

## **HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE FORMATION OF ASSAMESE IDENTITY: A REVIEW**

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**A thematic review of *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826-1947* by A. Guha; *Assam: A Burning Question* by H. Gohain; *Roots of Ethnic Conflict: Nationality Questions in North East India* by S. Nag; *Social Tensions in Assam Middle Class Politics* by A.K. Baruah; and *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Identity* by S. Baruah.**

### **Introduction**

Assam, tucked away in the Northeast corner of India is a state that has been locked for the last few years in a bloody struggle between 'insurgents' and the state as the architect of counter-insurgency operations. This may not come as a surprise, for Assam is not the only insurgency-ridden state in this country. But what makes Assam special and at the same time vulnerable is its geographical location in a region that is surrounded by international borders on three sides. It makes sense therefore to trace the roots of this 'ethnic' turmoil by taking a look at how an Assamese identity came to be imagined here in the nineteenth century.

The history of Assamese identity is a rather interesting one for the very reason that it is at once a story of the formation and transformation of the community. It has been remarked by one author (Misra 2001) that what has been happening in Assam over the past few decades in the matter of the widening of the parameters of the Assamese nationality as a result of swift demographic change, may be said to be unique not only in relation to the other

states or regions of India but also in relation to most other regions of the world where cross border migration is a problem. This article takes a closer look, with the aim of reviewing some of the existing literature on the formation and evolution of Assamese identity. The article has three sections. The first deals with the contents of the five books surveyed while the second section contains reviews of the latter. The last section, while summing up criticisms of these books also raises certain queries that have been left unanswered by the authors. Finally, in view of the inadequacy of the current arguments, an alternative approach has been held out for a proper understanding of the process of creation and evolution of Assamese identity.

### **Current Historiographical Approach**

Any survey of Assam's colonial past must include the pioneering work of Amalendu Guha (1977). He presents colonial Assam as a case of contending hegemonies owing to the co-existence of pan-Indian nationalism and regionalism, the latter manifesting itself in the form of a struggle to drive out the Bengali immigrants from Assam.

According to Guha, it was the colonial state that provided the initial stimuli for the growth of community consciousness among the Assamese by first encouraging immigration into Assam from neighbouring Bengal and then by imposing Bengali as the official language of the province. The need to induct outsiders into Assam first arose apparently owing to the acute manpower shortage in Assam, the problem being magnified by the demand for labour coming from the tea plantations. The easy availability of educated personnel from Bengal and the consequent redundancy of building an expensive educational infrastructure in Assam encouraged the employment of Bengalis in government offices. The inclusion of the Bengali speaking district of Sylhet in 1874 for colonial administrative reasons further increased the number of Bengalis in Assam. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the government encouraged immigration from overpopulated East Bengal to work the cultivable wasteland with an eye to increasing the revenue yielding capacity of the

province. Having first settled in the jungle infested riverine belt, the Mymensinghians, as the immigrants were popularly called, gradually spread out to claim areas held by the autochthones. Being better cultivators they could offer higher prices to induce Assamese peasants to sell off portions of their land holdings.

The author states that the outsider agitation in Assam stemmed from the apprehension that the Assamese would be turned into a minority in their own province. In several ways the British also encouraged such sentiments. While presenting the census report of 1931, C.S. Mullan, a European civil servant, prophesied that Sibsagar would ultimately remain the only district where the Assamese would find a home of his or her own. Such statements were definitely provocative.

Amalendu Guha's chief contribution lay in his identification of the primarily economic nature of the agitation against the outsiders. He classifies the immigrants in Assam into four groups: (1) tea garden labourers (2) migrants from East Bengal prior to independence (3) Hindus who came as a result of migration, and (4) Nepalis who came in search of livelihood. Guha points out that of these the Nepalis and the tea garden labourers did not compete with the natives for jobs, a factor, which rendered them more acceptable to the local people. The case of the Bengali immigrant was, however, different. According to Guha the immigrant Bengali Hindus were disliked because they competed with the dominant Assamese middle class for land, jobs and local power.

Like Guha, Hiren Gohain (1985) also attributes the beginning of community consciousness in Assam to colonial decisions that generated among the Assamese a fear that they would be eventually marginalised in their own homeland. At the same time, he also agrees with the former on the economic impulse behind the agitation. However, the similarity ends here for Gohain feels that yet another factor played a crucial role in 'ethnic' mobilisation in Assam. This he describes as the chauvinistic attitude of a section of the Bengali community in Assam. According to him,

well-placed Bengalis often appeared to endorse the colonial rulers' line of neglecting Assam. By way of example, he cites the Bengalis's lack of support for proposals to establish a separate university or railway zone for Assam. Gohain explains that since the common man, whether Assamese or tribal, often confronted the government in the person of the petty Bengali official, he often felt a blind resentment against Bengalis in general.

Gohain is not the only author who blames the Bengali settlers in Assam. Many authors have prioritised 'Bengali chauvinism' as the key factor that antagonised the Assamese and contributed to the growth of community consciousness among them. Sajal Nag (1990), for instance, refers to the ruthless attitude of the Bengali functionaries of the imperial administration as well as to their supercilious outlook in considering the Assamese as a subordinate and inferior people. In 1836, when Bengali was introduced as the official language, Bengali subordinates apparently helped Henry Hopkinson, the Commissioner of Assam, argue that Assamese was a mere variant of the Bengali language.

Apurba Baruah, in his book (Baruah 1991) on middle class politics in Assam, has also blamed the 'elite of the Bengali society and their patrons in Bengal' not only for the imposition of the Bengali language on Assam but also for the growth of anti-Bengali sentiments among the local people. Apurba Baruah rejects the role of economic factors as stimuli. Referring to Guha's statement that the migration of tea-garden labourers and Nepalis did create any problem because they did not compete with the Assamese for jobs, Apurba Baruah writes (1991: 37-38):

While the tea garden labourers did not add to the pressure on land in rural Assam because they more or less confined themselves to the tea plantations, the Nepalis settled down in villages and thus there was every possibility of their coming into conflict with the Assamese peasants. But what saved the situation was that the Nepalis slowly got assimilated with the Assamese. So did the tea garden

labourers so much so that a new dimension was added to the Assamese culture by the tea garden labourers ...The conflict that exists between the indigenous Assamese population and the immigrant Bengali in Assam is generated because of the resistance of the latter to the process of assimilation.

In *India against Itself*, on the other hand, Sanjib Baruah suggests that more than any other factor, 'colonial geography' shaped 'the projects of people hood in Assam- the Assamese sub-national narrative and the counter-narratives as well as the political agendas that followed from these narratives'. According to Sanjib Baruah, throughout the entire colonial period the British treated Assam as a land frontier for Bengal. This is evident both in the decision to introduce Bengali as the state language and in the inclusion of Sylhet in Assam. He states that their policy of encouraging large-scale immigration from Bengal to Assam, as well as the way the boundaries of Assam were drawn up, produced a demographic balance that kept Assam's language question a highly controversial one throughout the entire colonial period and beyond.

An interesting aspect of Sanjib Baruah's account is his views regarding language standardisation in Assam. He points out that the form language standardization takes in an area depends on many factors. In the case of Assam, there apparently was never a chance that Assamese could have emerged as the standard language of the whole of colonial Assam. First, Bengali identity around the Bengali language had predated language standardization in Assam, and many of the literate sections of the Bengali population in Assam, especially Hindus, had begun identifying with the Bengali language and culture. Moreover it was not known how the tribal population would react to prioritisation of Assamese. In fact, even the hill peoples who were historically close to the Assamese and some of the plains tribals who had historically adopted the Assamese language and culture eventually rejected Assamese.

Finally, Sanjib Baruah says that the concern with the question of 'developing' the Assamese language stemmed from the

belief that a 'developed' language is a sign of a 'developed' people; so the development of the language could be the road to the development of the people speaking that language. It seems to him that this formulation was shaped by the new ideas about modernity and progress.

### **Review**

Both Amalendu Guha and Hiren Gohain highlight the role of the colonial state not only in replacing Assamese by Bengali but also in opening up the region to immigration. At the same time, these authors draw attention to the economic aspect of the movement in Assam. The reader must also agree with Gohain that the high-handed attitude of a section of the Bengali population in Assam possibly added fuel to the smouldering fire of Assamese outrage. It also makes sense to exonerate the greater part of the community from the rather common charge of chauvinism. However the growth of an ethnic movement is a much more complex issue than the way it has been portrayed. That Guha and Gohain fail to see its layered structure has been shown in the concluding section of this review.

So far as the notions of Bengali-clerk conspiracy and Bengali chauvinism referred to by Sajal Nag and Apurba Baruah are concerned, Rajen Saikia (2001) has decisively dismissed these as myths. As far as alienation resulting from a Bengali sense of superiority was concerned, it must not be forgotten that the latter was widely acknowledged by the people at that time and hence this does not convincingly account for the Bengali emerging as the 'other' in Assam. Apurba Baruah, on the other hand, must remember that at a time when the Assamese language was in the process of being standardised, it was not unusual for ordinary Bengalis to deny it the status of an independent language. However, such beliefs were not strong enough to influence the British who had their own reasons in formulating their policies - a fact emphasized by Hiren Gohain. After all, it is clear enough by now that the colonial state selectively accepted ideas and judiciously interpreted them to suit their imperial interests. Apurba Baruah also

does not substantiate what kind of a role the Bengali elite and their patrons in Calcutta played in influencing the official opinion.

A well-written book, *India against itself* provides insights into yet another aspect of colonial administration in India – colonial geography. Its account of Assam being regarded as an extension of Bengal in the colonial imagination, adds to our knowledge of colonialism. All things said however, the book, while drawing attention to certain developments, fails to ask certain pertinent questions which follow logically therefrom and which I have mentioned in the concluding section. The author correctly regards the pre-1873 outrage of the Assamese as both cultural and economic. In that year Assamese was reinstated as the official language of Assam. One naturally expects language to move lower down in the hierarchy of issues in the subsequent stages of the ongoing ‘ethnic’ struggle now that it had received official sanction and its status was no longer at stake. Language, however, continued to occupy center-stage.

Sanjib Baruah says that the language question was kept alive by the inclusion of Sylhet in 1874. The English educated Sylhetis were apparently monopolizing government jobs to the annoyance of the newly emerging Assamese middle class. While it is not difficult to understand both the cultural and economic implications of this decision, one cannot help noting that the grievance here is more likely to be an economic one especially in the light of the removal of Bengali as the official language. However the book’s exposition of the subsequent stages of the identity movement in Assam indicates that this was primarily language centric. While one can appreciate attempts to develop a rich literature in Assamese, it is not easy to explain the rather militant tone of this effort. Instances of vilification of the Assamese language in the Bengali media were too few to explain the phenomenon adequately. One cannot help noting that fighting for the language would not have safeguarded the economic interests of the community, which ought to have been the chief concern. It is true that fighting for the recognition of one’s language is also integral to a community’s economic interests.

However, post 1873, the nature of the 'threat' had shifted out of the ambit of the language which now need not have been invoked to solve the demographic transformation. Thus the cause and effect relationship between the inclusion of Sylhet and the growth of linguistic nationalism is not clear. In one place the author refers to the influence of notions of modernity and progress behind the conviction that language needed to be developed but this is not elaborated. In course of the narrative the author points out that no one expected Assamese to be the primary language of Assam, but he does not ask why despite this a single language was sought to be imposed on the province.

Coming to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the author refers to the considerable opposition to immigration. At the same time, he shows that men like Ambikagiri Roychoudhury, one of the most vocal spokesmen of the Assamese community, were willing to co-opt all those who agreed to accept the Assamese culture. The Assam Sanrakshini Sabha, i.e., the Assam Preservation Society founded by the former, apparently had a policy of welcoming as members immigrants who chose to identify with Assamese culture (Baruah 2001: 82). According to the organization's rules, those who came to Assam before 1926 and were permanently settled in Assam, could be members of the organization if they signed a statement saying that they accepted Assamese as their language and declared themselves members of the Assamese nationality. It may be noted that major Assamese literary, cultural and political figures, many of who were Congress party activists were involved in the Roychaudhury-led Sanrakshini Sabha. Sanjib Baruah fails to ask whether under the circumstances, the war against immigration was a full-fledged one, to the extent that the war on language was. If it was not, then can we say that the Assamese intellectuals were really concerned about the occupation of their territory by the immigrants? In fact, a likely conclusion under the circumstances would be that the Assamese community consciousness of those days did not reflect the concerns of all sections of the population especially those of the peasants who were likely to be most affected by immigration. In fact, Krishak and Ryot Sabhas were already voicing the protests

of the peasants. Can we say then that the base of the Assamese community was narrow and that it echoed the views of the urban middle class only? In fact, the Assamese also displayed a large degree of indifference towards tribal fears of being outnumbered and of being dispossessed of their land by immigrants.

An interesting feature of identity politics in colonial Assam was that the willingness to accept immigrants as part of the Assamese community was leading to the transformation of this very community whose cultural determinants were largely Hindu. Recent research indicates that hidden beneath all the 19<sup>th</sup> century rhetoric about a multi-cultural identity was the firm belief that the Assamese identity was not an inclusive one, i.e., certain cultural parameters defined the contours of the community. Those not conforming to these markers were not accepted as true Asamiyas. While one parameter was definitely the Assamese language the second was the Vaishnava Hindu religion. The reader thus gains the impression that there existed even in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century a core group of true or legitimate Asamiyas within the bigger composite community. The Hindu religious underpinnings of the Assamese community are, in fact, impossible to overlook Udayon Misra (2001: 14) writes, “An influential section of the Assamese intelligentsia who stressed the polyethnic nature of Assamese society, at the same time felt that it was the Hindu, and particularly the Vaishnavite faith, which served as the main cementing force of Assamese society.”

If Vaishnava Hinduism was so important to the people, why was this ignored in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a marker of Assamese identity? One cannot help wondering whether a composite identity was being consciously forged at that time. Finally, why were the Hindu Bengalis the prime targets and not the Bengali Muslims, although Sanjib Baruah in one place acknowledges clearly that the former like the latter were not averse to becoming part of the Assamese cultural mainstream?

Clearly, what we have here is a case of evolution of identities and Sanjib Baruah fails to highlight it. It is not possible to take this point of the evolution of identities as usual and therefore not worthy of being mentioned for the simple reason that it was too serious to have happened naturally. Why was there a widening of the parameters of the Assamese identity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century? The nature of the shift was serious enough to justify the claim that what took place was an attempt to forge a new identity on the basis of certain selected markers. It is evident that there was a conscious process of selection and choice in deciding the markers of the Assamese identity in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. After all, language appears to have been relatively less important in comparison to religious beliefs. Once again, Udayon Misra (2001: 25) may be quoted in this context:

There seemed to have been a shift or movement from a position where the defining marks of Assamese tradition and culture made up of a mix of several ethnic streams were considered more important than the language itself, to a position where the Assamese language came to be seen as the primary and perhaps the sole cementing force of the different cultural streams which make up the Assamese community. Could we say that the idea of Assamese identity was gradually shifting from a position of 'multilingual uniculture' to one of 'unilingual multiculture'?

One is tempted to ask whether language was projected because the different sections of the people were more familiar with it than with the religion. If the answer lies in familiarity, then the question arises as to why the creation of a composite identity was so essential at that stage.

### **Conclusion: Reflections on the Formation of Assamese Identity**

At the outset, I would like to mention that my proposed critique of the existing literature notwithstanding, the aforementioned works have made a significant contribution to this area of historical

research. Apart from drawing academic attention to this rather neglected region of the Indian sub-continent, the works of Amalendu Guha, Hiren Gohain and Sanjib Baruah in particular have been responsible for shifting the focus away from the so called supercilious attitude of the immigrant Bengalis, which remains unverified, to the economic content of the grievances of the Assamese middle class. The role of colonial administrative policies in encouraging immigration and hence in the emergence of an Assamese identity has also been highlighted which is a far cry from the way immigration has been picturised in official accounts as being totally spontaneous. Nonetheless, the literature surveyed so far throw up certain obvious questions that merit a closer look. Firstly, how far was the earliest attempt to locate the self, the outcome of perceived wrongs of the kind referred to earlier? For a people to be antagonised by an assault on their language, prior existence of community consciousness (in this case, the sense of belonging to a linguistic community) is essential. However, if we presume that this did exist, then the arguments of these authors do not stand and we cannot trace the formation of the Assamese community to the event in 1836, i.e., the introduction of Bengali as the official language. We cannot however argue in favour of the existence of this kind of a community consciousness in Assam prior to 1836 because this would make it difficult for us to explain the lack of protests till 1853. Differences of opinion in Assamese society regarding the markers of identity would also be difficult to explain. Rajen Saikia points out that from 1836 when Bengali was introduced to 1853 there was no perceptible reaction against the decision. The protest came up loud and clear only in 1853 when A.J.M. Mills, Judge of the Sadar Dewani Adalat, visited Assam on an official inspection tour. After all, the language itself was being standardised all this while. In fact, what needs further exploration is the role of the missionaries in emphasizing the distinctness of the Assamese language. But the question remains as to whether we can regard even language standardisation as sufficient explanation for the formation of community consciousness in Assam. Should we not take into account the impact of Renascent Bengal on the earliest ideologues, considering the fact that most of them had spent some

time in Calcutta - the hub of Bengal? It may be noted that Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, one of the earliest exponents of the Assamese language, was himself patronised by Major Jenkins for receiving higher education in Calcutta. He became a regular contributor of *Orunodoy*, the paper which played a pioneering role in instituting Assamese as the official language, only on his return from Calcutta. Although a sound case can be prepared only on the basis of more evidence, *prima facie*, it seems that the final verdict on the creation of Assamese identity cannot be pronounced without reference to the impact of Calcutta in particular and Bengal in general on young Assamese minds. The researcher must also consider the impact of the growing anti-colonial consciousness throughout the country on the people. There were bound to be several 'others' in the story of the self-definition of the Assamese.

In other words, the introduction of Bengali and the employment of Bengalis to government offices surely contributed to the growth of community consciousness among a section of the Assamese speaking population, but the latter cannot claim sole credit for the phenomenon, perhaps not even the credit for being the initiator. Such a perspective becomes obvious especially in the light of selection of markers of identity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, this very selection itself is suspect for a variety of reasons. How was this selection carried out and what prompted such a selection? In other words, how did language become so important to the people? What happened to the other markers? Why was language so important even after 1873? It has already been shown that the inclusion of Sylhet cannot explain this adequately. In fact, why did language continue to retain its importance even when the demographic structure was changing in the 20<sup>th</sup> century owing to immigration? After all, the insistence on language was tampering with the very composition of the community and also alienating the tribal elements that were acknowledged as integral to the Assamese community. Was the projection of language as the only marker of identity not proving to be self-destructive? Why did the intellectuals not realise this? What was blurring their vision?

Finally, did the movement of the Assamese in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries reflect the concerns of the urban middle class alone? Fresh research that offers answers to these questions is needed in order to provide us with a comprehensive picture of the nature and genesis of the movement for an Assamese identity, filling, in the process, gaps left by existing studies on the subject. For the moment, it can only be said that the selection of markers of identity by Assamese intellectuals in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries led to a complete transformation and, subsequently, disintegration of the previous identity markers. In other words, what I am proposing is that a new community emerged in Assam in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with a predominantly, although not yet exclusively, linguistic identity. I do not regard this community as a so-called ethnic group, for if such a thing existed, then this could only have been prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and with a character quite distinct from the way it is perceived by available literature. It is, however, my conjecture from the foregoing literature survey that the emergence of a linguistic community in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was something entirely novel and that it synchronised with the politicisation and disintegration of specific ethnic boundaries in colonial Assam

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