

Whither is Assamese identity today



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The recent state wide ruckus in view of the ongoing eviction drive in government land, grazing and forest reserves have again brought the troubling question of Assamese identity as composite nationality to the forefront. It's undeniably true that the Assamese autochthons have been grappling with severe demographic, cultural, linguistic and political identity crisis since the endorsement of large scale immigration of East Bengali Muslim and labourers from Chotnagpur, Jharkhand and graziers from Nepal by colonialist British for economic reasons. British design to open up unused lands for use by land hungry East Bengali peasants had taken a toll in the lives of Assamese people. It's also true that Burmese invasion hastened by internecine feuds of Ahoms and successive prolonged Anglo- Burmese war left the state high and dry with more than half of it's population exterminated by Burmese invaders. The prospect of earning higher revenue by converting unused firm lands of sparsely populated Assam encouraged British to give a fillip to immigration. It was a storm tossed terrible time for Assamese that is best described in the opening lines of eminent novelist Dr Dhruba Jyoti Borah's acclaimed post modernist meta fiction *Inner Landscape*. Assamese autochthons have already been in disarray and scattered since the advent of Tai Shan Ahoms in 13th century forcing the former to be incorporated into the Ahom tribal system through racial fusion. Since the autochthons- Koch, Kachari, Moran, Borahi, Chutiya, Kaivartta, Nath Yogis, Rabha, Hajong, Deuri, Mishing etc did not have detailed chronicling of histories we are deprived of getting any first hand account of aborigine's encounter with Tai Shans. However as defined and accepted universally formation of Assamese identity was accelerated by Ahomisation and cultural shape was enhanced by the neo vaisnavite preacher Shankar Dev. Though Scottish army surgeon and war photographer John McCosh refrained from including war captive Goriya muslim as Assamese in his *Topography of Assam*, they also became part and parcel of ethnic Assamese as defined in Assamese

narrative. Though immigration of east Bengali Muslim exacerbated during the reign of erstwhile premiere Moulavi Syed Mohammad sir Sadulla in the 40's taking advantage of 'grow more food' as part of Muslim League's skewed design and posed threat to ethnic Assamese these lakhs of immigrant Bengali Muslim too were accepted in Assamese fold with a new term as- Na Axomiya Mussalman as brethren. In spite of the fact that land was scarce and resources were limited these hordes of invading immigrants were treated with generosity. They identified themselves as Assamese speakers when state re-organization was in the offing in 1956. However as writer Sanjay Baruah mentioned in his *India Against Itself* " whether they identified themselves that way to census officials as an act of convenience or to indicate a real desire to adopt Assamese, to many skeptics the rise of Assamese speakers from 31.4 percent of the population in 1931 to 56.7 percent in 1951 was not credible". However contrary to Bengali Hindu who were brazenly adamant to accept Assamese and challenged the Assamese language as medium of instruction , these immigrant Muslim stood with the Assamese. With their inclusion Assamese identity which was hitherto a socio-religious construct in British narrative took a linguistic turn making language as the significant parameter in Assamese national identity.

It's also true that due to the sporadic agitations and political upheavals often these immigrant Neo Assamese Muslim mulled about disowning Assamese language. Alienation was more severe in the aftermath of Nellie Massacre. Radical fringe elements among the immigrant Muslim try to take advantage of that vulnerability. While hordes of immigrants population posed demographic and economic threat to autochthons, the alarming rate of crime perpetrated by them also widened the rift with ethnic population. Recently a hitherto unknown insignificant ABMSU leader too have threatened to disown Assamese language if government's eviction drive continues. This is apparently a blackmail aiming at intimidating the autochthons. As narrated by historian Abu Syed Ahmed and Adil Ul Yasin in *Problems of Identity, Assimilation and Nation building* (1997) that in the aftermath of Assam movement many of immigrant Muslims who in 1971 identified themselves with Assamese society and language, expressed openly at the Haji Musafirkhana on the eve of 1991 census, the futility of false pretensions of assimilative gestures and their effort towards consolidation of their Assamese identity. Those who were incorporated into Assamese society as Neo Assamese vilified and demonized Assamese as chauvinistic xenophobic in international media like Aljazeera by widely circulating a new found Miya poetry. These dubious miya poets with the bizarre self identified term were patronized by a bogus literary mouthpiece of left communist ideology-*Alap* to denigrate the very identity of Assamese people. It is pertinent to mention here that even Jawahar Lal Nehru too who was bit patronizing about immigration from East Bengal also stressed on immigrant's adopting and accepting the culture and way of life of hosting ethnic Assamese population. Also Nehru warned about being selective and strict in issuing permanent land pattas to immigrants. This opinion of Nehru seldom find expression in socio political discourse as historical archival records were probably not available. Eminent journalist Harendra Nath Barua wrote about in *Sadiniya Axomiya* in December in 1937. After the settlement of Muslim immigrants in

Brahmaputra valley Muslim politics also came to the fore. Immigrant Neo Assamese Muslims while identifying as Assamese conspicuously at the same time keep providing support to later day illegal immigrants causing threat to the demographic balance in the state. Pro immigrant organizations and parties like AMSU, UMF, AIUDF tried to protect the illegal immigrants by opposing any legal action of government like- D voter, identification of foreigner at Tribunal etc. Even tribunal member Judges were too assaulted in court premise in broad day light while declaring illegal immigrants as foreigners in 2017 at Goalpara district Tribunal. Adding to the woes, population of immigrant East Bengali Muslim too are on the rise in unprecedented rate in comparison to ethnic Assamese at a growth rate of around six percent in each decade. According to an estimate in 2021 muslim population in Assam is 14 million out of 35 million total population constituting 40 percent of the state's population. Political future of assamese autochthons is really bleak and worrisome. Now hapless lot of Assamese autochthons is like that Odysseus- 'between Scylla and Charybdis'. Assamese must choose like that of Odysseus as to which course would be less harmful. It must be reiterated that language based state organization has become an obsolete idea. States cannot be re-organized based on language alone ignoring tribal and ethnic identities. Even states like Nagaland and Meghalaya were driven by ethnic and tribal identities rather than language alone. Even in Mauritius Bhojpuri speakers constitute more than five percent and it's a recognized language. If their speakers grow in number can we expect a Bihari Bhojpuri state in Mauritius? Ethnicity and economic factors are far more important than linguistic homogeneity.

Call of the hour is to review the NRC and implement the clause 6 A at the earliest. While Assam Congress after Bishnu Ram Medhi destroyed Assam by appeasing immigrants, AGP and AASU betrayed the naïve outgoing Assamese by dilly dallying the constitutional safe guard from a long timer. Assamese sub nationalism has been relegated to an individual profit making business enterprise by a section of sub nationalists. Shame on those traitors of Assamese nation! Defining Assamese is one of the simplest job if one is possessed by sincere good will , rather than political game and mudslinging. Or else Assam is soon to become another Pakistan or Kashmir as prophesied by the then Jamiat leader Hussain Ahmad Madani in July 1947 at Sylhet saying that Sylhet does not need to be annexed in Pakistan . Not only sylhet entire Assam too will gradually come under Muslim rule one day. Similar concern was voiced by Mohammad Ali Jinnah at Dacca University-“ Assam was in my pocket but I gave it away. We will take over Assam without waging any war”. If this is not frightening and intimidating then what would be given the prevailing scenario! Whither we Assamese autochthons are heading to?

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