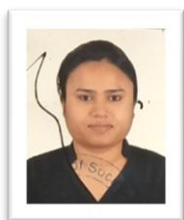


Identity Symbols and Politics in India: A Case from Assam



Raihana Azmeera Sultana

Assistant Professor,
Deptt. of Sociology,
NEF College,
Guwahati, Assam, India

Abstract

The crucial thing to notice here is that in India, people have tended strongly to shift their preoccupations from one of the many identities available to them to another, and then another, often and with great fluidity over time – as circumstances and the burning issues of the day change.

- James Manor in Caste in Indian Politics

Assam in particular and North-east India in general have witnessed multiple upsurge on claims on ethnic identity. These 'sons of the soil' movement base itself on debates on inclusion versus exclusion. This article will explore how ethnic claims are politically inclined and that the political elites chose the symbol according to their motivated self-interest. It will also be discussed that on one hand when shared identity provide a sense of belonging in times of conflict, at the same time perception of threat explodes among some community as identity symbols are manipulated by the elites. This again aims at the shifting nature of ethnic identity affiliation.

Keywords: Identity, Politics, Ethnicity, Assam.

Introduction

India is a multi-ethnic society where a number of ethnic groups are found belonging to almost all the possible 'categories of difference'¹ such as tribal, caste groups, language and religious groups etc. India belong to a multi-ethnic situation², which is characterised by 'a relatively even gradation of group in importance, from several large ones through several medium-sized ones to a number of small ones, with no clearly dominant ones and no sharp cut off points'. The most common perception about North-East India is that all the ethnicities that resides in this region are clubbed under one basket. It is often mis-represented as sharing one collective identity. One is also comprehended that people share commonalities, shared experiences and its diversity as well. The expression that Assam would serve as the melting pot for several ethnicities is time and again also challenged by resurgence of several ethnic identity movements.

Cultural symbols such as language, artefacts, attire, food etc are integral part in constructing an ethnic identity. The paper will examine what relation does ethnicity serve in politics of identity. Identity politics remains a categorical tool to sociologically evaluate the relationship between politics and identity. Identity politics is described as 'any mobilization related to politics, culture and identity' (Bernstein, 2005). Taking the Assam Movement of 1979-1985 in Assam as a case Brass (1974) theory that it is the interest of the elite minds that shapes the goal of the group to where it belongs will be applied to analyse the current political scenario of Assam.

Brass (1974) argues that 'political elites'³ choose the cultural symbols upon which they wish to base their claims for group rights, that they make a determination as to which symbol is decisive, and that they then work to make other cleavages congruent with the primary cleavage'. As a result, in a collective group struggle the elite of the particular group mould the demands of their movement and several times they have changed their demands to something different from what they were demanding for. The cultural policies/symbols were constantly defined and redefined when one dominant elite contested with the other (Baruah, Lessons of Assam, 1986). Ethnicity or ethnic identity also involves a claim to status and recognition, either as a superior group or as a group at least equal to other groups (Brass, 1991). Ethnic groups use their symbol of connection or differentiation in the political sphere to improve their status in the economic, social, educational and political spheres.

Although a particular group is not dominant but there has been a constant endeavour to overpower the opponent group and assert the identity of the powerful (Brass, 1974). While doing so several identities get submerged within a larger identity. But over a period of time a sense of deprivation and domination is felt by the submerged identities and struggle for recognition stir up among them.

'Recognition becomes the demand of contemporary politics sometimes' according to Charles Taylor (Taylor, 2011). It so happens because various groups are misrecognised^d and their identity is being shaped by others in a distorted and demeaning form which might break the self-assurance of a group or its members. Taylor (2011) opines that 'the demand comes to the fore in a number of ways in today's politics, on behalf of minority or subaltern groups, in some forms of feminism and in what is today called the politics of multiculturalism'. In multiculturalism, multiple identities emerged as the centre of attention in all debates and politics of the world.

But such mobilization imposes on the relevant groups a unity of views and experiences they do not and cannot have (Parekh, 2008). Parekh is of the view that "collective identity creates false antinomies between closed wholes. Since differences are taken to be the basis of identity in collective identity, conflict becomes the ground for the formation of collective identity and results in the conversion of the 'politics of identity' into 'politics of conflict'. Women movement which started as one collective force later witnessed conflict within the movement. Collective identity can be used negatively when the groups involved proposes to get liberated or freed and define their own identity such as the 'women liberation', 'black liberation' movements, from the dominant forces (Parekh, 2008). Positively, they are used in a liberal sense when the movements glorifies their own specific characteristics and feel proud to belong to one, for e.g. - 'black is beautiful' (Parekh, 2008). Collective identity has a major disadvantage because 'it imposes on the relevant groups a unity of views and experiences they do not and cannot have' (Parekh, 2008). It can be said that as collective identity combines the group with a particular view soon the group members begin to dissociate themselves from the group and some other form of identity becomes more important for them. Thus, new demands and different group emerge from an existing group.

Ethnicity Formation and The Politics of Identity: A Case from Assam

Paul Brass defined ethnicity as 'there are three ways of defining ethnic groups- in terms of objective attributes, with reference to subjective feelings, and in relation to behaviour. An objective definition assumes that though no specific attribute is invariably associated with all ethnic categories, there must be some distinguishing cultural feature that clearly separates one group of people from another, whether that feature or features be language, territory, religion, colour, diet, dress, or any of them. The difficulty with subjective definition is that they make it impossible to answer the basic question of how a

group of people arrives at subjective self-consciousness at the first place. Behavioural definition merely suggests that there are cultural differences between ethnic groups, but that the critical distinctions reveal themselves only in interaction with other groups'(Brass, 1991).

Brass argues that ethnic communities evolve out of ethnic groups when the dialects of some group, belief in different faith within the larger ethnic group combine people of such belief (Brass, 1991). He also states that 'ethnic communities are created and transformed by particular elites in modernizing and in post-industrial societies undergoing dramatic social change. Competition within the competing elite for leadership, economic benefits often results in the struggle in the political field. The elites enter into politics and use the symbol of its group and try to gain political power.

Let us consider the case of Assam movement once again to look at how cultural symbols are managed by political elites of the region. Assam comprises of several ethnic group who have migrated there since time immemorial. Assam was sparsely populated and the presence of large fallow lands as a result of the mighty Brahmaputra, immigration has never been an issue of concern there. But during the colonial period in the 19th century, the local elites felt for the first time that immigration was causing several problems for the indigenous Assamese people and an anti-outsider sentiment was stimulated for the first time (Das, 2005). A fear psychosis developed in the minds of the Assamese people that the Assamese would soon lose their identity and self- existence in the lofty height of uncontrollable Bangladeshi immigration (Das, 2005). It was the time when Assamese nationalism emerged for the first time but since then it has been the most important and unsolvable political issue in the Assam politics (Sharma, 2012).

The immigration issue was bothering so much the lives of the Assamese people that it resulted in the famous Assam movement of 1979-1985. The irony behind the politics of immigration in Assam was vividly described by A.H.W Bentinck, the Assam Legislative Council when he observed "so far as Assam valley is concerned the Assamese other than the Ahoms, came from west, the Ahoms came from the East, the Kacharis from the north, the Sylhetis, Bengales, Mymensingias from overseas, which of these has the best right to be called the children of the soil? (Dev & Lahiri, 1985). Considering Bentinck's observation, it is clear that mostly the populations are migrants at different point of history.

Linguistic and cultural differences are not superficial entities but rather they are the continuing sources for politics in India to be carried out. The politics that mainly dominated Assam was the politics of language and immigration until recently, when minority politics has gained success dramatically. The root of language conflict in Assam can be traced back to the times of the colonial power there. When the British occupied Assam and Ahom kingdom was dethroned, the government, its rulers and workers changed. The new government had to recruit experts

for the administration which the Assamese lacked and so officials from Bengal had to be appointed for the same. The process of colonisation in Assam was aimed at restructuring the society and monetising its economy to effectively serve the imperial interest (Goswami, 2001). The imperialist policy in Assam was to suppress local languages and differences between the local middle class and the immigrants were fostered (Goswami, 2001). Goswami (2001) had mentioned that the Assamese language remained suppressed during the whole period from 1836-1871 and almost all the government services were occupied by the Bengalis. In schools, where Bengali became the medium of instruction had to hire Bengali teachers as local teachers who knew Bengali were not available.

Assam, whose people helped AGP⁵ win election after the Assam movement with almost an absolute majority which convinced that the people of Assam irrespective of religion, caste, tribal, language identity had voted for a regional party now becomes a place for minority and divisive politics. Language was the main connecting factor in that election. Although the tribes have their own dialect, they could also connect themselves with the mother tongue of Assam. Language did not remain merely a means of communication, but a priceless heritage of group culture (Brass, 1991).

The Assam movement and the Nellie Massacre is the landmark in the Assam history which has shaken the otherwise silent Assamese society. The Assam movement demanded that those who migrated to Assam after 1971 should be deported to their place of origin i.e. Bengal or Bangladesh as a result Assam Accord was signed at the end of the movement. Henceforth, there has been a continuous struggle between the state, its people and the immigrants regarding their recognition and deportation. The indigenous Muslims who feels closer to the Assamese caste Hindus also participated in the movement and supported the cause.

A by- election in the Marigaon constituency in 1978 gave the ethnic Assamese the figures of towering increase of illegal immigrants which resulted in the Assam Movement initiated by the AASU (All Assam Students Union) in June 1979 (Goswami, 2001). The politics that revolved during the first part of the movement was against anti-foreigners. The political elite had then chosen the symbol of illegal immigration irrespective of any religion or culture against which they controlled the movement. Mass mobilization followed and people belonging to various tribe, religion or ethnicity participated in the same.

However, in the later part of the movement, the collective differentiating symbol of the movement shifted from anti-foreigner to only Muslim foreigners. The Nellie Massacre of 1983, another destructive landmark in the history of Assam, took place in the district of Nagaon, where thousands of immigrants were killed by the Assamese people. Thus, a shift in the symbol as markers of separation could be witnessed. Thousands of complaints were lodged during the revision of electoral rolls in the by-election and while doing so some of the ethnic

Assamese Muslims were also harassed (Baruah, 1999). There were a large number of Muslim victims in the election violence which strained the ethnic Assamese Muslim attitude towards the movement (Baruah, 1999). A section of the Muslims felt looked down upon and they sought to identify themselves with the greater Islamic world by actively participating in the religious works started by the Jammah and Tabligh groups (Ahmed & Yasin, 1997). A sense of fear has developed among the indigenous Muslims for which such fundamental groups could hold ground among the ethnic Assamese. The movement also produced two parties- the AGP (Assam Gana Parishad) who demanded the implementation of the Assam Accord and the UMF (United Minorities Front) who opposed the implementation of the same.

Identity declarations and identity crisis are articulated against fears of homogeneity, or fear of difference. Nandana Dutta (2012) stated 'the formulation or articulation of identity has always been in resistance; beleaguered, under threat from the universalist and homogenizing design of the nation-state, or from Bengal/East Pakistan/Bangladesh', in Assam. The major perception of threat, unlike some other place is not religion but language and culture. The religious dimension of the identity question was only secondary in Assam until recently. But rapid and large influx of Muslims from Bangladesh which is increasing the number of Muslim populations has affected the indigenous Assamese Muslims who has been an integral component of Assamese society. Religious fundamentalism is of recent origin in the state (Dutta, 2012).

The desire for recognition is the root cause of assertion of identities by ethnic, linguistic and religious groups within North East India (Dutta, 2012). Dutta (2012) remarked 'recognition is a recognition of dominance by the other while the 'politics of recognition bring together in a mutual reciprocity. The highly disputed 'Grow more food campaign'⁶ which invited several migrants to the valley of Assam further resulted in uncontrolled increase in migrant population. Those migrants basically came from its neighbouring Bengal, were mostly Bengali Muslims, and came to work in the tea plantation. In the course of time those migrants who were brought to get cheap labour was the main cause of turmoil in the state of Assam.

Conclusion

The Assam movement was supported by majority of its people against anti-foreigner issues. Conversely, the Nellie massacre of 1983 where only Muslims from the recently immigrated communities i.e. those who came during the British rule in Assam, were the victims gave rise to a new symbol of identity claims. The Nellie Massacre proves the inside fear/insecurity of the Assamese Hindus caused by the rising Muslim population. The movement which started as against foreigners in Assam irrespective of any religious affiliation, but later incidents suggests reallocation of cultural symbols as decided by the political elite. It is understood that there has been a continuous making and remaking of one group

identity. A group's affiliation has shifted from one point of interest to another in several occasions.

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Endnotes

1. 'Category of difference' is used here to mean how a group with same ethnic feature differentiate themselves from other ethnic category such as tribal from caste Hindus.
2. Multi- ethnic situations have been given by Clifford Geertz who has mentioned about five such types. They are asymmetrical and symmetrical duality, asymmetrical multiplicity (one large and several smaller groups), multiple ethnic fragmentation and the last one which is found in India.
3. Elites as described by Brass are the privileged few of a particular group
4. Misrecognition is the term used by Charles Tylor to mean when an identity is wrongly represented, or a distorted and demeaning picture is shown.
5. AGP- Assam Gana Parishad is regional party which was the product of the Assam Movement where All Assam Students Union took the major role in initiating the movement.
6. During the Saadulla Ministry, immigrants from Bengal, especially Mymensinghia, were brought for the purpose of agriculture under the campaign 'Grow More Food' but they were given a particular area to settle down. An imagery line was drawn, and they were not allowed to cross the line. This is known as the 'line system' which was introduced in order to keep a track of the migrants and to maintain the indigeneity of the tribal, Assamese Muslims and Hindus (Dev & Lahiri, 1985)