabari again Muslims killed Hindus; in Chaowlkhowa Chapori Assamese Hindus and Muslims together killed Bengali Muslims. And each community that was a victim in one place was a predator in another". ^[13] The pattern of violence reflected the total breakdown of order. If the violence did not follow neat ethnic cleavages, it is because of the oscillating and coalitional nature of ethnic projects in Assam. The violence took place along the weak links in ethnic coalitions. Most of the violence occurred as supporters of the election clashed with opponents. In so far as the attitude toward the election—which to many became Assam's "last struggle for survival"—defined the contours of ethnic conflict in Assam, the violence reflected the local variations in ethnic alignments. The violence took place partly because of inadequate intervention by the police. Even though there was no doubt in anyone's mind that the election would be violent, the holding of an election amidst the prevailing ethnic and political polarization was no ordinary law and order problem. The government prepared for the anticipated disruption and poll violence by mobilizing large contingents of military and police forces from the rest of the country. The estimated need for security personnel was so high that the election was staggered over three days to allow for the movement of security personnel. Furthermore, all intelligence warnings about potential violent ethnic conflicts in areas other than the polling stations themselves had to be ignored in order to concentrate security personnel at the polling stations. One of these was from a local police official who warned that "one thousand Assamese villagers are getting ready to attack" East Bengali immigrant villages "with deadly weapons." That warning, which anticipated the massacre in Nellie that was reported widely in the international press, was filed three days before the massacre. According to official figures, 1,383 men, women, and children were killed in that massacre. ^[14] The poll boycott was quite effective in the districts of the Brahmaputra Valley. Of Assam's 126 Assembly constituencies, only Congress (I) candidates contested and won unopposed in four constituencies. In 14 constituencies elections had to be cancelled because of the "total breakdown of law and administration." In some strong ethnic Assamese constituencies, the polling was as low as

0.38% (269 voters), 0.40% (360 voters), and 0.68% (440 voters).^[15] The election brought a new Congress (I) government headed by Hiteswar Saikia, an ethnic Assamese who is Ahom by caste. The choice of an Ahom as chief minister for the second consecutive time is significant since there was a widespread perception that the Assam movement had its strongest support among ethnic Assamese "upper" castes. The new government's strategy of dealing with the movement combined political maneuvering with the use of coercion. It sought to wean support away from the Assam movement by allocating governmental patronage to groups that constitute weak links in the Assamese ethnic coalition. The election violence had already strained the coalition. Ever since the election of Anwara Taimur as chief minister there had been some signs that sections of ethnic Assamese Muslims might have had second thoughts about their participation in the movement. The large number of Muslim victims in the election violence and the national and international press coverage of it as a case of Muslims being killed strained the Assamese Muslim attitude toward the movement. By May 1983 there was indication of a split in the AASU. At a secret conclave, several Muslim members of the AASU leadership issued an ultimatum to the AASU leadership demanding correction of a "pro-Hindu communal tilt." Their memorandum demanded a "firm definition" of a foreigner. The press gave some credit for the growing Hindu-Muslim rift in the ethnic Assamese coalition to the Saikia government. Rifts began to show in other weak links of the Assamese ethnic coalition as well. The election violence included some instances of conflict between ethnic Assamese opponents of the election and plains tribal supporters. In the following months important conferences of plains tribals made demands that emphasized their distinctiveness from the ethnic Assamese, demands that smacked of a rebellion from the Assamese coalition. These demands included recognition of Bodo as an associate official language, the adoption of the Roman script instead of the Assamese script for writing certain other tribal languages, and creation of autonomous districts and regions for plains tribals. The Saikia government probably played a significant role in these rifts: for instance, the government actively patronized the Bodo Sahitya Sabha and promoted it as a rival of the Assam Sahitya Sabha in plains tribal areas. The annual session of the organization was attended by most members of the Saikia cabinet. By contrast, the declining share of government resources and patronage forced the Assam Sahitya Sabha to reconsider its involvement in the Assam movement.^[16] The leadership of the movement had to guard against the growing divisions in the movement. The election violence forced the leadership to suspend the movement and concentrate attention on healing the rifts in the Assamese coalition. In January 1984 the AASU held a National Convention, which was attended by a number of prominent Assamese intellectuals as well as movement activists, in order to search for ways and means for "regeneration of the Assamese nationality and to provide a united socio-cultural as well as political platform." The emphasis on unity was recognition of the impact of the rifts. At the second AASU convention in December 1984, the need to adapt to the ethnic diversity of the state dominated the discussions. The convention formed a committee to complete the "process of political unification of the various ethnic groups of the Assamese people." There was discussion that stressed the need to include tea garden

workers, Indian Nepalis, the tribal communities, and "already assimilated religious minorities" and "like-minded Indians" in future protest actions.^[17]

After 18 months, negotiations between the government of India and the movement leaders were initiated once again in April 1984. An accord was signed between Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and leaders of the Assam movement on August 15, 1985, India's Independence Day. According to the accord, illegal aliens who entered the state between January 1966 and March 1971 will be disenfranchised for ten years and those who came after March 1971 will be deported. The state Assembly elected in 1983 was dissolved and fresh elections based on revised electoral roles took place in December 1985. An amendment to India's citizenship law that was enacted by the parliament in November 1985 stipulated that noncitizens who are found to have entered Assam between 1961 and 1971 will enjoy all rights of citizens except the right to vote for ten years. The AASU began to consider the formation of a new regional political party. Its second National Convention in December 1984 emphasized the need to bring together different ethnic subgroups in the Assamese ethnic coalition under a common political platform. After the signing of the accord, two new parties emerged: the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), formed by the student leaders of the Assam movement, and the United Minorities Front (UMF), formed by major East Bengali Hindu and Muslim politicians who had been members of the Congress (I). The process of organizing the Assamese people politically in a bid to capture political power of the state ultimately culminated in the formation of the AGP. It is ironical that after the full scale agitation against illegal immigrants (1979-1985) the Government had not only signed an Accord, but also enacted a law, called IMDT Act, to detect and deport them, but influx not only continued without hindrance, it actually increased. It is obvious that the timeframe of historic Assam Accord was made meaningless by the government. The descendents of earlier immigrants have become Indian and fresh immigration is still continued. In 1998, the then Governor of Assam, SK Sinha, studied the impact of illegal migration in Assam and in his report to the President of India, he observed: "Large scale illegal migration from East Pakistan/Bangladesh over several decades has been altering the demographic complexion of this State. It poses a grave threat both to the identity of the Assamese people and to our national security. Successive Governments at the Centre and in the State have not adequately met this challenge.... it is unfortunate that to this day after half-a-century of Independence; we have chosen to remain virtually oblivious to the grave danger to our national security arising from this unabated influx of illegal migrants".^[18]

Language as an issue of conflict in Assam

Language is a complex communicative symbol which is inextricably related to social activity and indispensable tool for all social existence. It is, however, not only the means of communication, but has also been an object of conflict between various groups. In most occasions, it has been used as an instrument for mobilising politics in the post-colonial democracy that operates in a multi-cultural plural society with acute economic unevenness. Thus, language has been an important political resource in India. Since independence, it has been assuming serious political dimensions leading to disturbances in the social, economic and political life of the

country. In post-independence period, the federating states in India were reorganized on linguistic basis in order to facilitate the diverse groups to develop their own language and culture. But the small linguistic groups began to feel the dominance of bigger groups over them. Therefore, the latter increasingly felt the need of asserting their linguistic rights in order to determine their distinct socio-cultural and even political existence. ^[19] After independence, the Assamese middle class elite became increasingly assertive of their socio-cultural and linguistic rights. Indeed, they intended to adopt certain measures to establish their language in its rightful place. As a part of this measure under the leadership of dominant section of the Assamese elite, the Government of Assam introduced the State Official Language Bill of 1960. No sooner had the Bill introduced, the linguistic minorities sharply reacted to it which subsequently led to the disturbance of peaceful situation causing acute law and order problems. The first challenge to the idea of Assamese as the state's official language came from the Bengali speakers who in 1951 made up 16.5% of Assam's population, including a large number of partition refugees from Sylhet as well as almost the entire population of Barak Valley. Their protests were soon followed by those of the indigenous tribes of Assam hills. The lack of fit between the model of a linguistically based state and the ethno-political reality of Assam led to severe intercommunity tension and even violence. ^[20] Riots broke out when the Assamese politicians tried to push through with the Official Language Bill of 1960, making Assamese the sole official language in Assam's two valleys. Riots on a lesser scale broke out again in 1972 when Gauhati and Dibrugarh university tried to introduce Assamese as the sole medium of instruction in Assam's colleges. In both instances, there were violent conflicts between the ethnic Assamese and Bengali Hindus, resulting in large-scale deaths, police action, and state repression. Both impasses were broken with a compromise: in 1960-61, it was decided that Assam would have not one but two state languages- Assamese in the Assamese dominated Brahmaputra Valley and Bengali in the Bengali dominated Barak Valley; the 1971 compromise allowed for a continuation of English teaching alongside Assamese in Assam's colleges. But while a truce was reached between the two major ethnic groups, Assam's rigid stand on the question of Assam being recognized as an "Assamese" state contributed to the restiveness of the indigenous tribes in the hill areas who raised, in some cases even violently demanded separation. ^[21] Over the years, four new states (Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh) were created out of Assam, but the Indian state's policy of breaking up Assam to end identity movements in the hills energized fresh movements for autonomy as well as separation in the northeast by newly politicized ethnic groups. The two most dangerous of South Asian insurgencies, those of the Assamese and the Bodos, were partly a result of this policy. Inept handling of the situation by the Indian state at the center, cross-border patronage, and access to sophisticated arms and weapons made Assam's graph of violence and civilian deaths rise. Thus, it appears that even after the formation of the Hill States, the problem of language never disappeared as Assam still remained linguistically diverse. In fact, the formation of Hill States inspired the other plain tribals of Assam to demand either separate or autonomous states. It seems that the medium movement of 1972, further expedited the sense of alienation

among various ethnic groups of Assam. Among the plain tribals the Bodos who are the aborigines of the Brahmaputra valley, became largely organized in a bid to maintain their distinct lingo-cultural identity. Besides the Bodos, the Karbis, the Mishings, the Tiwas, the Rabhas etc. were also not happy with what they called the 'linguistic chauvinism' of the Assamese. It is evident from the above discussion that when Assamese was imposed as the official language beyond the Brahmaputra valley, it was opposed in the hills and in the Barak valley. It facilitated the hill tribals to consolidate their ethnic consciousness. Even the tribals of the Brahmaputra valley who became almost bi-lingual, speaking both the Assamese and their own tribal language resented the imposition of Assamese language and they wanted to revive their own language. Indeed, their languages have become a tool for assertion of their distinct identity and opposing the Assamese hegemony in a multi-lingual and multi-ethnic state. In any case, the introduction of Assamese as the state language and medium of instruction created hectic political activities coupled with great deal of misplaced enthusiasm. The language issue appears to have been utilized as a 'pawn in the game of power politics' in Assam. The tendency throughout post-colonial Assam indicates that language agitation has predominantly been of middle class orientation. Disgruntled political leaders are found to be associated with the movements. In fact, language movements were organized by the reactionary and chauvinistic elements of the Assamese. On the other hand, the working class and peasantry have been a passive factor in these agitations. ^[22] Thus it appears that the issue of language has emerged as one of the most intransigent problems in post-independent Assam. It has been playing a unifying as well as a divisive force. More importantly, the language question has been assuming a crucial role in the shaping of political process of Assam. Therefore, proper recognition of the urge for self expression of different ethnic groups of the state is the need of the hour, as language being an important constituent of nationality and culture.

Conclusion

This study shows that the self-identity movement of the Assamese people is the result of the growing apprehension on the part of the Assamese people that they would be swamped by the continuous flow of the immigrants into Assam ever since the colonial rule. The inflow of the immigrants had disturbed the socio-economic structure of Assam, thereby threatening their socio-cultural identity and economic structure. Thus, the 'Assamese nationalism' began to take firm roots and the Assamese middle class undertook the task of strengthening 'self-consciousness' among the people with the hope that their mobilization might transform it into a widespread movement to achieve the goals of socio-economic, political and cultural significance. The language movement, medium movement and anti-foreigner movement were directed towards the realization of such goals. Although, these movements were mainly spear-headed in the name of AASU, the leadership of the movement was in the hands of the middle class leadership. These issues and movements had worked as one of the important cause of inter-ethnic conflict in post-independent Assam.

Both the Indian and the Assam state governments are severely discredited over mismanagement of the entire post-

colonial conflict situation and there is a serious crisis of governance. Much of the human tragedy in the northeastern region may be said to have stemmed from the center's initial inability to comprehend the complex relationships and equations that mark the different nationalities that comprise the northeastern mosaic. The Indian state has continued to treat the northeast within the framework of national security, considered all sub-national assertions as anti-national, used soft political compromises where it worked and in other cases gone for outright military options.^[23] The Indian state, in breaking up the original state of Assam into five separate states following identity assertions, has in fact legitimized the politics of homeland by the newly latterly politicized tribes such as the Bodos, Karbis, Tiwas, etc. Such precedence has made the prospects of a politics of accommodation almost impossible in Assam as the groups would not settle for anything less. Besides, the fear of losing identity from 'unbridled' illegal immigration from Bangladesh, policy of socio-economic discrimination, underdevelopment etc. are the key issues of widespread resentment and uprising amongst the indigenous groups of Assam i.e. Tai Ahoms, Morans, Muttacks, Tea-Tribes, Koch-Rajbonshis etc. in late nineties of the last century.

To solve these problems effective immigration policy and proper implementation, privilege and protection of indigenous people's rights on land and full regional autonomy should be provided to Assam as well as the other northeastern states of India. In order to safeguard the identity and existence of indigenous and ethnic groups and to solve inter-ethnic conflict, the federal administrative framework should be used in Assam.

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