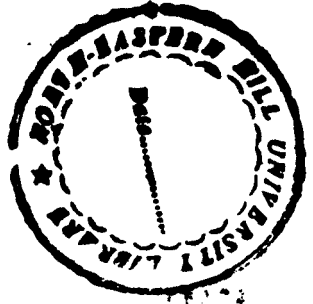


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**PROCEEDINGS OF  
NORTH EAST INDIA  
HISTORY ASSOCIATION**

**FIFTH SESSION**

**AIZAWL : 1984**



## PREFACE

It gives me great pleasure to place on record that the North-East India History association has been able to maintain its tradition of holding the annual sessions and publishing the proceedings volume of every session before the next session without any interruption. Within the first five years of its existence the Association has enlisted members not only from every research oriented institutions of higher education that are spread over the north-eastern region but also those scholars from outside the region who have been doing some research on this region. In five years our membership has increased at least ten times. Our emphasis is on scientific historiography which involves an inter-disciplinary approach to a given historical problem, in the specific context of the north-eastern region of India. The membership pattern of the Association is also representative of the various Social Science and inter-related academic disciplines.

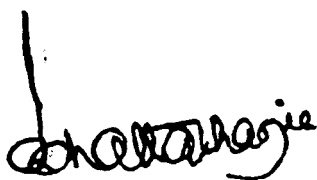
The objective of the Association has seen to encourage and promote research in the history of the region and the adjoining areas historically connected with it. We take some pride in our success on that count. The Association has been able to inspire research inside and outside its own forum. In every session so far, we have come across some scholars who presented their maiden papers. The studies presented in our sessions cover wide-ranging problems, including the issues that are currently confronting the life in the region. The research presented in the sessions have been followed up by the scholars themselves or by others in various forums and publications.

Our commitment has seen our strength. Otherwise, we have been working under several constraints, the most formidable being the problem of finance. The publication cost these days is indeed prohibitive for a non-official research organisation of this nature. And yet, we are required to publish our proceeding volumes out of our own resources. We are nevertheless, hopeful that the social relevance of our works shall some day be appreciated and some funding agency shall come forward to support our efforts. Till then, we shall take pride in the recognition of the academic contents of our works and continue to sustain all by ourselves.

This volume contains the papers that were presented at the Fifth Annual Session of the Association held at the Pachhunga University College, Aizawl on December 18-20, 1984. Professor

Sanat Bose, Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta presided over the session. Pu Saingenga, Principal, Pachhunga University College did us a great honour as Local Secretary of the session which was inaugurated by Shri Lalkhama, Chief Secretary to the government of Mizoram.

We are grateful to the authorities of the Pachhunga University College, its dynamic principal and the members of the History faculty for inviting the session and making the stay of the delegates so comfortable and so meaningful. The teachers and students of the college worked incessantly for the success of the session. This first ever academic gathering of this nature in Mizoram is indeed a milestone in the History of historical research in the region.



(J. B. Bhattacharjee)

Shillong  
The 25th July, 1985

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## **Religion and Ethnicity in class Formation: Aspects of Peasant Class Composition in Colonial Assam in the Context of Communalism**

**Sajal Nag**

The new emphasis in recent Indian historiography on Communalism is to treat it as a class struggle instead of viewing it as a hostility between two religious communities. This marks a new beginning. Indeed, the analysis of class-structure in the context of Indian nationalism and communalism has been extremely inadequate. The structure of class and class consciousness has to be correlated with it. The role of peasant classes here becomes immensely important. It was these classes which was the basis of communal political mobilisation. The crucial question that has not been tried to answer, why these class struggles were in the guise of communal conflict? Why a Hindu or Muslim facade? These questions themselves expose, the cruciality of ideologies in these strifes. In other words, the consciousness of these classes and under what circumstances these consciousness took a communal form. Both Class and Race are relationships. Class experience and class consciousness, race experience and race consciousness and racial conflict and class conflict thus involve all aspects of class race relationship.<sup>2</sup> What we suggest here, is that both class and communalism are based on relationships. Therefore Communalism need not be an inter-class conflict in the garb of religion, but it could even occur at the intra-class level. A fully developed class, which has attained its full consciousness, cannot really have communal consciousness too at the same time (theoretically).<sup>3</sup> But modern class formation in India began against the backdrop of Colonial Rule. It had disrupted the natural development of the classes. The forcible imposition of capitalism in colonial form had obviously disrupted the social evolution. It entailed in the formation of deformed classes which had abnormal birth and stunted and protracted

growth.<sup>4</sup> This could have left religious and ethnic elements within a class entity. This means Communal consciousness could have resulted even in the intra-class confines. In other words, a third dimension could be added to the analysis of communalism. Communalism need not be seen as a hostility between two groups of religious communities or class-struggle. It can be seen as a hostility between the members of a particular class within class boundary. In this paper which obviously is in the nature of a hypothesis, we make an attempt to make an examination into the formation of the peasant class in colonial Assam in the light of the questions we posed above.

## II

Within a few decades of the entry of British, the subsistence economy of Assam had been converted into a flourishing receiving economy.<sup>5</sup> The waste lands of Assam were sought to be brought under cultivation for agrarian commodity production. With the enormous growth of tea Industry, in alignment with the increasing communication facilities trade and commerce began to flourish. The economy was being injected with more and more inputs. The growing economy demanded an increasing labour supply. More the industrialisation that may have been imposed on Assam was agrarian in form: The tea Industry. The Cash Crop production were basically agricultural in form and hence it needed an immense amount of manpower supply. Assam was not rich in its population resources. Hence not only colonialism encouraged, assisted and imported immigrants into Assam even a natural inflow of immigrants from neighbouring Bengal especially<sup>6</sup> continued. Immigration was phenomenal.

### Density of Population per Square Mile : Brahmaputra Valley

Districts	1872	1881	1891	1901	1911	1921	1941
Kamrup	146	167	164	153	173	198	328
Darrang	69	80	90	99	110	170	263
Nowgong	68	80	98	88	79	108	299
Sibsagar	64	79	96	120	138	162	301
Lakhimpur	27	40	56	82	104	143	219
Goalpara	98	113	115	117	152	193	254

One of the major impact of this inflow of immigrants into Assam was the substantial change in the population composition and an extreme redistribution. The major shift in the composition and distribution of population was not only to affect the peasant economy, but also had a profound effect on the emerging structure. Religious and ethnic ideas found their way into the peasants' mind facilitated by new production relations resulted by ethnic redistributions. This happened because the indigenous inhabitants were Assamese Hindus mostly whereas the immigrants were mostly Bengali Muslim.<sup>7</sup> In other words, the two groups who were confronting each other in the confines of the same social arena belonged to two different religions as well as linguistic groups. But these confrontation was not really at will, but imposed by Colonialism. It is not really known from the available evidences what was their social relationship, but the subsequent Census Reports showed that there was tension in the rural Assams.<sup>8</sup> More often than not immigrants and the indigenous peasants had broken out in violent clashes.<sup>9</sup> These clashes were of course not on the basis of religion but the clash between an aggressive immigrants group desperately wanting to grab lands for permanent settlement and an indigenous settled group who resisted this encroachment.<sup>10</sup> The immigrants had often truly encroached into the lands of the indigenous peasants. On the other hand, the indigenous peasants also often sold off their lands to the immigrants to possess cash money and later on wanted the land back which the immigrants refused to comply with.<sup>11</sup> These were not the only reasons for the violent clashes. The *Social* habits and *Social* attitudes of the two groups were dissimilar. They were found to be incompatible.

The significant fact is that, though, the Raj encouraged and assisted immigration of the Muslim Peasants in Assam, no care was taken about the 'will' and opinion of the indigenous people of Assam. The immigrants were settled in the residential areas of the indigenous peasants. The residential distances was not maintained. Though the line system was a device to settle the immigrants and the indigenous peasants in two different demarcated areas, in reality it was in a haphazard manner. The two groups were settled not only in the same vicinity but even at the doorstep of each other.<sup>12</sup> This pattern of settlement took a vicious turn with the poli-

cies of the Sadulla Ministries during the 1930's, and 1940's.<sup>14</sup> The lack of spatial distance brought together two socially distant groups to confront each other resulting in collisions coming from two different social set up. The immigrants were an aggressive, violent group where as the indigenous people were meek and peace loving. Hence in such collision the indigenous peasants were often the frightened group.<sup>14</sup> A clear division between the two groups living in the same social arena was visible. This division was on the basis of indigenous and exogenous. But it apparently appeared to be a communal division because these groups belonged to two religious and linguistic communities.

The peasantry that emerged in Assam especially during the period of Indian Independence was a divided peasantry. An intra-class crack had crystalised. Both immigrants and the indigenous peasants belonged to this class. The direct producers had had equal share of participation in the process of production. Their cultivation, harvesting, ploughing all these, even share-cropping took place in the same sector, same arena. In other words they functioned in the same economic structure. They were the emerging peasant class of Assam and with the same class foundation. But it was not an unified class. The crack within its structure prevented the unification. The Assamese peasant class that thus appeared was a deformed, stuntedly developed class.

The intra-class division proved to be fatal and crucial in the politicisation of Nationalism and Communalism in the 1940's. The Muslim League's demand to include Assam in Pakistan and the League activities that followed in Assam during this period was on the strength of these immigrant population. It is difficult to trace how far these immigrants believed in the two nation-theory, but they often participated and were mobilised by the leaders in the League movements.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, to counteract the League mobilisation vigorous movements were also launched by the Hindu organisations.<sup>16</sup> The Hindu section of the population was impelled into the orbit of this movement. Significant fact is that both these communalist movements were based on the division that surfaced between the immigrants and the indigenous people. The intra-class division facilitated these respective mobilisations. But these mobilisations were not really autonomous or spontaneous. Though the intra-class polarisation

was an objective historical situation. A peasant class cannot really mobilise itself. It is always some leaders who help to raise the consciousness of the peasantry and mobilise them.<sup>17</sup> In this case the intra-class division though was between the indigenous and exogenous groups, it was also between two-religious and linguistic groups. But the latter was projected to be the major issue. Religious and ethnic ideas were propagated to show the incompatibility of the two groups. The Hindus were told that the Muslims were polluting the religion and the Muslims were told that they were politically incompatible with the Hindus. Thus the consciousness of the peasants that was being raised by the readers was in the communal direction. In other words religious and ethnic ideas were being implanted into the hearts of the peasants. The ideology of communalism was being preached. As against this ideology of nationalism was almost non-evident in the rural areas. Nationalism as an ideology remained confined only to the urban areas. Moreover, in the rural areas communalism was a more appealing ideology rather than nationalism. The peasants with their traditional consciousness of behaviour are hostile and opposite in their door steps. The differences and hostility between the indigenous and exogenous people were seen through a communal prism. The social attributes of the other group was seen to be so because of their different religion. So also, the incompatibility between the two which may be really because of their belonging to different social set ups, was seen to be as incompatibility between the two religious groups. Hence they had to face communalism in their everyday life whereas nationalism is an urban and modern phenomenon. The Assamese peasantry thus retained these consciousness which were really false consciousness.

### III

The pre-British Assamese Society had experienced ethnic homogeneity.<sup>18</sup> Efforts were made to maintain their Socio-cultural homogeneity. Supreme importance was given to ideologies. Thus the spiritual *Gurus* and *Gossains* were worshipped and considered to be next to God. With the acceleration of Hinduisation the Society had been in fact becoming more strict. In other words, a Hindu society was on the verge of emergence. The religious and ideological rigidity was gradually be-

coming the order of the day, though this rigidity was less than it was in Bengal. The consequent consciousness that developed in the peasant's mind as a result of these historical developments is significant. They solved their religious affiliations and worked hard to maintain their ideological purity which in turn got correlated to the maintenance of their homogeneous social cultural structure. This was because they lived in a closed up society with similar socio-cultural communities around them.

In such a structure the Muslims were latter entrants. There were two categories of Muslims living in Assam.<sup>19</sup> Firstly, the imprisoned Muslim soldiers left behind by the Muslim invaders and secondly, the Muslims who were imported by the royal government as high state employees. Besides these there were other Muslims who formed the occupational groups who specialised as some artisan or craftsmen or skilled groups. This group along with the captive soldiers who settled in Assam eventually, they were in general called *Qariyas* in local language. But in the villages they were called *Mariyas*. Their social position in the Assamese society is controversial; whereas the British reporters wrote that Assamese Muslims was a term of reproach and contempt.<sup>20</sup> The Assamese Muslim families do not approve of these. However, it can be deduced that the state employees were granted equal social status in the society but other group was granted an inferior social status.<sup>21</sup> In fact the term *Mariya* was given to the Muslims of lower order. Shihabunddin, when talked about the Assamese Muslims, he probably talked about the upper class of these Muslims.<sup>22</sup> However it cannot be negated that these Muslims were thoroughly assimilated. But whether as the plains tribes were converted to Hinduism and not, these Muslims suggest the emergence of a strong Muslim Society as well as the strong affinity of the Muslims to their own religion. Again the fact that the Muslims were called by name like *Gariya*, *Mariya* or even *Yavans* in the Vaihvana literature of Assam<sup>23</sup> reveals that they were differentiated in the society. But could be this differentiation was on the basis of indigenous and exogenousness initially. But the emergence of a strong Hindu Society and the strict affiliations of Muslims to their own religion, must have, in a later period brought religious and *et ni* considerations in their value system. Moreover, considering the position of the Muslims in Bengal, where they were

almost a prohibited religious group, it can be assumed that Bengal must have had some impact on the Assamese Hindu-Muslim relationship also. What follows is that some religious considerations had already crept up in the Assamese consciousness and obviously this was stricter at the peasant level.

When the British took over, these consciousness factor was not taken into account. Without modernising the consciousness of the peasants, without asking for their opinion, these peasants were made to confront a massive immigrants peasants in their door steps. Not only their ways of life but their economic and social activities were different also. For example, the immigrants were skilled with modern methods of the cultivation as against the economic traditionalism of the indigenous peasants. Moreover the indigenous group viewed the other to be *outsiders*. The division that arose between the two was now viewed to in religious terms. Immigrants were assumed to be different because they belonged to another religious group. Here the medieval consciousness of the Assamese worked. The hostility between the two groups came to be seen as religious hostility. An acute false consciousness that prevented the growth of an unified peasantry.

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