

**SOCIO-ECONOMIC ROOTS
OF
LANGUAGE POLITICS IN ASSAM
DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD**

(ABSTRACT)

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The dissertation is an attempt to study one of the various kinds of regionalism and communalism prevalent in the multinational Indian Union which frequently pose a potent threat to the integrity of the country. The specific case examined, is the Assamese-Bengali conflict in Assam. The emphasis is on the study of the inner-dynamics which led to the rise of this historic conflict.

The introductory pages present the problem and examines its importance in Modern Indian history.

Chapter one examines the pre-colonial geo-political position of Assam; a closed up and exclusive society. Such features of the Assamese society bears close resemblance to the characteristics of the societies, Marx talked of in his formulation of Asiatic Mode of Production. Hence Assamese society was examined in the light of the theory of Asiatic Mode of Production. This theoretical model, if refined on the basis of new empirical data, appears to be the most apposite one for studying the socio-economic formation of pre-colonial Assam.

The basis of the conflict was planted when this closed society was opened up by the British which entailed momentous destructions and modernisations in the traditional Assamese society.

The focus in chapter two is on the destructions and re-constructions done by the British in Assam. The self-sufficient Assamese economy was devastated; villages and urban centres plundered and the population terrorised. The continuous enhancement of land revenue rates imperilled the economic reproduction of the labourers and undermined the productive forces of the country and imposed an artificial division of labour. Thus Assam was soon transformed into a plantation and raw-material producing economy.

With the opening up of the closed economy, labour and capital began to pour in. The British imported functionaries from Bengal as the local people proved to be unsuitable and it was for the smooth functioning of the colonial machinery that Bengali language was brought into use in the courts and educational institutions of Assam. Although the Assamese people were successful in reinstating the Assamese language, they suspected hands of the Bengali functionaries in the persecution of Assamese language.



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In 1874 Assam was made a Chief Commissioner's province and three Bengali speaking district, Goalpara, Cachar and Sylhet was transferred to Assam. The Bengalis agitated to go back to their mother-province while the Assamese resented this attachment.

Colonial modernisations was thus successful in polarising the conflicting groups.

Chapter three examines the penetration of British capitalism in colonial form into Assam and its impact on the class and demographic structure of Assam. British policy of encouraging immigrants into Assam had a tremendous impact on the demographic balance of the province. Again with the advent of British rule, the traditional classes dissolved and newer ones were on the verge of emergence. The constant immigration of Bengal peasants, although helped Assam to have a prosperous agriculture, the indigenous peasants trailed far behind. Within a very short period the immigrants peasantry became prosperous entailing a economic disparity between the indigenous and immigrant peasants. This disparity culminated into an intra-class division. Racial and ethnic considerations got intermingled in this cleavage.

The product of British capitalistic intervention was the rise of white collar group. The economic transformation and the new system of education released a steady flow of people looking for white collar job facilities. In Assam, due to historical reasons, members of Bengali community dominated this scene too.

Such intra-class division brought the crystallisation of the cleavage that existed between the Assamese and the Bengali communities. By the 1930's the Assamese vigorously agitated against immigration and the immigrants, while the British and the Muslim leaders supported and encouraged immigration. Threatened of expulsion and deportation the immigrants claimed to have become 'Assamese' while the Assamese themselves feared that they would become a minority in their own land.

Chapter four studies the conflagration of the conflict. The product of the transformation of the non-capitalist Assamese economy into a subordinate capitalist one, was the middle class of Assam. The Assamese middle class was a late comer in the political arena of India. They were born under the dominance of Bengali Middle class. In their maturity they tried to break away from

this domination which had an inevitable impact on the masses. In the middle class politics, language was made the symbol of crusade and linguistic communities the scapegoat. The polemic between the Bengali and the Assamese middle classes, since then had been fairly continuous and symbolised in many ways the fight between the interest of an immigrant and comparatively advanced middle class and a less advanced group. In this conflict, communal and chauvinist ideologies were inflicted upon the masses. The intermingling of linguistic and religious issues prevented the rise of an objective nationalism. Instead, communal and regional interests played significant role.

Chapter five concludes that the logical culmination of colonial policies and actions was the rise of this conflict between the Assamese and the Bengali communities. In the process of the socio-economic transformation of Assam the relationship between these two nationalities were strained. The middle class members instead of cementing the crack fueled the conflict to be conflagarated.