

CHAPTER FIVE

Limits of National Identities A Study of Identity Politics in North East India

H. SRIKANTH

Introduction

The development of nationalities into nations is a complex and conditional process involving several interrelated factors and events. The actual course of development of nation differs from country to country and from one state of development of economy to other.¹ It is true that in 18th and 19th centuries, many modern nations like France, Italy, Germany, etc. emerged out of the national aspirations of nations, composed, basically of culturally and linguistically homogeneous people. The West provides us with examples of nations formed out of assimilation and integration of many nationalities.² The Great Britain, a classical example of modern nation, is formed out of combination of Anglo-Saxon, Scottish and Irish nationalities. In Switzerland the German, Italian and French speaking nationalities coexist peacefully as a single nation. The USA, the most powerful nation in the world today, was formed out of voluntary integration of the Anglo-Saxon nationality with substantial groups of Germans, Scottish, Irish, French, Dutch, Swedish, Swish, Polish and other millions of people belonging to various nationalities from different parts of the world, accepted the language and socio-political institutions of the Anglo-Saxon community, which had by then developed its own identity vis-a-vis its counterparts in England.³

The case of India is very much in common with multi-nationality nations like the USA, Switzerland and Great Britain. India is indeed a land of many nationalities. Had there been no colonial rule, many of these nationalities could have emerged as independent nations states. But the British rule brought the people of different nationalities under common political and economic system. The destruction of self-sufficient village economies and consequent development of modern education, communication and transport

enabled the people of different nationalities to interact and communicate with one another. As all nationalities were subjected to the same alien oppression and exploitation, their common sufferings and aspirations gave birth to pan-Indian national consciousness. Barring the demand for Pakistan, which was communal in its essence and had nothing to do with the aspirations of the so called Muslim nationalities, the aspirations of different nationalities to protect and promote their language and culture, did not impede the development of a national front against the British rule. Most nationalities aspired for autonomous states within the Indian union and did not insist on accession. After independence, the national bourgeoisie who attained the state power initiated many structural changes to accommodate the aspirations of different nationalities and ethnic groups within the parameters of the Indian constitution and at the same time bring them under the common political and economic rule of the bourgeoisie.⁴

As such, the presence of multi-nationality states and the possibility of developing into multi-nationality nations are beyond any controversy. However, developments in recent decades seem to be going against such nations, which have formed out of voluntary assimilation or integration of different nationalities and ethnic groups in the country. The break up of former socialist states like the USSR, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, etc. into many tiny independent states, the growth of secessionist movement in different parts of the world and the increasing assertion of the minorities even in countries like the USA, Great Britain, Canada and Belgium, have come to cast doubts about the success of multi-nationality nations. The increasing secessionist movements and ethnic groups are creating problems for the Indian bourgeoisie, who are aspiring to make India into a powerful nation.

All these developments have made some scholars and activists believe that nationality and ethnic aspirations and identities cannot be satisfied in multi-nationality states and hence these states would, sooner or later, break up into several independent states. Although this logic seems to be in tune with the empirical reality today, it need not be accepted as *fait accompli*. The nationality question cannot be understood in isolation, ignoring various structures and social forces influencing them. With this understanding, the present paper seeks to grasp the specificity of nationality question in India's Northeast and account for the factors that perpetuate the national and ethnic identities in this part of country even after fifty years of Indian independence.

Specificity of India's Northeast

Northeast India, inhabited by the people of diverse races, religions, cultures, languages and dialects, has many specific features, which distinguish it from

the rest of India. 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 had made inroad into Assam, Manipur and Tripura, but majority of people in Mizoram and Nagaland and over 40 per cent in Meghalaya are Christians. There are 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 420 languages or dialects. While one can see primitive tribes even today in Arunachal Pradesh, the tribal people in Mizoram and Nagaland are fairly advanced and westernized.⁵ In economy agriculture remains the main source of income to 80 per cent people in the hilly states, to 74 per cent in Tripura and to 65 per cent in Assam. Although in terms of indicators such as per-capita income, road mileage, rail communication, consumption of power, irrigation facilities, industrialization and urbanization, Northeast as a whole lags behind the national average, one can also notice differential levels of social, economic, educational and political developments across various states in the Northeast.⁶

Northeast under British Rule

Prior to the British conquest, Assam, for that matter entire Northeast, remained outside all the great empires established in the Indian subcontinent. When the Ahom ruled Brahmaputra valley, the tribal areas were under the Control of Cachari chiefs. After conquering Assam and subsequently other hilly areas, the British brought the entire Northeast India under the purview of the Bengal Presidency. After the British take over, Assam which had not even reached the feudal stage of development under the Ahom kings, witnessed rapid changes. The British capital penetrated into Assam and the necessary infrastructure was built to facilitate the imperialist exploitation. Many traders, lawyers, bankers and clerks came from other provinces to subserve the colonial masters.⁷ Apart from these sections, many poor and hardworking 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 region 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 opportunity to study in Calcutta were influenced by anti-imperialist struggle and they actively partici-

pated in the nationalist movement in Assam.

It was also during the British period that the tribal people living in the hilly areas of Northeast increasingly came in contact with contractors, money-lenders, traders and bureaucrats coming from the plains. But the blessings of the British government, the planters tried to encroach upon the tribal lands for tea plantations. The tribal people resisted these attempts and attacked the British officials and other encroachers.⁸ Soon the British understood the futility of fighting with the tribal people and even realized 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 Regulations Act of 1873 and the Scheduled Districts Act of 1874, the British government regulated the flow of non-tribals and allowed them to live as they like.⁹ The Christian missionaries, were, however, allowed to work among the tribals. Although this policy apparently looked humane, it 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 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 rule.¹⁰

Social Bases of National 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, monopolization 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 state for themselves. 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 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. Such measures and 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 people.¹¹ While leading the anti-Bengali-pro-Assamese movement, the Assamese leaders then received the support of Bodo tribes also. The Assamese leaders in the Congress Party, while working for India's freedom, started voicing the aspirations of the Assamese nationality as well.

No such developments took place among the tribal people living in the hilly areas. The tribes speaking different languages and dialects and having little interaction among them could not develop into nationalities in the real sense of the term. In fact, the terms 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 was traditional rivalry between or within the nomadic. 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 did bring 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 Reorganization 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 Bengali population in Assam, 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 Bengalis.¹² The Assamese leaders were anxious to utilize this opportunity to promote Assamese language and culture.

In the hilly areas of Assam, which were almost left unadministered earlier, the Nagas and Mizos were reluctant to join India.¹³ The legendary Irai-wat, who led the leftist uprising in Manipur also demanded a sovereign socialist Manipur. They felt that racially, culturally and linguistically, they were different from the mainland Indians. The tribal people were afraid that they would lose their separate identities and 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. Recognizing their unique socio-economic status, the Constitution of India also made a special provision for the administration of hilly tribes in the Northeast by incorporating the Sixth Schedule.¹⁴ Although placed within the Assam state, the responsibility of the hilly areas was vested with the Governor of Assam, not to the State Assembly. Provisions were made for the constitution of autonomous districts and autonomous regions and were placed under democratically elected district councils or regional councils. 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 – 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 five zones the Autonomous District Councils started functioning from 1952.

Attempts at Assamization

Assamese as a language developed as a result of interaction among different tribal groups in the Northeast, more particularly Cachari, Dimassas, Koch Rajbanshis and Ahoms. In its course of development, different tribes like Deuries, Tiwas, Sonowal Kacharis, Mech Kacharis, etc. got Assamized. 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, got more favourable conditions for its development after India became independent. 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 Assamized other ethnic groups. But the Assamese leaders were so blinded by anti-Bengali sentiments that from the day one, the Congress leaders in Assam started talking about Assamization, as if with vengeance and fear psychosis. 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 bilingual state." Another Congress MLA, Nilmoni Phukon asserted, "All languages of different communities and their cultures 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."¹⁵ With such overt and

covert threats, the Assam government could make lakhs of Bengali Muslim peasants and tea garden workers enlist themselves as Assamese. As a result, the Assamese population which was placed at 20 lakhs in 1931 census shot up to 59.6 lakhs in 1951 census, an increase of more than 200 per cent in two decades.¹⁶ 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 people living in Assam. If the census reports were genuine, there is no reason for the Assamese people to worry about the status of their language and culture. But the Assamese leaders themselves did not have faith in the figure. Hence they made effort to Assamize all people in the plains by imposing Assamese as official language as medium of instruction. But these measures met with stiff resistance from the Bengalis in the Barak valley region, compelling the government to recognize Bengali and later Bodo also as official languages of Assam. Although at that point, Assamese language was attempted to be imposed only in the plains, the tribal people in hill districts began to feel that they would be the next targets of Assamese chauvinism. This fear, combined with other factors, like negligence of development process in the hill districts, the big brotherly attitude of Assamese and the growing aspirations of the rising middle classes within the tribes, etc. made the tribal leaders demand for separate hill states. No other assurances and alternative suggestions could satisfy them and ultimately the political map of Northeast had to be reorganized by forming separate hill states of Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland.¹⁷ Only Karbis and Dimasas in North Cachar Hills could be convinced to remain within Assam.

Anti-Foreigners Movement

Instead of taking lessons from the bitter consequences of homogenization, which resulted in the shrinking of the Assam territory, the advocates of Assamese nationalism found it difficult to reconcile to the fact that Assam was basically a multi-national and multi-ethnic region. They continue to nurture anti-Bengali feelings. Initially, the educated middle class Assamese, who found their entry into government services and public sector jobs blocked by the educated Bengalis in Assam, articulated these sentiments. Later as the pressure on land increased in the countryside, the Assamese peasants began to see the Bengali Muslim cultivators as threat to their existence and growth. The growth of left movement in the seventies made the upcoming Assamese bourgeoisie turn against the Bengalis. During that period many riots were organized against the educated Bengali Hindus in towns and against the Bengali immigrants, the left cadres were harassed and attacked. But such violent anti-Bengali agitations could not win over the majority of people within and out-

side 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 then that the 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 a minority within Assam, they could mobilize lakhs of people in the name of Assamese language and culture. Massive mobilization of students and youth and the Gandhian tactics adopted by the leaders of the Assam agitation attracted the attention of the leaders and the masses. Many intellectuals and social activists in Assam, who were seriously concerned with the problems of underdevelopment of the region, gave intellectual justification to the movement by citing the injustice done to the Northeast as a whole by the Central government. Their support to the movement helped in giving a progressive colour to the anti-foreigners' agitation. The movement received tremendous response from the Assamese people in the Brahmaputra valley, who really believed that their culture and language is at stake due to the large-scale immigration. The movement lasted for more than half a decade. Finally, it came to an end with the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985.

The Assam agitation threw light on many unaddressed problems and fears of the people of this region. Issues like underdevelopment of the region and the Centre's neglect of the Northeast have come to receive the national attention for the first time. But while highlighting some, the movement has also hidden some basic facts about Assam. Although the presence of many Bengalis in Assam is an undeniable fact, it is not true all Bengalis living in Assam are immigrants. For example, many Bengalis living in the Barak valley are the residents of the region even before independence.¹⁸ There was hardly any Assamese population in this region at any point of time. Most of the immigrants found here are Hindus, not Muslims; and they had come and settled in the valley long before the Bangladesh War of 1971. This is not to say that Bangladeshi refugees did not come and settle in Assam. But their number cannot be anywhere near the astronomical figures quoted by All Assam Students' Union (AASU) or Northeastern Regional Students' Union (NERSU).¹⁹ Although a section of the otherwise progressive scholars were misled by the slogans and promises of the leaders, it was not difficult for the leftist parties and the minorities to realize that the movement was basically directed against all Bengali immigrants, not just against the Bangladeshi refugees. It was precisely the reason why there was hardly any response to the so-called national movement in the Bengali dominant regions in Assam such as the Barak val-

