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IDENTITY MOVEMENTS AND INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT IN ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

Assam, the most populous state of North East India has been experiencing the problem of internal displacement since independence. The environmental factors like the great earth quake of 1950 displaced many people in the state. Flood and river bank erosion too have caused displacement of many people in Assam every year. But the displacement which has drawn the attention of the social scientists is the internal displacement caused by conflicts and identity movements. The Official Language Movement of 1960, Language movement of 1972 and the Assam movement (1979-1985) were the main identity movements which generated large scale violence conflicts and internal displacement in post colonial Assam. These identity movements and their consequence internal displacement can not be understood in isolation from the ethno-linguistic composition, colonial policy of administration, complex history of migration and the partition of the state in 1947. Considering these factors in the present study an attempt has been made to analyze the internal displacement caused by Language movements and Assam movement.

KEYWORDS: *displacement, conflicts, identity movements, linguistic composition*

DISCUSSION

The state of Assam is considered as mini India. It is connected with main land of India with a narrow patch of land measuring 28 km on its western side. It has long boundary with all the north eastern states, West Bengal and the neighboring country of Bhutan and Bangladesh. The state of Assam is the most diverse state in India. "Society in Assam has historically been multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-ethnic, multi-caste, multi-class and multi-lingual in composition". (Hussain:1993,52). Sociologically Assam's society has been extra-ordinarily plural in its composition and highly uneven in structure. Although Assamese is the dominant language of the state yet a considerable number of people speak Bengali and Tribal languages. The Assamese people are concentrated in upper Assam but the Bengalis form the majority in the three districts of Southern Assam Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi. Besides, there is a large number of Bengali in the Brahmaputra valley and hilly region of the state. The hill Tribes are concentrated in the two hill districts of Karbi Anglang and Dima Hasaou (North Cachar). The Bodos constitute the single largest community in the lower Assam's districts of Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Odalguri. Apart from this the tribes like Deoris, Tiwas, Sonowals, Missings, Rabhas, Koch-Ranjanghis, Barman's

are concentrated in the different corners of the state. Some of these Tribes have assimilated themselves and have become the part and parcel of Assamese nationality. But the Bengalis, Nepalis, Manipuris and some of the tribes like the Bodos, Karbis, Dimasas etc. maintain their separate identity and try to protect their language and culture. There are more than 26 linguistic groups in the state. According to 2001 census 57.8% recorded Assamese, 21.61% recorded Bengali, 5.21% recorded Bodo, 4.62% recorded Hindi 3.66% recorded Missing, Karbi and Garo and rest 6.96% recorded Oriya, Nepali, Manipuri, Santal and other languages as their mother tongue. (wikipedia)

The main factor behind such ethno-linguistic composition of the state is the continuous flow of migration for several centuries. Almost all groups living here have migrated to this state from different places at different points in time. It is said that the Karbis were the first to enter this region. The Kiratas belonging to the mongoloid Race have migrated to this region from southern part of China. It was the Bodo Tribes who built up first civilization in the Brahmaputra valley. But in the 13th century the most important group known as Ahom entered to this region from the Maulung Province of Burma. The Ahoms defeated the local kings and the Tribal chiefs and by the 17th century they established

powerful Ahom kingdom. The Ahoms could resist and protect their kingdom from the Mughals. But there was cultural and religious interaction with the Ahom kingdom and the rest of India. They invited Brahmin priest from different parts of the country and granted them vast area of land and converted themselves into Hinduism. But due to some internal disorder Ahom ruler became weak and their kingdom was invaded by the Burmese. To save the Assamese from the atrocities of the Burmese the British interfere in the domestic matter of Ahom kingdom and with the support the local people they defatted the Burmese. But in course of time taking advantage of the weakness of the puppet kings and they annexed the Ahom kingdom under their administrative controlled and gradually occupied the whole north eastern region.

The occupation of entire north east region by the British gave new directions to the process of migration. During this period Bengalis, Marwaris, Biharis, Nepalis and Tea Tribes migrated to the state. As a result the colonial Assam became more diverse than the pre colonial Assam. The incorporation of this region into the colonial system led to the discontinuation of the earlier way of administration which was replaced by British system of Administration based on bureaucratic principle. Modern western educations become a precondition to get jobs in the new colonial Administration. So the British brought with them educated Bengali from Bengal as clerks' lawyers and other profession. According to Guha without any investment in western education in Assam, the colonizers availed the service of already surplus educated unemployed persons from Bengal Presidency. (Guha : 1977,58)

In 1836 the colonial government made Bengali as the official language of the State 'This declaration of the colonial master was one of the main reason for the Assamese-Bengali competition and conflict in the post colonial period, This issue has been utilized raucously by a very large number of the Assamese scholars, journalists, literary figures, politicians and even social scientists, of both the 19th and 20th century. Even today the blame continues to be on the Bengalis/Bengali baboos for misguiding the British colonial rulers against the legitimate right of the Assamese language in Assam. (Hussain :1993,232) They believe that a handful of the Bengali baboos were successful in persuading the British rulers to accept Bengali as the official language of Assam and their conspiracy led to the suppression of the Assamese language between 1837-1873. But this theory is not supported by any historical evidence. There is no evidence that Bengalis made organized demands for the declaration of Bengali as the official language of the state. Moreover when Bengali was declared as official language of Assam Sylhet was not part of it and the number of Bengali of the state was a few. The Bengali as other Indians had little role in the matter of policy formulation and all powers concentrated in the administrative missionary centered round English man.

In 1874 for administrative convenience Assam proper together with Cachar, Goalpara and Garo hills was formed into a chief commissioner province. Although vast in area this new province with its small population of 24, 43,000 had a merge revenue potential, "To make it financially viable therefore the authority decided to incorporate into it the populous Bengali speaking district of Sylhet which historically as well as ethnically was an integral part of Bengal". (Guha : 1977,27) A memorial protesting against the transfer of Sylhet was submitted to the authority. Though the authority refused

the prayer "but the petitioner obtained the assurance of no change whatsoever either in the system of law and judicial procedure.....". (Guha : 1977,28,29) Though the province was named Assam, it was in fact " an amalgam of Assamese speaking, Bengali speaking and myriad tongued hill and tribal areas in which Assamese was claimed mother tongue to less than a quarter and Bengali more than 40% of the population" (Guha :1980) It changed the demographic and linguistic structure of the state. Thus the colonial decision transforms the Assamese in to a minority. This colonial arrangement weakened both the Assamese and the Bengalis and paved the way for Assamese competition and conflict in colonial as well as post colonial Assam. Again to increase state revenue and to bring Barren land under cultivation the British Government with the support of the Assamese zaminders encourages Bengali Muslim peasants in to the Brahmaputra Valley which further increased the number of Bengali in the state.

India achieved independence in 1947. Independence brought not only pleasure but also pain because India became independent after her partition. The province of Bengal, Assam and Punjab were divided to create a separate state for the Muslims. The fate of Sylhet district of Assam was decided with a referendum. As per the result of the referendum major portion of Sylhet went to Pakistan. Only three thanas of Patharkandi, Ratabari and Badarpur and about one half of the thana of Karimganj remained with Assam. Sylhet, the 'Golden calf which was sacrificed in 1874 to usher in a new province was now once more sacrificed at the altar of a new state'. (Guha : 1977,320) When the result of the referendum was declared there was a feeling of relief in the Brahmaputra Valley because for Assamese it was a lifetime opportunity to get rid of Sylhet and to carve out a linguistically more homogenous province. Again the decision of the East Bengalis Muslims peasants of the Brahmaputra valley to declare Assamese as their mother tongue in the census of 1951 transformed the Bengali into a minority.

In such a situation the Assamese leader became more vocal about their language, culture and identity and demanded the introduction Assamese in the province as a whole and its adoption as the state language. Accordingly post colonial Assam witnessed two violent language movements. In 1959 the Assam Sahitya Sabha, the literary body of the Brahmaputra valley came out with statement..... that Assamese language must be declared as the state language of Assam and started movement accorss the valley (Goswami 1997:48) In 1960 the Assamese speaking student's of Brahmaputra valley started a demonstration in Guwahati for the declaration of Assamese as the official language of the state. State police attacked on the demonstration in which one student named Ranjit Barpujari was spot dead. The death of the student erupt entire Brahmaputra Valley into communal violence and led to the "Bongal Kheda Andolon" Thousands of Bengalis houses were plundered and set on fire. Bengali news papers were burnt and Bengali film exhibition was blocked in the Brahmaputra valley. All such activities of a section of the supporter of the movement terrorized the entire Bengali community in the Brahmaputra valley which resulted in mass displacement of thousand of Bengalis across the valley. Many Bengalis died and a large number took shelter in the relief camp. In such situation the in spite of protest of the linguistic minorities the state Legislative Assembly pass the Official Language Act on 17th October 1960 and made

Assamese as the official language of the state. It totally ignored the multi lingual character of the State. The linguistic minorities of the state opposed such hegemonic imposition of Assamese language on them. The Hill tribe under the banner of all Party Hill Leader Conference started movement protesting the language act. The Bengalis also under the banner of Nikhil Assam Banga Bhasha Sammellan and Sangram Samity started movement to protest against the hegemonic imposition of Assamese language and declaration of Bengali as another official language of the state. The state governments try to suppress such non violent and peaceful movement of the Bengali for the status of their mother tongue and killed 11 Satyagrohi at Silchar Railway Station on 19th May 1961. In this movement a few Assamese also died and they were elevated as martyr. The Assamese press ignored the atrocities over the Bengalis silently. Significantly Ranjit Burpujari was declared martyr by the State Government but 11 Bengali's has not been declared as martyr by the state government yet.

The All Assam Student's Union launched another movement in 1972. The aim of this movement was to make Assamese as medium of instruction up to the graduate level in addition to existing English language. The experienced Bengali Hindu community of Brahmaputra valley maintained total silence on the medium issue. The Bengalis of Barak valley through democratic process begged for the acceptance of Bengali as medium of instruction along with Assamese. That was enough to spark of a riot. A reign of terror was let loose over the Bengali speaking students of university and colleges. It once again generated terror against the Hindu Bengalis. The entire Brahmaputra valley plunged into violence and terror in the wake of this movement. The entire Bengali Hindu community of the Brahmaputra valley loses their hearth and home become completely dumb. Thousands of Bengalis left Brahmaputra valley and moved to Barak Valley and North Bengal. However on this movements a few Assamese also died and they were elevated as martyr. But the violence and its consequence displacement of Bengalis were ignored silently. The victims of displacement remained invisible where the victory of the emerging Assamese nationality was visibly depicted by the Assamese press. As a result it is difficult to find out the exact number of Bengali displaced by these two language movements.

The Assam movement (1979 – 1985) against foreigner living in Assam illegally generated unprecedented terror and violence. In 1980 when rest of the country went for Loksabha election the thickly populated northern part of Kamrup district was rocked by violence in which normal law and order failed totally. In March 1980 the villages of the minorities were attacked in North Kamrup where 25 thousands people mostly belonging to the Schedule Caste and Other Backward Classes have been rendered homeless. It was estimated that 200 to 300 persons died as a result of mob violence.(Hussain:1993,116).The identity of only 80 dead bodies could be established and 78 of them belonged to linguistic and religious minorities and 1 out remaining 2was a CRP jawan.(ibid)As the civil government failed in north Kamrup Army was called to contain violence. Again the Assamese press selectively highlighted the atrocities of army over of the Assamese but remained silent regarding plight of the displaced people. The heinous acts committed by a section of people in North Kamrup against their neighbors are rare in the history of civilized world. Moreover the killing of Shankar Ghosh of Jorhat,Dr. Anjan Chakravorty of Gauhati Medical

College, Timir Baran Majumder the young manager of UBI of Naharkotia and Ravi Mitra, the manager of Oil India Limited Duliajan, again terrorized the entire Bengali community of the Brahmaputra valley. On February 12, 1983 about 1200 persons were butchered to death at Nellie 70 K.M. east of Guwahati, the capital city of Assam. An eminent Assamese journalist estimated the death toll at 3000. All the victims were Muslims. Prof. Manirul Hussain observed the Nellie massacre as the single largest and severest programme that the post 2nd world war south Asia history has witnessed(ibid). Nellie was not the end it was followed by the massacre at Caulkhowa Chapori at Darrang district and Ahotguri area of Nagaon districts where the victims were of same group that of Nellie. Another massacre took place at Lakhimpur district where most of the victims were Bengali Hindus. At Gohpur in Darrang district several people died many were displaced in attack and counter attack.

The Assam movement came to an end with the signing of Assam Accord on August 15, 1985. The leaders of the movement form a political party and captured power. Everybody expected that peace and harmony would return to the soil of Assam. But soon after the Assam Gana Parishad came into power ULFA raised the demand for sovereign Assam.

The persons displaced by these movements were basically linguistic and religious minority (Bengali Hindus and Muslims). They are marginalized groups of the society in Brahmaputra valley. Their fore fathers migrated from other parts same country undivided India and adopted Brahmaputra valley as their homeland. They were targeted by the supporters of the movement to create hegemony of Assamese language and culture all over the state. The leadership of the movements have failed to comprehend the fact that Assam have been a shared homeland of different linguistic, cultural and ethnic group migrated from different places at different parts of the world at different point of time. It is not possible for any ethnic or linguistic group to establish one lingual homogeneous society in Assam. The strategy of one group to establish Supremacy over another will create problem for both. There is no alternative to human and democratic living in such society. Every group can maintain its identity and autonomy in a democratic way. The colonial policy of administration, partition of the state in 1947, complex history of migration and the failure of the Indian state to resolve the issues raised by the identity movements were the major factors of such mass internal displacement in post-colonial Assam.

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