

Marginalised Ethnicity of the Bengalis in Assam: Facing Identity Crisis and Exclusion in Own Land.

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Abstract

The Bengalis in Assam have been negotiating marginalization since partition. Coinage of the tags ‘migrants’, ‘immigrants’, ‘illegal immigrants’ with their identity has only resulted in exclusion from their birth-rights vis-à-vis has resulted in shrinking space in the literary and cultural arena of the State. The paper reviews the historical presence of Bengali-speakers in the land presently identified as Assam State, the rich heritage and cultivation of Bengali literature & culture in Assam and the threat faced out of the myopic approach of linguistic chauvinism based on regionalism. The paper explores the prevailing situation of landlessness (and Statelessness thereby) faced by the largest linguistic minority group in Assam, starting from partition to the formulation of Assam Accord up to the initiatives towards implementation of the clauses therein.

Introduction:

“*Assam: Raat Koto Holo?* (অসম: ৰাত কত হল?)” – is the title of a post-editorial article written by Dr. Tapadhir Bhattacharjee (DainikAajkaal, 11 July 2018)¹. The article picturizes the present environment of disbelief, utter helpless situation and threat of disfranchisement experienced by the largest linguistic minority group, the Bengalis in Assam. The similar state of affairs has been prevailing in the state since independence, or more correctly since partition. Sylhet referendum and subsequent partition of Sylhet has only brought misfortune to the Bengalis who have decided to stay in the truncated part of three-and-half *thanas* of Sylhet annexed to India consequent upon partition. Since then, the perils of partition and subsequent attempts to transform Assam into a unilingual State have been haunting the Bengalis of Assam; since then, the idea of construction of Nation-province of ethnic Assam has flourished day by day. The shrinking horizon of ethnicity of Bengalis has only resulted in fear of marginalization. The solitary approach towards identity construction of the largest linguistic group has only erupted in the environment of hate, disbelief and conflict among different

linguistic groups of Assam. But history says the region Assam has never been a unilingual province.

Marginalization or being marginalized in a society is a psychological experience that affects millions of people all over the world⁹. The marginalized people hardly have control over their own lives and resources available to them in a society. They are prevented from participating and contributing socially, culturally, economically, politically, etc. in the development of the society and in turn leading them to be more isolated. The marginalized people are socially, economically, politically and legally ignored, neglected or even excluded from the mainstream of participation in the social life. Going by the term, Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines marginalization as a *“means to relegate (individual or groups) to an unimportant or powerless position within a society or group.”* The Encyclopedia of Public health describes marginalization as one being *“placed in the margins, and thus excluded from the privilege and power found at the center.”* David D. Laitin observes that, marginality is so painstakingly humiliating, for overall *“well-being, for human dignity, as well as for physical security. Marginal peoples can always be identified by members of dominant society, and will face irrevocable discrimination.”*

Marginalization can be broadly classified as societal and spatial. Societal marginalization deals with the broad canvas of human dimensions that deal with human population, religion, culture and social stratification like caste, class, ethnicity, gender, etc. Societal marginalization studies the factors responsible for exclusion, social inequality and social injustice. Societal marginalization is imposed by the powerful on the powerless people and is done for the vested interest of an individual or a group. Societal marginalization thus directly or indirectly affects the growth and development of an individual or group. Spatial marginalization is concerned with geographical infrastructure - geographical remoteness of an area thus keeping it away from the benefits of mainstream resources.

The journey of Bengalis in Assam towards quest for identity is full of hardships, facing both societal and spatial marginalization. Although, history proves that Bengalis have been residing in Assam since time immemorial, it is their homeland. The very consciousness of the marginalized status of the Bengalis in Assam have given them or forced them to look towards themselves. This awareness has resulted in an identity crisis. Pavlenko and Blackledge rightly said *“languages may not only be ‘markers of identity’ but also sites of resistance, empowerment, solidarity and discrimination.”* The position of Bengalis in Assam is like that of an ‘outsider’ though they are very much

‘insider’. It is quite obvious when an individual or group find themselves in an unfortunate position in a society where they find it difficult to deal with various matters efficiently. There emerges the question of identity.

The History of Demography:

The modern Assamese Identity, most sought after at present date, has the foundation of fusion and conquest began at the days of Sukapha, the first Ahom King, in early thirteenth century. The expansion of Ahom kingdom in Brahmaputra valley at the cost of other linguistic groups like Bodo, Chutiya, Chachari, Maran, Koch has only resulted in transformation of Ahom Identity to Assamese Identity. The neo-Vaishnavite spiritual spread in forming an assimilative identity has only resulted in the boost for one and only one Assamese Identity in Brahmaputra Valley. However, this expansion of Assamese Identity did not percolate across Barak Valley, which has always been Bengali-dominated ushered to preserve the Bengali culture and ethnicity.

Not going too far down the history, after the Treaty of Yandabo (1826) when Assam was under Bengal Province, there has been dominance of Bengalis in Assam region in administrative front, Bengali being the official language of Assam region from 1835 to 1872. In 1874, Assam province was formed taking Sylhet from Dhaka division and Goalpara from Rongpur division of Bengal province². Due to this expansion, Assam has boosted larger geographical territory and reliable economic viability. At that time too Bengalis were the largest linguistic community of Assam province due to annexation of Sylhet and Goalpara. As per 1931 census, the Assamese speaking population in Assam province was 19,82,515 as compared to 39,54,035 of Bengali population. The scenario changed after partition, at the wake of bifurcation of Sylhet through *Radcliffe Award* when Bengali population of Assam reduced by more than 20 lakhs. As a result, the number of Assamese speaking and Bengali speaking people became equal in Assam. Over and above this, strangely enough the Assamese population in Assam has increased geometrically within few years of partition as reflected in 1951 census. In that census report, the Assamese population was reported as 49,13,929 as compared to 14,47,000 of Bengali population. This implies a rise of Assamese population of 150 percent over a period of twenty years. The then Superintendent of Census operations in Assam *R.B. Bhagaiwala* termed this as *Biological Miracle*. In his report he stated³:

‘There is a striking increase in the percentage of people who speak Assamese in 1951 (56.7) over those of 1931, which was only 31.4 per cent; there is an equally striking

decrease in the percentage of people speaking Bengali in 1951 which is only 16.5 against 26.8 per cent in 1931. With the solitary exception of Assamese, every language or language group in Assam shows a decline in the percentage of people speaking the same. All this decline has gone to swell the percentage of the people speaking Assamese in 1951. The figures do not fail to reflect the aggressive linguistic nationalism now prevailing in Assam, coupled with the desire of many persons among the Muslims as well as tea garden labour immigrants to adopt Assamese as their mother tongue in the state of their adoption. It is not unlikely that some amongst the persons who have returned their mother tongue as Assamese had done so from devious motives, even though their knowledge of Assamese may not amount to much' (Census of India, 1951, vol. XII, Part 1-A, pp. 413-14).

More surprisingly, in the next twenty years, the Assamese population in Assam has again taken another quantum leap of 150 percent. As per the census of 1971, the Assamese population has increased to 89,04,917. From 1931 census to 1971 census, in a time span of only forty years, the percentage rise of Assamese population in Assam region has been 350 percent, whereas that for Bengali population is 50 percent only. If we look at the percentage of Bengali population in Assam after partition, it would be evident that the number remained almost steady with only a nominal rise of 7 percent over a period of 60 years (from 1951 to 2011)^{4, 10}.

1951 - 21.2%

1961 – 18.5%

1971 – 19.7%

1991 – 21.7%

2001 – 27.5%

2011 - 28.91%

The same picture prevails in Barak Valley region of the State where the percentage of Bengali population was 77.1 percent in 1951 which has increased up to around 80 percent in 2001. However, based on sheer myth, an environment has been created in and around the state regarding huge rise of Bengali population in Assam due to infiltration. It cannot be negated that there has been infiltration in Assam from nearby States and bordering Countries. But this feature is not just that unique for Assam. Migration is a general feature of the world population. In India, as per census 2001, about 307 million persons have been reported as migration by place of birth. Out of them about 259 million (84.2%), migrated from one part of the state to another, i.e., from one village or town to another village or town. 42 million (2%) from outside the

country. Aggressive linguistic nationalism has been attempting to denounce the existence of Bengali populace in Assam as its original inhabitants, especially in Brahmaputra Valley. The decade long *Bongal Kheda* attempts is a clear and straight example of aggressive linguistic chauvinism which has turned into violent anti-Bengali movement in 1960s. Even the linguistic rights of the Bengalis have been attempted to be curtailed several times, in 1960 through Official Language Act, in 1986 through SEBA circular. This has been continuing till date with resistance to protect linguistic rights coming mainly from Bengali-majority Barak Valley region of southern Assam. Barak Valley has sacrificed their beloved sons and daughters in 1960-61 and in 1986 through *Bhasha Andolon* for reclaiming their linguistic rights. But then the situation in other parts of Assam has also been very disheartening – Assam has witnessed Nellie massacre in 1983. The pronouncement of Assam Accord on 15 August 1985 has given a big boost to the linguistic chauvinist groups of Assam. However, the Accord has posed to be a ‘Damocles Sword’ for the linguistic minority Bengalis in Assam.

The ‘Famous and Infamous’ Assam Accord and its Fallout:

The Assam Accord is not an act of the parliament. It is a tripartite agreement between Central Government, State Government and students’ organization AASU (15 August 1985) at the wake of the movement for protecting linguistic rights of Assamese community and against ‘illegal migration’ in Assam. Since 1985 till date this Act has posed to be a continuous threat towards multi-cultural identity of Assam, which has always been a multi-lingual, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious region of North East region. Though having no legal status as such, the Clauses therein have acquired or would presumably acquire legal status by part. The Clause 5 of Assam Accord has been subsequently included in the Citizenship Act of 1955 as Clause 6(A) with cut-off date for citizenship as 24 March 1971. On the basis of this, the NRC updating process in Assam has been executed. The process of NRC-update process, which should be for giving the citizenship rights to the people of the Indian state, has appeared to many as a measure for exclusion. More than 19 lakhs of people are excluded which are all from religious and linguistic minority Bengalis of Assam.

With the dark fate of 19 lakhs of NRC-out people, the initiative of Central and State Government towards implementation of Clause 6 of Assam Accord has put the Bengalis of Assam to another situation of utter marginalization. The Clause 6 of the Accord vows to extend constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards, as may be appropriate, to protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social, linguistic

identity and heritage of the Assamese people. The term 'Assamese People' has yet to be defined and it is not clear whether it includes non-Assamese speakers, that is, linguistic groups other than Assamese. Without ascertaining who would come under the purview of this 'Assamese people', the Central Government has constituted a high-level committee headed by retired judge Sri B. K. Sarma for putting forward suggestions for implementation of Clause 6 of Assam Accord through interaction with the stake-holders. Going one step forward, the committee has coined the term 'Indigenous people' as for 'Assamese people' in its notification. This has raised eyebrows of the linguistic minorities of Assam. The term 'indigenous people' appears more detrimental for the Bengalis for the obvious reason, whose meaning and sphere of influence is also not finalized. Although many attempts have been taken in recent past by the Assam Government in that direction, but with no proper outcome. Furthermore, the points of references cited in the notification of the B. K. Sarma Committee, two clauses are strikingly dangerous – one for reservation of seats in parliament, Assam Legislative Assembly and local bodies for indigenous people of Assam and the second one is reservation in employment. The committee is going to submit its report within a short period of time and given the present situation which of course prevailing persistently since partition, there is not so much ray of hope for Bengalis to be joyous on the ground of identity and ethnicity. Needless to say, the spirit of the Clause 6 of the Assam Accord has been simply to reassure and reiterate that the Nation fully recognizes its responsibility for ensuring the Assamese people the safely of their Language and Culture, but certainly not in exclusion of other linguistic groups, in that it would be in violation of the democratic and constitutional rights of other linguistic groups of the State. The apprehension of discrimination is reflected in the formation of the said twelve-member high-level committee where there is not a single member from the largest linguistic minority group of the State. This is sheer disregard of the demography and legitimate rights of all the citizens of Assam. Here, it is worthwhile to state that any attempt to provide benefit to a particular linguistic group at the cost of rights of the others would only tell upon the existing social-texture of the State.

The Perils of Marginalization and Statelessness:

It is said that the marginalized are rejected, subjugated and ignored by the ones in power. Power is a major factor for social inequality or marginalization and deals with both dominance and subordination. According to Talcott Parsons "power is a positive

social phenomenon, [a] capacity for achieving goals in social system [as well as] power is negative phenomena which prevent others from their wishful act at will". Also "*power is not a zero-sum phenomenon - if one has more power, the other necessarily has less power.*"

Since 1997, after intensive summary revision of Electoral Rolls by Election Commission of India, many are sent to Detention Camps in Assam in the name of Doubtful elector (D Voter), where many died for the reasons which should make every sensible citizen of the state ashamed. As per reports published in newspapers, the total death toll since the NRC process has begun is around 27 at date. Many poor people incapable to defend themselves legally have been staying in detention camps for years without any ray of hope for proper justice. It is to be mentioned here that the 'conviction-rate' of 'illegal migrants' out of all these D-voters is very low, less than 10 percent.

Couple of years back, a team of Human Right Activists led by Harsh Mander visited Assam (January 22 to 24, 2018) to have a grasp on alleged violation of human rights in the name of abrupt identification of D-voters. The team after scrutinizing the situation has expressed discontent on severe violation of human rights in the detention camps in their report submitted to National Human Rights Commission. But, none the less, Assam is now erecting the largest Detention Camp at Matia in Goalpara, 129 km from Guwahati, and will be able to house 3,000 inmates of 'illegal migrants'.

The question of landlessness, i.e., statelessness⁸ is becoming more and more prominent day by day in Assam. This picture is very painfully reflected in the short play '*Asraf Ali-r Swadesh*' written by Molay Kanti Dey where a village man feels the utter wrath of statelessness standing in the no-man's-land⁵.

Partition is Still Alive in Assam:

Swayam Prakash in his famous short story '*Partition*' lamented – '*It's (Partition) not over yet. It's happening – each moment, each hour!*' In Assam this is dangerously visible. Very recently the State Government has released 75 crore rupees for various organizations belonging to 22 linguistic groups for their literary and cultural development but surprisingly none of the organization is a Bengali organization. Sujit Choudhury in his article '*A God-sent opportunity?*'³ states – "*The problem of Assam is a vexed one and there is no tailor-made solution for its resolution. Some believe that once the identifiable foreigners are expelled, the agitation will fizzle out. They miss the basic point that a foreigner in the legal sense and a foreigner in Assamese perception*

are not the same and expulsion of the former will serve the objective of the agitators only marginally. Even if we think of an extreme solution of reserving Assam to the Assamese speakers alone, the Assamese mind will still be haunted by an apprehension of a different variety.” The narrative is righteous in that Assam cannot now strive for forming unilingual identity, after a long evolution and formation of multi-lingual social base.

Assam accord has emanated from the politics of identity and politics of power and control. The widening of multi-ethnic Assamese social base during colonial and post-colonial era has only resulted in making ethnic Assamese as only one of the numerous ethno-linguistic groups of Assam. On historical, geographical and demographic perspective, it can be said that ‘Assam’ is a misnomer.

The essence of *jus soli* and *jus sanguinis* appears many times to be frustrated in Assam when *bona fide* citizens are sent to detention camps and kept there for indefinite time, when in the name of NRC updating people are harassed so much so that they choose to commit suicide. ‘Exclusion’ becomes visibly prominent then. The attempts of such ‘exclusions’ of indigenously existing ethnic group would only result in disintegration of its multilingual and multicultural social texture. This would also pose threat to the economic and political viability of the present State. Immigrant Bengalis who came immediately after partition following Nehru-Liaquat Pact were in search of lebensraum and they in return have contributed to the economic security of the state. Owing to naturalized assimilation, they are claimants of citizenship by naturalization⁶. The attempts towards making Assam a nation-province during 1950s to 1960s has only resulted in discontent, conflict and cleavage among various ethnic groups. The State Reorganization Commission (SRC) in its report submitted in 1955 has identified Assam as a ‘multi-linguistic province and opined that Assamese linguistic people cannot demand for any particular facility and Assamese language cannot be considered as the primary language of the province’⁷.

Conclusion:

The multi-lingual character of Assam and its multi-culturalism cannot be denounced for meeting the ambition of a group of chauvinists. Bengalis in Assam, though minority demographically, never have had the feeling of minority. This is due to the very inherent inclusive nature of Bengali ethnicity, culture and literature. The Bengalis in Assam, since formation of Assam Province before partition, have contributed optimally towards Indian freedom struggle and never ever have taken part or supported

the separatist movements which Assam has been experiencing since partition. The ethos of assimilation and integration are inherent in the social and cultural walk of the Bengalis. At the same time, in the turbulent milieu of Assam since independence, Bengalis have been undaunted in forwarding their literary and cultural exercises, though the wrath of marginalization and exclusion has been reflected in them. The strength of such spirit of the Bengalis of Assam is reflected in the two lines of a poem by *Shaktipada Brahmachari*:

“যে কেড়েছে বাস্তুভিটে সেই কেড়েছে ভয়

আকাশ জুড়ে লেখা আমার আত্মপরিচয়”

(He who has taken away my home & land has also made me fearless,
As the signature of my identity remains prominent throughout the sky.)

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