

DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSITION AND IDENTITY CRISIS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE OF ASSAM

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Abstract

Demographic structure is regarded as one of the basic foundations of a state or a country as a whole and it plays a vital role in the socio-economic and political aspects of both state and the country.

Assam is a cultural variety of races and communities. Immigration from diversified regions of the country and outside of the country has transformed the demographic structure of the state. Because of these circumstances, the Indigenous people of the state are facing a crisis-like situation for which they have to protect and promote their unique identity. In many cases there have been instances of ethnic conflict with and among the different groups. Immigration from East Bengal to this state created a severe demographic change in Assam and it led to unrest in the state. In this context, this paper tries to elaborate the existing situation of demographic structure of the state of Assam and its relation with the identity crisis of the indigenous people of Assam through descriptive method of study.

Key words: Demographic, Indigenous, Transition, Identity crisis

Introduction :

Assam represents one of the eight states in India's Northeast region. Like the rest of Northeast India, Assam has a rich ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic diversity and also has one of the most beautiful natural environment. The natural growth rate of Muslim population is higher than that of non-Muslim population. However the increasing pressure on the use of land resources for production purposes creates disguised unemployment, poverty and negative marginal production. Due to socio-economic and political factors immigration took place from East Bengal to Assam and it created severe demographic changes in Assam. In many cases the immigration led to conflict. Though Assam has rich ethnic culture with diversity, but today the diverse ethnic communities instead of assimilating with each other are facing situation like alienation and isolation. In this stage, the ethnic communities are eager to protect their respective identity and have control over resources. In many occasion these kind of situation creates violent ethnic clashes and conflict. Assam has an area of 78,438 sq. km and represents 2.39 percent of total land area and also accounts for up to 3,200 km of India's international boundaries, with Bangladesh and Bhutan. It acts as a gateway to the other North-eastern states as it is surrounded by the state boundary of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Tripura as well as West Bengal. Assam's physiology is dominated by 2 major rivers – the Brahmaputra and its tributaries; and the Barak river and its tributaries. In terms of demographic composition the state of Assam has a population of 3.12 crore. The people of this region belong to different races, castes, tribes and speak many languages. The major dominant languages are – Assamese, Bengali, Hindi and Bodo. History says that demographic changes of the state of Assam started with Muslim invasion of Ahom kingdom during the 16th century. Since then a composite Assamese identity was made up with caste Hindus, the plain tribals and the small section of Muslim began to emerge and live among the people of this state.

1. Objectives of the Study:

The present study focuses on the ethnic conflict and demographic changes occurring in Assam.

Following are the main objectives of the study –

- Finding out the harmonious relationship between different groups.
- Understanding the cause and effect of the demographic changes and ethnic identity crisis in Assam.
- Finding out government's various policies to address and resolve the conflict issues.

Methodology:

With a view of pursuing the above mentioned objectives, descriptive method is primarily used as well as analytical and historical methods. The newest available data are collected from the secondary sources such as books, journals and many other reports.

Analysis:

The major demographic changes in Assam is due to the large number of barren land with wide variety of vegetation staying idle after the famine like *Kaolazar*, Malaria and Burmese Invasion. After Yandaboo Treaty, administration of Assam went into the hands of British and gradually they invited Bengali Muslims from highly populated East Bengal and had them stayed in Assam in these barren lands. Britishers also brought tea workers for tea cultivation from states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa, etc. Even though these labourers had come to Assam as temporary labourers but with the passage of time they settled here permanently. Nepali people migrated to Assam since 1891 as a result of the Indo-Nepal relationship and their religious oneness with the Hindus. The Nepali soldiers, known for their heroism and bravery in the battlefield, had entered into North-East or Assam to rescue Assam from the Burmese invasion in 1826. Most of them stayed in area with high altitudes and hilly slopes. They are mostly engaged in agriculture, forestry and employed in the militia. *Marwaries* and a portion of *Biharis* entered Assam in search of business opportunities. Though British government inspired Muslim immigrants to settle in Assam to increase their finance from the land revenue and taxes but on the other side they appeased the indigenous people of Assam by implementing Line system in 1920 as a protective measure. Through this system it meant that within the line no non-tribals were allowed to possess land. Tribal leaders were very conscious of their identity and they gave utmost importance to socio-economic and political rights with demand to improve the conditions of tribal people. All tribal societies and organizations also demanded government to establish schools in every villages for improvement of education for the tribal people of Assam. For the first time Line system was introduced in Nagaon district only but later did the system spread to all districts of Assam as a response to grievances from tribal organizations. In the population census report, the census superintendent of Assam, M. Mullan clearly mentioned about the demographic changes and ethnic identity crisis of Assamese indigenous people in his report and regarded it as a result of rapid increasing population pattern of Muslim immigrants. The Line system meant to protect the tribals underwent a crisis after a provincial Government was formed by the Muslim league. The ministers of Muslim league government preferred all round development and settlement of Muslim population in Assam instead of line system. After independence, Gopinath Bordoloi led the Congress government and implemented "Tribal belt and Block" and implemented Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act, 1947. As per this Act, villages with 50 percent tribal population came under its jurisdiction. Villages without 50 percent of tribal population will also come under the jurisdiction if the villages grouped with 50 percent Tribal dominated villages. But in practice, even after the implementation of the Act large scale encroachment of tribal land continued by tacking the existing laws. It is a tragic reality that in the post-independence period the issues of ethnic identity, identity crisis, ethnic conflict and immigration have been on the rise.

Assam having a complex social set up comprising of various ethnic groups has occasionally witnessed various social unrests and turmoil in the form of inter-ethnic conflicts. The ethnic conflict in Assam has been associated with an inter group phenomenon, it also has manifestations in the form of sub-nationalistic or ethno-nationalistic aspirations. We can say that the ethnic crisis and conflict in Assam is dynamic in nature. Many of the communities in Assam have been indulged in violent activities seen in terms of their armed struggle for the creation of separate 'homeland'. The concept of homeland here depicts the demands for the creation of separate state for autonomy as well as succession from the Indian union. Granting of autonomy and statehood in North-east India has been one of the most significant and structural changes in the administration. The concept of Autonomous District Council has been introduced by the Indian Government to ascertain the representatives at local level to the tribal population of the region. The sixth schedule enshrined under the Article 244 of Indian constitution grants local autonomy towards governance and rights for natural resources. This arrangement is made to protect preserve and privilege the local residents over and above the outsiders in the matters of land

THE QUILL-An Inter-disciplinary Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences // Vol. 01, June, 2024// and other resources under this arrangement the ADCs are Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), Dima Hasao District Autonomous Council (DHDAC) and Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC).

Apart from the Autonomous Councils mandated in the Sixth Schedule, Six other statutory autonomous councils mandated in the sixth schedule, six other statutory autonomous were constituted so to meet the demands and solve the problems of minority ethnic communities. These non-sixth schedule autonomous councils are the – Rabha Hajong Autonomous Council, Mising Autonomous Council, Deori Autonomous Council, Sonowal Kachari Autonomous Council and Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council. These were being set-up on the basis of their ethnic identity and its protection and development.

Conclusion:

Immigration in Assam has become a great issue over a period of time and it has caused various social unrests. The illegal immigration has been affecting Assam and its indigenous people in various aspects. It has changed the demographic set up of Assam. Due to the rapid change of demography in Assam, the immigration from regions of East Bengal made it a serious concern to safeguard the interests of indigenous people. These crisis lead to intra-ethnic conflict and the birth of extremists with various demands to prevent the indigenous communities to fight against the aggressive immigrants to preserve their own unique identity. This paper has probed the issue of ethnic conflict in Assam. As a response to the ethnic conflict in Assam, the Indian Government has followed various policies to bring down the uprising. Such policies could be observed in the form of creation of statehood and granting of Autonomous District Councils. However, these policies are not adequate to meet all the aspirations of the ethnic groups which is an indispensable part of any diverse society. Therefore, we can come to the conclusion that the rapid change of identity is neither considerable nor desirable for a society. So preservation of ethnic identity of the people is important with respect to ethnicity.

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