

Homogenisation and Disintegration : A Study of Northeast India

H. Srikanth

History is a witness to many-a-violent particial struggle waged in the name of national and ethnic identities. The intensification of national and ethnic movements in recent years, leading to the break up of different countries like the U.S.S.R, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Ethipoia etc., seems to be giving a credence to the belief that the principle of self-determination is an iron law of development of human societies. But, we know, at one point in history, when capitalism was just developing from within the womb of feudalism, modern nations like the USA, Great Britain, Switzerland etc. emerged through a process of assimilation and integration of different natinonalities and ethnic groups. The bourgeois conceptions of humanism, secularism and nationalism enabled the formation of such multi-national, multi-ethnic states without any need for exercising force or domination. But, such possibilities of achieving unity without coercion have become problematic in all class societies, after capitalism reached the stage of imperialism. Of late, the liberalisation programmes initated to overcome the crises in market economies have further complicated the problems of poverty, unemployment and other ills associated with capitalism and intensified national and ethnic tensions in different countries. These problems have become more acute and intense in the developing countries, which have taken the path of capitalism in its late phase. Uneven and sporadic development, a characteristic feature of capitalist growth, creates regional imbalances and further aggravates the problems of the people living in the backward areas, compelling them to agitate for the raddressal of their grievances. The State, unable to solve the basic problems of the people, attempts to keep the masses under control either through repression, or through cultural domination. These threats can be overcome and the real problems can be solved through the united struggle of all oppressed classes and communities against the crisis-ridden capitalist system. But in the absence of proper leadership, the people may mistake imaginary enemies for the real ones. Instead of working for radical transformation of the whole society, they demand for concessions within the system, as if piece-meal measures, like reservations, more powers to the states, formation of autonomous councils, separate statehoods or even secession would solve their problems. As none of these demands threaten the foundations of the State, these movements based on caste, religion, ethnicity or nationalities, can be used to divide the unity of the labouring masses. In such situation not only the forces advocating homogenisation and cultural domination, but also the protest movements demanding concessions within the system can turn out to be counter productive. This general theory holds good even for India in which both the trends of homogenisation and disintegration are at work. An attempt is made in this paper to further elaborate and substantiate the theme, by taking developments in Northeast India as our point of reference.

Specificity of Northeast

Northeast India, inhabited by people of diverse races, religions, cultures, languages and dialects, has many specific features which distinguish it from the rest of India¹. The people of Assam and Tripura live mainly in the valleys, whereas most people in Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram,

Manipur and Meghalaya live in the hilly areas. Hinduism has made inroad into Assam, Manipur and Tripura, but majority of people in Mizoram and Nagaland and over 40 percent in Meghalaya are Christians. There are many tribal groups in Arunachal Pradesh following Buddhism or their own primitive religions. Due to late entry of Hinduism, formation and permeation of caste values remained formal and confined only to few areas. Northeast India has over 150 tribes divided into numerous clans and speaking over 420 languages or dialects. While one can see primitive tribes even today in Arunachal Pradesh, we find hinduised tribes in Tripura, Assam and Manipur and fairly advanced and christianised tribes in Mizoram, Nagaland and Meghalaya. In economic field, agriculture remains the main source of income to 80 percent people in the hilly states, to 74 percent in Tripura and to 65 percent in Assam. Although in terms of indicators such as per-capita income, road mileage, rail communications, consumption of power, irrigation facilities, industrialisation and urbanisation, Northeast as a whole lags behind the national average, one can also notice differential levels of social, economic, educational and political developments among the Northeast states².

Northeast Under British Rule

Prior to the British conquest, Assam, for that matter the entire Northeast, remained outside all the great empires established in the Indian subcontinent. While Brahmaputra valley was ruled by the Ahom kings, the tribal areas in the plains of Assam were controlled by Cachari chiefs. When the British entered Northeast India, Tripura and Manipur were ruled by Hindu kings. There was some kind of republican rule in the Khasi hills, but in Jaintia hills the concept of kingship had already developed by them. However the Naga and Lushai hills remained under the control of traditional tribal chiefs. After conquering Assam and subsequently other hilly areas, the British brought the entire Northeast India, barring princely states of Tripura and Manipur under the purview of the Bengal Presidency. Assam which had not even reached the feudal stage of development under the Ahom kings, witnessed rapid changes in economy after the British took over. The British capital penetrated into Assam and the necessary infrastructure was built to facilitate the imperialist exploitation. Many traders, bankers, lawyers and clerks came from other provinces to subserve the colonial masters³. Apart from these sections, many poor hard working Bengali muslims were allowed by the Assamese zamindars to settle and cultivate the land. These poor immigrants cut the jungles, withstood the natural calamities, cultivated the barren lands and turned the valley into rich granaries. Besides them many workers, mostly tribals from Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Bengal were brought to work in the tea plantations. For the first time, the people of Assam got an opportunity to interact with different sections of people belonging to other regions. Although these developments caused hardships, they also helped the people of the region to get exposed to modern liberal and nationalist ideas. Many Assamese who had an opportunity to study in Calcutta were influenced by anti-imperialist struggle and they actively participated in the nationalist movement in Assam.

It was also during the British period that the tribes living in the hilly areas of Northeast increasingly came in contact with contractors, money lenders, traders and bureaucrats coming from the plains. With the blessings of the British government, the planters tried to encroach

upon the tribal lands for tea plantations. The tribals resisted these attempts and attacked the British officials and other encroachers⁴. Soon the British understood the futility of fighting with the tribals and even realised the need for keeping the tribal areas aloof from the plains for their own political and strategic interests. Accordingly, they followed the policy of least resistance and left the hilly areas almost unadministered. Through Inner Line Regulation Act of 1873 and the Scheduled Districts Act of 1874, the British government regulated the flow of non-tribals and allowed the tribals to live as they liked. The Christian missionaries were, however, allowed to work among the tribals. Although this policy apparently looks humane, it actually served the imperialist cause by keeping the tribals backward and aloof from the Indian nationalist movement. The Christian missionaries also made the tribals think that the tribals of the Northeast are distinct from the people of India in all respects. In the absence of effective communication and integration, the tribals continued to identify all people in the plains as exploiters or cheaters. On their part, the Indian nationalist leaders also did not make sincere attempts to influence and win over the confidence of the tribals. As a result, the tribals of Northeast remained away from the national mainstream almost till the end of the British rule⁶.

Social Base of Nationality and Ethnic Conflicts

The integration of Assam valley within the Indian subcontinent did create pan-Indian consciousness among the Assamese. But at the same time, rapid demographic changes, monopolisation of trade, government jobs and other important professions by the immigrants and the big brotherly attitude of the Bengalis, made the Assamese demand for a separate province for the Assamese. In 1874 the British Government, for its own administrative reasons, carved out of Bengal Presidency a separate province of Assam amalgamating the present Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram and Bengali speaking districts of Sylhet, Cachar and Goalpara. In this province also the Bengalis out-numbered the Assamese in all fronts. The British then saw Assam only as an extension of Bengal Presidency. Influenced by a strong Bengali lobby the government imposed Bengali as the official language of Assam. Being proud of their culture and language, the Bengalis looked down upon the Assamese language as only a dialect of Bengali language. These measures and the attitudes created bitter anti-Bengali feelings among the Assamese and the educated Assamese middle classes took the initiative to rouse the Assamese nationality consciousness among the people⁷. In their anti-Bengali-pro-Assamese movement, the Assamese leaders then received the support of Bodo tribes also. The Assamese leaders in Congress Party also could not overcome anti-Bengali feelings and while working for India's freedom, they also started voicing the aspirations of Assamese nationality.

No such developments took place among the tribals in the hilly areas. The tribes speaking different languages and dialects and having little interaction among themselves could not develop into nationalities in the real sense of the term. In fact, the term such as 'Nagas' and 'Mizos' are only generic names and there are various tribes and clans within each of them, speaking different dialects. Initially there were traditional rivalry between or within the nomadic tribes. The British made use of the animosities and played one against the other. Later, they carved out separate zones for each of the leading hill tribes and made them

settle in respective hill areas. However, because of their nomadic nature one can still see Nagas and Kukis in different parts of the Northeast. Restriction of their movements brought some kind of identity among them as Nagas, Mizos, Khasis, Jaintias and Garos. Through education and conversions, the Christian missionaries also played a role in strengthening the ethnic identities. In view of their low level of economic development, absence of developed language and lack of effective means of interaction, these ethnic groups could not develop into nationalities.

Independence and Reorganisation of Assam

The withdrawal of British and the subsequent partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan, had serious repercussions in the Northeast India. The Muslim dominated areas of Sylhet district opted to join East Pakistan. As a result, the Bengali dominant areas in Assam got truncated and the number of Bengalis despite immigration of many Bengali Hindu families from East Pakistan reduced considerably. For the first time, the Assamese were placed numerically in an advantageous position vis-a-vis the Bengalis⁸. The Assamese leaders were anxious to utilise this opportunity to promote Assamese language and culture.

In the hilly areas of Assam, which were almost left unadministered earlier, the Nagas and the Mizos were reluctant to join India⁹. The legendary Iraiwat, who led the leftist uprising in Manipur also demanded a sovereign socialist Manipur. They felt that racially, linguistically and culturally, they were different from the Indians. The tribal people were afraid that they would lose their separate identities and would be swamped by the people from the plains. The Indian State responded to these challenges both through repression and reform. On the one hand, it made the princely states sign the instrument of accession and on the other hand, it tried to convince the tribal leaders through negotiations and promises to remain in India. Recognising their unique socio-economic situation, the Constitution of India made special provision for the administration of hilly tribes in the Northeast by incorporating the sixth schedule¹⁰. Although placed within the Assam state, the responsibility of the hilly areas was vested with the Governor of Assam acting as the agent to the President. Provision was made for the constitution of autonomous districts and autonomous regions and they were placed under democratically elected district council or regional council. With intention to free the tribal mind from the sense of domination and exploitation by the people from other areas, the councils were given real powers-administrative, legal and financial-to make policies and implement the programs relating to wide range of issues, such as land use, unreserved forests, cultivation, primary education, health, fisheries, inheritance of property, regulation of money-lending and trade by the non-tribals, social customs, judicial administration and even appointment and succession of Chiefs. Except in the Naga Hills, in all other five zones the Autonomous District Councils started functioning from 1952.

Attempts at Assamisation

Assamese as a language developed as a result of interaction among different tribal groups in the Northeast, more particularly Cacharis, Dimashas, Koch Rajbanshis and Ahoms. In its course of development different tribes, like Deuris, Triwas, Sonowai, Kacharis, Mech Kacharis etc. got Assamised. If Assamese language was allowed to have its natural course, it could have become lingua-franca in the whole of Assam. The process of formation of

Assamese nationality which was retarded earlier due to the limited means of communication and transport, and later due to numerical dominance of more powerful Bengali nationality, got more favourable conditions for its development after independence. If Assamese leaders had greater insights into the complexity of Assam and comprehended the natural process of development of language and nationalities, they could have gradually assamised other ethnic groups. But they were so blinded by anti-Bengali sentiments that from the day one, the Congress leaders in Assam started talking about assamisation, as if with vengeance and fear psychosis. Mr. Gopinath Bardoloi, the first Chief Minister of Assam declared, "For the homogeneity of the province they (the non-Assamese) should adopt Assamese language and it is not the intention of the government to make Assam a bi-lingual state". Another Congress MLA, Mr. Nilmoay Phukan asserted, "All language of different community and their culture will be absorbed in Assamese culture. I speak rather with authority in the matter regarding the mind of our people that their state cannot nourish any language in the province"¹¹. With such overt and covert threats, the Assam government could make lakhs of Bengali-Muslim peasants and tea garden workers enlist themselves as Asamese. As a result, the Assamese population which was placed at 20 lakhs in 1931 census shot upto 59.6 lakhs in 1951 census, and increase of more than 200 per cent in two decades ¹². In the subsequent census in 1961 and 1971, it was shown that the Assamese population was double the combined population of the Bengalis and the tribals living in Assam. If the census reports were genuine, the Assamese need not worry about the status of their language and culture. But the Assamese leaders themselves did not have faith in the figures. Hence they made efforts to assamise all people in the plains by imposing Assamese as official language and as medium of instruction. But these measures were met with stiff resistance from the Bengalis in the Barak valley region, compelling the government to recognise Bengali and later Bodo as official languages along with Assamese.

Initially, the Assamese language was intended to be imposed only in the plains, but the tribals in hill districts felt that they would be the next targets of the Assamese chauvinists. This issue, combined with other factors, like negligense of development process in the hill districts, big brotherly attitude of the Assamese leaders, the fear of losing their identity and the growing aspirations of the rising middle classes within the tribes etc. made them demand separate hill states. No other assurances and alternative suggestions could satisfy them and ultimately the political map of the Northeast had to be reorganised by forming separate hill states of Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland ¹³. Only Karbis and Dimashas in North Cachar Hills could be convinced to remain within Assam.

Movements against the Foreigners

Instead of learning lessons from the bitter consequences of homogenisation which resulted in the shrinking of the Assam territory, the chauvinists continued to nurture anti-Bengali feelings. Initially, these sentiments were articulated through the educated middle class Assamese who found their entry into government services and public sector jobs blocked by the educated Bengalis. Later, as the pressure on land increased in the countryside, the Assamese peasants began to see the Bengali Muslim cultivators as a threat to their existence and growth. The growth of left movement in 70's made the upcoming Asamese bourgeoisie turn against the

Bengalis. In the seventies many riots were organised against the educated Bengali Hindus in towns and against the Bengali Muslim cultivators in the countryside. By branding all leftists as Bengali immigrants, the left cadres were harassed and attacked. But such violent anti-Bengali agitations could not win over the support of majority people within and outside Assam. This point became clear with the defeat of chauvinist parties like Assam Jatiyabad Dal (AJD) and Purbanchal Lok Parishad (PLP) and the victory of many candidates belonging to left parties and minorities in 1978 elections. It was them that Assamese chauvinists were forced to change their tactics and slogans. Those who did not raise the issue of foreigners in 1978 elections, suddenly invented the existence of 20 to 40 lakhs of refugees from Bangladesh in Assam. By creating a bogey of Assamese becoming minority within Assam, they could mobilise lakhs of people in the name of Assamese language and culture. The participation of students and youth in the Assam agitation attracted the attention of intellectuals and national parties. Many intellectuals in Assam also made a strong case in support of the agitation and gave progressive colour to it as a national movement. It was not difficult for leftist parties and the minorities to realise that anti-foreigner movement was basically directed against the Bengali immigrants. But most of the Bengalis living in certain parts of Assam, for example those living in Cachar region, are the original residents of the region or those who have migrated to Assam much before 1971¹⁴. It is not to say that Bangladesh refugees did not settle in Assam. But their number cannot be anywhere near the astronomical figures quoted by AASU or NERSU¹⁵.

The Assamese, carried away by the magical figures, started believing that their language and cultural would be wiped out, if the immigrants were not sent out. With the support flowing from within and outside, the so-called anti-foreigners' movement lasted for more than half a decade. The agitation came to an end with the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985.

Impact of Assam Agitation

Apparently it looked as if the Assamese won the battle. But if one looks at the agitation and the accord more critically, it becomes clear that the Assamese did not gain anything substantial. In reality there was never a threat to Assamese language at any time. For, no language dies out because of the existence of some other languages. A language disappears or becomes defunct, if only it fails to grow and develop according to the changing needs of the time. As long as Assamese language continues to develop, irrespective of the Accord, the language survives. As far as culture is concerned, no culture remains static forever. Every culture undergoes changes in course of time. Indeed one should guard oneself from cultural degeneration. But one should not have hesitation to accept and acquire a higher culture. There is nothing progressive or nationalistic about adhering to the native culture. Preserving Assamese culture and identity for eternity is impossible, even if all Bengalis are thrown out of Assam. As per the Accord, it is not possible to send out the Bengalis who have settled there before 1971. As far as the Bangladesh refugees are concerned, after hectic combing operations, only a few lakhs were identified as foreigners. How does disenfranchising these immigrants, most of whom are poor cultivators or agricultural labourers, serve the interests of the Assamese ?

At the time of Assam agitation, the leaders raised many issues concerning unemployment, industrialisation and development of the Northeast. But once the Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) came to government power, it proved to be as corrupt and as insensitive as the Congress government in dealing with the basic problems of the people. As the AGP party and government failed to realise the demands of Assam agitation, a radical section of the movement joined the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and declared secession from the Indian union as the only panacea for all the ills affecting Assam today. With ULFA taking to militant path, the Bodos, who at one time supported the Assamese against the Bengalis, also started agitating for separate Bodoland, on the ground that they have separate linguistic and cultural identities of their own. These movements have started influencing the Karbis in Karbi Anglong and the Bengalis in Barak valley region to think of separate statehoods¹⁶.

These developments in Assam have their repercussions in other Northeastern states as well. Anti-Bengali and anti-Indian feelings are growing stronger in Meghalaya, Manipur, Nagaland and Tripura. The tribals are becoming hostile to all outsiders. The problem did not end there. Every state has become a victim of inter-ethnic conflicts. The Garos demand for separate statehood in Meghalaya, Naga-Kuki clashes in Manipur, Riang-Mizos conflicts in Mizoram, growing tribal militancy in Tripura have called into question the very survival of these states.

Thus the experience of Northeast India underlines the fact that forcible homogenisation and cultural domination of one nationality over others cannot ensure the unity and integrity any multi-ethnic and multinational state. Rather, such measures could only create a sense of insecurity or deprivation among the subject nationalities and groups and give birth to narrow identity politics that would only lead to further disintegration.

Notes and References

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