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**THE  
UNRESOLVED  
ISSUE OF  
CITIZENSHIP IN  
THE ELECTORAL  
POLITICS OF  
ASSAM**

**11**

Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social  
Change and Development  
Guwahati : Assam

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## The Unresolved Issue of Citizenship in the Electoral Politics of Assam

Being circumscribed by religion and history, almost all the regional political forces now discernible in India's North East cannot adhere to an ideology that predisposes the nation to a Hindu state. But, the regional political actors are often found to be ambivalent to the ideological construct of a Hindu nation as the narcissism immanent in the regionalist ideological constructions does not essentialize any secular principle. The ambivalence can be seen as pragmatism, the survival strategy of the regional actors in power, necessitated by the contemporary political economy with its ever-increasing tendency of centralization. The discrete political units of India's North East are crucial for the hegemony of Indian federalism, especially for their historicity. But, in the present context of Indian politics imbued with the logic of governmentality that allows unabated shrinkage of political space for the constituent political units, survival of the regional players of the economically not so significant political units depends largely on their capacity to adjust with the regime that controls the nation state, whether secular or communal. The contemporary discourse on citizenship in India, largely been influenced by the idea of political citizenship developed by Marshall (1950), has unfolded many crucial questions. While the recent amendments made in the citizenship laws followed by the country since independence evoked nationwide contestations, most of the power-seeking political forces at the periphery demonstrated a wishy-washy response to it. In the specific context of Assam, in sharp contrast to the position taken by the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) which still claims to be regionalist in ideology, the people at large being conscious of an 'Asomiya' cultural identity became highly apprehensive about the amended Citizenship Act. For them, the amendments, besides being an assault on the secular fabric of the constitution, would jeopardize the 'Asomiya' identity, protection of which has been their primary concern for long.

The contemporary citizenship discourse in Assam has extensively been influenced by the political mayhem that broke out in the Brahmaputra valley in the late 1970s. Avoiding any polemics, an oversimplified narrative would reveal that the Assam Movement (1979-85)

was avowedly launched for protection of the "Assamese national identity" that essentialized citizenship for political mobilization. The movement was galvanized consciously directing and reshaping popular sentiment especially against the immigrants from Bangladesh, an alarming threat to the 'Assamese national identity'. The commitments made by the state in the "Assam Accord" to resolve the impasse of illegal immigrants satisfied the leadership of the movement; the sanctity of the "Public Law Contract" was, however, quashed by a visible apathy of the state. The unresolved issue of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh though played a crucial role in the electoral politics for decades, it reappeared more vigorously with the idea of the 'National Register of Citizens' (NRC) projected as a panacea of the protracted question. While the political project spearheaded by judicial activism was initiated without any well-conceived strategy to confront with the aftermaths, publication of the draft NRC substantially provoked the political regime at the centre to immediately push the Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB) linking citizenship with religion. The centrally sponsored move was defeated by the temporarily formed regional alliance, but interestingly, many of the regional forces which vehemently opposed the CAB remained with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), despite the party in power sought its mandate in the last Lok Sabha elections with a promise to make the CAB a reality. While the "Final NRC" that excluded nearly two million residents of Assam had largely been contested with a clandestine communal tone, hundreds of Foreigners Tribunals were promised to resolve the issue of citizenship for the excluded people on one hand and construction works of several Detention Camps were taken up for providing shelter to the people declared as "foreigners" by the Tribunals, until their deportation. The concomitant process has been the controversial amendments in the Citizenship Act. Therefore, in the specific context of Assam, the amended Citizenship Act was contested as it was perceived to be a move for nullifying the essence of the Assam Accord while the NRC was initially accepted as a step towards implementation of the later.

Politics is, undoubtedly, ideology in praxis, but the concepts that correlate to constitute the ideology are often imprecise in meaning and subject to multiple (re)constructions and interpretations. As ordained by necessities of the practitioners, an ideology can, therefore, be reconstructed and projected as absolute and univocal. Understanding of some of the ideas and concepts that emanated from the historical specificities of Assam is, therefore,

crucial for analyzing the contemporary citizenship discourses in the regional society; as such concepts and ideas are instrumental in shaping the ideology which has been significantly influencing the collective actions for long. Thus, it calls for much deeper and wider engagement with the enormously rich historical literature than the scope permitted by the present essay. Nevertheless, the immediate reference point may be the rich academic debate in the *Economic and Political Weekly* for the antimony it generated based on multitude of ideas drawing from the historical processes.

The Assam Movement generated a polemical academic discourse "in the midst of an immense tide of popular passion and ominous flashes of Fascist threat against dissent and criticism" (Gohain 1985, p xxii)", nevertheless it did not continue with the same rigor to empirically capture the movement in its later part which gradually unfolded fascist vulgarity with clandestine communalism leading to xenophobia. The debate started with Hiren Gohain's brief comments on the movement characterizing it as a counter attack on the organized left by the ruling class when the former demonstrated a visible presence in the electoral politics of Assam (Gohain 1980). This appeared as a "simple conspiracy theory" for Sanjib Kumar Baruah, and sought legitimacy of the movement as "the Assamese civil society in rebellion" under the leadership of the students (Baruah 1980). He asserted that the large-scale immigration into Assam within a relatively short period of time has tangled Assam's nationality question, but the justification of the movement as secular would mean an apology for academic neutrality. With an economic justification, Tilottama Misra characterized the movement as a resistance to the exploitation of an oppressed nationality (Misra 1980), and the analysis that followed was framed by her theoretical interpretation of what can be called as 'internal colonialism' in the context of Assam vis-a-vis the extra-regional big business interests.

The debate veered back to the tangled nationality question in Assam with Amalendu Guha's polemical intervention (Guha 1980). Guha defined the term 'Asamiya' on the criteria of both language and territoriality, those amongst the 'Assamese' (i.e. all who domiciled the present state of Assam) "who profess Asamiya to be their natural or acquired mother tongue". He argued that 'Asamiya little nationalism' began its journey in the 1850s through political mobilization by the Asomiya middle class leadership initially

on the language issue and to cover other issues later. Defining Little nationalism as “a spiritual sentiment that holds together a group of people claiming a common cultural-regional identity” aspiring for “a degree of autonomy within the larger nation-state”, Guha depicted the trajectory of the Asomiya little nationalism since its inception till it resumed the “proto-fascist” method of political assertion during the movement. Essentially contesting Guha’s characterization of the movement, Sanjib Kumar Baruah reiterated his earlier justification pointing out that “as a frontier people, the Assamese nationality is particularly vulnerable to threats to its rights as the ‘basic population’ of a territory, from exceptional immigration”; therefore, the fears and aspirations of the Assamese expressed through the movement were reasonable (Baruah 1981). For Gail Omvedt also, the fears of being overrun expressed by the Asomiya through the movement had a material base, nonetheless the fears were voiced by a petty bourgeoisie leadership with chauvinist tendencies in absence of left leadership (Omvedt 1981).

The debate may appear as an anachronism in the present context, but it is worth reiterating for its enormous academic richness crucial for analyzing the present discourse on citizenship. It raised many questions which are still pertinent, though it ignored certain nuanced historical issues crucial for understanding the trajectory of what has commonly been projected as Asomiya nationalism or little/sub-nationalism. For instance, Guha’s analysis of the origin of Asomiya little nationalism in the 1850s as political mobilization by the Asomiya middle class on language issue is not entirely flawless. Guha contradicts himself with his own definition of ‘Little nationalism’ where the idea of a nation-state is crucial. Similarly, emphasis on the historical role of the ‘Asomiya middle class’, the loosely structured concept commonly shared by most of the scholars, tends to camouflage the specific role played by the political leadership discernible at different historical juncture with different ideological constructs.

The historicity of the concept of nationalism has widely been debated both in the context of Europe and its colonies. Avoiding the details, what can be accepted is that while nationalism in Europe surfaced essentializing cultural homogeneity for formation of the nation-states necessitated by the bourgeoisie revolution, nationalism in the colonies appeared much later in the form of struggle against colonial domination, for reclaiming

sovereignty. It is worth referring to Anderson in this context as he conceptualized the nation as an ‘imagined political community’, refusing to accept any given set of criteria as its determinants (Anderson 1983). In the specific context of India, being shaped by the politico-economic framework of colonialism, nationalism gradually emerged as a pan-Indian ideology imbued with the imagination of a nation state, a political conglomeration of the historically evolved cultural identities. For Partha Chatterjee, the advent of British rule, the ‘Great Event’ for India “terminated centuries of despotism, superstition and vegetative life and ushered in a new era of change—of ‘destruction’ as well as ‘regeneration’, destruction of antiquated tradition and the emergence of modern, secular and national forces” (Chatterjee 1999: 22-23). Notwithstanding its disputable secular and modern character, the core of the ‘national forces’ fostered by the ‘Great Event’ was constituted by the emerging ‘ruling material force’ (Marx and Engels 1977: 47), for which, the Indian National Congress became the predominant political expression when it became a mass movement. Conceiving nationalism as the subjective manifestation of a political idea and a type of collective consciousness (Conversi 2004: 815-829), its instrumental role as an ideology cannot be overlooked. It is precisely for this instrumentalist role, almost all the cultural identities including multitude of ethnic, racial and religious categories across their class barriers became integral part of the mainstream nationalist discourse. Subsequently, being the ‘citizens’ of India, their national identity (nationality) as ‘Indian’ has been endorsed and objectified by the nation state.

Like many other cultural identities reshaped by colonial rule (commonly comprehended as nationalities) that were gradually brought under the pan-Indian nationalist discourse, depiction of the ‘Asomiya nationality’ as a culturally cohesive and distinct subset of the territorialized concept of the ‘Assamese’ has long been a serious political question. The so-called Assam Accord made the political equation between these two categories more complex than ever before. The state promised in the Accord<sup>1</sup> constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards to protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the ‘Assamese’ people. Since the Assamese language does not provide an equal term for ‘Assamese’<sup>2</sup>, its subsequent political interpretation consciously tagged it with indignity. Consequently, the concept ‘Asomiya/Assamese’ became practically incomprehensible as well as indefinable and the resultant ambiguity

has continuously been influencing the regional political theatre for decades. What is immanent in the contemporary imbroglio is that every 'Asomiya' is an 'Assamese' but not vice versa; and realization of the statist protection of the former, the assurance achieved through the protracted movement, is a historical necessity. Therefore, the nuanced conceptual difference between 'Asomiya' and 'Assamese' are crucial in the present context. While the former is deeply embedded in its history of political sociology, the later is intrinsically linked with citizenship of the domiciled besides their preferred and professed cultural and linguistic identities. It is, therefore, imperative to relocate both the concepts in their own historical contexts for delineation of the nuanced difference as well as the congruities that contributed to the formation of a common political category against colonialism.

History of nearly the first five decades of colonialism in Assam, since annexation of the Ahom state in 1826 and then placing under the Bengal presidency till creation of the province of Assam in 1874, is crucial not only for understanding the political-economy of colonialism as a late phenomenon in the region compared to rest of India but also for comprehending the political sociology of the Asomiya cultural and linguistic identity. As several empirical researches on the history of colonialism in Assam<sup>3</sup> have demonstrated, expansion of administration alongside rapid investment of colonial capital especially in the upper valley of the Brahmaputra, the territory of Ahom state or Assam proper, necessitated massive inflow of people from other parts of colonial India. While the conspicuous absences of a trading community in the non-monetized economy and English educated people with professional proficiency were filled by the Marowari traders and English educated Bengali Hindus settled in the emerging urban centers, the demand for manual labour force in the flourishing plantation sector was fulfilled largely by the immigrants from different parts of colonial India to the enclaves<sup>4</sup>. Concomitantly, protection of the colonial interests in the valley required stringent measures of control over the surrounding hills executed through a process of gradual annexation and socio-political exclusion (Sarmah 2018), the process that appeared as territorial expansion of the colonial state of Assam.

However, one of the most crucial outcomes of the colonial interventions during the first

fifty years that deserve careful consideration in the present context is the emergence of a small section of Asomiya intelligentsia with colonial patronage after the adoption of the Bengali language in 1837 for administration and judiciary in Assam. This tiny section emanated mainly from the Hindu upper caste rural landed gentry instilled by the newly introduced ryotwari system. Back at home; this English educated enlightened section grew up in Calcutta under the influences of the so-called Bengal renaissance, almost uncritically accepted Bengali language instead of showing resentment against the denial of the justified position of the Assamese language in Assam Proper<sup>5</sup>. Nevertheless, they joined the American Baptist missionaries who relentlessly worked for establishing Assamese as distinct and separate language and consequently Asomiya as a separate cultural entity.<sup>6</sup> Being preoccupied with social reforms, the primary concerns of this enlightened section were the plight of widows of upper caste Hindus, polygamy and widespread consumption of opium, and their endeavor to disseminate enlightened ideas and knowledge required formation of different sabha (society) for organizing regular study circles<sup>7</sup>. With the backdrop of their upper caste Hindu aristocracy and also having experienced the way Maniram Dewan was hanged publicly in February 1858 for his 'conspiracy' against colonialism<sup>8</sup>, this enlightened section comprised mainly of the salaried employees, carefully distanced itself from the larger political issues raised by the peasantry.

Starting with the Phulaguri uprising in 1861, mostly the tribal peasantry organized through their mels, the organized militancy of the ryots gradually expanded to other parts of the Brahmaputra valley towards the end of the century. Nevertheless, by the time Assam became a Chief Commissioner's Province in February 1874, the amalgamation of Assam proper with the multitude of ethnic, racial and linguistic identities<sup>9</sup>, the numerical strength of the Assamese rickety intelligentsia substantially grew up with the spirit of a separate linguistic identity already boosted by restoration of Assamese to its rightful position in 1873. Though the size was swelled up by the increased number of employees and professionals together with the 'native' entrepreneurs that also included few tea planters, their new professional and occupational engagement did not entirely detach them from their historical position, and therefore, they had also to respond to the issue of constant hike of land revenue, a concern common with the peasantry at large. In the

wake of peasant rebellion, the position newly acquired by the rickety intelligentsia helped them to engage the colonial administration for negotiation. The basic interests of this rickety intelligentsia are reflected well by the agenda and actions of different sabhas<sup>10</sup> they spearheaded during the last three decades of the nineteenth century when the common peasantry as a distinct class was active with its overtly anti-colonial agenda. This small section<sup>11</sup> of petit-bourgeoisie, professionals, traders and employees, despite their common concern for growth and development of Assamese language and social reforms, may be seen as what Gramsci termed as an “essential” social group (Gramsci 2007: 6-7). Notwithstanding its enormous contributions in reshaping Asomiya as a distinct cultural and linguistic identity besides preparing the ground for proliferation of a modern middle class, this category did not contribute much to the growth of any ‘nationalist spirit’ until appearance of the Congress. While comprehending nationalism in the colonial context as politics against colonialism, the collective actions of the peasantry in contemporary Assam can only be regarded as the emerging nationalist spirit without dismissing the historical importance of the progressive and enlightened ideas propagated by the English educated intelligentsia. After all, the missionaries were not nationalist!

Though the formation of the National Congress in 1885 started attracting imagination of Assamese intelligentsia, the conformism it inherited debilitated visualization of the socio-economic as well as political future of Assam. Under the aegis of the educated gentry, the Assam Association that came into being in 1903 as the valley based political organization remained primarily engaged with submission of petitions and memorials seeking more benefits from the colonial government and remained almost silent during the swadeshi movement as well as on the issue of formation of the Province of Eastern Bengal and Assam in 1906 (Mahanta 2010: 232-275; Dutta 1969: 41-45). However, deep engagement with the language question, now reconstructed as conspiracy of the Bengali officials in Assam, the so called Asomiya middle class sharpened the existing societal divides between the Assamese and the Bengalis, which has still been influencing the political processes. At the same time, it welcomed the colonial project of peasantization inaugurated in the beginning of the last century backed by the logic of enhancement of both agricultural production and revenue. The obvious consequence is large scale settlement of the hard-pressed tenants of East Bengal zamindars to make productive the water-logged, jungle

infested land of the Brahmaputra valley, the wasteland in the colonial lexicon.

The tenants from East Bengal with overwhelming majority of the Muslims favorably responded to the new colonial project to find in the Brahmaputra valley not only as their lebensraum but also as a land of plentiful opportunities. The political implications of massive immigration are expounded by many scholarly works (Guha 2006; Kar 1990; Barooah 2010; Misra 2017; Nag 2017), however, it may be reiterated that the colonial language played a critical role in construction of a new set of social differences that constituted the core of political discourse gradually intensified by the growing numerical strength of the immigrants. The number of immigrant peasants scattered mainly in the western part of the Brahmaputra valley in the first decade of the twentieth century was not more than the plantation labour brought to the tea estates of the eastern part. The Census Commissioner in 1911, however, characterized the immigration as a peaceful invasion of Assam by advancing hordes of Mymensinghia army. When the colonial project of peasantization through settlement of immigrants continued, the unabated influx naturally caused apprehensions. The strange aggressive immigrants settled indiscriminately in the valley, besides occupying the village reserved land, forests, and the riverine *chars*, started procuring arable land of the autochthons. When alienation of autochthons’ land and the growing strength of the culturally different immigrants appeared as a threat for the Assamese race<sup>12</sup>, C.S. Mulan, the Census Commissioner during the years 1921-31 projected the influx as “conquest”, “attack”, “invasion” etc<sup>13</sup>.

The colonial project of peasantization that continued with unabated influx not only created a fertile ground for communal polarization but also generated apprehensions amongst the plain tribes, especially the Bodos. Formation of the Tribal League in 1933 after the demand of the Kachari Jubak Sammilani placed before the Simon Commission for reservation of seats in the provincial legislature for the plain tribes reflected the growing political aspirations of the valley based myriad racial groups<sup>14</sup>. The short history of the Tribal League till it became a non-political entity in 1952 is crucial not only for political struggle for protection of tribal land but also for reshaping multitude of racial/ethnic identities that started gradually demystifying the perceived notion of assimilation of the valley based ethnocultural categories to form the so called Asomiya nationality. Though

the numerically strong but culturally and linguistically diverse laborers in the plantation sector had never been a serious concern of the cultural project of the Asomiya intelligentsia as they were not perceived to be a cultural threat, the immigrant Muslim peasants were expected to merge with the Asomiya cultural identity and they favorably responded to it. The fear and apprehension of Bengali domination, however, continued and reappeared in the post-Partition political theatre of the Brahmaputra valley. Starting with little over twelve thousand in August 1947, while the number of Hindu Bengalis taking shelter in Assam as refugees constantly increased in the subsequent years after independence, the Asom Jatiya Mahasabha perceived it as a political design of the Bengalis for creation of a "Brihattar Banga Samrajya" (Goswami 1997: 28). The riots in Assam in 1948 and 1950, characterized by the Calcutta press as "Bengali Kheda Andolon" were essentially to desist from running separate schools for Bengalis and to impose Assamese as medium of instruction, and meanwhile, the government of Assam initiated steps to make Assamese as the medium of instruction in all the schools of Assam valley amidst steep opposition from the Bengali Hindus (Goswami 1997: 31-32). The situation was worsened by West Bengal's claim over Goalpara district on linguistic consideration at the time of linguistic division of the states in the mid-1950s.

Consequent upon adoption of the principle of linguistic provinces for the Congress in 1920, the Assam Pradesh (Provincial) Congress Committee (APCC) emerged as the sole organized political movement with its defined territoriality to cover only the presumably Assamese dominated areas excluding the Surma Valley that remained, as before, under the organizational command of the Bengal Provincial Congress. For its ideological expansion transcending all religious or socio-economic fortifications and integrating the regional sentiment with the pan-Indian nationalist discourse, the primary concern of the APCC since its inception had been the issues specific to the regional society. For ensuring political integration of Assam with India, the leadership of the APCC precipitously opposed the All India Congress Committee for its position on the Cabinet Mission's proposal to group Assam with a predominantly Muslim zone in Eastern India. The same leadership was also instrumental in political integration of the hill districts, which were hardly influenced by the pan-Indian nationalist discourse, with the nation state. The political consideration of the caste Hindu Asomiya elite leadership of the Congress was to retain the hills under

its hegemonic political control without altering the colonial map of Assam. Amazingly, while the post-Partition Hindu Bengali immigrants to Assam were treated as "refugees", the first attempt to push back and prevent the increasing number of Muslim immigrants was made through the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act, 1950 amidst communal riots. Nearly one lakh immigrants, who reportedly left Assam during the riots, however, came back following the agreement between India and Pakistan, the Nehru-Liaquat Pact, signed just one month after enactment of the previous legislation. In the changed circumstances, when the political influences of the Assam Provincial Muslim League virtually disappeared after independence, the ruling Congress appeared in the guise of savior of the Muslim immigrants to monopolize the electoral dividends for the decades to come.

The National Congress with its "regionalist ethos", the camouflaged political interests of the caste Hindu Asomiya elite, was successful in suppressing some of the localized political platforms that emerged in Assam in the wake independence. However, it failed to keep its political territory undisturbed for long. Not only the Nagas who have their own history of nationalism parallel to that of pan-Indian nationalism, many other dominant communities also initiated their negotiations with the Indian state with their own imagination of greater autonomy and sovereignty. The militant form of political negotiations, often characterized as "insurgency", based on reconstructed history of the historically excluded communities resulted in political disintegration of Assam that substantially reduced the political space of the Congress on one hand and total obliteration of the political hegemony of the caste Hindu Asomiya elite over the highlanders on the other.

Nevertheless, with its irreproachable hegemony, the Congress continued its domination in the electoral politics of the Brahmaputra Valley till Sixth Lok Sabha elections held in 1977, though the so called "Congress system" was rejected by the people of India at large, at least for the time being. The electoral scenario of the Valley too, however, had dramatically changed in a short while when the people rejected the Congress in the Legislative Assembly elections held in 1978. Nor did the Janata Party despite being in power at the Centre and having alliance with the political forces which grew with their demands for further disintegration of Assam on ethnic lines<sup>15</sup> could emerge as a

clear alternative<sup>16</sup> to the Congress. Significant enough was the electoral victory of the Left parties<sup>17</sup> in a situation when the Congress, which always enjoyed mass support of the “immigrants”, lost its power for the first time. Definitely it was formidable for the politically insignificant infant political platforms such as the Asom Jatiyatabadi Dal (AJD) and the Purbanchaliya Lok Parishad (PLP) which sought electoral mandate with the imagery of “jatiyotabad” (nationalism) constructed on the issue of foreign nationals in Assam, distancing themselves from all other existing political forces.

The reinvented jatiyotabad, though electorally despised by people, became more vigorous after the elections. Now it started political articulation of the officially reinforced question of foreign nationals<sup>18</sup> to make citizenship as the most significant issue in electoral politics. As it was alleged, the police officials on instruction of the government of Assam hurriedly challenged the authenticity of citizenship of about 70,000 voters in the process of revision of the electoral rolls (ERs) before the by-election to the Mongaldoi Lok Sabha constituency that was to be held in December 1979. Subsequently, the All Assam Students Union (AASU), which remained almost silent on the issue after focusing the question of unbridled influx of people from outside Assam in its twenty-four points’ Charter of Demands formulated in 1974, was persuaded by some officers of the Border Police Organization for “filing objections against Bangladeshi voters, in the wake of the revision of ERs being done by the Election Commission” (Bhattacharyya 2018: 121). Some senior police officials also supported the leadership of the PLP by providing information required for making the issue of foreign nationals a strong base for a popular movement (Bora 2007: 22). For having a common platform to launch a broad-based movement on the issue of foreign national, the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad<sup>19</sup> (AAGSP) was formed in a meeting held on 27 August 1979 convened by the leadership of the Dibrugarh unit of AASU, as insisted by the PLP. The thinly attended meeting decided that a movement would be launched with the single issue of detection and deportation of the foreign nationals on the basis of the NRC 1951.

However, the AAGSP soon became a much larger political platform especially of the Asomiya people and its deeper engagement with the rural society helped the movement to continue with the well engineered pogroms. All the nationalist parties, except the

BJP and the Janata Party, were projected as enemies. The political attacks, nonetheless, continued to be much sharper against the organized lefts, especially the CPI(M) and its mass organizations, when the common Asomiya followers of the other parties had already shifted their political camp. Continuing the agitation with a reduced intensity, the AASU became active in formation of a new regional political party during the post 1983 phase of the movement. Finally, the Assam Accord was signed on 15 August 1985, though its essence was not radically different from what was proposed in 1981 by the ruling Congress at the centre as solution to the problem of foreign nationals. The nucleus of the AASU leadership now ready for election politics with the image of savior of the Asomiya national identity became more active in formation of a new political party under its leadership uniting the PLP and the AJD. Though the PLP was initially unhappy with the Accord; the lure of power in the changed circumstances compelled it to merge with the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) formed just three months after signing of the Accord. The core of the leadership of the newly formed party, of course, was constituted by the leadership of the movement just retired from the AASU. Soon, many of them had to migrate from the University hostels to Dispur after capturing the power through the Assembly elections in December 1985. A large scale violence was triggered off by the Assembly elections in 1983 as the ERs allegedly contained a huge chunk of illegal voters, but the same ERs became uncontaminated in the changed circumstances when the reconstructed ‘Asomiya nationalism’ assured its leadership an easy access to power.

The Accord that was instrumental for capturing power by the new leadership emerged through the movement, but it reinforced the political cleavages within the Assamese society already instilled by the prolonged violent movement which insinuated communalism. While the Muslim minority with its history of experiencing indiscriminate political harassment started political consolidation (Nath 2019), other ethnic communities became apprehensive about their existence as distinct linguistic and cultural identities for use of the undefined term ‘Assamese’ in the Accord (Dewri 2001). The six years of political mayhem created by the historic ‘Asomiya nationalist movement’ followed by the pandemonium of AGP rule (Sarmah 2002) brought back the Congress to power, now to politically maneuver the difference. Implementation of the Assam Accord was not in the political agenda of the AGP, nor did the Congress which replaced the AGP in power could

spare time for it. The immediate political priorities for the Congress were the growing popularity of the militancy under the aegis of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) that grew under the shadow of the Assam Movement and gained momentum during the period of the AGP in power, and the movement for separate state galvanized by the Bodo leadership. Besides the political engineering for damaging the basic spirit of the Assamese militancy reflected through ULFA, the ploy of the Congress leadership to politically disintegrate the Assamese society appeared in the form reimagined of autonomy for the major ethnic communities of the Brahmaputra Valley.

Political negotiation with the violent movements of the Bodos that finally culminated in formation of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) in 2003 under the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution was preceded by an ad hoc mechanism – the Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) constituted through a state legislation enacted in 1993, adding fuel to the fire. Concomitantly, three other so called autonomous councils were formed in 1995 reinforcing distinct cultural identities of the Rabha, the Mising and the Lalung (Tiwa). The number of such autonomous councils proliferated after a decade, again during the Congress rule in the state, reconstructing cultural distinctness of three other racial categories viz. the Deori, the Sonowal Kachari and the Thengal Kachari (Lalfakzuala and Sarmah 2019). All these six communities, despite their nuanced cultural differences, were considered to be integral components of what has generally been comprehended as the broad 'Asomiya nationality', nevertheless, they all occupied lower positions in the social hierarchy dominated by the upper caste Hindus. With such constructions, implementation of the Assam Accord was relegated to the back bench in everyday politics of the Valley by both the AGP and the Congress, though the issue of foreign nationals was kept alive for electoral politics.

Amazingly, the issue of foreign nationals in Assam does become a major concern mainly for the rightwing political parties only in the run-up to the elections. While the state remained conspicuously indifferent to the question of deportation engaging Bangladesh in any negotiation, more than two lakh thirty thousand people in Assam were marked as 'D' voters (Doubtful voters) in 1998 debarring their right to vote, unless they prove their citizenship in the Foreigners' Tribunal constituted for detection of foreigners in Assam. A

large number of such cases referred to the Tribunals are yet to be resolved. The decision for updating the NRC 1951 was taken in 2005, but the Pilot Project for the exercise started exactly after five years. It was postponed due to violent resistance. While the BJP made its big claim to deport all Bangladeshis from Assam, of course with the promise to treat the Hindus as refugees, before the parliamentary elections held in 2014, the process for updating the NRC 1951 began with judicial activism. Despite apprehensions expressed by few in the academic circle, the apparently judicial initiative was welcomed by all political forces active in the Brahmaputra Valley across their ideological difference, as it was expected to resolve at least the question of detection of the foreign nationals for the deportation process to be followed.

The mammoth exercise that continuously engaged a huge workforce for long came to an end with the final NRC published on 31 August 2019 confirming Indian citizenship to 3.11 crore people of Assam excluding 19.06 lakh applicants, whose citizenship has to be determined by the Foreigners' Tribunals. Both sanctity of the exercise and accuracy of the outcome were, however, immediately questioned by different political parties as well as many other apparently nonpolitical organizations. The AASU expressed its resentment because of the phenomenal gap between the estimated numbers of illegal migrants stated by the central government from time to time and the total number of people excluded by the NRC. As pointed out by different organizations, the NRC excluded a large number of people of various tribal communities of the state, more prominently the Bengali Hindus. The total number of Hindu Bengalis excluded by the NRC is more than the total number of Muslims from East Bengal origin, as alleged<sup>20</sup>. The immediate reaction of the BJP was overtly communal. The President of the State Unit of BJP alleged that claims of people having surnames like Biswas, Sarkar and Saha were intentionally rejected by the NRC authorities, and therefore, besides demanding an NRC for the country as a whole, he claimed that new laws would be brought, if necessary, to ensure protection of the Hindus.<sup>21</sup>

In the specific context Assam therefore, the basic ethos of the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2016 (CAB) introduced on the Lok Sabha on 19 July 2016 cannot be isolated from the whole process of NRC on one hand and the Assam Accord on the other (Roy 2019).

While the CAB was steeply contested by the people of the North East in general and Assam in particular for the fear that it would not only legitimize especially the Hindu immigrants who entered the region even after 25 March 1971 but would also open the new floodgates for infiltrators from Bangladesh, the discourse on secular character of the constitution was not much visible in other parts of the country. The Bill could not be placed in the Rajya Sabha mainly because of the political maneuver of the combined regionalist forces in the North East; the fragile issue-based alliance however soon became instrumental for the BJP in the subsequent Lok Sabha elections. While the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 became a political reality followed by nationwide contestations against the discriminatory and communal ethos of the legislation, the regionalist political leadership sharing power with the BJP in different states of the region preferred to remain silent. Nevertheless, spontaneous protest in Assam has been backed by the renewed anxiety of losing cultural and linguistic identity now aggravated by a fear of getting politically marginalized by the Bengali Hindus. Therefore, the sanctity of the Assam Accord, specifically its Clause 6, became a crucial issue. The BJP has tried to ameliorate its political position the North East by extenuating the historical political differences for gradual alienation of the voices from contestation to the new legislation. The political engineering thus warranted exclusion of the states with Inner Line Permit (ILP) and the areas covered by the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution from the jurisdiction of the amended citizenship legislation. With that logic, Manipur has been brought under the ILP, the colonial device of exclusion framed in 1873 essentially required for fortification of the Brahmaputra Valley (Sarmah 2018). It implies that, in the entire North East, only the plain districts of Assam and Tripura excluding the areas covered the Sixth Schedule will have to accommodate all those post 1971 Hindu immigrants now to be treated as citizens while the number of this new category of citizens may continuously increase. Appearing in the guise of saviour, the government of India constituted a committee for working out the modality for constitutional safeguards to the "Assamese", essentialization of the historical differences between the "immigrant Muslims" and the indigenous people, the ruling BJP concomitantly announced its decision to create a greater number of autonomous councils for the ethnic communities demanding their inclusion in the category of Scheduled Tribes (Sarma and Hazarika 2020).

The above discussion clearly delineates that the essential social category that came into

being in the mid-nineteenth century's Brahmaputra Valley inherited a rational set of beliefs and practices from the so-called Bengal renaissance. The allegiance to colonialism demonstrated by this category was also, therefore, not inimitable though this category in the given context incontrovertibly became committed to reshape Asomiya as a distinct cultural and linguistic identity as its social responsibility. However, the contemporary peasantry at large could overcome the dilemma of loyalty to and confrontation with colonialism. Continuing the allegiance to colonial rule along with a commitment for further development of Asomiya linguistic identity, the emerging Asomiya middle caste towards the end of the nineteenth century had sharpened the existing societal divides between the Asomiya and the Bengalis, implying Asomiya as a subset of Assamese. The emerging Asomiya middle class was even not adverse to the colonial project of peasantization through indiscriminate settlement of the strange aggressive immigrants, overwhelmingly Muslims, since beginning of the last century because the later consciously identified themselves with the Asomiya linguistic and cultural identity. Though communalization of resource distribution was inflicted upon the Brahmaputra Valley by the colonial administration, it could not outweigh the increasing influences of the pan-Indian nationalism on the emerging Asomiya middle class. The nationalist ideology wrought by the Congress under the leadership of the Asomiya elites, however, compromised with the popular sentiment against the Bengali Hindus, rooted deeply in the language politics of Assam.

Though alienation of and right to autochthons' arable land in the predominantly agrarian economy of the Brahmaputra Valley has always remained as a major political concern during the post-colonial phase, the question of citizenship of the immigrants had never influenced the electoral politics till the entire period of political hegemony enjoyed by the Congress. Though predominated by upper caste Hindu Asomiya with a regionalist approach, the Congress always projected itself as the saviour of the immigrants, obviously for its electoral dividends. Nevertheless, political decline of the Congress by the end of 1970s brought new opportunities for the power seeking incipient regional political forces which also considered the left organizations as a political force to be reckoned with. In the imagination of a new form of identity politics, conscious remodeling of 'Asomiya nationalism' required the numerically conspicuous immigrants of East Bengal/

Bangladesh origin as the immediate reference point, essentializing citizenship for political mobilization of the common Hindu Assamese. Now the threat to 'Asomiya identity' has been reconstructed shifting political attention from language to citizenship, ultimately the majority always makes sense in democratic drama. The immigrants, being overwhelmingly Muslims, such a political maneuver naturally provided enormous opportunities for the BJP to demonstrate its solidarity with the re-imagined 'Asomiya nationalism' in the changed circumstances. The Assam Movement, besides all other political implications, created space for Hinduization of citizenship. In absence of any political commitment to resolve the issue of foreign nationals in Assam on the part of both AGP and the Congress during the subsequent three decades of signing of the contentious Assam Accord in 1985, the BJP appeared as the savior of Asomiya identity by communalizing the question of citizenship. While the so-called Accord helped the newly formed regional party to capture power in the state, the same irrevocable "Public Law Contract" became instrumental for communalization of citizenship, a successful experimentation of Hindu nationalism in Assam to be replicated nationwide.

## Notes

### Endnotes

- 1 See clause 6 of the Assam Accord.
- 2 The signed Accord was in English without qualifying the crucial expression.
- 3 See particularly the works of Guba (1991; 2006).
- 4 The census of Assam, 1901 shows that 6.24 lakh of tea labours were brought to the colonial Assam, and more than 60 per cent of the alien labour force was settled in the four major tea producing upper Assam districts, Darrang, Nowgong, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur.
- 5 The only exception was the memorial submitted by Anandaram Dhekial-Phukan to A.J. Moffat Mills (1984).
- 6 Besides started publishing the first Assamese monthly magazine (Orunudo) in 1846, the American Baptist Missionaries enormously contributed to develop Assamese as a distinct and separate language. Prabhakara (2012) provides a precise account of the contributions of the missionaries.
- 7 The *Asam Desh Hitaishini Sabha* was formed in 1855 at Sibsagar, The *Jnan-Pradayini Sabha* was formed in 1857 at Nowgong, and another society with the same name was formed in 1857 in upper Assam.
- 8 K.N. Dutta (1969: 20-26) provides a precise account of the armed insurrection for restoring the old native rule in Assam by overthrowing the colonial rule planned by Maniram Dewan.
- 9 The province was newly structured mainly for convenience of colonial administration and it included five Assamese dominated districts of the Brahmaputra valley (Assam proper, Goalpara where Bengali and Assamese cultures overlapped, the two Bengali dominated districts of Surma Valley i.e. Sylhet and Cachar, and all other hill districts. This administrative amalgamation with a sharp political/cultural divide between the hills and the plains instilled by the Inner Line Regulations of 1873, juxtaposed the relatively smaller Assamese cultural/linguistic identity with the bigger Bengali cultural identity within a single administrative unit. This had severely influenced the political processes in the subsequent period, and such influences are still visible in the political discourses.
- 10 While the Jorhat Sarvajanik Sabha was formed in the middle of the 1880s, the Tezpur Ryot Sabha, the Nowgaong Ryot Sabha and the Upper Assam Association came into being in the 1880s. Mahanta (2010: 213-223) provides a comprehensive analysis of these Sabhas/Associations.

11 Amalendu Guha enlisted 25 people whom he referred to as the Assamese Middle Class that emerged in the last quarter of the nineteenth century (Guha 2006: 281-283).

12 For instance, Ambikagiri Raychoudhury formed the Asamiya Samrakshini Sabha in 1926 for protection of the Assamese race.

13 For the hate campaign against the immigrants by Mulan, see 1931 Census Report, p. 51.

14 Though the Kachari Jubak Sammilani was formed in 1928 specifically for the representation before the Simon Commission, it reflected the political aspiration of the plain tribes, especially of the Bodos and it led to formation of the Tribal League in 1933. This was the beginning of the organized movement of the Bodos (Choudhury 2007; Dewri 2001; Pathak 2010).

15 The Janata Party had alliance with the Plain Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) formed in 1967 with the demand for Udayachal as a separate state for the plain tribes of Assam, and the Ujoni Asom Rajya Parishad (UARP) formed in 1970 with the demand for a separate state consisting of three upper Assam districts having concentration of the Ahoms.

16 Out of the 126 constituencies, the Janata Party could win 53 seats and the PTCA won 4 seats.

17 For the first time in the history of electoral politics in Assam, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) alone returned 11 candidates and the other Left forces such as the Communist Party of India, the Revolutionary Communist Party of India and the Socialist Unity Centre of India together returned another 11 seats.

18 In a conference of the state electoral officers held on 24 October 1978 the Chief Election Commissioner stated that large inclusion of foreign nationals (in electoral rolls) in some states especially in the North Eastern region was alarming and required drastic action (*The Assam Tribune*, 25 October, 1978). Subsequently, the Chief Minister of Assam who belonged to the Janata Party announced in the State Assembly on 16 March, 1978 that influx of foreign nationals was assuming alarming proportions (*The Assam Tribune*, 17 March 1979).

19 It is worth noticing that many of the prominent leaders of the Assam Movement were not much visible when the AAGSP was formed with four conveners, Atul Bora from PLP, Bhriugu Phukan from AASU, Prasenjit Brahma from Progressive Plain Tribal Council (PPTC) and Nagen Saikia from Asom Sahitya Sabha though Saikia attended the meeting on his personal capacity. Few representatives from the Nagaon unit of the Asam Jatiyatabadi Yuba Chatra Parishad (AJYCP) attended the meeting, but did not take part in the discussion as they did not officially represent the central committee of the organization. Similarly, a member of the AJD from Nagaon attended the meeting but he too did not represent the central committee of the organization. (Bora 2007: 23).

20 Without referring to any source, as the final NRC did not disclose anything about the people excluded,

*Doinik Asom*, a widely circulated Assamese daily from Guwahati made the head line on 13 September 2019 stating that the NRC excluded 6.9 lakh Hindu Bengalis besides giving the ethnic community wise breakup of the people excluded.

21 For immediate reactions to the final NRC expressed by different political parties, see *The Assam Tribune*, 1 September, 2019.

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