

Nationalist Project and Ethnic Response in Post Colonial Assam

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Abstract: Recently a link is increasingly being drawn between the nation building process and the ethnic assertion to explain the ethnic movement in the post colonial societies. Similar framework of analysis can also be applied to understand the ethnic assertion in post colonial Assam. The nationalist project of Assam because of its partial and exclusive nature, it is argued, has led to the marginalization of ethnic groups of Assam. As a result they have expressed strong resentment against the nationalist project of Assam and have come up with a set of demands to protect their interests. In view of this the present paper seeks to examine the nature of nation building process and to explore the link between such nation building process and ethnic assertion in Assam. This paper argues that such ethnic assertion has raised serious question on the desirability of nation state model in multi-ethnic societies like Assam.

Key words: Nation-state, nationalist project, ethnic assertion, multi ethnic societies.

1. Introduction:

The closing decades of last century have witnessed the rise and proliferation of ethnic resentment and conflict all over the world and more particularly such ethnic unrest has become perennial feature in most of the post colonial states. In recognition of this new realities of the world significant amount of scholarly effort have been directed to understand the origin and factors behind the growth of such ethnic dissatisfaction. As a result of such efforts number of alternative and sometimes competing theoretical models such as modernization approach, political economy model, relative deprivation theory, elite competition model, internal colonialism thesis, cultural deprivation arguments etc. have been proposed. However, in the context of post colonial states besides these theoretical paradigms a link between nation building process and ethnic resentment is increasingly being drawn to explain the growth of such ethnic dissatisfaction in these societies. In other words there has been a growing tendency on the part of scholars as well as leaders of claimant ethnic groups to view the ethnic demands and mobilizations as reaction to the nation building process that most of these post colonial states are engaged in. It is argued that given the plural demographic character the nation building process of these states either by design or default has led to the political, economic and cultural marginalization of ethnic minority groups and the ethnic claims are assertions against such marginality induced by this nation building process. In the context of Assam also a similar connection can be seen between nation building process and ethnic resentment. The leaders of different ethnic groups of Assam have

repeatedly expressed their dissatisfaction on the nation building process for being exclusive and hegemonic in nature. It is alleged that the nation building process of Assam is designed to protect and promote the interests of the Assamese speaking people and does not take into account the interest and aspiration of other ethnic groups of Assam. While different theoretical perspectives have been proposed focusing on aspects like elite competition, deprivation, foreign conspiracy etc, the relationship between the nation building process and ethnic assertions has remained relatively unexplored in the existing scholarly attempts to understand the ethnic tension in Assam. It is in this context that the present article intends to examine the nature of nation building process and the associated problem in the post colonial states in general. Then, the proposed work will try to highlight the nature of nation building process in post colonial Assam in terms of its rational and manifestations. And finally an attempt will be made to explore the link between such nation building process and ethnic assertion in Assam.

2. Nationalism and Ethnicity in Post Colonial States:

The relationship between nationalism and ethnicity has assumed serious complexity in most of the post colonial states in the context of the nation building process that these states have engaged themselves in immediately after independence. The nation building process of these countries is necessitated by their effort to replicate the European nation state model in their own society. Nation state in Europe emerged out of a complex historical process that began with the treaty of Westphalia and perfected in subsequent period. This model is based on the idea of congruence between state, nation and sovereignty. In other words, it holds that state should be structured around a territorially anchored nation. Under this model nation became the basis for organizing state and accordingly national identity is prioritized over any other identity. The logic of nation state, therefore, demanded creation of a national community and as a result nation states were invariably engaged in a project of homogenizing ethnic and other pluralities in to a nation. ‘Such project operated at two levels. At the visible level state sought to homogenize the ethnic pluralities into a civil society, through expansion of the market and extension of citizenship to them. At the second level, which was for long not so visible but is becoming visible now, the state sought to integrate the ethnic minorities into a *national* society characterized by the ethos and interests of ethnic majority’. (Seth, 1989) Accordingly, interest and right of ethnic minorities were protected to the extent that they did not threaten this nationalist project. The

post colonial states swallowed this readymade model of nation state made available by the West as they had no other choice and more importantly because it provided a state for their nascent nationalism, promised economic development and above all political coherence for their ethnically divided society. As in the case of European countries, the imitation of the nation state model by the post colonial states involves a state sponsored nation building project to create a national homogeneous community so that the state can correspond to a nation. Given the demographic complexity of these states, such nation building process has produced serious consequences for the relation between dominant ethnic majority and other minority ethnic groups. Most of the post colonial states in order to develop their ‘nation’, instead of trying to achieve the same through the creation of a civil society based on the extension of citizenship right, have sought to rely on the idea of creating a national society by integrating the diverse ethnic and other groups around the values and culture of majority ethnic group. As a result, states in these parts of the world has become an instrument for dominance for imposing the political and cultural will of ethnic majority over minority ethnic groups. The minority ethnic groups in return have also tried to politically mobilize themselves for securing their cultural and political rights. Thus the attempt to super impose nation state on ethnically plural societies of post colonial states on the basis of received history and theory of European nation states has produced serious ethnic resentment and mobilization with serious implication for legitimacy of the state and nation in these societies. A similar framework of analysis can be applied to understand the relation between nationalism and ethnicity in Assam.

3. Nation building process in post colonial Assam:

Parallel to the nation building process of India, one can observe the existence of similar process in case of Assam also. The nation building process in Assam began as back as in nineteenth century itself when some educated Assamese youth tried to forge the Assamese nation around Assamese language and culture. Initially the main concern of nationalist project of Assam was to promote Assamese language and culture and to rejuvenate Assamese society. In the twentieth century, however, this nationalist project assumed the concern of protecting the interests of Assamese people in the face of massive inflow of outsiders to the province. In the post independence period the nationalist project, as its supporter claim, was push forward in response to some socio-political, cultural and economic threats that confronted the Assamese nation and accordingly it was designed to

secure different socio-political, economic and cultural interest of Assamese people in the face of these challenges.

The nationalist movement in Assam in the post independence period was primarily aimed at securing Assam for the Assamese. This led the nationalist leaders to press for two kinds of demands-first to expel all the migrants who have entered Assam illegally after independence and second, greater share of political power visa-a- vie the centre either in the form of more autonomy or complete independence. It is significant to note here that both these demands are clearly linked and one has influenced the other. The origin of such demands, however, could be traced back to much earlier times. For instance, as back as in the 19th century itself resentment against migration and desire for independence were expressed and such sentiments were reverberated in the views expressed by people like Ambikagiri Roychoudhury, Jyananath Borah, Gauri Shankar Bhattacharya etc in the first half of 20th century. (Mishra, 1999) In the post independence period such demand acquired more vigour and intensity as could be observed in the demand for more political and financial power put forward by the leaders of Assam congress in the constituent Assembly debate and spirited defence put up by the Congress Government of Assam against the centre decision to rehabilitate Hindu refuge from East Pakistan and its antipathy towards the problem of unchecked illegal migration. The fear of being outnumbered by the outsiders ultimately culminated in the launching of a six years long Anti Foreigner Movement in 1979 by the nationalist leaders of Assam with the objective of expelling all illegal migrants that had entered Assam after 1971. The movement came to an end with the signing of Assam accord between ASSU and the central government. The Assam Accord, among other things, provides for different political, cultural and economic safeguards for Assamese people. For instance, clause 6 of the Accord states that constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards as may be appropriate shall be provided to protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social and linguistic identity and heritage of Assamese people. (The Assam Accord, 1985) During the same time some Assamese youth were toying with the idea of Swadhin Asom and accordingly on 7th April, 1979 formed the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) with the aim of liberating Assam through arm struggle.

Another important objective of the nationalist project of Assam was to improve the economic condition of Assamese people. The urge for economic regeneration was evident even in the formative stage of Assamese nationalism. As with the establishment of British

rule the control over economy of Assam gradually went away from the hands of Assamese to the outsiders, a belief gradually grew in among the Assamese nationalist that foreign domination was at the root of all economic misery of Assam. In such circumstances it was quite natural for the nationalist to access that if Assamese were to prosper economically, then Assam's economy must be liberated from the clutches of foreign hands and survival of Assamese community as distinct nation would depend upon its economic progress.

It was this consideration that led the Assamese leaders in the constituent Assembly to argue for strong financial autonomy for the province. They insisted on inclusion of certain provision in the constitution to safeguard the economic interest of Assam. In this regard, they wanted the constitution to specifically ensure larger share of export and excise duty for Assam on products like tea, jute and oil which were mainly produced in Assam. (Phukon, 1984) The constitution which was finally enacted, however, did not reflect these concerns of Assamese leaders. On the other hand the economy of the Assam in the post independence period declined further with complete absence of industrialization process, sharp rise in the rate of unemployment, low agricultural productivity and growing pressure on agricultural lands. It was in such an environment of growing economic resentment, Assamese people launched a movement demanding establishment of an oil refinery in 1957. In an another manifestation of nationalistic feeling, some youth, organized under the banner of Lachit Sena, attacked on Marwaris business houses of Guwahati and other towns of Assam in January 1968 with the aim of freeing Assam's economy from the control of outsiders. (Deka, 2010) This was followed by the second refinery movement which began in 1969 under the leadership of *All Assam Oil Refinery Sangram Parishad*. The mounting economic frustration of Assamese people ultimately found its expression in Assam movement. Although the immediate motivation behind the Assam movement was the fear of Assamese identity being swamped by the immigrants, as argued by the Udayan Mishra, it was in actuality a popular outburst of decades of economic neglect of the state by the central government. (Mishra, 1999) Such economic grievances and demands still remain recurring theme of Assamese nationalist agenda.

Again the nationalist project in the post colonial period in its cultural front has found expression in the form of an attempt to promote and expand Assamese language and culture. During the British rule, as it is argued above, due to various developments the Assamese language faced the danger of losing its identity and majority status. It was in this context that

the cultural mission of spreading Assamese language was undertaken and thus from the beginning of British rule and up to independence the main concern of Assamese linguistic nationalism was to spread Assamese language among those who had entered Assam from the rest of the country from the beginning of British rule and different tribes of plains and hills such as Mising, Karbi, Nagas and Garos of Assam. Different socio-political and cultural organizations that were set up from the beginning of 20th century including Asom Sahitya Sabha clearly exhibited this tendency of cultural expansionism. (Choudhury, 2007) In the post independence period also this fear persisted and thus not being assured of the future of Assamese language, proponents of Assamese linguistic nationalism carried on with their cultural projects of spreading Assamese language with *Asom Sahitya Sabha* taking the leading role. In 1958, *Asom Shatiya Sabha* brought out a book titled '*The Outlook on NEFA*' to promote Assamese language in NEFA. (Choudhury, 2007) The desire to spread Assamese language all over Assam has led the Assamese elite to launch the language movement in 1960 with the goal of making Assamese language the official language of Assam. In view of this growing pressure, Assam Government introduced the Assam Official Language Bill in the Assam Legislative Assembly on 10th October with a view to make the Assamese the sole official language of the state. Following this, Assamese middle class under the leadership of *All Assam Students Union* and *Asom Sahitya Sabha* initiated another move to make Assamese as the sole medium of instruction in the state. In response to this, Gauhati and Dibrugarh University decided to adopt Assamese as the medium of instruction in the state. A resolution to this effect was passed unanimously in the Assam Legislative Assembly on 23rd September 1972 which resolved that the medium of instruction at the college level under Gauhati and Dibrugarh University should be Assamese. English should, however, be continued as the medium of instruction. (Choudhury, 2007) Thus the Assamese nationalists in the post independence period have consistently tried to promote the Assamese language as a measure to protect their lingo-cultural interests. However, such attempt on the part of Assamese elite have been resented by the linguistic minorities of Assam including the different tribal groups of Assam as they consider such acts as some sort of design on the part of Assamese people to impose their language and culture on them.

4. Reaction to the nation building process in Assam:

There has been a strong tendency to view the ethnic assertions of different communities as a reaction to the nation building process of Assam. In the previous section, it has been discussed how the urban educated class of Assamese society from the later part of 19th century embarked upon a nationalist project to develop and further the interest of Assamese nation. This nationalist project continued in the post-independence period also and assumed different dimensions. It has been argued that this nationalist project in Assam is structured around the exclusive definition of Assamese nation based on Assamese language and culture. The leaders of Assamese society, who are engaged in the task of building an Assamese nation, have defined it primarily in terms of Assamese language and culture. The language and cultures of different ethnic groups are not accommodated in the definition of Assamese language and culture and as a result these groups have remained outside the purview of Assamese nation. As a result, nation building project of Assam in effect has turned into an attempt to protect and promote the interest of Assamese people without taking into account the interest of different ethnic groups of Assam. The nationalist project of Assam has aimed at making Assam for Assamese, but the very meaning of ‘Assamese’ (or notion of ‘Assamese’) is defined in such a way as to exclude the different ethnic groups. The project of making Assam for Assamese thus has meant politically capturing political power and administration, economically establishing monopoly over the government jobs, services and other economic opportunities and culturally promotion of Assamese language and culture.

It has been already discussed that the nationalist project in post-colonial Assam has assumed different dimensions. In socio-political term, it has come to mean expulsion of outsiders and arrest of political power. However, because of exclusive nature of the idea of Assamese, such socio-political project ultimately has turned into an effort for making Assam for Assamese speaking people only. The nationalist project with such objective in post-colonial Assam quite often has gone against the interests of different ethnic groups. For instance, the Assam Movement which was launched ostensibly to oust the outsiders/foreigners from Assam, at times was also directed against the different ethnic groups of Assam. During the agitation in places like *Gohpur* people belonging to *Bodo* community were targeted, attacked and even killed. (Choudhury, 2007) The Assam Agitation came to an end in 1983 with the signing of the Assam Accord between the Central Government and the leaders of the *AASU* and *Assam Gana Sangram Parishad* representing the interests of Assamese speaking people. However, at the time of signing the Accord,

different ethnic and minority groups were not taken into confidence. As a result, the Accord incorporated number of provisions that were highly resented by different ethnic groups as anti-tribal and anti-minority. (Deori, 2001) The Accord in its number of clauses provided for protection of political, economic and cultural interests of ‘Assamese’ people. But in the absence of any explanation of the meaning of the term ‘Assamese’, the AGP government interpreted it narrowly to mean only the Assamese speaking people and indulged in various activities that adversely affected the interests of ethnic groups of Assam. (Deori, 2001) The desire to make Assam for Assamese in the name of nation building process has also made the Assamese people reluctant to share political power with the members of ethnic groups of Assam. It is alleged that the Assam Movement was launched mainly to ensure the monopoly of Assamese speaking people over the political power and prevent others from getting share of it. (Guha, 2006) In the pre-independence period itself, Assamese speaking caste-Hindus had established their control over state’s political power and they continued to enjoy such position in the post-independence period also. However, in the 70s for the first time the Assamese ruling class had to face challenge to its dominant position. Up to this period, Congress was the ruling party in Assam and the caste-Hindu Assamese had complete control over it. But from the 70s, the caste-Hindu Assamese gradually started losing its grip over the Congress party. In the 1972 Assembly elections in the Brahmaputra valley out of 96 seats, caste-Hindus could capture only 54 seats and in the 1977 elections the number further fell down to 42. (Choudhury, 2007) It was at this moment, the caste-Hindu Assamese started getting disillusioned with the Congress. And in order to retain their hold over the state power, they moved towards regional ideology which culminated in the launching of Assam Agitation. After the Agitation, *Assam Gana Parishad* was formed and its success in the Assembly elections again brought back the caste-Hindus Assamese to power.

One of the main motives behind the nationalist project of post-colonial Assam has been to capture all the economic opportunities for Assamese people. The tendency to reserve the economic benefits for caste-Hindu Assamese was apparent in the pre-independence period itself. During the pre-independence period, one of the important criteria for appointment in government job was that candidates must belong to good family. The good family in actual sense meant people belonging to upper caste. (Choudhury, 2007) Both during the pre and post-independence period, Assamese had to face stiff competition in the economic sphere from outsiders such as Bengalis, *Biharis*, *Marwaris*, *Nepalis* etc. Therefore, one of the major economic concerns of Assamese people has been to ensure their economic

interests against the competition from these outsiders. The nationalist project in post-colonial Assam to certain extent has been initiated in response to this concern. However, in their effort to reserve the economic benefits exclusively for Assamese, they have even excluded the ethnic groups along with the outsiders. For instance, during the Assam Agitation, *AASU* and *AAGSP* raised the demand for abolition of reservations in education and jobs for the tribes of Assam. (Memorandum, 1980)

The sectional design of nationalist project in Assam is most obvious in its cultural manifestation. In conformity with general trend (or like elsewhere) the nation building processes in Assam has sought to forge a common Assamese identity out of the diverse cultural tradition of Assam. The idea is to form a homogeneous Assamese community on the basis of common language and culture. As a part of this homogenizing drive, the Assamese speaking people have imposed Assamese language and culture on the different tribes of Assam. The Assamese speaking people through their numerous acts of commission and omission on the one hand have attempted to impose Assamese language on the tribal people of Assam and on the other hand thwarted the development of their own language and culture. In 1960, the Assam Legislative Assembly passed the State Official Language Act which made Assamese the sole official language of Assam. Again in 1972 in the wake of medium movement spearheaded by *AASU* and *Asom Sahitya Sabha*, the Academic Councils of Gauhati University and Dibrugarh University decided to make Assamese the only medium of instruction in college and university level. Further during the rule of AGP government the SEBA through a circular in 1987 imposed Assamese language as compulsory third language in all the non-Assamese medium schools of Assam. All these Acts were designed to promote Assamese language at the cost of other languages of different tribes of Assam. At the same time the Assamese speaking people have shown utter neglect towards the development of language and culture of tribes of Assam and ignored some of the genuine linguistic and cultural demands of them such as introduction of their language as medium of instruction in primary and secondary level etc. The tribal people of Assam have reacted strongly to such policies of Assamese speaking people aimed at establishing cultural hegemony over them. Lot of people argue that such cultural chauvinism of Assamese speaking people has created a permanent rift between the tribal groups and Assamese speaking people. For instance, the State Official Language Act of 1960 hurt the cultural sentiment of tribal people and eventually paved the way for disintegration of Assam and formation of hill states. The plains tribes have also resented against such expansionist design of Assamese speaking people.

Various tribal organisations, in numerous memorandums, have categorically mentioned the hegemonic attitude of Assamese as one of the main reasons behind their demand for political autonomy. For instance, in a memorandum to the Prime Minister submitted in 1973, the *Mikir and North Cachar Hills Leaders' Conference* alleged that Assamese junta are determined to 'Assamise' the linguistic minorities by forcing Assamese language and culture upon them and wiping out their own language and culture which they too cherish to develop. It further claimed that the only solution for the hill people is separation from Assam to have their own state. (Memorandum, 1973) The subsequent such memorandums submitted on November 24, 1980, January 18, 1982 and May 18, 1987 by various organisations representing *Karbi Anglong* and *North Cachar* also objected to language policy of Assam government as an attempt to impose Assamese language on them). Similarly, PTCA in a memorandum to the President of India on May 20, 1967 echoed the same sentiment by alleging that Assamese speaking majority are trying to 'Assamise' other linguistic minority groups and make them their political beggarries. (Memorandum, 1967) *Bodo Sahitya Sabha* also passed a resolution in 1960 opposing the Official Language Bill. It considered that the Bill had threatened the unity of Assam by realising fissiparous tendencies and would amount to imposition of Assamese language on other linguistic groups. (Memorandum, 1967) Likewise, the *All Bodo Students' Union* of Assam accused the Assamese people of following the policy of Assamese expansionism and chauvinism and considered this as one of the major causes of their demand for a separate state. (Leaflet, 1987)

The exclusive nature of nationalist project in Assam has created sharp reaction among the tribal people of Assam and the ethnic assertion of tribal people of Assam is interpreted as reaction to such nation building process in Assam. It is interesting to note that tribal people of Assam while expressing their reaction to the nationalist project of Assamese people have emulated the sub-nationalist movement of Assamese people. Particularly from the late 80s, different organisations representing the tribal people of Assam have modelled their agitation on the line of Assam Agitation in terms of goals, strategies and techniques to secure their various cultural, economic and political demands.

5. Conclusion:

Nationalist project in most of the post colonial states with multi-ethnic societies bears with some inherent problems. Following the nation-state model of the West, such projects are premised upon the assumption that there should be congruence between culture and power. It is assumed that every culture should be entrusted with power in the form of a state. The rationale behind such link is that state power is necessary to ensure protection and preservation of the culture and development of people belonging to that culture; at the same time cultural basis provides legitimacy and unity to the states and serves some other important needs of the modern states. Thus, the adoption of nation-state model in multi ethnic societies of the post colonial states involve the projects of creating a nation through homogenization either on the basis of common culture or political values and a state that will represent this nation. Third world states, however, had two alternatives to develop their nation-either through cultural homogenization or on the basis of common political values. The creation of a national community on the common political values in these multi ethnic states has faced serious challenges because of presence of traditional form of loyalties. Unlike the West where modernization process facilitated the production of a national community, the traditional bonds between people in these third world states remain strong in the absence of such process. So generally national mobilization in these states have taken place on the ethnic lines with the result that here nation-states are defined in terms of the culture and values of dominant ethnic majority and nation building process means imposition of majority's culture on minority ethnic groups. As a result, state end up representing the dominant ethnic group instead of the whole nation and become an instrument of the majority group for fulfilling their interest. As the nation-state that the nationalist project of most of the post colonial states propose to build fails to accommodate the culture and interests of minority ethnic groups, they are forced to seek political power either in the form of separate state or some autonomous arrangement that will protect and promote their own culture and interests.

Similar problems of nation building project in multi ethnic societies can be observed in India. India immediately after independence, like other states of the third world, in order to engineer a nation-state initiated the nation building project. However, after independence considering the plural character of Indian society, the nation building project of India rejected any ethnic basis for its propose nation and instead, try to fashion a national community on the basis of Western values such as citizenship, democracy, secularism etc. Such attempt to create a national community through political means soon had to face resistance from the competing nationalism of different ethno-national groups. Ultimately in 1955, Indian state was forced to reorganize its provinces on the ethno-linguistic line in recognition of the

nationalist urge of these groups. With this culture became the basis for recognition of political power within Indian nation state.

It is against this background that nation building process of Assam can be examined. Parallel to the process of rise Indian nationalism, the idea of Assamese nation and nationalism grew during the colonial period. Assamese nationalism, as it is the case with Indian nationalism, had two projects-to promote and rejuvenate Assamese nation and Assamese culture and to secure political power for promotion and protection of this Assamese nation. The political urge of Assamese nationalism got recognized with the formation of province of Assam. In the post independence period also, nation building project in Assam continued in response to certain developments that threaten Assamese nation. The nation building project in Assam in post independence period, however, meted with serious resistance from the different ethnic communities of Assam because of the nature of nation building project. For quite long period of time, Assamese culture developed as a composite culture incorporating elements of culture of different ethnic communities inhabiting Assam. However, when a particular section of Assamese society, being inspired by the nationalist ideas tried to develop Assamese nation and culture, they basically emphasized on the culture of Assamese speaking people to the exclusion of culture of other communities. The exclusive character of nation building project in Assam remained intact in the post independence period also, as it was defined in terms culture of Assamese speaking people and state government, the political power representing this Assamese nation, was used to ensure the various socio-political and economic interest of Assamese nation. As a result, the ethnic groups of Assam gradually came to distance them away from this Assamese nation and saw the state power as the instrument for imposing hegemony of Assamese nation over them. Further, the incorporation of these different ethnic groups within a centralized bureaucratic state under the nation-state scheme put them in disadvantageous positions. Centralized state implies certain uniformities-uniformity of rules, regulation and even opportunities and participation in the political and economic life of the state requires certain educational, technical and economic skills. The different ethnic groups of Assam, being habituated to isolated, primitive and tribal mode of living, were relatively late in acquiring these skills and therefore, remained at the periphery of the of this modern political and economic process generated by the functioning of a centralized state. The result was the gradual deprivation and marginalization of socio-political and economic interest of these communities. The emerging elite of these communities were first to realize their deprived and backward status. Realizing the fact that in a nation-state model every culture has the right to acquire political power and it is only

through the political power that the interest of the people belonging to a particular culture can be protected, elites of these different communities have raised various ethnic demands that collectively seek to promote their respective culture and to seek political power for them. It is in this context that today Assam is witnessing growing ethno-national demands on the part of different ethnic communities of Assam.

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