

NATIONALITY QUESTION IN ASSAM : SOME CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

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The contemporary Assamese society is facing a serious political problem arising out of the aggressive assertion of identities by many of its ethnic minorities. It is rather interesting to note that these communities, who used to view themselves as integral parts of the Assamese society, are now following a familiar pattern of cultural revivalism manifesting itself in demands for political autonomy, protection of linguistic and cultural identity and preferential treatment in employment. Almost invariably the struggles launched by these communities are being led by their respective intelligentsia or educated elite. Apparently these struggles are generated by the belief that these communities are nationalities and that their interest needs protection from the domination of the comparatively advanced 'Asomiya' nationality. How and why this situation came about at this point of time cannot be understood without discussing certain conceptual issues involved in the nationality question of India as whole. This paper is an attempt at understanding some of these issues.

II

The powerful struggles launched by many small nationalities for the protection of their ethnic identities and the creation of a congenial atmosphere for their

development appear to have created a serious crisis in the Indian body politic mainly because a dominant section of the so called mainstream politicians and opinion builders have been taking an intolerant view of these struggles, so much so that movements of small nationalities which seek to redress their grievances very much within the State of India have also been depicted by these sections as separatist and at times even as secessionist. This attitude is in fact a reflection of a pan-Indian chauvinism which views India as a 'nation state' and believes that the various ethnic and cultural communities inhabiting the country are in the process of getting assimilated in the melting pot of Indian nationalism. This view may occasionally condescend to recognise the distinct cultural identity of many Indian communities and mouth slogans like 'unity in diversity' but refuses to recognise these small communities as nationalities. Assertion of identity by the small nationalities is viewed as a major threat to the Indian nation state. At a conceptual level this view subscribes to a definition of nation which gives a central place to the idea of State. Accepting this definition, which perceives nationalism as a political phenomenon centering on the concept of a state, often called a nation-state, implies that multicultural societies bound by a state will gradually assimilate the minor or weaker communities with the dominant one or various nationalities will, over a period, move towards formation of their own independent "nation-states". From this perspective it is natural for the nationalist forces to attempt assimilation or even forcible assimilation. This view derives its historical inspiration from many European countries where ethnic consolidation was closely linked with the formation of nation states so much so that in countries like Denmark, Italy and Norway there are no significant ethnic minorities.

This perception, however, overlooks the historical experiences of countries which are essentially polyethnic or multi-cultural and where statehood and nationality are understood as two different concepts — statehood implying political allegiance and nationality implying ethnic or cultural affiliation. As is obvious, in this perception a nationality is viewed more as a cultural phenomenon with an emphasis on its ethnic dimensions and not so much as a political entity. From our historical experiences it is reasonable to argue that while cultural or ethnic affinity may often lead to political unity the opposite process is rather rare in our times. It also appears that among the cultural factors facilitating emergence of a national feeling the most important, at least in the modern times, is linguistic homogeneity. We cannot ignore the fact that even in many so-called multi-lingual nation states problems relating to the nationality question on the linguistic lines are cropping up and in others like Switzerland political and economic integration of the Germans, French, Swiss, Italians and Romanians are taking place in an atmosphere of cultural equality.

If we accept this definition of nationality and emphasise its ethnocultural dimension without basing it necessarily on the foundation of nation-states it becomes possible for us to accept the existence of more than one nationality within a state without expecting the weaker ones to assimilate with the dominant one or suspecting the former to be working towards secession and therefore towards disintegration of the present state. However, in many multi-ethnic/multi-cultural societies this definition of nationality and the attendant distinction between the state and the nation remain contentious because the opinion-builders, belonging to the dominant nationality which captures and monopolizes state power are inclined

to identify their own community with the 'nation' which is of course viewed as synonymous with the state. It is true that many nations and nationalities of our times have either formed their own state or nurture the ambition of possessing a state of their own; but it must not be overlooked that this political ambition or urge is generated by the belief that a nation or a nationality cannot protect its interest without a sovereign state of its own.

All states and societies are multi-cultural in the sense that they include people of various cultures. But when cultural groups in a particular society possess or attain a degree of numerical strength and also consciousness about their distinct identity which makes their continued existence as a specific cultural group viable, the society has to be specifically identified as multi-cultural society. When such groups inhabit particular areas which they consider to be their homeland they qualify to be regarded as nationalities because subjective factors like attachment to one's native land and speech and a sense of wider kinship are vital for emergence of a nationality consciousness. In class societies such multi-national states came into being not as a consequence of free and voluntary association of different ethnic groups or nationalities but invariably nationalities as a result of conquest and assimilation of the territories of the weaker nationalities by a stronger nationality. It is therefore natural that in such societies the smaller nationalities will bear a grudge against the dominant nationality. The situation worsens when such countries adopt a capitalist path of development which enables the dominant nationality, with its dominant class exercising a monopoly over political and economic power, to reap the benefits of development and converts the weaker or smaller

nationalities into colonial hinterlands, thus depriving these nationalities of the fruits of development. It is true that class divisions emerge even among the backward communities but even the most advanced classes of these communities remain relatively deprived when compared to the dominant nationality and its dominant class. The hegemonic position of the dominant nationality enables it to impose its culture in a manner that the smaller nationalities feel threatened. It is true that this hegemony is the hegemony of the dominant section of the hegemonic nationality but it pervades the social reality of the community in a manner that even the unprivileged sections of the community get affected by it. At times, this produces a bellicose-nationalism of the worst type. This is particularly so because the hegemonic classes use emotional slogans to camouflage their real interests. It is only natural that the conflict of interest generated by a process of internal colonisation motivates the elites of the smaller nationalities also to effect emotional integration in their respective communities so that they could put up a fight against the dominant nationality. The struggle is for fruits of development and it is fought mainly by those who are in a position to capture these. But the emotive slogans get all sections of these communities involved. As a result a critical situation does emerge. In all class-divided societies under the capitalist path of development there will always be layers of this conflict because as the fruits and evils of capitalist development percolate, elites emerge in smaller nationalities in a descending order depending upon their stages of development. While the most advanced of these fight against the dominant nationality for fruits of development at that level, others compete with their immediate superiors for fruits in corresponding levels of development. It is obvious that a permanent solution to the problem can be found only with

a radical change in the path of development. But if conditions for such change are not ripe, the relatively advanced communities and their elites must grant concessions and try to unite the smaller communities in a fight for a change in the path of development. But such a progressive consciousness can emerge only if the working classes of these communities put sufficient pressure on their respective elites. Progressive intellectuals can play a major role in this if they try and disseminate ideas explaining the need for unity of the smaller nationalities to effect a change towards progress.)

III

(The theoretical framework developed above can be used to explain the developments that have been taking place in Assam with respect to the growing tensions among the small nationalities of the region. These tensions are, however, of fairly recent origin dating back to that phase when educated elites began to emerge amongst the various ethnic communities of Assam. Before this development took place these various ethnic communities were component parts of what was called Assamese nationality. This nationalism which began to emerge from the second half of the nineteenth century with the growth of an educated elite in Assam, gradually came to be dominated and led by the Assamese middle class, which emerged as the hegemonic class in this region. There are certain historical reasons for the hegemony of the Assamese middle class, the most important being the fact that there has been hardly any significant growth of a regional bourgeoisie in this area and the preponderance of the peasantry coupled with mass illiteracy makes it possible for this class led by the intelligentsia to hold sway

over the entire society. The late emergence of middle classes amongst the other ethnic communities gave the Assamese middle class not only hegemony but it also made it the most advanced middle class of the North-East. (This fact has led to many tensions. Just as in late nineteenth century Assam, antagonisms developed between the more advanced Bengali middle class and the nascent and, therefore, less advanced Assamese middle class, similarly tensions are now developing between the more advanced Assamese middle class and the other nascent middle classes of the region.)

(This dominant position of the Assamese middle class has had other repercussions also. The nationalism which developed in Assam grew under the leadership of this middle class and the Assamese, came to play the role of a dominant nationality in this region. As a result the ideas, values and culture of the middle class came to be so imposed on this region that as the other nationalities began to grow they felt the pressure of the Assamese nationality. This dominance can be very clearly seen in the role of important Assamese middle class organisations like the Assam Sahitya Sabha. This organisation from its inception has taken a big-brotherly attitude towards the tribes of the hills and plains. The insensitivity of the Assamese middle class, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, towards the ethnic minorities had generated some resentment which led to the formation of organisations like the Tribal League.) However, the elites of these communities were not in a position to seriously challenge the hegemonic class. (Till independence the Assamese middle class did not show much interest in the cultures of these groups but from about the time of independence, when educated elites began to emerge from amongst some of these ethnic

communities, it began to show signs of awareness of their distinct existence and its initial response was to preach assimilation. But assimilation can be propagated only from a position of strength and hence in an attempt at consolidating the position of Assamese nationality the Assamese middle class started pressing for recognition of Assamese as the official language and began to maintain that the Assamese script should be taught to all the ethnic communities of the region. Such cultural expansionism should have been resisted but the nascent educated elite of these communities, though they occasionally voiced weak protests, were being absorbed in the Assamese middle class.

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* (The scenario, however, began to change from the 1950s onwards. With the formation of Bodo Sahitya Sabha, the Bodo educated elite were the first to acquire the necessary strength to resist the Assamese hegemony. The movement for Bodo script and language indicated that the Bodo educated elite had arrived and with the acquisition of a system of writing the ethno-consolidating role of the Bodo language especially increased which inevitably led to the emergence of a nationality consciousness and political aspirations and organisations followed. There were of course important economic reasons for the Bodo educated elite fo playing a crucial role in this. By that time their number had increased and it became impossible for the Assamese middle class to create job oppotunities for them. They had then to compete with the Assamese middle class who had been occupying a dominant position in the services and petty trade. As, in the case of the Assamese educated elite of nineteenth century, the Bodo elite at this stage do not have the skill and capital to compete with the big business, their obvious immediate enemy became the Assamese middle class and

the big brotherly attitude of the Assamese nationality added fuel to the fire.) A similar pattern is emerging among the Karbis and the Mishings also.

(It is important to understand that though what motivates the elites of the ethnic minorities of Assam to launch a struggle against the Assamese is their economic interest they do realise that these interests can be pursued only if the lower strata of their own communities are mobilised. Moreover the cultural and ethnic issues they raise are intricately woven with the economic issues. The nationality question thus acquires very great importance for them. It is not within the powers of the Assamese middle class to create conditions for allowing the smaller nationalities to be equal partners in the State of India; but they can definitely take a more tolerant view of these struggles. If the situation is to be eased they must at least grant some concessions to these nationalities and must not do anything to hamper their growth. It is true that history has shown that despite the concessions the Assamese middle class had wrested from the comparatively more advanced Bengali middle class, these concessions alone did not solve the problem of the middle class. A section of the class did get certain benefits no doubt but the problems remained and despite all facilities there is still increasing unemployment and frustration in the ranks of the middle class.) There will therefore be a similar condition of the Bodo, Karbi, Mishing nationalities as well. Concessions alone will not solve their problems because they will still be within this same capitalist system which brings about unequal development and unfair distribution of the fruits of development. So even after getting concessions they will still labour under the same difficulties as the Assamese middle class is doing. (What is therefore needed for a more permanent solution of

the problems of these smaller nationalities is a more egalitarian distribution of the wealth of the state of India. But that is not possible within the present system because under this socio-economic structure this North-Eastern region will continue to hold a colonial hinterland status. What is therefore really needed is a united fight by all nationalities of this region against the dominant national bourgeoisie.)

(Such a fight however is not possible under the present leadership of either the Assamese middle class) or the educated elites of the Bodos, Karbis and Mishings, because these middle class and elite groups have very limited aims in view and for the achieving of these aims they are mobilising the people of their communities with emotive slogans of nationality and culture. Had there been a sizeable working class in Assam or if the peasantry had been well organised as a conscious peasantry then the outward manifestation of Assamese nationalism might have been different from that which has been manifested by the Assamese middle class. But there being no significant working class in Assam and the peasantry, although having a history of militancy being more or less under middle class leadership, the impact of these classes on the expression of Assamese nationalism have been negated by the middle class hegemony.) Therefore under the present leadership and combination of forces there seems to be no possibility of diffusing tensions in this region. (On the theoretical plane the tensions can be removed only with the end of unequal development which means a change in the entire mode of production. That would mean a socialistic pattern of distribution but for that a total change in the whole socio-economic system would have to be effected which would mean a social revolution. That is an end which would require an

ideological struggle and mobilisation on a level far beyond the interests of the Assamese middle class or the elites of the smaller nationalities. However within the existing framework, the sanest step that the progressive section of the elites of the smaller nationalities of this region and the Assamese middle class can take, is for a united fight of all nationalities of this region against the ruling classes of the Indian State to put an end to this colonial hinterland status. This would bring greater development to this region which might be the first step towards solving some of the problems by increasing job opportunities, expanding the market and bringing prosperity to the region. We are however not arguing that economic prosperity alone would fulfill all the cultural and nationalistic aspirations of the smaller nationalities. But the end of colonial exploitation and the all-round development of the region would also provide opportunities for the fulfilment of the cultural and other aspirations of the small nationalities.