

Assamese Identity Issues: A Chapter Review of ‘India’s North-East: Identity Movements, State and Civil Society’

Manash Pratim Borah^{1*} & Mridu Paban Nath²

^{1,2}Department of Social Work, Tezpur University, Assam, India. Email: borahpratimmanash@gmail.com*

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.38177/AJBSR.2023.5211>



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Article Received: 07 May 2023

Article Accepted: 18 June 2023

Article Published: 27 June 2023

ABSTRACT

This commentary article discusses the chapter titled ‘Assam: Identity Movements and Insurgent Politics’ – ‘Assamese Identity Issues’ in Udayon Misra’s book “India’s North East: Identity Movements, State and Civil Society” (2014), focusing on the Assam movement and its implications for Assamese identity. The author sheds light on how the movement was centered around the issues and questions between foreign migrants and indigenous people, highlighting the struggle for linguistic identity and the yearning for a unified homeland. The commentary also underscores the need for social and political cohesion, effective conflict management, and inclusive governance to ensure a peaceful resolution and foster the development of Assamese society. It provides a comprehensive analysis of the historical context, starting with rich debates spanning over many decades.

Keywords: Assam movement; Assamese identity; United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA); All Assam Students Union (AASU); Assam Accord.

Commentary

The chapter ‘Assamese Identity Issues’ in Udayon Mishra’s book ‘India North East: Identity Movements, State and Society’ (2014) published by Oxford University Press is an insightful work which offers an excellent monograph on the Assamese identity turmoil which has long occupied the Centre stage of society and politics in Assam. The author includes rich historical debates that cover more than hundred years, attempts to disseminate the root of regional problems and tries to construct coherent arguments with special reference to Assam movement. He clearly explains how the Assam movement is based on the foreign national’s issue and the Assamese national question arises the struggle for linguistic identity and a quest for homogeneous homeland. The chapter discusses the rise of ULFA with a sole motive of ‘*Swadhin Asom*’ (Sovereign/Independent Assam) for ethnic and linguistic independence, which later became an insurgent group. On the contrary the Assamese national sentiment also opened up the movement led by AASU for indigenous homeland where different communities of Assam came under one umbrella.

Gradually, the chapter introduced us with the origin of Assamese community which took a proper shape during the reign of Ahom Kingdom. Also, the conflicts between Ahom and Mughal bonded the feeling of Assamese oneness, moreover the Ahom attitudes of acceptance and accommodativeness towards different ethnic group and negligence to caste biasness which made it easier for communities to come under one-fold. Moreover, *Shankardeva* who founded *Vaishnavism* greatly cemented the force of Assamese nationality among greater Assamese people. But in the post-independence era the threats that forged unity between the different segments of Assamese community and strengthened the Assamese national consciousness -were the struggles to regain the status of Assamese language and increasing pressure on cultivable land as a result of illegal immigration from neighboring country Bangladesh; it led to rise of the historical Assam Agitation or Assam Movement. The Assam movement that started its root from the greater Assamese middle class for the sole reason they believe that there was a threat to the Assamese culture

and they are being reduced to a minority in their own land. The initial phase of the movement led by All Assam Students Union and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) or AGP was marked by writings and demonstrations against government's exclusionary attitudes and call for protest. Mass dharnas, picketing, Satyagraha, strikes and mass signature campaigns, black-outs at night followed. As many as 18 lakh people took oath to carry out the struggle until the foreigners were ousted. People of Assam refused to take part in General Elections (1979). "No deletion, no election" was the demand. Assam became the first state in Independent India to not have taken part in the parliamentary elections. As a result, 12 of the 14 constituencies' seats remained vacant in the elections of 1979. Crude oil from the oil fields of upper Assam was refused to the rest of the country through formation of human chain. The rigid attitude of the agitators to end the movement till their demands were met and the impairing economic blockade made the Centre establish President's rule in December 1979, which continued for a year. There was a complete breakdown of administrative machinery. The Nellie massacre (1983) was the major conflict in name of indigenouness changed the dynamics when people were brutally massacred and killed. The chapter discusses the series of tumultuous years (1979–1984) of objection and violence, despite of it the Indira Gandhi government decided to hold elections in January, 1983 which was met with violent protests throughout the state. The state has also seen agitation of ULFA in regards of mass and secret killings in the name of socialist and sovereign state.

The later phase of the chapter discusses the new Central Government under Rajiv Gandhi decided to call the leaders AAGSP (Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, Biraj Sarma, Bhrihu Phukan) for negotiations. After a lot of deliberation, the historic Assam Accord was signed in 15th August 1985. 1st January 1966 became the base year for detecting foreigners and 24th March 1971 was decided as the cut-off date for detecting illegal foreigners and removing them from the electoral rolls. Several other clauses were also included which are still issues of intense debate even today. According to the author the Assam Agitation slit open the diverse state of Assam into a battleground of community and identity politics. Oppression of the native Bodo community during the movement years proved to be disastrous and gave rise to the demand for Bodoland in the later years. Post the agitation there were demands for autonomous councils among most of the tribal communities of the state. However, in the present context, the Assam Accord till date has not been fully implemented. Each successive government has made it a part of their campaign narrative but actual work done is not substantial. The National Register of Citizens (NRC) was the last hope for the people of the state so that the objectives of the Assam Movement were fulfilled.

Perspective

It is important to acknowledge that the Assam Movement was a response to genuine concerns and grievances of the indigenous Assamese population. The movement symbolized their aspirations for the protection of their cultural identity and the preservation of their homeland. However, a more inclusive approach that recognizes and embraces the diversity within Assamese society could have helped bridge the gap between different communities and fostered a more harmonious coexistence. The chapter helps to identify the lens of social models which influenced the Assam Movement to a great extent. The lack of social and political cohesion lead to the brutal massacre across the state, (e.g. Nellie massacre). This conflict could have been reduced to a great extent if the administrative machinery was flexible and worked in adherence to the nationalistic mindset of the communities. Also, social cohesion is very

important driver for peace building and resistance for violence and conflict which makes societies stable; in addition, it will lead to secular culture, tolerance and social progress. Social cohesion could have been infused in the sentiments if the leaders of Assam movement could have sensitized them towards the commonalities of ethnic and linguistic diversities that has always been a part of greater Assamese society.

In hindsight, a more strategic approach to conflict management during the Assam Agitation could have averted the escalation of violence and ethnic tensions. The movement has affected the basic social service in Assam to an extent that people suffered for basic amenities, rights, freedom, laws and order. The movement has negatively impacted the education structure of the time which could have been reduced through proper agitation planning and implementation. The breakdown of Assam economy could have been suppressed if activities like arbitrary arrest of businessmen, demand of money (by insurgent groups) and destruction of public property were neutralized.

The Assam Movement not only had a profound impact on the social fabric of Assam but also deeply affected the region's economic development. The disruptions caused by the movement, including arbitrary arrests of businessmen and the demand for money by insurgent groups, resulted in a significant setback to Assam's economy. Lastly, during the time of Assam Agitation, the native people has seen various dormant struggles which lead to conflict and deadly massacre on account of dividend ethnicity and linguistic roles among communities. The model conflict management could evade this type of anomalies through strategic role of administration, suppressing false rumors, through awareness and sensitization. As rightly stated by Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann – ‘one should always strive for measures to reduce and handle conflict in a manner, we choose to be cooperative and assertive towards it’. Post-conflict reconciliation and development pose significant challenges for Assam. Rebuilding trust among communities, addressing socio-economic disparities, and ensuring inclusive governance are essential components of the long-term healing process. Efforts should focus on promoting dialogue, creating opportunities for cross-community interactions, and implementing policies that address the root causes of grievances and inequality.

Declarations

Source of Funding

This study did not receive any grant from funding agencies in the public or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Consent for Publication

The authors declare that they consented to the publication of this study.

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