

Immigration, Identity Politics and Exclusion: The Experience of Assam

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With a relatively recent history of immigration encouraged by colonial administration, the Muslim peasantry with their distinct ethnic identity constitutes nearly one fourth of the total rural workforce of present Assam. The immigrants, overwhelmingly belonging to a broad class of oppressed peasantry providing a solid support base to the ruling congress during the post-colonial period had never been a major political issue in the state till the late 1970s. The identity movement of the indigenous Assamese (1979-85). Launched essentially on the issue of citizenship of the immigrants politically isolated the community from the indigenous peasantry on the one hand and ruined the prospects of left and democratic processes to articulate their class interests on the other. With a brief historical account of the process of immigration of the peasantry from the erstwhile east Bengal districts (present Bangladesh) to the Brahmaputra valley and substantial empirical insights, this paper attempts to analyse the issues of the immigrant peasants and rural workforce in the overall political context of Assam. The basic argument is in an overwhelmingly agrarian and multi ethnic society when the class boundaries are coterminous with ethnic boundaries and the ideological penetration of the left and democratic forces is poor, the peasantry of the dominant community tends to constitute a political constituency vulnerable to chauvinist identity politics in order to articulate their interest. Consequently, the peasantry of the minority community, a victim of identity politics, lives in a precarious condition depending largely at the mercy of the ruling class.

In a sharp contrast to many different regions of the country, the contemporary agrarian structure of Assam, especially of the Brahmaputra Valley, does not witness any significant shift from its colonial past primarily (Sarmah, 1994; Chaudhary, 1986; 1991). As the state experienced relatively a higher rate of population growth during the decades after independence, one amongst several ramifications of State non intervention has been gradual decline of the contribution of agriculture to the aggregate State Domestic product without any appreciable reduction in the number of people dependent on the sector. Secondly, perhaps more importantly, an alarmingly rapid marginalization of operational holding coupled with increase in the records, has significantly contributed to rural pauperization. These fundamental issues, which could have influenced the political process, are largely ignored in the contemporary politics of the state. This essay is an attempt to comprehend the issues in the present political context of Assam.

Immigration and its impact on the Agrarian structure:

Although the last two centuries of Ahom rule (1228-1826) witnessed a process of feudal consolidation, the agrarian structure of the Brahmaputra Valley prior to colonial take over in 1826 was marked by absence of heritable private property rights over agricultural land, unless backed by specific royal grants. Agricultural land used primarily for wet paddy cultivation, excluding such land covered by the royal grants in favour of the Brahmans, religious institutions, as well as the royal farms were uniformly distributed amongst the paiks i.e. the adult male subjects who were not slaves. Each paik for his share of two puras (about 2.6 acres) of tax free wet paddy land was obliged to render annually

three to four months' service to the state. Such a social formation embedded in the cultural tradition of communal ownership allowed a peasant to exercise his mere usufruct right over the peace of wet paddy land allotted to him. Share of his agricultural land always reverted back to the community on his death becoming over aged. Primarily for poor revenue yielding potential, the sparsely populated Brahmaputra Valley with abundance of agricultural waste land had never been an attraction for the British colonialism until the Burmese invasion of Assam and subsequent political chaos during the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Although the Burmese invasion compelled the British to annex Assam in 1826, the colonial power initially established its direct control Lower Assam, i.e. Kamrup and a part of Darrang which used to generate revenue to the tune of one lakh rupees in 1828, were, however, resorted to a section of Ahom royalty (Barpujari, 1980). The charter of 1833, which witnessed the final ascendancy of industrial capitalist interest over mercantile interest in Britain, had also determined the colonization agenda for Assam subsequently. While the colonial industrial capitalist interest explored the natural potential of Upper Assam initially in terms of production of tea, the colonial rule changed its attitude and Assam proper was brought under direct colonial rule in 1836. (Barpujari, 197).

The Charter required the East India Company to facilitate penetration of British Private capital to India, and for the first time it allowed Europeans to hold land either on long term basis or with free hold rights. Therefore, the charter paved the way for direct intervention of colonial capital. The British private capital enthusiastically responded to the prospects of tea plantation in Assam, and consequently the Assam Tea Company was established in 1838 for the production of Assam tea. The local authorities were directed by the Governor General in council to allow the Assam Tea Company to commence operations and occupy such land as might be required under Wasteland Grants Rules, 1838. The newly explored tea sector and its rapid growth during the later half of nineteenth century significantly changed the economics as well as the demographic structure of colonial Assam. Tea witnessed a very rapid growth and it was established firmly as a new crop of capitalist farming by 1870s (Guha, 1991). With the growth of plantation economy the colonial regime devised even oppressive mechanism to force local farmers to accept employment in the tea sector, which increasingly demanded labour. However the response of the local people was by and large negative. As a result the planters had to depend almost entirely on the famine stricken tribal areas of rest of India for required labour. In 1901, local labourers constituted only 0.65 percent of the total 307000 workers engaged in plantation in Assam proper (Guha) 1991). Further, the plantation economy demanded a network of supportive secondary activities. The colonial administration had to build the infrastructure to sustain the colonial set up besides monetization of the economy. The traders, bankers, lawyers and clerks for other Indian provinces entered Assam in large numbers. Consequently the Brahmaputra valley was exposed to extensive immigration of labour and other people from other Indian provinces in the absence of required local skill.

The large scale immigration of the tea garden labourers contributed to a rapid growth of population in Upper Assam districts in last part of nineteenth century. For instance the population of Lakhmipur had increased by 46.1 percent between 1881 and 1901- an estimated 16 percent through natural growth and 30 percent through immigration. Similar the population of sibasagar increased by 24.4 percent, and half of the increase was due to immigration (Guha, 1977). However, the district of lower Assam experienced a significant loss of population in the last two decades of the nineteenth century mainly due to black fever epidemic, which first affected Goalpara in 1833 and gradually captured the entire Brahmaputra valley. During 1881-91, the population of Goalpara sub-division decreased by 18 percent and that of kamrup district by 1.6 percent. During 1891-1901, the population of Kamrup decreased by 7.1 percent, that of Mangaldoi sub-division of Darrang by 19 percent and Nowgong district by 24.8 percent. This was mostly the loss of indigenous population as immigration in these areas was marginal, and cumulative decline of the indigenous population of the valley was 7.7 percent in the last two decades of the nineteenth century.

The significant decline of indigenous population in lower Assam district and the huge influx of immigrants, particularly the tea garden labour to the upper Assam districts, had certain adverse effect on the land abundant agrarian economy of the Brahmaputra valley. The agricultural sector failed to meet the increasing demand for food from the plantation sector due to an acute shortage of man power. As a result, prices of food grains were rising alongside the increasing annual import of food grains into the valley during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The situation, therefore, demanded an expansion of the agricultural sector. The colonial regime allowed the ex-tea garden coolies to take up wasteland for cultivation mainly in the neighbourhood of tea gardens since 1905. The extent of government land taken up by coolies for cultivation increased from 112 thousands acres in 1906 to 262 thousands acres by 1921. Further even coolies on tea garden Master Rolls carried on some cultivation. For example in 1920-21, they held 100728 acres of tea garden land as tenants, 10372 acres as tenants of other landlords and 15847 acres as direct settlement holders under the government (Guha 1977).

British colonialism, however, had unfolded a new era in the history of Assam by allowing massive influx of peasants to the districts of the Brahmaputra valley from the East Bengal districts of Mymensing, Pubna, Bogra and Ranpur. Driven by the pressure on the soil at home, and lured by cheap and plentiful supply of the virgin and exceptionally fertile land in Assam the land hungry peasants, mostly the Muslims from East Bengal, began to pour into Assam from the beginning of the twentieth century (Guha 1977; Goswami and Gogoi, 1984). The freedom of settlement under the ryotwari system had helped the process further. Guha has estimated that 85 percent of the East Bengal immigrants were Muslim and they started settling down in thousands since 1905 on the uninhabited riverine tracts (Guha, 1977). The immigrants from the adjacent Bengal district had first settled down in Goalpara. They numbered 51000 in Goalpara and 3000 in Assam proper in 1911. However by 1921 together 141 East Bengal immigrants had settled down in Goalpara and 117 thousand in Assam proper. The numbers of East Bengal settlers in the Brahmaputra valley were estimated to be 300 thousands in 1921 census.

Besides the freedom of settlement provided by the ryotwari system, the colonial administration also encouraged settlement of immigrants in the Brahmaputra Valley on large scale primarily to earn more revenue. The local money lenders, Assamese and Marwari, the matabars and Dewani, the leading men of the Muslim community, made the most of the opportunity to earn more by providing the immigrants with the required loan. The new settlers required loans for reclamation of more and more land with a view to expand cultivation of jute, pulses and vegetables. Even many Assamese farmers had turned into land speculators and they sold off their land to the immigrants at a good price. Being favoured by all such factors, the influx of East Bengal immigrants into the Brahmaputra valley continued uninterrupted, and as the 1931 census reported, the number of settlers including children born after their arrival further increased to over half a million in 1931.

The immigrants initially settled in waterlogged, jungle-infested, riverine belt, and converted such areas into prosperous villages with a rapid expansion of the agricultural sector. Many of them, however, acquired large blocks of land amounting to as much as five hundred, or in some cases, a thousand bighas and emerged a Zamindar (Report of the Line system committee, 1983). Yet, the large scale grabbing of the flood prone riverine belts by the immigrants was initially not opposed by indigenous population of the land abundant Brahmaputra valley. But, the land hungry immigrants pressed themselves forward in all directions from their riverine base, and started rapidly occupying land in the areas held by the indigenous people. Such an expansion led to a conflict of interest between the immigrants and the indigenous population including the Assamese Muslims. As a result, the colonial administration had to devise certain measures to contain the increasing conflict. The administrative measures related to settlement of the immigrants, initiated by the colonial administration in 1920s, therefore, should also be seen in the context of the increasing conflict of

interest between the immigrants and the indigenous population besides the interests of British colonialism in Assam.

The colonial administration devised the 'line system' to restrict indiscriminate settlement of the immigrants and this system was introduced first in now going 1920. Under the system certain segregated areas were marked by the district administration for exclusive settlement of the immigrants. Villages in such areas could be broadly classified into three categories, exclusively reserved for the immigrants; exclusively reserved for the local people; the villages available to both immigrants and local people. Besides, no immigrant family could procure land beyond a ceiling of 16 bighas, and the indigenous Assamese were debarred from sub-letting their land to the immigrants and from employing them as agricultural labour under the line system.

Such an administrative devise to contain the conflict of interests between the indigenous population and the immigrants failed to yield the desired result. The system, nonetheless, brought a golden opportunity to the corrupt revenue officials to earn easy money by tampering the alignments of lines on maps and giving pattas to the immigrants beyond the areas reserved for them. Even many farmers of the Assamese lined villages sold their patta land to the immigrants who were always ready to pay a good price (Report of the Line System Committee, 1983).

Consequently the British administrators demanded the 'colonization scheme' which was formally approved by the conference of official and non-official members of the council in September in 1928. Under general policy of the new scheme, a small immigrant family was to be given about 20 bighas of land on payment of a premium which was fixed at Rs. 25 a bigha but reduced to Rs. 10 in 1935. A colonization officer was appointed in Nowgong to settle all available Wasteland in the immigrants areas on the block system. A similar scheme was in operation in the mangaldoi and barpeta sub-division In 1932 as it was found impossible to realize premium. Guha has noted that during 1930-36 as many as 59 grazing, forest and village reserves had been thrown open in Nowgong under colonization scheme for settling the immigrants (Guha 1991).

All such administrative measures failed to contain the increasing conflict of interests between the indigenous Assamese, including both Hindus and Muslims, and the immigrants from East Bengal districts. Nevertheless the policy of settlement of the immigrants in segregated areas paved the way for communal politics in Assam. For instance, in July 1927, Mahadev Sharma moved a resolution in Assam legislative Assembly with a view to prevent or at least restrict the settlement of immigrants on wastelands. But, sharply divided on a communal line on this resolution, the house voted 24 to 18 to reject it. In October 1936 Khand Bahadur Nuruddin Ahmed moved another resolution pleading complete abolition of line system. He pointed out "the system effectively obstructed the assimilation of the immigrants with the Assamese people, imposed on the Assamese a stigma of segregation and inferiority which they resented and fostered a sense of animosity between the indigenous Assamese and the immigrants which could not be for the good of the province, and tended to keep the price of the land low" (Report of line system committee, 1983). The resolution was defeated and the voting was again entirely on communal line.

The open support lent to the immigrants in 1930 by the Assamese Muslim leader was, however politically motivated. The spirit and essence of the resolution introduced by Nuruddin Ahmed must be seen in the context of the overall political process of contemporary Assam. The common indigenous Assamese Muslim who were relatively better off and educationally advanced, were not much enthusiastic about socially interacting East Bengal Muslim settlers. Nevertheless as section of Assamese Muslim welcomed the immigrants with the hope that they would be Assamised in due course and add 'numerical strength' to Muslim communal political in the province.

On the other side of the divide, an influential section of the Assamese Hindu raised slogan that the Assamese race is in danger. The Asamiya Samarakshini sabha came into being in 1926 to champion

the Assamese cause. A fear that continues immigration would turn the Assamese in to a linguistic minority disturbed the minds of not only urban middle class but also the masses. The publications of 1931 census report further added strength to the apprehension. The British Census Commissioner, C.S Mullan, in most irresponsible way characterized the influx of East Bengal immigration as 'invasion' of Moimansingiyas over the Assamese. The issue of immigration of East Bengal Muslims became highly politicized when the Muslim league demanded Pakistan. The increase of Muslim population in the province encouraged the Muslim League in Demanding inclusion of Assam in Jinnah's proposed East Pakistan. As a counter move a vocal section of the Assamese elite criticized the Muslim League government in Assam headed by Muhammed Sadulla for deliberately welcoming the Muslims into the province on one pretext or the other (Phukan, 1996).

The uncontrolled and enormous influx of the landless peasants from the East Bengal districts, particularly the Muslims, and its impact on the socio-economic milieu of colonial Assam, undoubtedly provided a base for political mobilization on communal line. Steps, which were taken by the administration, could hardly arrest the inflow of people. As a result the influx of immigrants, both Hindu and Muslim, from erstwhile East Bengal or East Pakistan or present Bangladesh continued even after independence. It is evident from the fact that the total population of Assam increased by 82.16 percent between 1951 and 1971 against the national average of 51.81 percent for the same period. Besides, several other factors such as, interstate migration, natural growth of population in the state etc., immigration and acceptance of a sizeable section of Hindu-bengali refugees by Assam were some of the major factors which contributed to such a significantly high growth of population of post independence Assam. The independence and consequent partition of India caused massive inflow of Bengali Hindu refugees from East Pakistan to the Eastern Indian states particularly to West Bengal, Tripura and Assam. About 53 lakh refugees entered India after 1947, and West Bengal alone received 75 percent of them while another 13 percent took shelter in Assam. Therefore acceptance of 7 lakh Bengali-Hindu refugees from East Pakistan definitely contributed to relatively higher growth of Hindu Population in Assam. It is evident from the fact that Muslim population of Assam during the period between 1951 and 1971 registered a growth of 81.25 percent while the growth of Hindu population in the State during the same period had been 83.25 percent. Nevertheless, the decadal growth of Muslims in the post-independence period has been much higher than the rate of growth in the decades before independence. Of course, immigration is not the only factor responsible for relatively higher growth rate of the Muslims in Assam after Independence.

Alongside a visible demographic transformation marked by overgrowth of Muslim population, the unrestricted influx of land hungry peasants especially during the decades after independence contributed to emergence and growth of the class of agricultural labour in the Barhmaputra valley were occupied by the migrants by 1931, the over whelming majority of the immigrants in the subsequent decades had to find their livelihood primarily as landless agricultural labour. The present demographic configuration and agrarian structure of the valley corroborates this. According to the 2001 Census, 30.92 percent of the total population of the state is constituted by the Muslims, and one can roughly estimate that more than 25 percent of the total population of present Assam is constituted by the people of the East Bengal origin including the immigrants who entered the valley in the decades after independence. Now, if we look at the geographical pattern of their distribution, five present districts (Dhubri, Barpeta, Goalpara, Nagaon and Morigaon), together constituting 27 percent of the total population of Assam, accommodate almost 52 percent of the total Muslim population of the state. It is worth noting that nearly 35 percent of the main workforce of these five districts together belongs to the category of landless agricultural labourer, while the same ratio for the state is 13.25 percent.

The size class distribution of own cultivated land amongst different socio-religious categories of the Muslim minority concentrated district of the Brahmaputra Valley depicts a more precarious condition of the Muslim population. For instance, in the present district of Dhubri, which accounts for the

highest concentration of the Muslims for its won history, 58 percent of the Muslim households are virtually landless. The same ratio for the Hindu population is although as high as 52.6 percent, over whelming Hindu landless households belong to the socially deprived section of the society, who has at least some constitutional safeguard. Therefore, it amounts to say that, the muslims peasantry of Assam, over whelming majority of who are landless, irrespective of the history or their origin, presently constitutes socially as well as economically a more vulnerable category than the constitutionally recognized deprived sections of people of the state.

The peasantry and Identity Politics

The composite Assamese national identity that emerged during the later part of the Ahom rule was essentially a product of a complex process of socio-cultural assimilation with the autochthons of the people with myriad linguistic and cultural identities migrated to the Brahmaputra Valley from other parts of the Indian Sub-continent as well as the neighboring countries. Therefore, Assam (read as the Brahmaputra Valley) has been characterized as the melting-pot of diverse cultural streams, the Indo-Aryan and the Austro-Mongloid being the central ones (Misra: 1999), what largely constituted a glorified chapter of Assam history.

The incipient Assamese nationality that emerged prior to the colonial annexation of Assam clearly witnessed a liberal attitude of the Assamese people towards the migrants of varying cultural and linguistic hues. Nevertheless, the spate of migration of the Muslim peasants that began in the early part of the last century with initial encouragement of the colonial regime had became one of the most contention led to the six year prolonged Assam movement starting from 1979, and the same fear is still haunting the Assamese psyche.

Besides political mobilization at level unprecedented in the post-colonial history of Assam, the Assam movement also inspired an academic discourse of remarkably high order initially led by the 'Economic and Political Weekly'. Although the academic discourse was initiated by Gohain (1980) characterizing the movekent as Cudgel of Chauvinism', Guha's subsequent intervention (Guha: 1980) became the central point of the debate. In addition to an analysis on the nature and the basic character of the mass movement, the intellectual discourse also essentially addressed the fundamental issue of socio-cultural and linguistic assimilation of the migrants with the autochthons, a historical process that has remained incomplete. However, prior to Guha's brilliant academic intervention, Baruah (1980) constested Gohain's analysis of the Movement as a simple conspiracy theory, and argued that the failure of independence and partition to put a stop to the influx from East Pakistan (Subsequently Banladesh) was the major source or resentment underlying the Assam movement, and therefore, Assam's nationality question, tangled primarily as a result of the influx, would have to be accepted as real. Again contesting Gohain's initial analysis, Tilottama Misra (1980) highlighted the movement as one essentially set against extra-regional big business domination over region's economy.

Considering the specific issue of assimilation, Guha argues that although large-scale immigration has been said to be a threat to the Asamiya being swamped by Bengalis has little objective basis. This fear, as he argues, was cultivated by british civil servants like Gordon and Mulan in the past as a part of their divide and rule policy. Mulan, in his 1931 Census Report, provocatively described the immigration process as an 'invasion' as 'conquest' and its predication that Sibsagar would ultimately remain the only Asamiya home district has not come out to be true, nor was his interpretation of the census data held correct. On the basis of the available census data on the mother tongue and bilingualism, Guha argues that there has been continous assimilation, although much remains to be achieved. Guha admits that the decision of Bengali Muslim settlers of the Brahmaputra Valley to merge their linguistic identity with the major language and culture was indeed a political act in 1948 with a view to minimizing social tension. Nevertheless, for him, It was also an act of political wisdom- an expression of genuine urge for assimilation. From their second generation, the Bengali migrants' major dialect, Mymensinghia, began to borrow words and idioms from their asamiya neighbours, and

as a result, their dialect is increasingly gravitating to Asamiya. Therefore, Guha projects the process of assimilation as an answer to the question of Asamiya nationality and its fear of being swamped by the immigrant Bengali Muslims.

Addressing the specific question of assimilation, Udayon Misra (1981) takes a different position. For him the distinct national identity of the Bengali immigrants in Assam and their concentration in certain 'pockets' in the Brahmaputra Valley reduced their need to culturally and linguistically assimilate with the neighbouring Assamese. The process of assimilation, as he argues, that had started in certain immigrant areas has been disrupted by fresh waves of migrants from East Pakistan and Bangladesh. In areas where the migrants are numerically strong and having possession of vast tracts of land, their urge to assimilate with the indigenous people would be naturally less. In response to Misra, Guha (1981) points out that the ongoing historical process of voluntary integration or assimilation is a two way traffic and does not necessarily involve total linguistic conversion; although that, too, might take place. In the specific context of Assam, as Guha argues, Asamiyaisation through linguistic conversion is one form of assimilation. There could be assimilation even without it. In a multilingual society, assimilation could be achieved either on the basis of equal rights for several languages or on the basis of adoption of one common language by diverse national groups.

The unresolved question of socio-cultural and linguistic assimilation continued to significantly influence the post Assam Movement theoretical discourse. Hussain (1993) argues that the primary concern of the migrants, an oppressed group of landless people was to ensure their survival not language or culture. They declared themselves as Asamiya in 1951 Census consequent upon a collective decision taken earlier around the time of independence. The migrants gradually assimilated and integrated into Asamiya nationality, and in the contemporary Assam, although the elder generation of the migrants is bi-lingual, the new generation is largely becoming unilingual Asamiya.

With an analysis of Socio-cultural as well as political assimilation of the Muslims of Assam, Ahmed and Yasin (1997) argue that the Assam movement halted, for the first time, the process of Muslims' assimilation with the greater Assamese society besides raising certain question regarding identity of the Muslims. They conclude that because of the situation created by the Movement in Assam, a large segment of the Muslim Population is being tempted to disown its Assamese Cultural identity and adopt pan-Islamic position.

With an exposition of the historical process of migrants getting accommodated in the Assamese society, Misra (1999) pointed out that the immigrant Muslim population of Assam more enthusiastically responded to the process of linguistic assimilation than their Bengali Hindu counterpart. As the Assamese-speaking immigrant Muslims grew numerically, Assamese socio-cultural organizations accepted them first as Na-Asamiya and subsequently as Assamese. Nevertheless, with more and more immigrant Muslims joining the Assamese mainstream, as Misra argues, the social divide that one existed between the indigenous Assamese Muslim and the Bengali immigrant Muslim is bound to become thinner and a more cohesive Muslim identity will inevitably emerge. To substantiate his argument, Misra cited the aspiration of Assamese Muslim intellectuals for proportional reservation of Muslims in jobs and services in the state as evidence. As he argues, the Muslims intellectuals are now not talking only about the indigenous Assamese society affected by the unabated influx of Bengali-speaking Muslims who in the recent past are taken into the Assamese fold. With the growing numerical strength of the migrant Muslim in Assamese society. Misra seems to be quite apprehensive about the cultural changes that are bound to follow the shift in the demographic balance. Therefore, Misra's fundamental question are, how far would the immigrant neo-Assamese Muslims be able to integrate themselves with Assamese nationality and what sort of social tensions would such a process generate? How far would the cultural roots of Assamese literature and society be affected by the assimilation process? How far would the adoption of Assamese by the immigrants affect the particular community or nationality being totally outnumbered by another through a

demographic invasion; of the relatively small Assamese nationality being finally swamped by the larger and more versatile Bengali speaking migrants from East Bengal?

The theoretical discourse centering on the issues of the immigrants briefly outlined above, has essentially been a product of the complex political process in Assam before and after independence. Albeit quite rich in content, the overall debate, as it has often been stimulated by the political process, is loaded heavily with generalization made on the basis of the available census data and influenced by subjectivity and ideology of the individual scholars.

Nevertheless, taking cognizance of the academic discourse, instead of getting into a detailed description of the identity movement, a brief discussion on the factors which culminated in a political chaos and jeopardized the potential of class based political mobilization in Assam would be relevant in the present context. First, this movement brought back the issue of Muslim immigration to the political agenda of Assam in a particular historical juncture, and leadership characterized the entire Muslim population that entered Assam from East Bengal or present Bangladesh at different point of time as foreigners, demanded their detection and deportation. Second, the issue of foreign national assumed a communal overtone from the initial phase of the identity movement. Third, the identity movement was initiated by a couple of regional parties with a negligible support base, subsequently brought the All Assam Students Union (AASU) to take its leadership, while they remained active in mobilizing the cast Hindu peasantry as well as the urban middle class. The common migrant/immigrant peasantry settled in different parts of the state was projected as the primary enemy of the Assamese nationality defined in an extremely parochial sense. Fourth, besides the Congress, the Left parties, which became visible in the electoral political of Assam in 1979 were considered as a force to be reckoned with and projected them as "Bangladeshi Dalal" to be an easy prey of national chauvinism.

With independence and subsequent end of the era of Muslim League political in Assam, when the Congress in its secular guise appeared as the only savior of the Muslims in the volatile political milieu after the partition, especially the Muslims of East Bengal origin decided to join the party en masses. In turn, the Congress, essentially dominated by the caste Hindus, found a ready made support base to ensure its victory in the electoral politics during the subsequent decades without showing much serious concern for the basic economic issues. The Congress with this new political ally had almost an unimpeachable hegemony on the electoral political of Assam for about two and half decades after independence, till the Sixth Lok Sabha election held in 1977. However, the tradition of one party electoral domination in Assam had come to an end when the strength of the Congress declined only to 26 seats in 1978 from 95 members in the dissolved Assembly. The major political factors which alienated the congress from the people of the country as a whole were also applicable in case of Assam: nevertheless the process was further accelerated by certain issues specific to the state (Deka, 1979; Deka et al, 1987; Sarmah 2002).

Couple of such local factors deserves attention in the present context. One of the most significant developments in the early 1970s was political consolidation of the "other Backward Classes" (OBC) with a demand for expansion of the constitutional provisions of positive discrimination for their socio-economic uplift. In an unfavourable political circumstance, the popular congress ministry headed by Mohendra Mohan Chaudhury was asked to resign by Mrs. Gandhi subsequently Sarat Chandra Sinha to become the Chief Minister. It was widely propagated in the state that Chaudhury's resignation symbolized the end of upper caste rule, and subsequently, elevation of Sinha to head the Congress government opened up a new era- the beginning of 'self assertion' by the OBC and other down-trodden who were exploited throughout the ages by the upper castes (Deka, 1979).

Yet another factor which caused substantial loss for the congress, was the land reform measures enforced by the congress ministry headed by Sarat Chandra Sinha during the period of Emergency. Although there had hardly been any positive impact so far as distribution of ceiling surplus land or

tenancy reform was concerned, the attempt to implement a couple of land reform measures merely with administrative vigor during the Emergency was politically counterproductive for the congress. Specifically, attempt to enforce the Assam eixation of Land Holding Act, 1956 after its amendment made b Sinha ministry to substantially bring down the ceiling during the Emergency challenged the hitherto socio-political influences of the caste Hindu Assamese elites, the traditional support base of the Congress. It is evident from the fact that six of the twenty subdivisions (Dhubri, Goalpara, Kokrajhar, Guwahati, Tezpur and Mongoldoi) had 54 percent share of the total individual lands acquired by the government under the said act, and these sub-divisions comprising the Lok Sabha constituencies of Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Guwahati and Tezpur constituted the Janta beld in the Sixth Lok Sabha election (Chaube, 1985).

Antagonized and threstened by the congress under the leadership of Sinha, the numerically small but politically quite influential section of the upper caste Hindu Assamese elite refused to support the couple of newly emerged regional political parties i.e. the Assam Jatiyatabadi dal (AJD) and purbanchaliya Lok Parishad (PIP) in the state Assembly elections held in 1978. Instead this section of ex-congressmen preferred to strengthen the Janata Party along with the Jana Singh, Swatantra party and the socialist party to provide a political alternative to the congress. Although the issue of foreign nationals (initially bohiragoto or outsiders) in Assam and their increasing threat to the Assamese national identity was the major component of both AJD and PLP in the 1978 elections, all the candidate constested from these two regional parties lost their security deposits.

Although the issue of foreign nationals or the outsiders and their projected threat to the Assamese national identity did not pay any immediate political dividend to the newly emerged Assamese nationality based regional parties, they continued the anti-Bohiragoto compaign more vigorously after the elections. The issue soon became a serious political issue when the Chief Election Commissioner emphasized on drastic action against inclusion of the foreign nationals in the electoral rools. The Janata Party Chief Minister of Assam also later reiterated the threat of foreign nationals, just before declaration of a by-election to the Lok Sabha in the Mongaldoi constituency, which prepared the ground for a mass movement.

The AASU, which had never been concerned with the issue of foreign national in Assam was brought to the leadership of the movement for its wide acceptability to the common Assumes people as the so-called student organization provided leadership to a series of populat movement in the state. Nevertheless, the PLP, the AJD, the Asom Sahitya Sabha (a literary organization) and the Sadau Asom Karamachari Parishad, which is an association of the state government employees. Thus the initiative of the PLP brought into being the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) on 27 August, 1979 under the aegis of the AASU to spearhead the identity movement with a specific political design and an ideology of aggressive cultural nationalism. The AAGSP was instrumental in making the identity movement a broad based political up charge with unprecedented support from the Assamese peasantry. The Hindu Assamese peasantry, overwhelmingly but uncritically, got involved in the movement with the expectation that expulsion of the Muslim peasantry, characterized as illegal immigrants, would result in abundance of agricultural land to be occupied.

Despite having a long history of the leftist movement especially on the issues of agrarian reform, the left political parties had almost negligible influence on the electoral political of Assam till Assembly elections held in 1978. The later part of the 1970s however, witnessed an increasing influence of the left parties especially of the CPI(M). The party was successful to an extent to expand its support base especially among the Assamese urban middle class, students as well as the peasantry through its different mass organization. In addition, electoral victory of the party in neighbouring West Bengal and Tripura also inspired its committed cadres in Assam. Although the CIP(M) registered a remarkable presence in 1978 elections, it must, however, be noted that the party didi not have a deep ideological penetration among the Muslim peasants, nor the politically insecure religious minority

community could accept the CPI(M) as their savior in a situation when the Congress political hegemony over the majority community experienced a sharp decline since the mid 1970s. Objectively, the electoral gain of the CPI(M) in 1978 was more due a strong sense of anti-Congressism among the caste Hindu voters, both Assamese and Bengali, and quite respectable image of the candidates they put in the electoral battle than any deep ideological penetration amongst the common mass.

Nevertheless, the electoral gains of the left forces in the 1978 elections in Assam and their victory in the two neighbouring states (West Bengal and Tripura) alarmed the regionalist forces, who sought to emerge as an alternative to the congress in the state. This fear, which had an objective basis, prompted indiscriminate attack on the left forces through the well organized mass based identity movement.

Conclusion:

The identity movement came to an end after six years with the signing of the so called Assam accord, now characterized as an "Accord of Betrayal" even by the people who remained wholeheartedly active throughout the movement, let alone its critique. The AAGSP turned AGP (Asom Gana Parishad) came to the power in 1985 with the promise of a "Golden Assam" free from the illegal immigrants. Its gross failure in power, first from 1985 to 1990 and then from 1996 to 2001 finally paved the way for the congress to rule over the 'disillusioned masses' in the subsequent period. The society at large, however, had to pay a disproportionate political price for the experiment with regionalism.

The unresolved question of citizenship of a sizeable section of the Muslim peasantry, mostly the agricultural labourers, besides placing them in a quite vulnerable position, has made them living at the mercy of the party in power. At the time of elections, their right to vote can be 'somehow managed' nonetheless, they can always be blackmailed as foreigners. Therefore, despite prolonged deprivation, accumulated frustration and socio-political insecurity, their response to the class based mobilization would naturally be poor. On the other hand, as the communal line was further sharpened by the identity movement, they are also in the downward direction of communal mobilization, the old electoral strategy of the ruling congress. To be precise, the identity movement of the aggressive Assamese nationalism caused a great damage to the incipient left and democratic movement over the issue of agrarian reforms and the peasantry including the agricultural labourers.

Notes

1. Agriculture in Assam is still marked by all widespread practice of traditional farming techniques, low usage of modern inputs, and hence, low level of productivity and cropping intensity. Yet, out of the total rural population, which is more than 85 percent overwhelming majority of them (about 75 percent of the state's population) is directly or indirectly dependent on agriculture.
2. One of the most alarming aspects of Assam's economy is continuous decline of per capita net SDP in Assam in the early 1950s was higher than that of the national average, we find reversal trend since 1960s primarily due to sluggish growth of net SDP. In a predominantly agrarian society, such a decline in obvious as contribution of the agriculture sector to the aggregate SDP has sharply been declining from 57.6 percent in 1971 to 46.4 percent in 1983-84, and further to about 35 percent till the end of 1990s.
3. Comparing the figures provided by the NSSO 43rd and the 59th Round, the marginal holdings in Assam increased from 52.40 per cent in 1970-71 to 76.20 percent in 2002-03 while the corresponding figures for the country as a whole were 45.77 percent in 1983-84 and further to about 35 percent till the end of 1990s.
4. According to BPL Census, 1998, nearly 60 percent of the total rural households in Assam belonged to the Below poverty category. According to the planning commission of India, (Planning Commission and NSSO data, 61st Round) the percentage of population living below poverty line in Assam was 51.21 in 1973-74 to 26.10 in 1999-2000. Assam still accounts

for considerably a high BPL Ratio, next to the states of Orissa (47.15 percent), Bihar (42.60 Percent) and Madhya Pradesh (37.43 percent). If we consider some of the other indicators of development, such as consumption expenditure, nutritional status of children, Body Mass index and Anaemia in women, the present scenario of Assam is not much different from what has been depicted on the basis on BPL ratio.

5. Ahoms, who came from upper Burma ruled Assam for 600 years (1228-1818), and the Ahom kingdom during its later part included the then districts of Kamrup, Nowgong, Darrang, Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh and Sibsagar which became a new division of the Bengal Presidency after colonial annexation of Assam in 1826.
6. As the Assam Banking Enquiry Committee Report, 1929-30 pointed out in Barpeta alone, there were about 100 professional money lenders including both Assamese and Marwari traders and shopkeepers. Money was lent to the immigrants at a rate of interest of 1 to 2 anna, and even in some cases 4 annas per rupee per month.
7. As pointed out by Kar (Kar, 1997), there were 6779978 acres of cultivable waste land in the five Brahmaputra valley districts. Of this 1258277 acres were cultivated by 1875-76 and within next 25 years the cultivated area increased to 1685078 acres.
8. To quote Mulan from the Census of India, 1931, Assam, part-1, "I have already remarked that by 1921 the first army corps of the invaders had conquered Goalpara. The second army corps. Which followed them in the years 1921-31, has consolidated their position in the district and has also, completed the conquest of nowgong. The Barpeta subdivision of Kamrup has also fallen to their attack and Darrang is being invaded. Sibsagar has so far escaped completely but the few thousand mymensinghies in North Lakhimpur are outpost which may, during next decade, prove to be valuable basis of major operation."
9. In a study to ascertain the total effect of the migrants on the growth of Assam's the population in the state increased by 4915058 during the period. The total number of international migrants in the state during the period, however, was 1954958 (Saikia, Goswami and Goswami, 2003).
10. The Census of India, 1931 Assam part I reported that Assam was mainly a land of peasant proprietors and would be entirely so except for two permanently settled districts of sylhet and Goalpara.
11. As reported by the Census 1961, only 3.6 percent of the total workers of Assam belonged to the category of Agricultural Labourer. However, the same ratio for the district of Goalpara (Present district of Dhubri, goalpara, Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon) was 6.28 percent; for Kamrup (present districts of Kamrup, Nalbari and Barpeta) it was 3.54 percent, and Nawgaon (Present districts of Nawgaon and Morigaon) accounted for 5.02 percent. However, the proportion of Agricultural Labourer to the total workforce of Assam increased to 12.89 percent and further to 13.25 percent in 2001, as reported by the respective Census.
12. If we look at the districts separately, as reported by Census 2001, 74.29 percent of the total population of Dhubri is Muslim and nearly 24 percent of the total workforce of the district belongs to the category of landless agricultural labour. The same ratios for Barpeta is 59.37 percent and 15.84 percent, for Goalpara 53.71 percent 18.29 percent, for Nagaon it is 51 Percent and 19.89 percent, and for morigaon it is 47.59 percent and 19.73 percent.
13. Omeo Kumar Das institute of Social change and Development, Guwahati conducted a base Line Survey of the 13 districts of Assam as declared by the Ministry of Minority Affairs, Government of India as minority concentrated districts. The base line survey conducted by the institute in 2006-07 is an enormous source of data to draw an objective comparison of the Muslim population of the state with other socio-religious categories. The example cited is based on the Base Line Survey of the district Dhubri.

14. For Guha, the term Assamese' means all inhabitants who have their domicile in the present Assam, Whether of origin or of choice; and the term 'Asamiya' means those Assames who profess Assamiya to be their natural or acquired mother tongue.
15. This is evident from the fact that between August 1979 and February 1980, about 200 to 300 persons died as a result of mob violence in North Kamrup. The identity of 80 dead body could be established and 78 of them belonged to religious and linguistic minority and one out of the remaining two was CRPF Jawan. Similarly, the 'Gandhian movement also resulted in an unprecedented and extremely brutalized event on 18 February 1983 at Nellied where about 3000 Muslims, mostly women and children, were butchered to death. There are many more such instances, which witnessed the communal character of the movement on the one hand, and the brutal political design against the immigrant Muslims on the other.
16. In the 1st Lok Sabha elections held in 1952, the congress won 11 out of the total 12 seats of Assam, and polled almost 44 percent of the total valid votes. In the 2nd and the 3rd Lok Sabha elections, the congress won 9 out of the total 12 seats, and polled almost 48 percent of the total valid votes. In the 4th and the 6th Lok Sabha elections the congress won 10 out of 14 seats and polled almost 46 and 50 percent of the total valid votes respectively, while in the 5th Lok Sabha elections held in 1971, the congress won all the 14 seats and polled more than 54 percent of the total valid votes. Similarly, in the first five Assembly elections also, the congress had absolute majority in Assam.
17. In a conference of the state electoral officers held on 24 October 1978, the Chief Election Commissioner stated that the large scale inclusion of foreign nationals in the electoral rolls in some states especially in the North Eastern region was alarming and required drastic action (The Assam Tribune, 25 October 1978).
18. The Chief Minister Announced in the Assembly on 16 March 1979 that influx of foreign national was assuming alarming proportions (The Assam Tribune, 17 march 1979), and the by election to the mongaldoi constituency was ordered in April, 1979.
19. In the process of revision of the electoral rolls, the police officials on instruction from the government of Assam headed by the Janata Party, as it was alleged, hurriedly challenged the authenticity of citizenship of about 70000 voters of the mongaldoi Lok Sabha constituency. Consequently, the arrangement for holding the elections were cancelled on the one hand, and it inaugurated the era of political turmoil in the entire state on the other.
20. The charter of demands submitted by the ASSU to the Janata Government which assumed power on 12 March, 1978 was totally silent on the issue of foreign national in the state.
21. The president of the PLP, in fact, was keen to retain the leadership of the movement in the hands of the party itself. However, the ex-ASSU leaders in the party insisted on bringing ASSU to the forefront. The greatest advantage was AASU's non-political image. Moreover, since its birth in 1972, the ASSU led several popular movements including the movement to make assamese as the medium of instruction together with English up to the Graduation level.
22. There are enough evidence in support of a clear involvement of the caste Hindu Assamese peasantry, under the local leadership of the movement, in the unprecedented and extremely brutalized event in February 1983 at Nellie, where about 3000 Muslims, mostly women and children, were butchered to death, and similar events in Gohpur, Darrang, Dhemaji etc. The author recently interacted with a good number of people of Gohur and Dhemaji for an objective understanding of the events took place in February 1983.
23. The CPI had only one seat in the first general elections in the state held I 1952, four seats in 1957 seven seats in 1967 and three seats in the fifth general elections held in 1971. The RCPI could win one seat in 1957 and again one seat in 1962. However, in the 1978 general elections the CPI(M) could capture 11 seats, CPI won in five seats and the RCPI in four seats.

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