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BRITISH COLONIAL POLICIES AND THE ORIGINS OF ASSAMESE NATIONALIST MOVEMENT IN INDIA

Abstract

The article deals with the origin of the Assamese nationalist movement in India, which can be termed as the most organized among all separatist movements in the country. The paper argues that the colonial administrative and economic policies during 19th and 20th century laid the basis for formation of an Assamese nationalist movement that was different in its objective and character from the Pan-Indian nationalism. The paper shows that the most distinct dimension of the Assamese nationalism *vis-à-vis* the pan-Indian nationalist doctrine concerned the struggle of the Assamese people against the domination of the migrant communities from other regions of British India. It also articulates how geographical construction of Assam provided the basis of nationalist agenda on part of the Assamese. The narratives of Assamese nationalism, thus, reveal the presence of the fragmentation within the idea of Indian nation during the colonial era.

Introduction

Northeast India is an assembly of ethno-cultural diversity. Out of India's 67.76 million population considered to be 'tribal', 8.14 million live in the seven northeastern states, popularly known as the 'seven sisters'.¹ The region has long remained as one of the most volatile

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¹ Fernandes, Walter, "Conflict in North East: A Historical Perspective", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 34, No. 51, 1999, p. 3579.

areas in terms of violent ethnic and nationalist conflicts. Among the major separatist movements in Northeast India, the Assamese ethno-nationalist struggle is perhaps the most organized, involving a high level of violence and atrocities. During 1978-2000, more than 15000 people including civilians, military officers and the members of the insurgent group died in violent conflicts in the region.

The nationalist movement of the Assamese people in independent India took shape mainly as a movement against the migrants from other provinces of India and from neighboring Bangladesh. The movement intensified during 1979-85 under the leadership of the All Assam Students Union (AASU), whose leaders later formed the regional government of Assam in 1983, under the banner of Assam Gono Parishad (AGP). But on one hand, AGP's failure to ensure the active role of the central government in solving the migration problem and on the other, persistence of economic backwardness of Assam compared to other regions of India, fueled grievances of the local population against the central government. It was in this context that the separatist slogans of the armed militant group United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) became the dominant player in the Assamese nationalist movement. The 1990s experienced a prolonged period of military measures by the Indian government to suppress the movement and the ensuing violent confrontation. Since then, the counter insurgency measures together with offers of economic rewards and *de facto* legal immunities to the militants who surrender have significantly reduced the intensity of the movement. But, as Sanjib Baruah rightly pointed out, the response of the Indian state to Assamese nationalism did little to address the ideological challenge to the Indian nation-state posed by separatist nationalist movement.²

This paper argues that the colonial administrative and economic policies during 19th and 20th century laid the basis for formation of an Assamese nationalist movement that was different in its objective and character from the Pan-Indian nationalism. While the mainstream Indian nationalist movement targeted the establishment of a homogenous Indian nation-state by ousting the colonial authorities, the Assamese nationalism developed its own objectives and goals that

² Baruah, Sanjib, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999, p. 144.

were different and sometimes even contradictory to the former. The paper, thus, focuses on explaining the essential differences between pan-Indian nationalism and Assamese nationalism by tracing its evolution under the colonial rule.

Indian Nationalism and Assamese Nationalist Movement under the British Colonial Rule

Indian nationalism during the British colonial period grew out as a movement to fight colonial domination with the aim of establishing a homogeneous Indian nation-state, a state essentially shaped by the experience of modern colonial administration, education and socio-economic policies. As Partha Chatterjee argued, anti-colonial nationalism as a political movement “begins its journey...by inserting itself into a new public sphere constituted by the process and forms of modern (in this case colonial) state.”³ The dominant and more popular explanation of the development of Indian nationalism has treated the process as unilinear and mono-dimensional, manifesting itself as a movement that rallied all Indians together to combat British colonialism and establish an independent Indian nation-state, where the Indian identity surpasses and satisfies all other regional, tribal or ethnic identities of various groups within the geographical boundaries of British India. As Sajal Nag observed, “The Indian nation that the nationalists constructed to present to the British as well as to the rest of the world was an enumerable monolithic community which was unified despite diversities in terms of language, religion, caste, creed, tribe and region.”⁴ But the nationalist movement of the Muslims for separate homeland during the colonial era challenged this vision of monolithic Indian nationalism.

Similar challenges were also posed by separate nationalist agendas of various regional, linguistic and cultural groups within the colonial geographical boundaries. Authors like Sajal Nag, Amelandu Guha and Ranjit Guha (in the context of Bengali Nationalism) argued that the colonial India experienced two streams of coeval processes as far as its

³ Chatterjee, Partha, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Post Colonial Histories*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993, p. 10.

⁴ Nag, Sajal, *Nationalism, Separatism and Secessionism*, New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 1999, p. 23.

nationality question was concerned. One was based on its pan-Indian identity and the other on its regional linguistic-cultural identity.⁵ This paper has attempted to evaluate Assamese nationalism broadly on basis of such assumption, but places more emphasis on the role of colonial policy in development of a political nationalist movement on the basis of separate linguistic-cultural identities and socio-economic interests.

The most distinct dimension of the Assamese nationalism *vis-à-vis* the pan-Indian nationalist doctrine concerned the struggle of the Assamese people against the domination of the migrant communities from other regions of British India. The movement emerged as means to resist the subordination of the Assamese culture to that of the migrant Bengalis and the marginalization of the Assamese people in the colonial economic structure, which facilitated the domination of the Bengalis and Marwaris. The primary motivation of the Assamese nationalist movement was to protect the status of Assamese language when Bengali was proclaimed as the official language of the province in 1836. The forced supremacy of the Bengali language made the Assamese discover and articulate a separate linguistic identity. Gradually, other important issues like economic marginalization, discrimination in terms of employment and arbitrary demarcation of colonial boundaries of Assam became major sources of their nationalist discontent. The migrants, as it turned out, started to be defined largely as the “foreigners” (Bideshi) in the Assamese nationalist discourse, which indicated the cultural and physical boundaries that the Assamese had drawn between themselves and the “others”.

Assamese nationalist issues not only had an anti-migrant overtone, but also often were contradictory to the pan-Indian nationalist discourse. This was clearly revealed soon after the independence of India in 1947 when the Assamese Prime Minister Gopinath Bordoili attempted to restrict immigration of Hindu Bengalis from the newly created East Pakistan (former East Bengal). Bordoili faced severe criticism and intimidating response from the then India’s Prime Minister Jawharlal Nehru who accused and criticized Assam for

⁵ Guha, Amalendu, “Indian National Question: A Conceptual Framework” in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.17, Special Number, July 31, 1982, pp. 2-12; and Guha, Ranjit, *An Indian Historiography of India: A Nineteenth Century Agenda and its Implications*, Calcutta: K. P Bagchi, 1987.

pursuing a narrow-minded policy. Nehru wrote in a letter to Bordoli, "It is patent that if land is not available in Assam, it is still less available in the rest of India" and even went to the extent of threatening that "if Assam adopts an attitude of incapacity to help solve the refugee problem, then the claims of Assam for financial help will obviously suffer".⁶ Assamese nationalist leaders also came in confrontation with the leaders of All India Congress in 1946 when the latter almost accepted the Cabinet Mission Plan that envisioned the creation of two groups of Hindu and Muslim provinces in Independent India with Assam becoming a part of the Muslim province of East Bengal. Fierce resistance from the Assamese is cited as one of the important reasons behind Congress's decision to reject the plan.⁷ Thus, in terms of major issues and political concerns of the nationalist movement, Assamese nationalism differed substantially from the vision of pan-Indian nationalism. Moreover, the nationalist discontents of the Assamese were mainly directed against the Bengalis, who in fact were one of the leading groups that articulated the Indian nationalist agenda during late 19th century. It was such diverging characteristics of the Assamese nationalist agenda and its alienation from the mainstream that created the basis for separatist movements of the Assamese in the postcolonial period.

The major impacts of the colonial economic and administrative policies that contributed towards a separate nationalist agenda for the Assamese may be summarized as following:

- a) Facilitation of migration of different communities from other provinces of India and allowing them to
 - subordinate local culture and
 - marginalize the local people in terms of socio-economic position and status.
- b) Construction of Assam's geographical position within British India that led to its subordination to a more advanced province of Bengal.

Indignation towards the growing dominance of the people from other regions and the policies that facilitated a process of marginalization remained at the center of Assamese nationalist agenda.

⁶ Cited in Baruah, *op.cit.*, p. 85.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

On the one hand, a sense of economic deprivation developed due to direct economic dislocations caused by various colonial policies regarding land distribution, taxation and territorial boundary demarcations. On the other hand, relatively better standing of the migrant communities *vis-à-vis* the local also contributed in creating such economic deprivation.

Assam and the British Rule

Assam came under British rule in 1826 in accordance with the Yandabo Treaty between the Burmese (present Myanmar) empire and the East India Company. The Ahom kingdom used to rule the region and the British interference in Assam came as a result of the Ahom aristocracies seeking British assistance against military intervention by the Burmese. By the early 1840s, the East India Company consolidated its dominance over the region and as Sanjib Baruah observed, “it was the first time in history that the Assamese heartland became politically incorporated into a pan-Indian imperial formation.”⁸ In fact, it was the colonial rule that introduced the concept of entire North-east India as a geographical category, a category that was completely absent in ancient and medieval Indian writings.⁹

The British interest in Assam was primarily driven by a motivation to exploit certain lucrative resources: natural and climatic conditions highly suitable for tea production and existence of abundant natural and mineral resources like timber, coal, oil and gas. The British rulers also wanted to capture the inexpensive trade routes to China and Tibet through Assam. In 1840, the British rulers established the first tea company in Assam—the Assam Company. By the end of 19th century, Assam emerged as a major tea producing Indian state covering 67.4% of the total cropped area of the country.¹⁰ In 1867, oil was struck near Digboi and commercial drilling started from 1889. Also, the British

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁹ Bhumik, Subir, “North East India: Evolution of a Post Colonial Region”, in Partha Chatterjee (ed.), *Wages of Freedom: Fifty Years of the Indian Nation State*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 310.

¹⁰ Sharma, Manoranjan, “Industrialization of Assam and its Effect on the Development Process”, in Udayan Misra (ed.), *Nation Building and Development in North East India*, Guwahati, India, Purbanchal Prakash, 1991, p. 93.

rulers initiated the opening of Makum Coal field in 1884. The British administrative and economic policies in the region developed primarily to ensure and maximize their economic and strategic interests. The resulting transformations had profound impact upon the native Assamese lifestyle and society, which was already devastated by repeated Burmese invasions. In the following sections, this paper evaluates the implications of the colonial policies for the development of Assamese nationalism.

Colonial Policy and Migration

With the development of tea plantation, oil prospecting and timber collection there were a massive influx of population from other regions to Assam. From the perspective of the colonial rulers, Assam was primarily seen as a land frontier of a pan-Indian economic space that needed more settlers and accordingly, the authorities actively pursued a policy to encourage immigration. Then, as Sanjib Baruah described, “The economic transformations that began with the introduction of tea plantation set off economic forces that gave further impetus to immigration and turned the colonial vision of Assam as a land frontier into a reality.”¹¹ The communities that immigrated under the British rule included:

- Tribal laborers from Chota Nagpur region of Bihar and Orissa, employed in British owned tea gardens;
- Bengali Muslims from the East Bengal (now Bangladesh) district of Mymensingh;
- Bengali Hindus, originating in East Bengal and especially from Sylhet district, who held important administrative and white-collar jobs;
- Marwaris, an entrepreneurial community from Rajasthan, who were actively engaged in trade, commerce and money lending.¹²

Table 1 provides the figures on immigration into Assam during the first part of the 20th century.

¹¹ Baruah, *op.cit.*, p. 66.

¹² Weiner, Myron, *Sons of the Soil: Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978, p. 86.

Table-1: Growth of Migrant Population in Assam 1921-1951¹³

Year	Cumulative Migrant Population as % of Total Population
1921	17.83
1931	21.83
1941	22.94
1951	26.17

British policy not only encouraged migration but also allowed migrant groups, especially the Bengali Hindus and the Marwaris, to become dominant in the socio-economic hierarchy of Assam. This particular aspect of migration during the British period formed the basis of Assamese fear of economic and cultural marginalization and led them to assert their separate nationalist identity.

Colonial Policy, Bengali Domination and Rise of Assamese Linguistic Nationalism

Colonial administration in Assam required people with sufficient English language to staff different administrative positions. Early in their administration, the British sought to make use of high-ranking officials of the previous Ahom kingdom, especially in revenue administration and judiciary. But difficulties arose due to their inexperience in proper record keeping and more importantly, inefficiency in using English. Thus, the British government persuaded a policy of *importing* officials from other regions. The Hindu Bengalis were almost an automatic choice due to Bengal's geographic proximity to Assam and the Bengali people's early exposure to colonial education. David Scott, the agent of East Indian Company in Assam, acknowledged the potential problems caused by the decline of the power of the Assamese *vis-à-vis* the immigrant Bengalis within the colonial system of administration, but also "was equally aware of the extreme difficulty of finding local officials competent to serve the company."¹⁴ Although he proposed to establish a system of indirect rule where the aristocrats of Ahom kingdom and the high-ranking officials would possess significant positions, the East India Company

¹³ Kumar, D. P., *Challenges to India's Unity: Assam's Student Agitation and the Government*, Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corporation, 1990, p. 92.

¹⁴ Barooah, Nirod, K., *David Scott in North East India: A Study in British Paternalism*, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1970, p. 137.

“doubted the capacity of native government to maintain order among the various tribes of the frontier and had no intention of permitting a weak and hostile state to stand between itself and the frontier.”¹⁵ Thus, the colonial policy facilitated the inroad of the Bengalis in Assam and let them acquire influential positions in the administrative hierarchy and in other middle-class professions like legal practice or teaching as well. Weiner described the process as following:

“And so the Bengalis came. First they moved into administrative positions. Then, since Bengali Hindus were among the first social group in India to study at the British created missionary and government colleges, they entered the modern professions. By the beginning of the 20th century, the doctors, lawyers, teachers, journalists, clerks, railway and post office officials, as well as officers of the state government were Bengali Hindu migrants.”¹⁶

The Assamese discontent grew over the influence and dominance of the Bengalis, particularly, in the realm of culture, promoted by the Bengalis and the colonial administrators alike. Since there are a lot of similarities between Bengali and Assamese language and scripts, it appeared to be beneficial for both the British and Bengali administrative officials to use Bengali as the official language of Assam. In fact, as Sanjib Baruah pointed out, assertion of Assamese nationalist distinctiveness emerged as a corollary to the decisions of the British colonial officials’ recognition of Bengali as the language of court and medium of instruction in schools in 1836.¹⁷ Apart from pointing out the difficulties for the Bengali administrative officials to read Assamese, another major argument of the colonial rulers was the sheer lack of any material in Assamese to properly pursue education in schools and colleges. A major implication of the British decision was the tacit acknowledgement towards the superior status of Bengali language and culture *vis-à-vis* the Assamese. This was clearly reflected in the British announcement regarding the introduction of Bengali as the medium of instruction. The statement mentioned that the learning of Bengali would enable the Assamese to be “enlightened by the

¹⁵ Weiner, Myron, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹⁷ Baruah, *op.cit.*, p. 71.

progress in science and arts with their brethren in Bengal.”¹⁸ Another important aspect of the British language policy was also reflected in an official letter of Francis Jenkins, the Commissioner and Agent to the Governor General of Assam and Northeast, to the Secretary to the Government of India. The letter stressed the importance of assimilating different nations and tribes. As Jenkins wrote;

“It must be our policy and the duty of the Government of India, by all means in its power to assimilate the many nations and tribes under our rule into one people and if the early introduction of Bengali in this lately conquered province of Assam be in any degree productive of blending the people of Assam with the people of our earlier acquired provinces...I think the government will have course to rejoice...”¹⁹

The subordination and removal of local language generated a severe dissatisfaction among the Assamese who were almost forced to discover their separate linguistic identity and demand for restoration of the status of their language. The activities of the American Baptist missionaries, however, played an important role in consolidating the local demands against official status of Bengali language. In his statement about the state of education in Assam to the Judge of the Sudder (town) Court, missionary A.H. Danforth made a strong appeal to replace Bengali by vernacular Assamese as the medium of instructions in schools. He stated,

“education is growing up here merely as a foreign plant. It is emphatically an alien, and must continue to be such so long as the Government carefully excludes the vernacular from the schools. It forms no part of the constitution of the people; it enters not at all into their social feelings and interests. It does not combine with or modify their (Assamese) customs.”²⁰

The problems arising from replacing vernacular language with Bengali was officially put forward by Anundaram Dakeal Phookun on

¹⁸ Cited in Nag, *op.cit.*, p. 51.

¹⁹ Cited in *ibid.*, p. 51.

²⁰ Mills, Moffatt, A.J., *Report on Assam-1853*, Delhi: Gian Publications, 1980, p. xxix.

behalf of the Assamese in his petition to the Saddar court, “We find, however, with regret that...a *foreign language*, viz. the Bengallee (Bengali) has been introduced into the courts of Assam. The mass of the population and even private gentlemen possess no knowledge of the language....On what grounds the Bengallee has been allowed to supersede the vernacular we are at a loss to understand.”²¹ Repeated pleas and petitions succeeded in reversing the British decision in 1873 and Assamese once again became the official language of the province. But the fear of cultural subordination left a deep imprint that articulated a sense of Assamese nationalism. The period when Bengali was the official language (1836-73) has been portrayed as a “dark period” for Assamese language, literature and culture in the Assamese nationalist historiography.²² In order to restore the status of their language, the educated Assamese people initiated a nationalist project of identifying the different characteristics of the Assamese language and improving its status. Dakeal Phookun published an influential book titled *A Few Remarks on Assamese Language* in 1855, which sought to identify the vast and extensive literary tradition of Assam. Also, Hemchandra Barua and Gunabhiram Boruah published important works like *The Grammar of Assamese Language* (1856), *Hemkosh* (1900, the first Anglo-Assamese Dictionary) and also *Adipatha* and *Pathmala*, which were meant to be vernacular textbooks for Assamese pupils. Hemchandra Barua also started the first Assamese journal, *Assam Bandhu* (Friend of Assam).²³ Another important step towards consolidation of linguistic nationalism was the foundation of Ashom Bhasha Unnati Sadhini Samiti (Association for the Development of Assamese Language) in 1888 by the Assamese students in Calcutta. The association sought to enable the Assamese to “reach the heights of other rich and prosperous languages of the world.”²⁴ The foundation of the association is considered to be a landmark in the development of linguistic nationalism in Assam. As Udayan Misra observed,

“It is important to note that, right from the days when a handful of Assamese students set up the Asamiya

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

²² Baruah, *op.cit.*, p. 71.

²³ Nag, *op.cit.*, p.115.

²⁴ Baruah, *op.cit.*, p. 72.

Bhasha Unnati Sadhani Samiti in Calcutta in 1888, the growth of Assamese nationalism has been inextricably tied up with the question of the official recognition of the Assamese language. Loyalty to the Assamese language was seen as the sole criterion in establishing one's identity."²⁵

Socio-economic Marginalization and Assamese Nationalist Movement

Colonial administrative and economic policies also caused economic marginalization and subordination of the Assamese people *vis-à-vis* the migrant communities and exposed them to the latter's exploitation. This in turn fueled anti-migrant nationalist movement.

With the introduction of colonial economic system, which initiated tea cultivation, ancillary industries, communication and transport route with the rest of India and commercial townships, a large number of traders, speculators, merchants and shopkeepers gained important position in the local socio-economic hierarchy. In absence of any substantial competition from a local trading class, the Marwaris quickly attained a dominant position in the region's new trade and commerce. They were largely engaged in money lending business and also selling salt, cotton-twists, brass metals and sugar. By 1906, according to a government report, Marwari merchants practically monopolized the whole of the trade of Assam valley²⁶ and at the same time, the Bengalis attained powerful administrative positions. As Weiner observed,

“The Assamese were largely unequipped to take the advantage of some of these new opportunities. They lacked the education which the Bengalis had acquired...As for moving into entrepreneurial and banking activities, the Assamese lacked the skills and vast contacts that characterized the Marwari.”²⁷

²⁵ Misra, Udayan, “Immigration and Identity Transformation in Assam”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 34, No. 21, 1999, p.1267.

²⁶ Cited in *ibid.*, p. 1269.

²⁷ Weiner, *op.cit.*, p. 105.

Moreover, on behalf of the British rulers, the Bengalis were empowered to carry out various administrative measures, especially tax collection, which severely embittered their relationship with the local Assamese. The colonial tax policy put severe pressure and burden upon the local peasantry, who never had the experience to pay taxes in cash. High rates of different kinds of taxes like 1% of the value of production to the treasurers for profit or loss, 0.5 % as commission, 12.5 % - 37.5 % to cover the expenses of police and contingencies besides interests and fines for dilatory payment, caused severe impoverishment in Assamese villages.²⁸ Direct involvement of the Bengalis in the tax collecting system strengthened the antagonistic feelings of the Assamese against them. However, the initial peasant revolts against repressive tax measures like the Jayantia Rebellion (1860-63), The Phulaguri Uprisings (1861) and Rangia, Lachima and Patharughat uprisings (1860s) were directed mainly towards the British rulers and not against migrant domination. But these movements clearly lacked any politico-cultural identification of the involved community as Assamese and cannot be considered as important part of the nationalist movement.

Nationalist sentiment seemed to be more involved in the discontent of the growing number of educated Assamese over the lack of access to administrative jobs and other positions due to stiff competition from the Bengalis. Primarily, such discontent mainly lied with the high-ranking officials of the previous Ahom kingdom and the members of the Ahom aristocracy, who were replaced by the Bengalis in order to facilitate the British rule. As Barpujari pointed out,

“It was not so much the cultural or linguistic domination as the economic impact – the virtual monopoly of office in all departments – that made the immigrants of Bengal the eye sore of the Assamese upper classes for whom there was no means of livelihood except that of government service.”²⁹

This discontent intensified with the spread of higher education in the region during the latter half of the 19th century. A section of these

²⁸ Barpujari, H. K., *Political History of Assam*, Vol. 1, Gauhati: Government of Assam, 1977, pp.14 -15.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

educated Assamese received employment in the middle ranking positions in the administration and some of them went to Calcutta to attain higher education in English. But the earlier attainment of education and administrative positions by the Bengalis severely curtailed the prospect of any increase in the number of Assamese having proper employment. Thus, a sense of discrimination and frustration contributed towards the Assamese nationalist objective of removing Bengali domination. As the judge of the town court in Gowhatty, A.J. Moffatt Mills pointed out in his report,

“The motive which brings the boys to the school is simply the prospect of getting government employment....The people should be disabused of the idea that one great aim and the end of giving them education is to qualify them for public employment, but the natives of the province have greater reason to complain of the preference, which is too often given to Bengallees, when selecting officers to fill vacancies.”³⁰

Mill recognized that earlier it was necessary to employ the Bengalis but “there are now in Seeksagur and Gowhatty (two provincial towns) many young men of high family and good character who have qualified themselves...and it is most discouraging to them to see most of the high and even some of the inferior offices filled by foreigners.”³¹

The situation turned complex due to the overall state of economic underdevelopment in Assam. There was almost no effort, what so ever, to strengthen the local market or increase local investment from the profits generated by new industrial activities initiated by the colonial authority. Whatever benefit they could earn from plantations, mines and related industries, were quickly repatriated to London. Moreover, entrepreneurs from other regions of India, specially the Marwaris, used to send their dividend to their own provinces. Even the tea garden laborers sent remittance back home. Thus, people were coming in and money was flying out of Assam. British capitalists organized primary industries in Assam but kept all major economic activities connected thereto in distant Calcutta, using Assam as a mere production base.

³⁰ Mills, *op.cit.*, p. 27.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

Thus, the migrants and the British prospered quickly, leaving the Assamese severely lagging behind. Manoranjan Sharma observed in this context, “The pattern of development (in Assam) was simply “dualism” marked by coexistence of developed and underdeveloped sectors side by side.”³² The situation was clearly suitable for escalation of a feeling of exploitation, discrimination and relative deprivation, which eventually led to a xenophobic nationalism on part of the Assamese. The crux of the Assamese nationalist feeling was uniquely captured in a set of essays by Gyananath Borah, an influential nationalist intellectual of Assam, titled *Ashomot Bideshi* (Foreigners in Assam) published in an Assamese nationalist magazine *Chetana* (Consciousness) in 1935. He argued that the major obstacle to Assam’s progress is that its trade and economy is totally under the control of ‘foreigners’. He resented the fact the Assamese had to rely on ‘foreigners’ even for their food and clothing and were indebted and subordinated to them. Millions of rupees were going out of Assam, leaving its productive base and market totally underdeveloped. Thus, the sole concern and responsibility of the Assamese, he believed, was “to save themselves from the grip of foreigners.”³³ These essays also pointed out the basic underlying contradiction between Assamese and pan-Indian nationalism; “These days people often say that unless Indians unite, they will not be able to gain independence. But how should different provinces, different languages, different literature and different religions become one?”³⁴ Baruah’s essays indeed pointed out the distinct nationalist perceptions and aspirations of the Assamese that were different from and even contradictory to a monolithic version of Indian nation and such differences were essentially developed on the basis of resentments against the migrants.

The nationalist response of the Assamese to the domination by the migrant communities was further reflected in the wave of political and social movements spearheaded by the middle class during late 19th and 20th century. Various Assamese civil society associations like the Assamese Sahitya Sabha (Assamese Literary Organization) stressed the importance of both Assamese national unity against migrant domination and the glory and prosperity of the people during the Ahom

³² Sharma, *op.cit.*, p. 94.

³³ Cited in Baruah, *op.cit.*, pp. 81-82.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

kingdom, compared to their condition under colonial rule. Tarun Ram Phookun, in his presidential address at the Assam Sahitya Sabha in 1927 said,

“We Assamese are a distinct nationality among Indians. A rising nationality shows signs of life by way of extending domination over others. Alas it is otherwise; we are not only dependent, our neighbor (implying Bengal) is trying to swallow us, taking advantage of our helplessness. Brother Asomiya (Assamese), recollect your past glory to have an understanding of the present situation.”³⁵

Alak Chandra Rajkhowa, another influential Assamese leader, also pointed out in the Assam Student Conference of 1926, “Today the Assamese have forgotten all the skills their forefathers possessed. Even our industry, commerce home-hearth everything is trailing behind. Recall the past. Our industrial pursuit was a matter of pride to us.”³⁶ This strategy of revoking the glorified past to condemn the dismal present has indeed been present in the agenda of numerous nationalist movements throughout the world. And the ‘present’ for the Assamese was a deplorable one due to the domination of migrant communities.

Geographical Construction of Assam under the Colonial Rule: Implications for Assamese Nationalism

The manner in which the colonial authority defined Assam within the geographical boundaries of British India had a profound implication for the Assamese nationalist agenda. The boundaries of Assam were drawn and redrawn and its administrative status changed. These changes had far reaching implications for Assamese defining of self-identity under colonial rule.

First, drawing Assam’s boundary under British rule never reflected any considerations about historical continuity or cultural contiguity. For almost fifty years after its annexation, the British ruled Assam as a part of Bengal. This was totally unprecedented in the history of Assam since the region was not even a part of pre-colonial Indian empires (like Mughul Empire), let alone be a part of Bengal. It was only in

³⁵ Cited in Guha, Amalendu, “Little Nationalism Turns Chauvinist”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XV, No. 41, 1980, p. 1710.

³⁶ Cited in *ibid.*, p. 1710.

1874 that Assam was declared as a separate Chief Commissioner's Province of British India. But even after that, the geographical perception of Assam as an extension of Bengal continued to loom large in the mindset of the British administrators. This, in fact, laid the basis for a more 'modernized' Bengali community to become dominant in the Assamese affair. Given the problems associated with the Bengali domination, it was only natural that the Assamese people reacted adversely to their state of subordination as a part of a more advanced province. Thus, they rejected the Bengal partition of 1905 that turned Assam into a part of East Bengal. The grievances and concerns of the Assamese people were reflected in the activities of the Assam Association (formed in 1905) and played a significant role in the political advancement of the province. The association expressed its grave concern that due to the partition,

“the historic name of Assam will be obliterated for ever, her language (will) suffer and the removal of the seat of the government to a place outside Assam proper and further away from geographical center will necessarily make her lose the amount of care and attention which it (has) at present received from the government.”³⁷

The Assam Association's statement not only reflected their fear of marginalization as a national group under Bengal province but also their perception about the colonial authority, which they felt could ensure their progress when Assam is administered as a separate province. Once again, it shows the greater importance attached to domination of Bengal in the Assamese nationalist agenda.

The partition of 1905 was annulled in 1911 in face of stiff resistance movement spearheaded mainly by the Hindu Bengali middle class and Assam gained back its position as a Chief Commissioner's Province. Assamese nationalist leaders widely supported and participated in the movement for their own nationalist aspirations. The period of 1905-11, however, added another dimension to the Assamese nationalist movement. This time, their nationalist struggle came into confrontation with the large number of Bengali Muslims, who were much more integrated with Assamese life and culture than the

³⁷ Barpujari, *op.cit.*, p. 180.

Hindus.³⁸ This friction grew deeper with the advent of the movement for Pakistan led by the All India Muslim League, particularly when the Muslims advocated inclusion of Assam with East Pakistan. Assamese discontent in this respect, however, was driven more by the fear of subjugation under Bengal than communal feelings against the Muslims.

Another closely related geographical concern that constantly influenced Assamese fear of cultural and socio-economic marginalization was the inclusion of Sylhet district (presently a district in Bangladesh) with Assam, even when the latter was a separate province. Sylhet, being a predominantly Bengali inhabited region, increased the threat of marginalization of the Assamese. To refer once again to Sanjib Baruah, “When to the population of Sylhet one adds the large number of Bengalis who immigrated to Assam, there were more Bengalis in Assam than Assamese.”³⁹ The people of Sylhet, being Bengali Muslims, also resented their inclusion in Assam. Therefore, there was a strong support among the Sylhetis in favor of 1905 partition, which placed Sylhet under Bengal. After the annulment of the partition, both the Bengalis of Sylhet and Assamese wanted to get rid of each other. Exclusion of Sylhet turned a major concern of political movements of the Assamese during 1910s and 1920s. The Sylhet controversy further shows how colonial geographical boundaries raised the level of contention between Assamese and the Bengalis and promoted Assam’s anti-Bengali nationalism. Actually, the boundary demarcation among different colonial provinces in India was mainly in accordance with administrative convenience of the British rulers and often was a part of their divide and rule strategy – the partition of 1905 being a major example. Such demarcation rarely considered difference of cultural identities and socio-economic interests of different communities. Therefore, as the paper has discussed in the case of Assam, scopes of contentious relationship among different communities were widened and such contentions quickly turned into strong basis for both protecting and asserting nationalist causes and aspirations.

³⁸ Baruah, *op.cit.*, p. 53.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

Conclusion

During the colonial period the Assamese nationalist movement grew mainly on the basis of cultural and socio-economic grievances against migrant communities from other regions of India. The British administrative and economic policies allowed the migrants to attain greater socio-economic status *vis-à-vis* the native Assamese people, which resulted in the latter's assertion of own nationalist identity in order to resist its marginalization. H. Srikanth has nicely captured the essence of such reactive nationalism of the Assamese by arguing,

“the migrations that took place during the British period, apart from creating the ground for cultural and linguistic conflicts, generated competition among different groups for new economic and political opportunities thrown open to the public by colonial rule...The ‘natives’, who could not compete with the new immigrants, began to worry about domination by these new immigrants in all spheres. Their sense of insecurity and feeling of alienation made them conscious of their own identity *vis-à-vis* the Bengalis.”⁴⁰

Such characteristics of Assamese nationalism clearly separated it from the monolithic vision about a single homogenous Indian nation. Unlike the Indian nationalist movement, the primary nationalist motivation for the Assamese was not confined to ending colonial domination. Rather, they aimed at removing the domination of other communities who belonged within the perceived Indian nation. Thus, the narratives of Assamese nationalism reveal the presence of the fragmentation within the idea of Indian nation during the colonial era. The legacy of such fragmentation has been clearly reflected in the numerous nationalist movements for autonomy and separation within the post-colonial Indian nation-state.

⁴⁰ Srikanth, H., “Militancy and Identity Politics in Assam”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 35, No. 47, 2000, p. 4119.