

Contextualizing the Ethnic issues in Assam with reference to Bangladeshi Migration

Pallavi deka

Abstract-The paper is an attempt to analyse the ethnic issues in Assam in the context of the human migration that has been occurring across the border from Bangladesh. In recent years there have been deep rooted anguish and wide range of conflictual situations in many parts of Assam based on migration issue. The arguments like internal security crisis, danger to the identity of Assam as an integral part of India and threat to the unique identity of the state are critically explored in the paper. The fact that 'Assamese' identity has never been a homogenous one and migration has been a persistent feature of the region cannot be undermined. Hence the paper argues that the problem that Assam faces today is not ethnic in actual sense but much beyond that. Political crisis of the caste Hindu ruling class has an agenda behind this manufacturing due to increasing number, consciousness and organisation of the among the Muslim population in the state.

Key Words: Bangladeshi Migration, Assam .

Introduction

In the year 1980, there was a series of publication of epoch making articles in Economic and Political Weekly revolving around the question of 'Assamese' nationalism resulting from the anti immigration sentiments. The historic Assam Movement has now become a matter of past, but the intellectual debate that took place in the heydays of the movement did not die down. The article 'Little Nationalism turned Chauvinist' by Amalendu Guha brought much deliberations in the EPW special edition and that discussion still persist in terms of the continued immigration from Bangladesh. However the question still looms large in regard to whether little nationalism has turned into big communalism in the present context of national political discourse in India.

Migration studies have remained, by and large, the concern of demography and economics. However there is an intellectual engagement going on in the modern period if there is a causal relationship between immigration pressure and aggressive nationalism. One view sets that it is because of the migrated people that there is rising

crisis of identity of the indigenous people because of which nationalism become extreme and this causes a genuine hate campaign towards the migrants as they are conceived as invaders of a 'solid identity' of the indigenous population. There is a counter view towards this perspective, which is that, the sources of animosity towards foreigners and immigrants lie within the internal problems of a society that exist without, and that have existed prior to, the presence of foreigners and irrespective of the presence of trans-national migration process. The aggression that seeks out the foreigner as scapegoat readily originates from the resentments among those who are endangered by marginalization.

Historical Over-view

If we go into the history of ethno-religious events in modern Assam, then the picture becomes much clear. Whole paranoid regarding migration of people from outside the state has to be looked upon from the angle of how spirit of nationalism was nurtured in this part. India, generally held up as a successful model of 'nation building' in a multi ethnic polity. Even though the rise of Hindu nationalism in recent years may have raised

Pallavi Deka is currently teaching in the Department of Political Science in Delhi College of Arts and Commerce, Delhi University. She hails from the state of Assam and her area of research interest is the north-eastern region of India and the Eastern neighbouring countries.

doubts in certain quarters about the future religious tolerance, “ethnic” or what has been called “sub national” dissent in India is seen as being well managed (Baruah: 1999: xi). The issue of national though centered mainly on language, but in recent times it has taken more a religious stance.

The concept of ultra nationalism on religious terms though new in the state, its genesis could be found in the initial period of reaction to the immigration of East Bengali Muslim peasants. The anti partition struggle was in full swing in Bengal and the Surma Valley in first decade of the 20th century. The prospect of Muslims out-numbering the Bengali Hindus in the new province had its appeal to the former. Thus Hindu and Muslim identity became strong in the Valley. In 1940's the demand for the abolition of the Line System had converged on the demand for a six-province Pakistan that would include Assam. In January 1946, Province's Muslim electorate stood behind this demand. Under these circumstances the Bordoloi government's routine measure to evict thousands of immigrant squatters from grazing and forest reserves, looked like a counter measure to curb the League, had to be stopped.

The communal feeling was running high, particularly since the observation of Direct Action Day. There was a minor communal clash in Sylhet. The district magistrate of Darrang felt in November that in many areas “the eviction operation would require strong military aid not only to give protection to the officers but also to protect Assamese villages....against retaliation” (S.N. Maitra, District Magistrate to the Divisional Commissioner, ii November 1946). The League politics provided an opportunity to the chauvinistic influence of Ambikagiri Raychaudhury to thrive. Raychaudhury's call for the organization of two lacs strong Assamese volunteers styled Assam Atmarakshini Bahini to resist further immigration. With independence of India and with the recognition of Assamese as the official language and medium language all these issues went to the back burner for sometime. But with the starting of the Assam Movement the Communal sentiments again flared up in Assam.

The 'law and order situation' became extremely unpredictable with the Assam Police and the state administration lending unconcealed support to the movement. Violence erupted in Dibrugarh and Tinsukia, where Bengali minority came under attack.

At this juncture the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak element in the movement tried to divert the tension into anti Muslim channels and nearly succeeded. Since the youths in the movement were not given clear instructions as to the procedures for detection and expulsion of foreigners, since there was no strict discipline and control at the local level, and since extremist among the regional groups made a habit of coercive fascist practices, incidents of violence and intimidation were bound to increase. A river boat carrying 'Bangladeshis' to the paper mill of Jogighopa was seized and helpless members of the Muslim crew were butchered near Sualkuchi (Gohain: 1980:418-20). The horrors of Nallie massacre has been already in discussion in mainstream academia and political realm.

The political leadership of the Bengali Muslim community skilfully insulated the influx issue from the language politics that dominated the scene by getting that community to return Assamese as their mother tongue. However things have greatly changed as continuous alienation have made, what is called forced attempts of amalgamation with the Hindu Assamese society loose, on the part of immigrant Muslim community in India. This is further strengthened by the similar trends among all 'other' communities in Assam.

Theorizing the perspective

In its new sense of “citizenship in a civil society,” this post-ethno-national “nationality” is conceived mainly as a result of a continuous identification with a common *res publica*, whereby the idea of national citizenship rests on the conscious will of individuals and is directed towards the future, not determined by the past and dependent on the ties of genetic descent. This is a completely left wing, rigorously egalitarian, political view to three other positions—the ethno-nationalist (right wing), nation-state

(conservative), and multiculturalist (liberal) (Fizalkowski: 1993:850-869). Thus this would be a defensive reaction to accept that there is an inseparable link between increasing immigration pressure and aggressive nationalism. The main cause of aggressive nationalism are rooted, on one hand, in the internal aspect of the domestic society and the problems of deficient social integration and, on the other hand, in an uncertain collective identity within the domestic society that remains unresolved irrespective of the immigration flow.

When we take this changed notion of citizenship in terms of Assam, the question still comes that by virtue of conscious will of the individual, if the Muslims coming from Bangladesh get the citizenship in Assam, then what may be the consequences. The reply may be simplified to the extent that Muslims may become majority to dominate in the political matters. So the fear that soon Assam will become a part of Bangladesh, which is expressed in the common realm even by the intellectual community in Assam, gets defeated because no one wants themselves to be living in Assam with a Bangladeshi citizenship. Hence the main problem is the fear of loss of political power by the Hindu elite Assamese section which has been enjoying that power since long by denying the lawful rights of the tribes of Assam (which is now accepted by most sections due to the alienation of all tribal community to the 'Assamese' identity). So the basis of the insecurity seems more of communal than any other sentiments.

Here the other view of challenge to a 'solid identity' in case of Assam becomes obsolete because today it has been questioned from all angles. It is hard to believe that the tribal communities will come united with the upper class Hindu Assamese in fight against illegal intruders; so the ruling Assamese elite takes the smallest pretext to provoke the tribal communities against the outsiders. The easiest way is to bring out the issue of land grabbing by the foreigners. It is a concern that due to population increase, by whichever way- natural or through internal as well as external migration, there has been encroachment of agricultural

lands and forestry etc. But it is an issue of broader texture because aspects of population increase, scarce resources and misplaced priorities of the government need to be critically examined here. But in case of Assam, the only concentration is that the foreigners are grabbing the land holdings of the tribal population of Assam and many stray to serious incidents of tussles are happening including some major conflicts till today.

The ideology of indigeneness has had profound effects on the attitude towards the immigration issue in Assam and on the pattern of socio- political and economic activities in the state. Concern over becoming a minority has also been a central issue in India's north-eastern state of Assam, where there has been a long history of immigration from the neighboring Bengali-speaking region. The nationalist movement that developed in Assam in the end of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century was directed against the Bengali settlers as well as against the British. So the immigration issue gave a base to root the predominance of the Assamese, the 'sons of the soil' or the 'Bhumiputra' concept was strengthened. The six years long Assam movement further consolidated the hatred toward the migrants and stabilized the extreme nationalism. However, as has been said it is not only because of the Bangladeshi migrants that the nationalistic sentiments arose in Assam. In fact these people were merely a part of the whole conspiracy of the Assamese elite who try to consolidate their position by continuously searching for an 'other'-in each stage of history (Guha: 1974:348-365). Thus Assam proves itself to be laboratory test to discuss about the relation between migration and the rise of aggressive nationalistic sentiments.

Assamese language and culture has and would never been the asset of any particular community. The way how the 'immigrant' Brahmins came from Banga, Orissa, Bihar, and 'immigrant' Kayasth came from Kanauj and Gaud to become a part of Assamese community; likewise the 'immigrant' Muslims who came from East Bengal/ East Pakistan has accepted the Assamese language and culture to become a part and parcel of Assamese nationality. Therefore the

Assamese society should accept these people as 'Assamese' without any doubts and narrowness in mind. Instead of doing that if this community is ridiculed and referred to as 'miyas', outsiders, doubtful Bangladeshis for long, then in spite of coming closer, the possibility of their going away from the Assamese national life can not be negated. Taking this possibility as a challenge, there is every reason to take opposite steps against such mentalities (Hussain: 1997:30-31). In the vastly changed demographic reality of Assam, the Assamese were now dependent on some bargaining with the other communities even to realise the dream of a linguistically defined Assamese homeland (Baruah: 1980:543-545). The “ethnic Assamese” can be distinguished from Assam's many “immigrant” communities and the tribal communities—the later two, in recent years, less likely to be sympathizer with Assamese sub nationalism. The Bodo activists, for instance are seeking a division of Assam in half and a separate Bodo homeland. Many other plain tribal have also laid down similar concerns. Hence the concept of nationalism in Assam which once was dominated by cultural and linguistic issues now has shifted more to religion targeting mainly to the non-Hindus in general and Muslims in particular.

Conclusion

The fact that the rightists forces in Assam has got the message from these communities very clearly that it is not possible to construct a broader Assamese nationality on the basis of language which is basically a Indo-Aryan construct. So they have shifted the whole debate to the danger towards Hindu religion from the Muslim invasion from outside and hence all social and political happenings in Assam are pointing towards this fact. There can be no better example than the alliance between AGP and BJP in 2009 Parliamentary election in the state. The use of logo of AASU by the ABVP in their campaign (Chalo Chicken Neck Campaign) and without a word against it by the former is a clear message of this fact. In the civil society and media, no much debate is drawn toward both these incidents shows the larger acceptability in the society towards this shift.

The far sightedness of the present

situation depicts two polled possibilities. One, as followers of Hindu culture and religion, in broad sense, all the communities in Assam (including the plain tribal and non-tribal) will ally themselves against the Muslim communities (both Assamese Muslims as well as immigrant Muslims). Secondly, the aggrieved communities of Assam, that is, the tribal communities, who are historically exploited by the caste Hindu Assamese to remain in power, will form alliance with the Muslims to outnumber them. The second possibility though can not be negated in long terms, but recent future seems closer to the first possibility because of the increasing fascist propaganda in the country and Assam coming into this fold very fast.

End notes

1 There is also a debate on who are Assamese as many tribal communities in Assam are questioning this term as a new discourse has come that using of this term indicate subordination of the tribal existence by upper caste Hindus

2 Someone who can be shown as not belonging to one's faith or nationhood

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