

Birth of a Nation and Lost Identities

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Abstract. When borders are created then question of legality and illegality arises. With the change in destinations a struggle to prove one's identity and nationality begins. This problem is more visible in case of migrant communities, gets multiplied when there is an intra-religion divide and then identity becomes a critical subject. The assimilation of different ethnic groups and the perceived threat of the earlier inhabitants have culminated into the critical issues of identity and citizenship in the state. This paper talks about the issue of migration and identity crisis of a minority community in Assam, which has been assimilating people from diverse ethnic, cultural and linguistic groups who migrated to this region over a period of time. However, for past two decades a large chunk of non-Assamese population of East Bengal origin has moved out of Assam and has taken different occupations to support their livelihood. The paper ends with a suggestion that the areas of commonality cutting across the ethnic boundaries need to be strengthened instead of focusing on the singularity of communal identity.

Keywords: *Identity, Migration, Assam, Muslim*

The Setting

Aziz works as a stockbroker in a firm. When a new government comes to power, Aziz decides after some serious reflection that nothing was going to change. In fact, contrary to fears, the new government has had a beneficial effect on the Sensex - it has revived. Aziz is therefore all for the new government, even to the extent of supporting its view that all the foreigners must be driven out. Aziz's firm decides to send him to Frankfurt for an industrial exhibition and for this he has to acquire a passport. For this he must first acquire a ration card to prove he exists. The supply officer who visits Aziz's house for the purpose of verification instructs Aziz to visit Pramila Gokhale at the supply office. When Aziz reaches the office, interrogation starts and it turns out that the objective is to prove or disprove that Aziz is an Indian. Aziz gets angry and demands: Suppose you were woken up from

sleep one night and asked to prove that you are an Indian, what would you do? The soft spoken reply comes: I will just tell my name, that's all. My name is both my history and geography - Pramila Gokhale, Maharashtrian, Hindu, Chitpavan Brahmin. What can Aziz do to prove his nationality? He was born in 1971, the year when infiltration from Bangladesh started.

This is a Malayalam story 'Mumbai' by N.S. Madhavan (Dharmarajan 1997) which exhibits that a Muslim in India is a critical subject not by virtue of his religious concerns but because of the combined historical burden of colonial and nationalist policies and practices. The memories of partition have shaped Indian history in such a way that the burden of proof of loyalty and allegiance continues to be on the Muslims.

More than six decades have passed since the boundaries were redrawn in the Indian sub-continent and a new state of Pakistan was formed with areas on the eastern and western parts of India. A huge tract of Indian territory divided East Pakistan from West Pakistan. A constant tussle between the two parts and an imposed domination of West Pakistan led to further redefining of the borders and a new nation state Bangladesh came into existence in 1971. It further resulted in cultural discontinuity for people living in geographically contiguous areas. The memories of this historical development still haunt those who became victims of the creation of nation states when a new definition of their existing identities emerged. This was further complicated by the massive displacement that took place in 1971 and which blurred identities in turn. The Bengali Muslim population of East Bengal origin which got divided between Bangladesh (erstwhile Pakistan) and Residual Assam has been living with their transmuted identity and citizenship status till date. Do they belong to Assam or are they illegal immigrants from Bangladesh? The question is still very much alive in public discourse as well as in political thought and opens up a debate in theoretical space when spoken in context of the marginal or oppressed groups. 'Identity is a process between the identity of the individual and the identity of the communal culture according to Erikson who coined the phrase identity crisis in 1940s. The term referred to a person who had lost a sense of personal sameness and historical continuity' (Edgar and Sedgwick 2004). The issue of identity becomes more critical for those communities which are mobile or migrant in nature. With changing destinations their identity elements tends to change. The purpose of this article is to reflect the problem of that section of religious minority who have been struggling to prove their citizenship status in the state of Assam post partition.

Retrospective view of Migration in Assam

Migration is a demographic phenomenon altering the demography of that region or nation which witness migration. According to the Neo-classical economic theory at micro level, generally individuals decide to move out of their native place because of cost-benefit analysis expecting them to give positive net return (monetary) from movement. When translated into the context of cross-border migration, theories of neo-classical economists like Lewis (1954), Fei-Ranis (1951) focused attention on the transfer of labour from agriculture to the non-agricultural sector in the process of economic development. Furthermore, there are certain cumulative factors explained in the cumulative causation theory of migration given by Myrdal (1957) which alters the social context thus, resulting in subsequent decisions for migratory pattern. Ernest Ravenstein is widely regarded as the earliest migration theorist. Ravenstein, an English geographer, used census data from England and Wales to develop his 'Laws of Migration' (1889). He concluded that migration was governed by a 'push-pull' process; that is, unfavorable conditions in one place 'push' people out, and favorable conditions in an external location 'pull' them out. Ravenstein's laws stated that the primary cause for migration was better external economic opportunities; the volume of migration decreases as distance increases; migration occurs in stages instead of one long move; population movements are bilateral; and migration differentials (e.g., gender, social class, age) influence a person's mobility.

When we talk about the process of migration in Assam then, historically, Assam has been a land of migrants and has seen multiple waves of migration. The Ahoms came from an area in China. Sir Edward Gait in his *A History of Assam* gives a detailed account of the conquest of the Ahoms and their glorious rule. The second big wave of migration was initiated by the British after the discovery of tea in Assam. Looking at the history of work, NitinVarma points out how it was difficult to persuade tea garden labourers from Chhota Nagpur to cross over to the valley of Assam. Assam at that time was perceived as a dark lost world. The sense of loss associated with Assam tea gardens also became a part of songs like Jhumur. AmalenduGuha in *Planter Raj to Swaraj* talks about how the Assamese economy during the colonial period was nurtured as a plantation economy and this hampered agriculture. Tea Plantations developed at the cost of agriculture.

JayeetaSarma in her *Empire's Garden* called Assam an empire's garden and how every development of the state revolved around it being a tea plantation economy. However despite the reluctance, the British recruiters often succeeded in getting workers for the plantation by using fear, force as well as deceit.

Gorky Chakraborty gives a detailed account of migration during the colonial rule. In his book *Assam's Hinterland*, he points out that the British brought the first big group of migrants to serve the emerging plantation sector in 1858-59. But as plantation improved at the cost of agriculture, the second batch of migrants was brought from East Bengal to transform the agrarian scenario of the state. These people transformed Assam's uncultivated wasteland including forest, into revenue yielding fields. During this period, the char areas of the Brahmaputra region were also transformed from natural habitats to areas of human habitation (Chakraborty, 2009, p. 5).

Such migration changed the demographic character of the state as well. The assimilation of different ethnic groups and the perceived threat of the earlier inhabitants have culminated into the critical issues of identity and citizenship in the state. Prior to the partition of the Indian sub-continent, India was under the colonial rule. In 1874 the Britishers separated Assam from Bengal (Bang-e-Islam), developed tea industry in Assam and started importing labour mostly from Chotanagpur region from Bihar, Tamil Nadu and other provinces to work in tea gardens. Assam is geographically divided into upper Assam and lower Assam. The people living in upper Assam were not interested in working as labour in tea gardens or cultivate the virgin land in lower Assam. Therefore, Britishers then encouraged Bengali Muslims peasants from present Bangladesh to move into lower Assam and work as agricultural labourers in these uninhabited wastelands. 'Colonisation opened a new chapter of Assam's history where migration was an integral part of this historical migration' (Hussain 1993).

During Sir Mohammed Sadulla's Muslim League ministry, under the 'Grow more food programme' a concerted effort was made to encourage the migration of Bengali Muslims into Assam. Lord Wavell, the then Viceroy in his Viceroy's journal wrote – 'The chief political problem is the desire of Muslim ministers to increase this migration into the uncultivated government lands under the slogan of Grow more food but what they are really after is Grow more Muslims'. On the other hand it is often accused that the extent of migration is exaggerated by the local Assamese politicians. Interestingly Sir Sadullah is also credited with brutal

implementation of the Line System which tried to segregate the Muslims of East Bengal origin and the local inhabitants. (Kar, 1990)

Simultaneously, the fusion of tribes from other parts of the country into Assam to work in tea plantations also created tensions between the indigenous Assamese and the settlers. The Assamese people were of the opinion that their cultural identity was in danger and were afraid of being turned into a minority in their very own state. This migration which continued uninterrupted for livelihood concerns prior to the partition of Indian sub-continent was now being viewed as illegal by the newly created states in the post colonial era. Myron Weiner more than thirty years ago recognized the 'potentially explosive' situation stemming from clashes between migrant and indigenous populations, in his classic *Sons of the Soil*. In a broader sense, it is evident that some of the worst ethnic violence in the last several centuries has involved the annihilation of indigenous groups by ethnically distinct settlers bearing 'guns, germs, and steel' (Mann 2005). The indigenous population is usually threatened by the new migrants to their region.

The Language Question

With the background of linguistic reorganisation of states, having a standardized language spoken by the majority of people in the states became a prerequisite for statehood. Assamese was challenged in this case by Bengali which also had a large number of speakers. However in the census of 1951 all the Muslims of East Bengal origin who were Bengali speakers recorded their mother tongue as Assamese so that they may be accepted by the Assamese community. It was during the peak of Language Movement that these Muslims sided with the Assamese against the Bengali speakers of Barak Valley. They boosted the number of Assamese speakers and it paved the way for making Assamese the state language.

The important question which arises here is that why did Bengali Muslims give up their mother tongue and accepted another language as well as the title of Na-Asamiya (New Assamese)? 'Muslims of Assam were rechristened as *Na Asamiya* and encouraged to barter their identity for security by way of reporting Assamese as their mother tongue in census returns in order to strengthen the claim to make Assam the nation province for the Assamese.'(Das 2001). For them survival and livelihood were two important issues which forced them to adopt a new linguistic

identity. They thought further cultural assimilation would accentuate their acceptance in the state and they will no longer be viewed as outsiders. 'Their acceptance of Asamiya represents their fundamental desire for survival in a society which did not accept them. In order to avoid non-acceptance and hostility of their neighbours, the Assamiyas, who had been rightly or wrongly suffering from an identity crisis syndrome since 1834, they declared themselves as Asamiya in the 1951 census' (Hussain 1993). However, their conversation in Assamese was visible in public sphere only. Despite this they continued to face discrimination and oppression in the name of being called foreigners/Bangladeshis.

The Threat Perception

At the time of partition in 1947, the demography of this state got skewed when large number of non-Assamese/ Hindu refugees moved into and settled down in Assam particularly from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) fleeing from religious persecution. Along with them, Muslim population of East Bengal origin continued migrating through porous boundaries into Assam for economic reasons and altered the demography of Assam. It was apprehended that they have outnumbered the indigenous population of the state as illegal migrants. Right wing political groups exaggerated the issue and tried to manipulate the panic stricken indigenous people. This apprehension paved way to the Assam Movement of early 1979 and signing of Assam Accord in 1985 which demanded to fence the border between India and Bangladesh among other things. For the defacto citizenship, cutoff date was decided to be March 25, 1971 i.e. deportation of all immigrants irrespective of religion who entered the country after this date. Ironically, however, after the All Assam Students Union (AASU) leaders transformed themselves into politicians, forming the AsomGanaParishad (AGP) in 1985, in a span of nearly ten years, spread over two terms, the AGP Government in Assam deported fewer than 1,500 illegal migrants. The mood of the agitation was well accounted by journalist ChaitanyaKalbagh: 'Aside from the anti-foreigner sentiment, the movement has developed other dangerous strains - anti-Bengali, anti-Left, anti-Muslim, anti-non Assamese, and slowly but discernibly, even anti-Indian.' (Bhattacharya, 2008). This period also saw the heinous Nellie massacre of 1983 in which around 3000 Bengali Muslims, mostly women and children were massacred by local tribals due to misplaced threat perception.

History speaks about the displacement of these migrants from their native place in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) to Assam, and then after the riots in Assam to other parts of the nation like West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi etc. 'The victims of displacement remained virtually invisible whereas the victory of the emerging Asamiya nationalism was highlighted visibly in the Asamiya press.'(Hussain 2000). Emphatically it needs to be mentioned here that does migration of Bengali Muslims had no other effect in the state of Assam except for swamping the Assamese Identity?Paradoxically enough, it was only with the coming of the skilled people from outside that indirectly laid the foundations of the Assamese national identity (Gohain 1980).Going through the available literature it has become an established fact that the indigenous Assamese people have developed a kind of hostility towards this religious minority as they fear that their continued migration from Bangladesh have outnumbered them in their very own state.as per census 2011 results, 06 out of 27 districts of Assam viz. Dhubri, Barpeta, Nagaon, Goalpara, Hailakandi and Karimganj are dominated by Muslims .It needs to be emphasizes here is that we need not forget that prior to partition, Assam was the homeland of Bengali speakers also and relative preponderance of Bengali speaking people in Assam can be traced in its origin.

D-Voter issue

A unique feature of Assam electoral list is the visibility of the fourth letter of the Roman alphabet D which means doubtful. These 'doubtful' citizens are put in this category implying that they are Bangladeshi migrants. While many non-Muslims also come under the category of D voters, the majority continues to be Muslims. Technically incomplete data, misspell names, double entry in electoral rolls might put someone in the category of D-voter. But in Assam's highly politicized discourse of immigration, the mere mention of 'D' is tantamount to concluding that the person concerned is an illegal immigrant.

Flooded with complaints from various civil and social bodies on the presence of a huge number of foreigners, the Election Commission of India on the 17th of July, 1997 issued a circular to the State of Assam to mark 'D' against the names of the voters who were found missing or absent and should be put on trial before the Foreigners' Tribunals. These D category voters are asked to prove their citizenship by producing the valid documents. It is worth mentioning that large

numbers of peasants are engaged in agricultural activities. They live in Chars-the riverine islands which are formed and deformed by the river Brahmaputra. This natural activity becomes more intense during floods displacing thousands of people who then move from submerged riverine islands to either a new island or towards mainland in search of livelihood losing their land holdings and documents establishing their identity.

There are many families in lower Assam where one member of the family has been marked as doubtful voter in absence of relevant documents (implying that rest of the members are Indians but the one who is marked D is a foreigner). This is a reflection of sheer discriminatory behavior. These people are then kept in detention camps and such cases are referred to Foreigner Tribunals. The Hon'ble Gauhati High Court by its order dated 21st April, 2011 has asked the State Government to put all the persons whose cases were referred to the Foreigners Tribunal under bar in 'detention camp' till the disposal of their cases. The important point here is that there 1.5 lakhs people (The Telegraph) who have got doubtful identity and are not allowed to exercise their voting rights in Assam also get deprived of many government schemes and benefits. Since the cases which are being taken up by each Tribunal are solved at snail pace, therefore people falling into this doubtful category are waiting for years to get their citizenship status cleared. This is a kind of discrimination which one can notice in Assam as it is the only state since 1997 to have a special category of Doubtful voters. It is, indeed, an irony of the politics of ethnicity in Assam that the immigrant Muslims, who had been instrumental in making Assamese the single largest linguistic community at one point of time and helped them to advance the claim of making Assam a nation-province, are now viewed as the principal threat to the political security of the ethnic Assamese in the State (Das 2001). The phenomenon of marking people as D voter has actually ended up harassing poor Muslims. As this D voter issue has attracted criticism from every possible corner, the Government of Assam decided to update the NRC (National Register of Citizens) which would verify the identity of the people living in Assam.

The IDP Question

Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) are a group of people who are displaced by multiple factors like natural disasters, development projects, conflicts etc. A

major part of IDPs are people displaced by river erosion and flooding of river islands. River basins are densely populated and it leads to large scale internal displacement in case of floods and river erosions. In Assam the question of IDPs is complicated because it is intrinsically linked to the question of illegal immigrants. Forced to migrate to nearby places, these people face accusation of being illegal immigrants. The IDPs in other parts of India does not bear the brunt of a negative image. Their appearance in mainland town following erosion is seen as a fresh spate of immigration. This is mainly because these people belong to the cultural stock of Muslims of East Bengal origin. Line System introduced in 1916 and implemented from 1920 separated the indigenous people from crowded migrant bastis. Small enclave and ghettos came up in the riverine districts of Assam. MonirulHussain in his works on IDPs points out that displaced persons who are rendered homeless due to river erosion cannot go back as their homes are already part of the extended river bed. Large number of people is displaced because of floods and river erosion but there is not enough data on this phenomenon. Most of the IDPs from the Char areas of Assam are Muslims of East Bengal Origin, a community that is commonly suspected of being fresh illegal immigrants. While this community accepted Assamese and was taken in the fold as Na Axamiya or Neo-Assamese, there was no move to address the development deficit or the stigmatisation that this Community faced.

Identity in Vote Bank Politics

The state of Assam has been assimilating people from diverse ethnic, cultural and linguistic groups who migrated to this region over a period of time. However, for past two decades a large chunk of non-Assamese population of East Bengal origin has moved out of Assam and has taken different occupations to support their livelihood. Some have indulged themselves in the task of collecting household waste in major cities of northern India or are involved in painstaking Zari embroidery work. Women work as domestic helps at atrociously low wages. Most of them belong to Muslim community and their linguistic dialect is a mixture of Assamese and Bengali. The pattern of migration is mainly poverty driven. Earlier these people used to work in their agricultural fields in different parts of Assam but due to reoccurrence of flood and lack of employment opportunities in their native places, they have been forced to move to other regions of India.

It is interesting to know from field observations that this section of migrant population during the time of elections make it a point to go to Assam to cast their respective votes¹. This phenomenon was observed in the recent assembly elections of 2011. They call themselves Assamese because they feature on the electoral list and exercise their right to vote in the state of Assam. Incidentally, they all have legal documents like Electoral identity cards, ration cards, certificates from Gram Panchayats or MLAs, certificates of Health Department of Assam and in some cases PAN cards also to establish their nationality as Indian. A common conflict which occupies space into the minds of Pan Indians about people involved in picking and collecting waste in northern India is that whether they belong to the state of Assam or have migrated from Bangladesh and have now found their livelihoods in waste? A fear psychosis is reflected in their body language and a struggle for their own identity can be noticed when they come in interaction with masses. Whenever they are asked why you need to cast your vote in Assam, the unanimous reply is that if they do not cast their votes and their name gets struck off from the voter's list, then they will be called Bangladeshi. The question which comes to mind is that these poor people who belong to a deprived group are really aware of their voting rights or is it something else which is not visible to our naked eyes. They are vulnerable and are often harassed by the local police to get their documents verified every year. They have adopted a migratory route to escape from harassment so that they find a secure place where they no more face ethnic and linguistic tensions. Yet their legality is still questionable and debatable to this date.

The Way Out

Millions of people were displaced by partition and their tryst for their own identities did not end even after the birth of a nation. Their journey has not been smooth sailing and underwent multiple conflicts. This still persists. For several decades, Assam has been passing through too much of tears and blood and the mighty river Brahmaputra has turned red many a times. (Nellie massacre, Assam movement, the Bodo-Muslim ethnic conflict). We all understand that when borders are created then people living on both sides of border who share common

1. This observation has emerged through field visits in different slum areas of Lucknow which give shelter to thousands of rag-pickers, majority of whom have migrated from different parts of Assam especially Barpeta since last two decades.

religion and language and feel a sense of common ethnic identity become citizens of two different nation states overnight. Similar was the case when the border between Assam and East Pakistan was drawn. It divided the lives of many as well.

Migration is a natural phenomenon and there is a need to understand its economic aspect. Instead of stopping it we must find out ways to regulate it in some ways so that the questions of poverty and hunger get answered. Development should become more inclusive. If the present situation continues without any effective intervention, then Assam is likely to experience more conflict induced internal displacement of population, particularly the marginalized groups in near future (Hussain 2000). The important issue which needs to be highlighted is that the identity quest of these people needs to be resolved in a politically correct and socially acceptable manner so that they are included in the process of development and are not seen as a challenge or threat to the socio-economic and political ideologies of the nation. The problem has emerged due to creation of international boundaries without taking into consideration the problems of their respective population.

Immigration becomes illegal when we define it in terms of borders and since borders have already been drawn there is absolutely no chance to undo it, this is an established fact. The solution is to make the process of migration easy and ensure the people crossing borders that they shall be treated as legal migrants if they are crossing borders through permissible routes as they come in search of livelihood. Else sufficient employment needs to be generated in their native state if one actually wants to curb migration. Many scholars from the region of Northeast Assam have pointed to the need of a humanitarian solution of the problem. They advocate issuing work permits to these immigrants.

With the increasing burden and pressure on land no nation can make their borders invisible to others as they themselves lack adequate resources to support their native population. Migration is generally induced except in case of natural calamities. There is a reason to migrate. It can be temporary or permanent. But why it should be illegal? Why do people need to cross- borders illicitly? Why the policies framed are forcing them to be called as Illegal Immigrants? This itself is indicative of flaws in government's decision making powers. The phenomenon of insurgency in Assam may be viewed, to a large extent, as the by-product of identity movements. Following the adoption of strategy of violence by the identity movements their adverse impact on the economy have increased manifold. The

areas of commonality cutting across the ethnic boundaries need to be strengthened instead of focusing on the singularity of communal identity. Migration question in Assam seems to have lost its humanitarian hue because of the added politicization. There is absolutely no dialogue between the India-Bangladesh governments regarding the problem of migration. This puts the lives of the so called illegal immigrants in a limbo. Many a times, some have been left in the No Man's Land to go back to Bangladesh while Bangladesh denied to take them in. This has resulted in gross human rights violation. Hence, respecting dignity of a human being and realistically finding a solution to their social, cultural and economic problems should be the way out. Identity ensures stability. This in turn beckons positivity for self, state and lastly, nation.

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