

Politics of Identity Assertion of the Plains Tribes in Assam

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Abstract: Assam is a meeting ground of different ethnic groups which have their own language, culture, customs, tradition and historical background. They consider these as their 'identity symbol'. On the basis of the identity symbol they wanted to protect their identity. To protect their identity they used the technique of autonomy movement. Because, the outcome of the autonomy movement is to formation of an autonomous council and through it they can enjoy their political power. Keeping the view in mind, the paper tries to focus the following objectives: 1) To analyse the theoretical perception of Politics of Identity. 2) To describe the background of plains tribe. 3) To explore the causes which induced for the identity assertion of the Plains Tribes.

Keywords: Autonomy, Identity, Ethnicity, Politics, Movement

1. Introduction

The process of identity assertion among different ethnic groups in Assam is not a new phenomenon. It is, because Assam has been a melting pot of diverse ethnic groups of mankind that included the Austric, Mongoloid, Dravidian and Aryan who entered Assam in different period of history carrying diversities in respect of language, culture, customs, traditions, historical backgrounds and so on. That is why, they are not prepared to get themselves and their culture merged completely with the national mainstream and intended to maintain their respective identities on the basis of lingo-cultural traits. Furthermore, such inducement has eventually led a section of them to the extent of launching autonomy as well as a separate state as a measure of protecting their identity. Likewise, some of the smaller ethnic groups of Mongoloid origin who latter came to be known as plains tribes also wanted to protect their identity on the basis of their language, religion, culture, tradition etc. These plains tribes have been pressing either for the creation of separate Autonomous council or Autonomous state and inclusion of the same into the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution on the basis of their lingo-cultural identity.

2. Theoretical Analysis

In this context, it is worthwhile to explain the term *politics of identity*; how it leads to the identity movement and *ethnicity* becomes an important factor in this regard. It is a word which is not only used today by academics but is perhaps more commonly used today by various political groups and other organizational bodies. Before going to analyze the term *politics of identity*, it is necessary to know about the concept of *identity*. The term *identity* has been derived from the Latin word *idem* which means *what a thing is*. It is the concept used to describe an individual sense of who he or she is. The term *identity* is presently used in two linked sense i.e the individual identity and collective identity/ group identity. In case of individual identity, it gives prominence to the individual and identifies him/her as different from others in the society. The features that shape the individual identity are language, religion, attire, traditions, origin, spirituality etc. On the other hand, collective identity refers to a person's sense of belonging to

a group. The identity of the group becomes a part of the person's individual identity. The characteristics and values of a group are used by the people to define themselves. It is mentionable here that the present work is basically related to the ethnic identity or group identity. That is why, it is important to discuss about the term *ethnic*. The term *ethnic* has been derived from the Greek word *ethnikos* which refers to *gentle or pagans* (considered derogatory); people who are not Christians or Jews (Sollors, 1996). But social scientists describe it in different ways. According to them, the term *ethnic* means a group of people having their common culture, tradition, historical background etc. Nevertheless, in modern times, the social scientist uses the term *ethnicity* instead of *ethnic*. The term *ethnicity* is used by David Riesman in 1853 and it became popular after the Second World War as well as emergence of so called third world in international politics (Glazer, Nathan & Moynihan and Patrick, 1976). *Ethnicity* stands for a group of human beings with a common culture, history, a common origin, language, religion, tradition etc. Likewise, each individual of the group feel that they are from the same stock and their identity also similar in terms of race, caste and religion. In view of this, the term *Identity* is built up through a sense of identification (Datta Ray, 1889). Rose and Rose have emphasized that ethnic group identification implies a positive orientation (Datta Ray, 1889). It involves not only a recognition that because of one's ancestry one is a member of a racial or religious group and a recognition that a majority group defines are as belonging to that racial or religious group; it also involves a positive desire to identify oneself as a member of the group and feeling of pleasure where one does so (Datta Ray, 1889). The term *Politics of Identity* or *Identity Politics* begins with the process of identity formation of certain sections of the society who consider themselves to be oppressed and marginalized. It cultivates the experience of inequalities that people encountered as member of a particular identity groups. In such a way, the concept of self identity may emerge among the groups on the basis of race, gender or an ethnic consciousness of a group. Sometimes, it leads to a movement when the symbols of identities (e.g. language, culture, customs, tradition, race and ethnicity) are utilized by elites to mobilize group sentiments. However, the elites of the group try to secure their social recognition and legal concessions. Thus, it is

Volume 8 Issue 9, September 2019

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also identified as the politics of *recognition*. However, there exists two contradictory approaches which describe about the causes of identity politics or identity movement i.e. materialistic and non materialistic (Bernstein, 1996). According to materialistic approach identity movement or identity politics is the reaction of economic inequality and economic exploitation. And the non materialistic approach believes in non materialistic factors like language, culture, social values, tradition, religion, gender and race as the source of identity politics. But it rejects the notion that economic factor is central to any political action and emphasizes on non materialistic factors of identity politics. In academic discourse, the term identity politics was first used by Anspach in the late 70's and since then the concept has gained popularity especially in social science (Wiards, 2016). In social science, it describes the phenomenon like multiculturalism, feminism, civil rights separatist movement and violent ethnic mobilization in post colonial Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe. The issues of Balkans in Europe, Hutus and Tutsis in Africa, Tamils in SriLanka, Chakmas in Bangladesh etc are the examples of identity politics emanating from ethnicity.

3. Methodology

The study is mainly based on the primary and secondary sources of data. The primary sources basically include relevant government reports and documents, pamphlets, memoranda submitted to the Government by various organizations of the Plains tribes, proceedings of the different meetings and conferences of the socio-cultural organizations, local dailies. Likewise, field survey is also utilized for the generation of primary sources. The interview with the common masses of the tribals and leaders of the tribals, knowledgeable persons and concerned Government officials are also included. Besides, the relevant Books, Journals, Articles, Periodicals are used as secondary sources in this academic exercise. A historic -cum -analytical method is employed to uphold the findings of the study.

4. About the Tribes

Before going to discuss about the plains tribes it is necessary to know about the tribe. Different scholars give their view in different way in terms of tribe. Some scholars opine that India has been a land of innumerable tribes since the time immemorial. The term *tribe* originated around the time of Greek and early formation of Roman Empire (Sahu, 1998). It is derived from the Latin word *tribus*. Earlier the Romans used the term to designate the divisions in the society. In Asia and Africa, it has become popular during the expansion of colonialism. *Tribes* are the groups of people with special attachments to land, kinship, ties, unique culture and religious belief that differentiate and separate them from the mainstream. Anthropological literature characterizes a *tribe* as (i) inhabit in hilly or hill clad areas and forest or forest clad areas. (ii) Isolated or semi-isolated from the wider community. (iii) having economic self-sufficiency i.e. subsistence economy, with no surplus production (iv) backward technology (v) lack of division of labour (vi) having mechanical solidarity (vii) economic exchange based

on reciprocity or on barter (viii) political autonomy or having their own political system (ix) egalitarian values (x) having religious faith (xi) a sense of belongingness to the community (Choudhury, 2004). The general masses commonly use the term *Adivasi* to describe it. However, the colonial ruler noticed that the *tribes* are the degraded people in Indian society. So, they recognized them as *backward tribe* under the Government of India Act 1935. In 1950, with the enactment of India's Constitution these *backward tribes* were referred to as *Scheduled Tribe*. Therefore, a scheduled tribe is primarily an administrative and constitutional concept. Article 342 of the Indian Constitution has dealt with it. According to this Article, a special provision has been provided to protect the interest of these communities on the basis of certain criteria. To look after the matter, an advisory committee was formed known as *Lokur Committee* in 1965. The *Lokur Committee* (1965) has taken primordial traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the society at large and backwardness as the important criteria for testing the eligibility of a *tribe* as *Scheduled Tribe* (Nath, 2006). The tribal population of India is greater than that of any other country in the world. There are two types of Schedule Tribes population in India as well as Assam i.e Hill tribes and Plains tribes. In Assam, the chief plains tribes are the Bodo, Mising, Tiwa, Rabha, Deori, Sonowal Kachari, Thengal-Kachari and the Mech.

5. Discussion

It is necessary to mention here that each and every group contributed their respective shares towards the growth and development of composite Assamese society during the colonial period. More importantly, they are the part of the concept 'Bor Asom' which was created by the Ahom ruler prior to British rule. But the colonial ruler adopted the policy of separation for the tribal people. They created separate administrative system for the tribal people through various Acts i.e. the Inner-Line Regulation Act (1873), Government of India Act (1919), Government of India Act (1935). However, it was the policy of the British to make the tribal separate from the others politically and mentally (Nath, 2013). Besides, the colonial ruler did not give minimum interest for the tribal groups. They found them unsuitable and useless for colonial administration. Significantly, the tribal people were not appointed into any administrative post created by the British. To conduct the administrative functions, they brought a huge amount of people from East Bengal. On the other hand, they also imported a large number of working hands to work in the tea plantation, road construction, oil field, coal mines and so on (Phukon, 1996). It is also mentionable that the Assamese Upper Caste Hindu people took advantage from the colonial administration and they were recruited in some prestigious post under the British administration. Aside from, the tribal people could not get any benefit as well as responsible position in the Upper Caste dominated Assamese society. The Upper Caste Hindu people treated them as untouchable in the society and keep maintain a distance from them. So, they remained isolate from the society. The following chart highlights the picture of the social position of different groups.

<p>Out siders High Class- The Britishers, Administrator, Tea Planters and Members Of Christian Missionaries, The Americans</p> <p>Middle Class- The Hindu Bengalis The Marwaris etc.</p> <p>Subaltem Class- Tea Garden Laboures Muslim Peasants, Nepalese and Biharis etc.</p>	<p>Original inhabitants Revenue collector, Tea Planters, Indigenous Mercantile class etc.</p> <p>Assamese Middle class who were mostly educated in Calcutta</p> <p>The Assamese Peasantry/ Indigenous tribal people</p>
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(Source: Konwar, 2006)

Keeping view in mind, the educated elite of these groups felt that they were deliberately deprived of their legitimate right and due share of government jobs under colonial administration. They realized that the discriminatory attitude of the British and the domination of the Upper Caste Hindu people were mainly responsible for their exclusiveness and backwardness. Another reason of their identity assertion was the alarming increase of Muslim people. A number of Muslim populations substantially increased in the Brahmaputra valley which threatened the identity of the tribal people. The following table point out the alarming increase of Muslim population in Assam.

Table 1.1: Increase of Muslim population in Colonial Assam

Year	Muslim Population
1911	3,55,320
1921	5,85,943
1931	9,43,352
1941	13,03,962

Source: Girin Phukon, Assam’s Attitude to Federalism, 1984, p.13

To remove their backwardness as well as to protect their identity, the elite of these groups namely Kalicharan Brahma, Hitanath Brahma Choudhury, Chemchan Singh Ingti thought for an alternative way which relieved them to some extent. Gradually, they realized that organizing themselves is the way to fight against their backwardness. Therefore, they formed a number of organizations such as *Kachari Sanmilian* (1921), *Kachari Students’ Association* (1922), *All Boro Chatra Sanmilian* (1918), *Bodo Maha Sanmilian* (1924), *The Mising Bane Kebang* (1924), *All Assam Tribal League* (1933) and so on. These organizations raised demands like adequate representation in the Provincial Legislature, Recognition of Minority Rights, Reservation of Government jobs, Reservation of seats in the educational institutions, Preservation of their language and culture, as a means of removing social inequalities etc (Phukon, 1996). Likewise, they came forward with lots of other demands against the colonial administration. As a part of their demands, they submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission on 14th September 1929 (Deori, 2010). In this memorandum, they clearly mentioned about the discriminatory attitude of the government and their backwardness. On the other hand, the plains tribe people became afraid of the immigrant who had been allegedly invited by the Muslim League Government. The immigrants occupied the tribal land for their livelihood as well as

cultivation. It appeared to them that the continuous flow of immigrants into the state became a threat to their overall identity. So, they demanded constitutional safeguards in respect of their identity which was going to be framed. It may be reiterated that the Constitution of the independent India has provided for two schedules for the administration of tribal areas; i.e. the Fifth and Sixth schedule. While the Fifth schedule provides for formation of Tribal Advisory Council in the other states except North-East India, the Sixth schedule makes provision for the formation of Autonomous District Council in the hills tribal areas in the North-East. But the tribal communities of the plains of Assam such as Bodo, Mising, Tiwa, Rabha, Deori, Sonowal Kachari and hills of Manipur have been left out from these two schedules. So, it also became a reason for the identity movement of the various tribal groups in Assam.

Interestingly, the situation of the plains tribes has remained unchanged in the post colonial era too. They were again degraded by the High Caste Hindu people and failed to occupy any prominent place in the high caste dominated Assamese Society. All the administrative facilities were availed by the upper caste people. Prior to the job reservation Act 1978, the grade wise total representation of tribal in various Government Departments in 1975 was as follows:

Table 1.2: Grade wise total representation of Tribal in Government Departments in 1975

Grade I	Grade II	Grade III	Grade IV	Total
44	12	3942	1390	5488

(Statistical Hand Book, Govt. Of Assam 1978, Dispur)

Table 1.3: Backlog in reserved posts till 1978

Description	Grade I	Grade II	Grade III	Grade IV	Total
Representation due	145	451	6512	2959	10,006
Representation effected	44	112	3942	1390	5,488
Backlog	101	339	2570	1568	4,578

Source: (Statistical Abstract 1978, Govt. of Assam)

Table 1.4: Category wise Job opportunities enjoyed in 1978

Caste	Grade I	Grade II	Grade III	Grade IV	Total
SC	56	185	3679	3081	
ST (H)	9	47	1502	588	
ST (P)	44	117	3942	1390	
OBC	171	798	2086	956	

Muslims	168	517	7396	3199	
Others	999	2956	46517	20744	

Source: (Statistical Abstract 1978, Govt. Of Assam)

Table 1.04 shows that majority of the job occupied by the others than the SC, ST, OBC and Muslim community. They have become marginalised in job opportunities. Such kind of declining status inspired the tribals to inculcate a sense of awareness among their people at large. In due course, the tribal elite, the growing awareness would be instrumental in the event of asserting their distinctive identity.

Therefore, they began to feel that they were systematically deprived of by the dominant class of the Assamese society and felt the need of organizing their respective communities on the basis of their distinctive ethnic identity for fulfilment of their grievances. As a result, *Plains Tribal Council of Assam (1967)* and *All Assam Tribes and Races Federation (1954)* were formed by the various plains tribes like the Misings, Tiwas, Sonowal-Kacharies, Deoris, Rabhas for the fulfilment of their common aspirations. Furthermore, they came to realize that their language, cultures should be developed and their legitimate political share could be attained only under a separate administrative and political structure.

For this purpose, the identity assertion movement of the different plains tribes became more forceful due to their backwardness. They got organized and articulate to capable of asserting their rights more vigorously which led to the formation of a host of socio-cultural and political organizations among the plains tribes of Assam such as the *Mising students' Union (1939)*, *Deori students' Union, (1959)*, *Deori Sahitya Sabha (1965)*, *Rabha Students' union (1967)*, *Ban ok public Mioung Tai (1987)*, *Mising Agom Kebang (1989)* and others. The declared demands of all the plains tribal groups were dissimilar in nature. While some of them were pressing for special constitutional safeguards for their distinct identities as well as socio-economic upliftment, others demanding either Autonomous Council or Separate State for the cause of all round development of their respective communities.

Thus, it appears that almost all the indigenous Plains Tribe of Assam has been striving for maintenance of their respective distinct identities. The Autonomy Movement is one of the ways for the fulfilment of their aforesaid aspiration under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. By and large, they realized that maintenance of their distinct identities could be possible only through the establishment of Autonomous Council or Separate State. As a result, the Government of Assam has already granted Autonomy to the different plains tribes like Bodos, Mishings, Tiwas, Rabhas, Sonowal kacharis, Deoris, Thengal kacharis and others. Except the Bodos, all other communities have been granted autonomy without demarcating the boundary. So, all the tribes did not seem to be satisfied with alleging that these are inadequate for all round development of their respective communities.

6. Findings

- 1) All the plains tribes have their own customs, traditions, language, beliefs and culture. They tend to maintain their identity on the basis of these 'identity symbols'.
- 2) During the colonial period, they enjoyed an independent system of government. But they remained backward in every spheres of their life such as economic, political, educational and social. The colonial ruler treated them as an inferior section of the society.
- 3) Significantly, the plains tribes of Assam also left out from the ambit of the Sixth Schedule of Indian constitution. And the problems like development, unemployment, immigration, reservation in government educational institution, reservation of government jobs, religious discrimination and scholarship for the students and land patta for the tribal people remained unsolved.
- 4) In order to solve these problems, they formed a number of organizations were formed for the common development of the tribals i.e the Tribal League, Plains Tribals Council of Assam and some were formed for the particular development of their communities.
- 5) . The leaders of the various organizations of the tribals conceived their separate identity in terms of the political identity. So, they started demanding due share in power politics. It leads to identity movement with the technique of autonomy for acquiring political power. They indeed sought an Autonomous Council as a political means of their holistic development. They thought that without political power all round development of their community would not be possible.
- 6) The reasons for their identity assertion were to remove backwardness as well as to protect their land from the illegal migrants.

7. Conclusion

At present, Assertion for separate identity of the plains tribes have been occupying the whole political scenario of Assam. The plains tribes started their identity movement with some non-political issue and gradually it turned to political one. It is because, they realised that without political power all round development of the community would not be possible. It is also mentionable that in a multi-ethnic society like Assam each and every diverse group has their rights to preserve and protect their lingo-cultural traits. So, their assertion for separate identity is significant in real sense of the term.

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