



Research Paper

## “Shaping and Re-shaping of Identity in Assam: The Question of Multiculturalism”

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### ABSTRACT

Even in the turbulent times of social unrest, political agitations, and deteriorating economy Indians have taken pride in being characterised with the phrase “unity in diversity”. The Constitution of India has provided for numerous provisions to uphold the same. India has not declared multiculturalism to be a policy, however its spirit has been a part of the country’s existence throughout history. The northeastern region of the country is not connected to the rest of the states since the colonial era itself which continues to pose questions on inclusion in true sense of the term. Assam, one of the eight states of the region, is home to a large number of ethnic groups, religions, and linguistic groups. Consequently, identity politics has played a major role in shaping its character. The history of identity politics in Assam is not devoid of jingoism and bloodshed. From time to time both the central and the state government have tried to accommodate the interests of different groups and yet there exist continuous demands for autonomy as well as secession at different parts of the state. This paper is a humble attempt at studying the efforts of the Indian state as well as the ethnic communities of Assam to accommodate the spirits of multiculturalism

**KEYWORDS:** Multiculturalism, Cultural Diversity, Assam, Identity Politics

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Multiculturalism has gained a great deal of importance in the functioning of liberal democracies to become more sensitive to the cases of minority cultures and to provide for their preservation and promotion. Cultural diversity and cultural equality are the two prime concerns of multiculturalism. Assam is a land of multiple ethnic groups and immigrant communities, speaking different languages, belonging to different religions. Multiculturalism provides for an interesting yet complex lens to look at the heterogeneous character of the Assamese society. From the beginning of the post-independence era Assam has witnessed the wrath of identity politics. The Nagas and the Mizos have fought ardently for separate homelands which resulted in utter violence and suffering. The present day Assam is also not free from ethnic conflicts and bloodshed. The root of those lies primarily in the nonfulfillment of the demands and aspirations of the various groups for larger inclusion within the ambit of the Indian state and at times for separation from the Indian state. At this juncture a systemic study of the different cultures throughout the past and the present is of utmost necessity.

Multiculturalism is not about the mere existence of multiple cultures. It is embedded in the notion of cultural equality or equal treatment of all cultures on the part of the state. At the same time it focuses on recognising their differences and respecting the boundaries. It also requires accommodation of the beliefs and practices of minority cultures by majority cultures.

### II. CONSTITUTIONAL SAFEGUARDS FOR MINORITY CULTURES

Recognising the diverse nature of the Indian population the makers of the constitution highly emphasised on the accommodation of their general as well as particular interests. Considered as the backbone of the constitution, the Preamble itself promotes certain notions and principles which are analogous to those of multiculturalism. Various articles promote the spirit of multiculturalism including the six fundamental rights which recognise both individual and collective rights. In this chapter we will primarily reflect upon those constitutional provisions which have impacts on the vast existence of cultural diversity in Assam.

The diverse population of the state can be categorised on the basis of language, religion, caste, tribes etc. Considering the same, Article 21 (1) says that any citizen of India with a distinct language, script or culture shall have the right to conserve those. In addition to that, Article 29 (2) provides for non-discrimination of any citizen on the basis of religion, race, caste or language in matters concerning admission into educational institutions. Article 330 and Article 332 deals with reservation of seats in the House of the People and the Legislative Assemblies of the states for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes respectively. Article 339 (1) empowers the President to appoint a commission to report on the welfare of the scheduled tribes in the states. Article 350 (A) makes it the duty of states and local authorities to promote adequate facilities at the primary stage of education. The Sixth Schedule of the constitution extensively mentions the provisions for the administration of tribal areas in the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram.

In a state where identity has been shaped, reshaped and challenged since the colonial rule at the whims of the British, it will need more than interpretation and execution of constitutional guarantees to promote cultural equality. Assam has been prone to ethnic conflicts and insurgent activities which diminish the prospect of collective and inclusive existence.

### **III. TRIBAL GHETTOISATION<sup>1</sup>**

Kham Khan SuanHausing uses the term “tribal ghettoisation” to refer to the policy of colonial rulers in the pre-independence period while administering the northeastern region of the country. Hausing opines, “The inner line regulation (1873), backward tract (1919), and the excluded and partially excluded areas (1935) put in place special and preferential regime which overtime sustained their autonomous societal cultures... this process entrenched disparate social and cultural boundaries in the long run.”<sup>2</sup> The insurgent activities and the Separatist tendencies which arose in the Naga Hills, Mizo Hills and Assam throughout the decades succeeding independence were related to a long epoch of lack of connectivity with mainland India. UdayanMisra in his book “Burden of History: Assam and the Partition- Unresolved Issues” explains how the partition left its impact in the territory of Assam as well as in the consciousness of the people. He says, “...entire politics centred around grouping, where the Central Congress leadership initially displayed a marked insensitivity towards Assam’s position, was to colour the province’s and the northeastern region’s relationship with the Centre in the post-independence years.”<sup>3</sup>

### **IV. IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES AND THE SHAPING OF ASSAMESE IDENTITY**

Immigration in Assam was initiated by the promising opportunity of commercial production of tea and discovery of oil seepages during the colonial era. The workers for tea plantation were recruited mostly from present day Bihar and Odisha. Since their arrival the tea tribes have been one of the most flexible cultures who have adopted to the Assamese way of life. Inter-marriage and getting Assamese education have provided further scope for cultural integration. In “India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality” SanjibBaruah states that, “Historically, their inclination to speak Assamese and adopt Assamese ways has made them model immigrants in the eyes of the ethnic Assamese. However, the ethnic Assamese upper classes have accorded them low status, and that has not always made it easy for them to become part of Assamese society”.<sup>4</sup> From this standpoint the efforts for establishing cultural equality has not been much commendable on the part of the ethnic Assamese. Before colonial rule started in India, after the Muslim invasions of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century, a sizeable section of Muslims stayed behind in Assam. Those people, with time assimilated with the other communities of Assam and came to be known as “AsomiyaMussalmans”. The cultural divide between those Assamese Muslim and Assamese Hindu was not sharp. However, the accommodative nature of the Assamese society was impeded by continuous and mostly unabated influx from Bangladesh. It was one of the biggest concerns which resulted in the Assam Movement. The history of post-independence Assam has not been devoid of communal clashes. The Nellie Massacre of 1983 bears the haunting memory of communal riot that shook the entire country. These conflicts have decelerated the process of trust-building among the communities. There are several other communities whose presence has over the decades affected the already complex multi-ethnic society of Assam. A sizeable portion of population are from Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Punjab have settled in Assam primarily for commercial purposes.

### **V. IDENTITY POLITICS VIS-`A-VIS MULTICULTURALISM IN ASSAM**

The seeds of identity politics in Assam were sown right from the beginning of the colonial era. In 1836, Bengali was made the language of rule in Assam. It resulted in profound reactions of a section of concerned people. AnandramDhekiyalPhukan took a staunch stand against it and finally in 1873 Assamese as the language of rule was restored. Assamese sub-nationalism, has always been closely associated with the language. The establishment of AxomiyaBhaxaUnnatiXadhiniXobha (Association for the Development of the Assamese Language) in 1888 is widely considered as a landmark in the formation of Assamese sub-nationalism in a concrete manner. The events concerning the language and its standardization have at times proved to be

antagonistic to upholding cultural equality of the region. The efforts to make Assamese the official language in 1960 and medium of instruction at the college/university level in 1972 alienated the tribes of both hills and plains having their own languages/dialects. UdayanMisra states, “It was evident that the Assamese middle class leadership, pre-occupied as it was with the struggle to establish Assamese hegemony, has failed to respond to the growing sense of insecurity in the tribal mind.”<sup>5</sup> When the Assam Movement started in 1979, inhabitants of Assam encompassing almost all the tribes took to the streets in order to vent their anger towards the central government’s lackadaisical attitude for the problem of continued influx as well as decades of economic neglect of the state. However, by the time the Assam Accord was signed in 1985, the support had diminished considerably. In the words of Misra, “They viewed the accord as a move aimed at protecting the identity only of the Assamese speaking people, while totally ignoring and overlooking the grave dangers that were being posed to tribal identity”.<sup>6</sup> The ruptures in the ties of the ethnic groups of Assam were to have their impact on the existence of the state as a social and political entity. The rift between the ethnic communities took a very complex character over the years of the agitation. Throughout the years various tribes namely Bodos, Karbis, Tiwas and Rabhas have showed interest in situating themselves outside the Assamese subnational formation. Bodos, the largest plain tribe of the state has been demanding for territorial separation.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

The case for multiculturalism in India stands different from that of countries like Canada where it has been declared as a government policy. The Constitution of India embodies certain provisions which aim at preserving and prompting minority rights, thus giving way to realisation of the principles of multiculturalism. Yet, reconsideration of certain structures is very necessary to provide for an adequate place for the minority cultures to avail their rights. The Indian Constitution put forth a strong centre. In the present scenario where people have become more aware of their identity which at times is deviated from the pan-Indian formation, the federal structure of the country needs to be restructured. Centralisation of decision-making process is not conducive to integration of yet disjointed regions like northeast India.

The Assamese society has never been a homogenous one. The language politics of 60s and 70s, the Assam Movement and consequently the Assam Accord has led to breakage in the inclusion process. Clause 6 of the Assam Accord aims at preserving the cultural identity of “the Assamese people”. It appears vague and confusing as the term “Assamese” do not have a concrete definition of the population it includes. Considering the muddled state of affairs intercultural dialogue is the need of the hour without giving space for monologic attitude of any particular group. The autonomy provided by the Constitution to certain tribes is not going to be sufficient to uphold the spirit of cultural diversity and equality. What is needed is a creation of a broader space for critical and reasoned discourse. At the same time, merely allowing the members of minority communities to continue their distinct practices do not meet the criteria of multiculturalism. The civil society and the state system shall encourage the practice of those cultures equally in the public sphere.

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