

Discussion Notes/Commentaries

The Identity Discourse in Assam: A Review

Ranga Ranjan Das¹

Assam, the premiere state of the north eastern region occupies a significant place in the history of migration. People belonging to different races, sub-races came to Assam at different phases and intervals through different migratory routes. Due to a prolonged contact and association, a racial admixture is observed over the years. In the process of their settlement, they differentiated into diverse groups with different cultural practices and traditions. In the long run, a common identity was developed for the residents of Assam under an umbrella term 'Asomiya' to denote 'Greater Assamese Society'. Literally, it means a lot for the people of Assam. However, with the advent of time, this identity has little meaning in socio-political context. Post-Independence period reveals the emergence of identity discourse among the people of Assam to fulfill socio-political aspirations. This paper briefly highlights the discourse of identity among various ethnic groups in socio-cultural and political context.

Identity discourse is one of the fast emerging trends of social science research. The post-Independence period witnessed the growth of identity politics in India. It is observed that in today's India identity politics, among other issues, has opened up the theoretical space for the marginal and oppressed groups to challenge and re-negotiate the identities that have been forced upon them. Ethnic, caste, gender, etc are thus becoming part of intense political debates (Baral, 2014: 45-46). In simple word, identity reflects both likeness and uniqueness. It relates to the members of a group which share a certain culture in common, at the same time which differentiates it from others. Such attributes not only distinguish a group from other groups but also contribute to the sameness and oneness among its members for identification. In North-East India, politics has generally followed the ethnic path. Ethnic-culture mobilization and ethnic movements launched by various ethnic groups in the region remain on-going processes. Each movement in the region started with identifying certain social problem followed by concretizing the identity through forming an ethnic association claiming for a separate administrative unit. Differences among

¹ Director [I/C], Law Research Institute, Eastern Region, Gauhati High Court, Guwahati.
Email: ranga_das@rediffmail.com.

different ethnic group arose where smaller communities tented to merge and form bigger identities making it convenient to raise political demands (Pyal 2006: 213-214). In contemporary writings, the 'IDENTITY' discourse is associated with two valuable terms: culture and ethnicity. Though, each term has own significance but they form core element in identity discourse. As Prodhani and Thakur (2014: 1) opine:

Culture and ethnicity have become two intertwined entities in the parlance of everyday discourse of our time, largely because of the growing visibility of the 'ethnic' not only as an exotic category but rather as an assertive entity that has progressively mastered the terms and strategies through which these entities have so far been essentialised by the operators who enjoy full access to and control over various, what Althusser defined as, 'apparatuses of power', both political and pedagogic. Culture is no longer a site of secular aesthetic manifestations; rather, it has evolved into a potential site of assertion and exclusivity claims.

Identity formation is apparently the most pertinent problematic of contemporary socio-political episteme in North East India. Ethnic assertion, revivalism, reverse appropriations, quests for a separate space are the major motifs that infuse and inform the contemporary socio-political and cultural idioms of the state. Most resistant and resurgent idioms are centred on the issue of ethnic identity, and language doubles up as a socio-cultural indicator (Sarma 2014: 80). Acharya (2014: 25-27) maintained that identity, like DNA, is not destiny- it is history. He further said that narratives about identity or identity politics are freshly problematized. In the North East, there are increasing numbers of cultural hybrids, who, through travel, consumption, mixture, and social mobility display complex geographies of identification-local, regional, national and perhaps post-national. That is why fears of cultural loss and community in the context of a globalised and consumerist economy have reinforced the growth of identity politics and nascent cultural fundamentalism. Spread of modern education and advent of Christianity have made a gross impact among the various tribes of the region. Rather, it is useful to signify them as 'ethnic groups'. In the present context, tribe is no more an isolated, self-contained and primitive social formation. The scheduled tribe in India has not only been vaguely defined, but also avoids the issue of formal definition and merely stands for a set of communities listed in the official schedule. Beyond that tribe is both constituted by and constituted of the social, political and geographical factors in a place (cited in Sharma 2015: 3). In such a situation a tribe may be understood as an ethnic group with a distinct cultural base, but politically organized with a view to produce solidarity-oriented action among the members. Demographic character, territorial integrity, linguistic affiliation may contribute to prepare the

ground for ethnic and cultural base to take a firm root, but ultimately it is left to the members of a community to define their own social environment and decide upon their future course of action (Das 2008: 36). In such a context, this paper will review the identity discourse of some selected ethnic groups of Assam.

Most people have multiple identities and affinities - some location based, some family based, some age or class based and some culturally differentiated. In the post-colonial period, North east India in general and Assam in particular have been witnessing proliferation of ethnic identity movements. A sense of identity can be a source not merely of pride and joy, but also of strength and confidence. It is not surprising that the idea of identity receives such wide spread admiration, from popular advocacy of loving your neighbour to high theories of social capital and of communitarian self definition (Barman 2014: 99). It is also important to put emphasis on the question of the identity of the North East as a region. It is also often argued that the existence of the North-East as a region is a myth. No doubt, it has its historical and even mythical antecedents in Pragjyotish and later Assam, despite the fact that Manipur and Tripura, the then two princely states were outside Assam. Ethnic groups who have converted to Christianity during the last century mostly inhabit in the hills, non-tribal or Hinduised tribal populations, on the other hand, inhabit the Brahmaputra, Barak and Imphal valleys. Various ethnic groups with their sub-groups are residing in the nook and corner of the region. They are at the various phases of transition. The independent India emerged with an ethno-political identity, which is composite in its forms and texture. Transition from colonial administration to an administration democratically oriented created a transitional vacuum. The old policy of status quo and isolation was replaced by a policy of development and integration (cited in Medhi and Roy 2009: 13). However, it is essential to review the entire policies adopted for developments of the weaker sections. Various scholars have argued that there have been rumblings of discontent and unrest among the various groups resulting from their relations with the non-tribals. They are at the cross roads and in the midst of societal self-awareness and cultural synthesis. They have their basic problem to protect their culture from the onslaught of other cultural factor and forces and also to integrate in the cultural mainstream. In this process, they, though, have lost many of the elements, but now in a mood to revive for reconstructing identity. In Assam, we have seen a process of cultural revivalism among the various groups to rebuild their identity. The identity discourse among six ethnic groups is well known to all. Ahom, Koch-Rajbongshi, Moran, Chutia, Mattak and Tea tribes have been battling for scheduling under ST (P) category. Their scheduling has gained a political dimension over the years. However, there are contradictions within. Regarding 'Koch-Rajbongshi' identity, it is very complicated. In this regard, it is important

to put emphasis on a news article: *Koch-Rajbongshi can't be an ethnic group* (*Assam Tribune*, 3.9. 2015)

“The present ‘Koch’ community has been named ‘Koch-Rajbongshi’ by political and apolitical leaders of the community for seeking a separate identity, distorting the history of the ethnic group, alleged the Royal Union of Koch-Rajbongshis (RUKR), an organization claiming to represent the royal dynasty of the Koches. Prithiviraj Narayan Dev, president of RUKR, which was formed on December 11, 2013 in Kokrajhar district, said ‘Koch’ is the name of a community and ‘Rajbongshi’ means ancestors of a royal family, hence ‘Koch-Rajbongshi’ cannot be a name of an ethnic group.....Quoting historical accounts furnished by Koch scholar and Kamataratna late Ambika Charan Choudhury and historian Sydney Endle, Dev said, ‘ when the community had resided beside the ‘Kochi’ river, they were called ‘Koch’ and when a group of this community shifted to living beside the ‘Mechi’ river, they were called ‘Mech’ (present Bodos). Hence, there is no difference between the ‘Meches’ and ‘Koches’.....”

Regarding Koch community, it is seen that their constitutional status varies from state to state. In Assam and Meghalaya they are regarded as OBC and in W.B., they are as S.C. But the Koch-Rabha of Assam and West Bengal are officially recognized as ST under ‘Rabha’ nomenclature. In pre-independence era many of the Koch population in different geographical settings began to cease their own identity and claimed as caste after various reform movements (cited in Pal 1990: 201-210). However, with the advent of time, they re-think over their socio-economic condition. They believe that identity as a ST will be helpful to change their present situation. The identity issue has multiple dimensions. In Assam, we have found group who is identified by its association with its occupation. The tea labour community of Assam basically consists of various ethnic, linguistic and cultural groups and it has recorded the names of 57, 80 and 131 different ethnic groups respectively by different scholars. Linguistically, they are divided into (i) Kolarian speaking, e.g. the Munda, Ho, Santhal and the Kharia (ii) Dravidian speaking groups include Oraon, Kondh, Gond and the Malpahariya and (iii) groups speaking Oriya, Bengali and Hindi. However, a new language has come up as the lingua franca locally known as *sadani*. To these diverse groups of labourers, the plantation offered opportunity to come together and share the common working and living conditions and compelled them to give up many of their traditional beliefs and customs. But still the nature and degree of assimilation of various tea labour groups within themselves as well as with Assamese culture has been viewed differently by different scholars (cited in Kar and Sharma 1990: 151-153). It is perhaps a difficult situation where different groups are considered as one common identity ‘tea tribes’. Besides, the Ahom, Chutia, Moran, Mottock are also aspiring for a separate identity and safe guards

under Sixth Schedule of Indian Constitution. The Ahom has a long history of being rulers of Assam after the down fall of Koch kingdom. They are the royal people as depicted in monuments found in the nook and corner of Assam. Except the lingua franca of tea tribes, all these groups are the speakers of Assamese language. Now, the other groups have proposed various other demand. Besides ST status, Moran demanded the exclusion of villages dominated by Moran people from the Sonowal Kachari Autonomous Council. In the last two decades, there is a movement to re-establish a separate ethnic identity for them. The cause for this ethnic revivalism is due to the under development of the Moran and to revive their traditional customs, cultural heritage, remaining as a follower of the Mayamora Vaishnavism (Boruah and Boruah 1990: 184-185). Though Moran and Mottock are distinguishing themselves as a different group, it is observed that there are close nexus between the two groups. However, at the present situation both the groups maintain a distinct identity. In this process, the Moran community at Kakopathar, has celebrated 'Rati Bilu' this year for the 5th consecutive year since 2012 with pomp and gaity. *Daal kari*- an indigenous game is also part of the event. A process of cultural revival is going on among the various ethnic groups. Assam, occupies a significant place in the history of migration. People belonging to different races, sub-races came to Assam at different phases and intervals through different migratory routes. Due to a prolonged contact and association, a racial admixture is observed over the years. In the process of their settlement, they differentiated into diverse groups with different cultural practices and traditions. In the long run, a common identity was developed for the residents of Assam under an umbrella term 'Asomiya' to denote 'Greater Assamese Society'. Literally, it means a lot for the people of Assam. However, with the advent of time, this identity has little meaning in socio-political context. In spite of assimilation every group is thinking of separate identity. In recent times, the 'Kalita' are also unified as a group for separate identity. The problems of plain tribes are many. They are at all not satisfied with the move to assign the six ethnic groups under ST (P) status. They are vehemently opposing the entire process. They argued that the existing socio-political and reservation privileges will have a great effect if the new groups are placed without framing adequate framework. Revealing the history when Koch-Rajbongshis were accorded ST (P) status for a specified period, members of other existing ST (P) category had to face rigors of reservation policy. Besides, the plain tribes have other issues with non-tribal Assamese people. As reveals, the plain tribes are divided under two broad groups: Bodo and the Miri groups, ethnologically different from the rest of the Assamese people. They are the earliest known inhabitants in Assam and maintaining their sovereignty till their last king Tula Ram Senapati died in 1854 A.D. Language belong to Tibeto-Burman group and widely differs from

Assamese language. They claimed that they had been the masters and rulers of Assam at one time and the present Assamese society was formed by the influx from Kanauj, Mithila, Magadha, etc. of the central India in the thirteenth and fourteenth century only whereas the Bodos and other tribals are the aboriginal people of Assam. The Assamese people and the government are having a deep conspiracy to swallow and assimilate the tribals with Assamese people and the Assam will finish them gradually. They claim their distinct linguistic and cultural heritage and hence Assam should be separated on the basis of language and culture. The tribals want to enjoy the right to political self-determination and a separate state would fulfill their desires (Dutta and Pradhan, 2006: 170-171). Language, being hallmark of identity, have several issues in the past. While the Assam government started consolidating the Assamese language in the educational system and administration, the non-Assamese communities have also shown due apprehension. The Bodos, the largest plain tribes of Assam, soon started a movement for the inclusion of their language as the medium of education, followed by the demand for their own script. The term Assamese people has created controversies because the non-Assamese refuse to be treated as Assamese people, and hence they felt that Assam Accord might give legitimacy to the imposition of Assamese language and culture to them. They soon started the movements in the name of protecting and preserving their cultures, including the demand for the division of Assam to facilitate the formation of new states. For example, the Bodos started a movement for the creation of a separate state along the north bank of Brahmaputra (Singh 2014: 23-24). In Assam, we have seen identity discourse has gone towards a different level through political influence. It is high time to differentiate identity discourse from political propaganda.

Like other tribes of North East, the ethnic groups of Assam have also under gone a process of transition and transformation. The post-Independence period focused towards the policy of integration and development. The Indian Constitution has kept necessary arrangement for uplifting the socio-economic conditions of the weaker section. To provide necessary equipments, it has classified the entire population of India under class, caste and tribe. It is the beginning of identity discourse. People are categorized under various heads and provided adequate measures. But, the thing is that initially the entire scheduling of people is for specific period. But it is going on extending without examining their current status. What is their existing position in comparison to so called 'main stream' population? Whether they really derive benefit out of the existing provisions? What are the socio-economic conditions of the other groups? What are their problems? What are desire and aspirations? It would have been helpful if steps should be taken to sort out various socio-economical problems of the

other groups. Instead of dealing as an issue of politics, it should have been dealt as human right perspectives. Now, it is perhaps late. In Assam, the identity discourse have shaped in a new look. Every group is in a race to assert their own identity. There is double impact. In this process, some lost cultural elements are seen reviving, and on the other hand, frequent *bandh* (strike) incurs heavy loss to the state economy. While the six groups are demanding for inclusion under ST (P), on the other hand, the existing ST (P) groups are seriously opposing the entire issue. In such a situation, often hot debates and strong arguments come across according to their respective position. In this regard, the role of social scientist is very significant to provide amicable solutions for consolidating identity discourse in Assam.

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