IDENTITY AND UNDERDEVELOPMENT – ON CONFLICT AND PEACE IN DEVELOPING SOCIETIES – A CASE STUDY OF ASSAM IN INDIA

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Identity and underdevelopment are the two basic issues that have kept Assam on the boil for long. The problem with identity has arisen due to the incongruity between the aspiration of the ethnic Assamese to make Assam a "nation province" of the Assamese and the historically developed multy-ethnic social base of territorial Assam of today. The relentless strides made towards homogenization and realization of the goal of making Assam a nation-province of the ethnic Assamese during the 1950s and 1960s not only aggravated the ethnic cleavage structure developed during colonial period but also developed new cleavages along the ethnic faultlines leading to the reorganization of Assam in 1972. Although the diversity of ethnic cleavages has reduced in post-reorganized Assam due to the reduction of demographic heterogeneity and has made the ethnic Assamese the single largest community, their aspirations to make Assam a nation-province have remained unfulfilled. This paper argues that the root cause of inter-ethnic conflicts and assertion of identities by various ethnic and tribal groups lies in the solitary approach towards identity adopted by the ethnic Assamese in Assam. Efforts to make Assam a nation province for the ethnic Assamese have ignited the identity conflicts, which, in turn, have accelerated the transformation from multiculturalism to plural monoculturalism. The paper seeks to explain the triadic linkages among identity, insurgency and economic underdevelopment based on Assam experience. It also seeks to suggest options available for the resolution of identity conflicts in Assam.

Keywords: ethnic conflict, politics of identity, underdevelopment, ethnic boundary.

Identity and underdevelopment are the two basic issues that kept have Assam on the boil for long. The problem with identity has arisen due to the incongruity between the aspiration of the ethnic Assamese to make Assam a "nation province" of the Assamese and the historically developed multy-ethnic social base of territorial Assam of today. The relentless strides made towards homogenization and realization of the goal of making Assam a nation-province of the ethnic Assamese during the 1950s and 1960s not only aggravated the ethnic cleavage structure developed during colonial period but also developed new cleavages along the ethnic faultlines leading to the reorganization of Assam in 1972. Although the diversity of ethnic cleavages has reduced in post-reorganized Assam due to the reduction of demographic heterogeneity and has made the ethnic Assamese the single largest community, their aspirations to make Assam a nation-province have remained unfulfilled.

In fact the idea of a nation-province for the ethnic Assamese is basically an unrealizable goal within the present political boundary of Assam primarily because of the fact that these two

boundaries, viz., ethnic and political, do not coincide. The political boundary of Assam not only includes the ethnic Assamese but also the Dimasas of N C Hills , Karbis of Karbi Anglong, Bodos, Koches, Miris, Chutias, Kacharis, Deoris, Rabhas, Lalungs, Morans, and other indegenious populations and Muslims, Hindu Bengalis and tea tribes in Brahmaputra Valley. Thus, historically evolved geographic and demographic structures in Assam are not in conformity with the claim of making Assam a nation province for the ethnic Assamese. While members of a multy-ethnic society like Assam have multiple identities, i.e., one can simultaneously be a Bodo, an Assamese and a Christian, adoption of singular identity and trying to magnify it only leads to inter-group conflicts and identity disintegration. Identity politics in Assam has many facets rooted in remote as well as recent social history of Assam.

With the adoption of the three language formula for the state of Assam, i.e., Assamese as official language for the Brahmaputra Valley, Bengali for Barak Valley and English for N C Hills and Karbi Anglong and later on Bodo for the Bodoland area, the ethnic Assamese nationality seems to have realized the futility of their aspiration of making Assam a nation-province for themselves. As the politics of identity, instead of paying any dividends, has reduced the territorial boundary of Assam further, the implications of the presence of a large migrant Muslim population in the Brahmaputra Valley itself, which the ethnic Assamese consider to be their homeland, has become obvious. Having overcrowded Bangladesh across the border, the perceived threat of being overrun by the Bangladeshi migrants looms large in the psyche of the ethnic Assamese.

This paper argues that the root cause of inter-ethnic conflicts and assertion of identities by various ethnic and tribal groups lies in the solitary approach towards identity adopted by the ethnic Assamese in Assam. Efforts to make Assam a nation province for the ethnic Assamese have ignited the identity conflicts, which, in turn, have accelerated the transformation from multiculturalism to plural monoculturalism. The paper seeks to explain the triadic linkages among identity, insurgency and economic underdevelopment based on Assam experience. It also seeks to suggest options available for the resolution of identity conflicts in Assam.

Evolution of Multi-Ethnic Social Base in Assam: The Age of the Ahoms

The process of fusion that has worked in making the modern Assamese identity for about 750 years since the days of Sukapha (1228), the first Ahom king, till independence (1947) is well documented in the annals of history. The rise of Ahoms in the Brahmaputra valley at the cost of the Bodos, Chutiyas, Cacharis, Marans, Moamarias and Koches had set in the process of inclusion of the latter identities into the former either through conquest or through cross cultural social bonding like marriage. As the territorial boundary of the Ahom kingdom expanded overtime, the degree of assimilation of the defeated social groups mentioned above into the Ahom identity started weakening with the distance from the seat of power. The identities of the invaded groups did not vanquish altogether rather they remained dormant often as a sub-category of the broader Ahom identity. While this process of fusion was under operation, shifting of "Ahom identity" towards "Assamese identity" was also taking place particularly under the influence of the Brahmins who had been brought into the kingdom by the rulers of Assam particularly from Navadweep, the cultural citadel of the then Bengal. Brahmanical rituals gradually got prominence even in the courts of the Ahom kings and the tribal belief system was increasingly on the wane.

Sankar Dev's Bhakti Movement has created the "cultural life world" of the Assamese identity. While the Ahom kings created the political boundary, which varied with the stature of

the king, the more powerful the king the wider the size of the kingdom, it was the rise of Sankardev's neo-Vaishnavite movement during the 16th century which began to melt the different social formations into a singular Assamese identity. It may be noted that the neo-Vaishnavite movement had grown in spite of the initial opposition by the Ahom kings and had finally dragged the royal authority to identify themselves with it. The movement had gained so much popularity that some of the Ahom kings later used the Vaishnavite institutions as cultural ambassadors of the royal court for inculcating loyalty among the people of newly acquired territory *a la* Christianity by the western powers and Islam by the Muslim rulers. Thus Brahmanical variety of Hinduism and neo-Vaisnavism together, both based in Aryan religious scriptures like Bhagbat Gita, Ramayana, Mahabharat, Upanishads and Purans, constituted the "belief system" of the Assamese identity which is primarily rooted in Hindu heritage. The influence of the "cultural life world", created by the neo-Vaishnavite movement, was so strong that the Ahom nobility had embraced it in order to legitimize their rule. In course of time, "Tai"--the royal language--was replaced by "Assamese", tribal religious practices and rituals were replaced by Hindu/neo-Vaishnavite practices, the identity of the "Ahom" became a part of the broader "Assamese" identity.

Although the neo-Vaishnavite movement had a great potential to mobilize people across caste and creed to form an Assamese national identity, its assimilative capacity narrowed down in the post Sankardev phase as Brahmanical castist social philosophy crept into the satriya institutions as well as segmentation of the movement into different denominations. As a result, the boundary of the Assamese identity based on religious and cultural markers, which are largely the offshoots of the neo-Vaishnabite movement including the Assamese language, was stiffened making the way for the Christianity to had sway in the hills during the colonial period.

When the Ahoms invaded the territory of the Morans, Bodos and Chutiyas during the 13 th century and consolidated their rule in the eastern part of the Brahmaputra Valley centering around the present Sibsagar district, Sen dynasty had been overrun by the Turk Sultanate (1203) and Muslim power continued to grow in Bengal. Even before the Koch kingdom, comprising of Western part of the Brahmaputra Valley and Northern part of Bengal, which, for a considerable time, acted as the buffer between the Sultanate of Bengal and the Ahom kingdom, came into being, Muslim invaders from Bengal under the leadership of Ikhtiar Uddin Mahammad Bakhtiar Khilji (1205-06), Giasuddin Bakhtiar (around 1226), and Ikhtiar Uddin Malik Ujbeg Tugrilkha (1254-55) tried in vain to invade Kamatapur (Choudhury : 1982). However, at last, Hussain Shah defeated the last Kamata king Nilambar in 1498 A D and occupied Kamatapur. Shah's son ruled the country for quite sometime centering Hajo before being vanquished by war with the Ahom kings (Gait: 1981). The void created out of the defeat of the Muslim ruler had later been filled by the rise of the Koch kingdom (1515) on the edifice of erstwhile Kamatapur. There had been several encounters between the Ahoms and the Koch kings as well as between Musilm invading forces from Bengal and the Koch kings of western Assam during the 16th century. Again, for a considerable period, western Assam was under the occupation of the Muslims.This "eastern thrust" of the Muslim invading forces gained considerable strength during the 17th century with the consolidation of the Mughal power in Delhi. Mughals replaced the Sultanate in Bengal and ruled it through the governor. Althrough the 17th century, Mughal governors of Bengal sent. one after another, expeditions to invade Assam. During the second half of the 17th century, Mughal forces under Mir Jumlah even succeeded to capture Garhgaon, the capital of the Ahoms. By the end of the century, with the capture of Gauhati by the Ahom king Gadadhar Singh in 1682, the Mughal interest in the western Assam had been completely wiped out. Aurangzeb's

preoccupation with south India and the weakening of Mughal empire following his demise in 1707 had caused the "eastern thrust" to wither away.

The purpose of browsing through the history of the Muslim invasions into Assam is to drive the point home that the two century long interactions (1498-1682) between the Muslims and different powers in western Assam in particular and the Ahoms in general has , no doubt, left some legacies in terms of accommodation of some Muslim population by way of war captives, engaging in trade and commerce and settling down in the valley.

During his Kamatapur campaign, Hussain Shah encouraged many Muslim warriors to settle down at Hajo and he built , perhaps, the first masjid at Rangamati.(Choudhuri: 1982). The Muslim population which settled in the Brahmaputra valley either by compulsion or by choice was gradually mingled with the multi-ethnic social fabric of the then Assam. Muslim settlers were engaged by the Ahom kings as security guards, workers in kings' fire arms manufacturing as well as minting workshops (Choudhuri: 1982). Muslims were good at making copper utensils and this industry was monopolized by them in medieval Assam. They were also employed to carry out finer artistic works in temples. Tailoring was another profession in which Muslims were good at. Their Bengal connections helped them to carry out trade and commerce across Assam and Bengal. In fact, prior to the arrival of Marwari traders during the colonial period, Muslim traders used to play a significant role in this sector. Some of the early Muslim settlers were also worked as musicians and singers, shoe makers and *japi* manufacturers (Barua:1989).

Besides the Sultanate and Mughal invading forces, preachers of Islam in general and Sufism in particular had also visited the Brahmaputra valley during the medieval period. The activities of different peers and fakirs like Jamaluddin Tabriji during the 13th century, Giasuddin Aulia during the 14th century and Azan Fakir during the 17th century had led to the internalization of Islam as one of the components of local medieval culture. It may not be out of place to mention here that Ahom king Surampha (1641-1644), also known as Bhaga Raja, had even conferred land grants to Azan Fakir. Although the Ahom kings vigorously fought against the Muslim invasion all through their reign till the end of 17th century, there is no single instance of their war against Islam. In fact, Sufism and Sankardev's neo-Vaishnavite movement progressed hand in hand in medieval Assam. Many Muslims became the disciple of Sankardev and some of them like Chand Khan, Joyhari, Haridas and Dheli Darji are well known for their contribution to the growth of neo-Vaishnavite movement in pre-colonial Assam (Barua:1989). Even Sankardev himself referred to the existence of the "Turuk"(meaning the Muslims) population in Assam during his time (Neog:1985). When the Muhammedan chronicler Shihabuddin visited Assam with the Mughal invading army led by Mir Jumla during 1662-63, he noted that the Muslims settled here had assimilated themselves to such an extent that except the name nothing was left of Islam with them (Gait: 1981, Neog:1985).

Thus, it is needless to mention that the society in feudal Assam was not a monolithic one. Centering around the political power of the Ahom kings and Sankardev's neo-Vaishnavite movement, people of other faiths and origins adjusted themselves in the medieval social order of Assam. Although the political power was in the hands of the Ahoms who called themselves Tais, but whom the indigenous people called Asam (unequalled) (Gait: 1981, Kakati: 1995)   and later this exoethnonym was ascribed to the teritorry under their rule, which subsequently expanded to include the whole of the Brahmaputra valley, the social space was studded by numerous indigenous groups of people as well as early Muslim settlers. Political loyalty to the Ahom kings, gradual adoption of symbols of Asamiya culture including language and neo-Vaishnavite religion of Sankardev had gradually drawn these groups nearer to Asamiya identity. The modern names like Assam and Assamese are the anglicized names of Asam and Asamiya (Kakati: 1995)

which Britishers used for the kingdom of the Ahom kings and the people therein respectively following the annexation of the Brahmaputra valley in 1826.

Evolution of Multi-Ethnic Social Base in Assam: The Colonial Era

Before the natural process of ethnic fusion undergoing during the feudal era (1228-1826) could galvanize into the emergence of a singular Assamese identity, annexation of, and subsequent administrative experimentation with, Assam (1826-1947) by the colonial ruler had added altogether different dimensions having far reaching consequences for the Assamese nationality formation and inter-ethnic relations in both colonial and post-colonial Assam. The boundary of the multi-ethnic social base was further widened with the incorporation of new territories within the political boundary of Assam as well as induction of different groups of people from various parts of British India.

Following the victory in the first Anglo-Burmese war in 1826, although western Assam was immediately annexed to the British India, eastern Assam was brought only under direct colonial rule in 1839. Since then for about 35 years Assam remained under the umbrella of the Bengal Presidency till the administrative reorganization of 1874. During this early phase of colonial rule, British introduced Bengali as the court language of Assam at the cost of the linguistic identity of the Assamese in 1837, which sowed the seeds of Assamese-Bengali inter-ethnic conflict till the restoration of Assamese in 1874. Although the Assamese language was restored to its rightful place in 1874, the inter-ethnic hostility continued althrough the colonial period and even spilled over to the post-colonial era. with Assamese history writing interpreting this fact as the machinations of the Bengalis in general and Bengali bureaucrats in particular (Neog: 1962, Sarma:1965; Sarma:1972; Weiner:1978). However, the gains from the restoration of Assamese as the official language was more than nullified by the addition of three Bengali dominated areas of Goalpara, Sylhet and Cachar (While North Cachar was transferred to Assam in 1854, the remaining part of the Cachar plains which was a part of Dacca Division was transferred to Assam in 1874) to the reconstituted Assam in 1874 which was taken out of the administrative umbrella of Bengal Presidency and elevated to a Chief Commissionership. In this reconstituted Assam, Assamese became the minority with 38.30 per cent (1871 Census) of the total provincial population (Kar: 2005). As the districts of Sylhet, Cachar and Goalpara had a large Muslim Bengali settler, their attachment led to the sudden rise of Muslim population in the colonial Assam. In fact while the Muslims constituted only about 6 per cent of the total population of the five districts of the Brahamaputra valley (Darrang, Kamrup, Lakhimpur, Nowgong and Sibsagar), following the attachment of Sylhet, Cachar and Goalpara, their number had increased fivefold to constitute about 30 per cent of the total provincial population (1871 Census) (Kar: 2005).

The Assamese identity was further threatened with the constitution of the province of Eastern Bengal and Assam in 1905 following the partition of Bengal as part of the colonial strategy to crush the growth of nationalism in Bengal. As Eastern Bengal was dominated by the Muslim Bengalis, Assamese people became miniscule minority in this newly formed province. However, this arrangement was short lived and Assam got back its pre-1905 status with the annulment of partition of Bengal in 1912. Although Assam was made a governor's province in 1921 and continued to remain so till 1947, no new territories were added to it any longer. Following the Sylhet referendum in 1946, Assam got rid of the Bengali dominated Sylhet which largely paved way for the claim to make Assam a nation province of the Assamese (now being the single largest community). However, both Goalpara and Cachar remained parts of Assam

thereby making both the Hindu and Muslim Bengalis constituents of the polity of Assam. Thus territorial reorganization had simultaneously expanded the political boundary as well as multi-ethnic social base of colonial Assam.

Besides British political interest in territorial reorganization, colonial administrative and economic interests also brought the Bengalis, both Hindu and Muslims, Marwaris, tribal people from central Provinces to Assam. Hindu Bengalis were brought to run the British administration as well as to provide professional services. Muslim Bengali peasants were settled particularly in western rural Assam as peasants. Marwaris came as comprador to British capital and made a deep penetration in state's trade and commerce. Tribals from Cental Provinces particularly from Chotanagpur region were brought to work in the tea gardens in eastern Assam. Besides these groups, Nepalese came as soldiers of the colonial army and Biharis as manual labour force to work in construction activities. The story of migration of different ethnic groups in colonial Assam is well documented (Hussain: 1993; Barua: 1999; Kar: 1990; Weiner:1978; Nag:1990, Das :1996; Das: 2002) and we do not intend to repeat the same. However, it is important to note that of all these groups, large immigration of the Muslim peasants into the wastelands of western Assam and the tribals into the tea gardens of eastern Assam had radically changed the demographic composition of colonial Assam. While the Muslim population in Assam was a little more than 2 lakhs in 1881 (Nag: 1990), following the addition of Sylhet, Cachar and Goalpara as well as settlement of Muslim peasants in the wastelands, this number had gone up to 35 lakhs (Kar: 1990) on the eve of independence. Thus, just before the Sylhet referendum, Muslims constituted 34 per cent of the provincial population while the Hindus were 39 per cent (Kar: 1990). From 1902-03 to 1937-38, a total of about 17 lakhs of tea labourers were brought in Assam (Guha: 1977).

Thus, colonial Assam no longer remained the homeland of the Assamese. Although tea labourers (popularly known as Adivasis or tea tribes) remained isolated and did not transform themselves into a political community, Muslim Bengalis under the banner of Muslim League contested for political power against the Assamese Hindus organized under the banner of Indian National Congress in colonial Assam. Assamese nationalism, articulated by the ethnic Hindu Assamese middle class, thus, had to have a three pronged struggle viz. struggle against British colonialism, struggle against Muslim political and territorial interests and struggle against Hindu Bengali domination in cultural and professional spheres, in colonial Assam. These struggles had created, on the one hand, some sort of centripetal forces which helped the indigenous communities like the Bodos, Chutiyas, Cacharis, Morans, Muttaks and Deuris to increasingly gravitate towards Assamese nationalismand simultaneously, on the other hand, centrifugal forces which intensified Hindu-Muslim conflict particularly during the first half of the twentieth century. All other ethnic equations were over shadowed by the Hindu-Muslim conflict in colonial Assam. In fact, it was the Assamese political leadership who, by opposing to group Assam with Bengal, as proposed in the Cabinet Mission Plan and supported by the Muslim League, had in a way ultimately saved Assam as well as the North Eastern States for India. Thus, besides being anti-colonial, strong anti-Muslim as well as anti-Bengali currents were embedded in the ideology of Assamese nationalism.

Evolution of Multi-Ethnic Social Base in Assam: The Post-Colonial Era

The inter-ethnic relations based on religion and language and the cleavage structures developed during the colonial era took a new turn following the partition and independence. Muslims in Assam in general and Brahmaputra valley in particular had to compromise with their fate and

provincial Muslim league was dissolved and the followers joined en masse in the congress (Kar: 1990). Following the transfer of Sylhet to East Pakistan, Muslim population in Assam had reduced to 25 per cent (Kar: 1990) which further declined to about 22 per cent immediately after the 1950 communal riot. Henceforth, Muslim politics in Assam was rechristened as minority politics shedding away the pro-Pakistan position and seeking integration with the host society.

Multi-ethnic social base of Assam was further widened with the inclusion of 'excluded" and "partially excluded" hilly areas inhabited by the tribals. The Naga hills, Lushai/Mizo hills, Khasi hills, Garo hills, Jaintia hills and Mikir hills—all were added to Assam as it was viewed as the "last outpost of Indian civilization in the east" by the mainland political leaders. Thus, post-colonial Assam expanded both in terms of territory and population making its name a misnomer where ethnic Assamese became merely one of the numerous ethnic groups having no clear majority in the provincial population.

Assamese National Aspiration and the Politics of Identity

Although the multi-ethnic social base that has historically evolved in Assam stood on the way of making Assam a nation province for the Assamese, following the rules of the game of carving out provinces in independent India based on ethno-linguistic identity, ethnic Assamese elites vigorously strived for it. The expediencies of electoral politics as well as the aspiration for making Assam a nation province for the Assamese led to the widening of Assamese linguistic identity in order to accommodate the Muslims of Brahmaputra valley as well as the tea tribes within the fold of Assamese nationalism. Muslims of Assam were rechristened as *Na Asamiya* (New Assamese) and encouraged to barter their identity for security by way of reporting Assamese as their mother tongue in census returns in order to strengthen the claim to make Assam the nation province for the Assamese. It may be pointed out that, at this stage, the Congress-led ruling elites in Assam tacitly encouraged the immigration of Muslim Bengalis from East Pakistan. As the immigrant Muslim Bengalis readily shifted their ethnic identity in favour of the Assamese, they became useful not only as a 'safe vote bank' but also to realize the majority claim of the Assamese (Das: 2001a).

It may also be noted that this game plan of the ethnic Assamese elites also suited the needs of the immigrant Bengali Muslims. They came to Assam in search of a *lebensraum*. Faced with strong push factors at home arising out of a 'failed state syndrome' in East Pakistan, economic security for them was much more important than their cultural symbols. In fact, their decision to barter their cultural identity against economic security was also essentially political. While indicating this, it is not intended to deny the fact that this has also created a space, albeit limited, for naturalized assimilation of the new generations of immigrant Muslims. But primarily, the relationship between the two communities may, at best, be described as a marriage of convenience. The immigrants needed a living space and the ethnic Assamese elites needed their political support to stake a majority claim in multi-ethnic Assam (Das: 2001a).

But this strategy of assimilation that had been attempted through the practice of majoritarian politics did not work. The segmented social space in post colonial Assam, instead, presented an altogether different political reality. Majoritarian politics practised in a multi-ethnic society led to unequal development of various socio-economic formations, particularly of the minorities and peripheral groups (Das:2001a).

It may not be out of context to note that, while the process of unequal development within a homogeneous society leads to class-cleavages, the same process, within a multi-ethnic society, leads to ethnic cleavages. While class cleavages do not pose any territorial threat in terms of

separation or secession, the ethnic cleavages do pose a threat, particularly when different ethnic groups are territorially concentrated. And the geo-political location of a territory, undoubtedly, plays a crucial role in setting the political goal of a deprived segment. While the separatist goals are feasible, irrespective of territorial location, secessionist goals are more feasible for the communities living along international borders (Das:2001a).

Be that as it may, the relentless efforts made towards homogenization and realization of the goal of making Assam a nation-province during the 1950s and 1960s had resulted in unmanageable discontent among various groups, which ultimately led to the reorganization of Assam in 1972 along ethnic lines. It has already been discussed elsewhere (Das: 2001b) that both external security threats to India's north east arising out of the consequences of cold war rivalry and internal insecurity arising out of imposition of the linguistic identity of the ethnic Assamese in post colonial multi-ethnic Assam had intensified the inter-ethnic rivalries to such an extent that reorganization of the province had been considered to be the best option by the Indian state. Naga hills were taken out much earlier in 1963 to form the province of Nagaland and under the 1972 reorganization plan, Garo, Khasi and Jaintia hills were taken out to form Meghalaya and Lushai hills were made the province of Mizoram. Thus the post colonial territorial gain was lost in post-reorganized Assam.

Although the diversity of ethnic cleavages has reduced in post-reorganized Assam, the faultlines continue to persist. Though the 1972 reorganization has reduced the demographic heterogeneity and rendered the ethnic Assamese as the single largest community in Assam, their aspirations to make Assam a nation-province has remained unfulfilled. Instead, a new dimension came into sharp focus in post-reorganized Assam, i.e. the steady ingress of the Muslims into the political power structures. It is, indeed, an irony of the politics of ethnicity in Assam that the immigrant Muslims, who had been instrumental in making Assamese the single largest community at one point of time and helped them to advance the claim of making Assam a nation-province, are now viewed as the principal threat to the political security of the ethnic Assamese in the State. In approximately 23 electoral constituencies out of a total of 120 Legislative Assembly segments, Muslims are now believed to enjoy majority support. In another seven constituencies, they are the deciding factor (Das: 2001a).

In order to counter the growing electoral strength of the Muslims whose strategic support is no longer important in post-reorganized Assam, the ethnic Assamese elites wanted to get rid of them and, thus, demanded their deportation by setting 1951 as the cut-off year. The anti-foreigner agitation or the Assam Movement (1979-85) has, thus, lent support to our hypothesis that Assam's policy of assimilation of the immigrant Muslims had been a tactical move intended to gain mileage over other ethnic groups in multi-ethnic Assam during the 1950s and 1960s. They were used as pawns in the number game to realize the aspirations of the ethnic Assamese. And with the failure of the strategy of assimilation in realizing the goal of making Assam a nation-province, the attitude of ethnic Assamese towards immigrant Muslims changed. From a constituent of the Assamese linguistic community, they were suddenly branded as foreigners in Assam (Das: 2001a). Besides language, religious and racial attributes were emphasized to define the identity of the Assamese in social and political discourse of the Asamiya ethnic civil society movements and organizations ostensively to bracket the Muslims in Brahmaputra valley.

In spite of sensitizing some of the security concerns arising out of fresh illegal immigration of Bengali Muslims from Bangladesh, the Assam Movement has failed in realizing its goal as far as the deportation of immigrant Muslims is concerned. Like the agenda of making Assam a nation-province, the 'deportation- goal' was also unattainable, given the constitutional and legal framework of the country. On the contrary, the ethnic ideology of the movement has made it

amply clear that the inclusion of a group within the "Assamese ethnic boundary", or for that matter its exclusion (from it), is defined exclusively by the interest of the 'ethnic Assamese'. Linguistic symbols alone are not sufficient to claim Assamese identity. Rather, non-existence of an 'other' cultural / sub-cultural base has become the prime criterion. The Movement, thus, in a way, drew an implicit boundary in a hitherto open-ended process of Assamese nationality formation. The exclusionist ethnic ideology of the Movement alarmed ethnic minorities and encouraged them in a compelling way to construct their identities in rigid terms in order to claim politico-territorial autonomy in their respective traditional homelands. Besides, the Bengalis of Barak valley, who have all along opposed the Assamese idea of making Assam a nation-province, the Bodos, Karbis and Dimasas have also started pressing hard for complete autonomy. The Tiwas, Deuris, Lalungs and Koch Rajbanshis have also made conscious efforts to dissociate themselves from the Assamese identity. Thus, instead of mellowing down in post-reorganized Assam, the residual faultlines have widened further (Das: 2001a). The "singular identity" approach, as Sen (2006) has described it, adopted by the ethnic Assamese has led to the narrowing down of their ethnic boundary which, in turn, has created multiple identity boxes paving way the emergence of "plural monoculturalism" in place of "multiculturalism" in post colonial Assam.

Who is an Assamese in Assam?

Although, as it has already been discussed, the social space of Assam is multi-ethnic in nature, there is hardly any term available to capture the concept of "people of Assam" or "citizen of Assam". The etymology of the term Assamese may be traced to Ahom>Asam>Asamiya>Assamese. The term "Assamese" has been and is being used at least in four senses: (i) to mean the residents of Assam, (ii) to mean the Asamiya linguistic group, (iii) to mean the ethnic Assamese, and (iv) indigenous Assamese, the *Bhumiputras* (sons of the soil).

The term "Assamese" is often implicitly used to refer the residents of Assam in political and social discourses in post-colonial pre-reorganized Assam (1947-1972). It may be noted that this has been the time while ethnic Assamese elites were facing the challenges of integration of the ethnically most heterogeneous groups of people placed under the political and administrative leadership of Assam. The political leadership of the Indian state sought integration of the hills of north east and people therein through Assam and not through the Assamese linguistic community. Nehru's idea of integrating the hills through Assam while read along with his approach towards tribal development in the region makes the issue amply clear (Elwin: 1958). If the term "Assamese" is taken as a territorial identity, then it becomes a generic name for the multitude of identities including the ethnic Assamese, Hindu and Muslim Bengalis, Bodos, Dimasas, Karbis, Koch Rajbongshis, Cacharis and others. However, the term "Assamese" is more popularly used to refer to the linguistic identity of the Asamiyas rather than to the territorial identity of the people of Assam.

In the second sense, "Assamese" refers to the group of people who speaks in Asamiya language. In fact the Assamese is the anglicized name of Asamiya. Speakers of Assamese language may broadly be divided into two groups—(i) people whose mother tongue is Assamese, and (ii) people whose mother tongue is different but have acquired Assamese language either formally or informally. Many people belonging to the second category use their mother tongue for private communication but use Assamese for communication in public. Most of the tribal groups, Hindu and Muslim Bengalis of Brahmaputra valley, Bodos, Karbis, Dimasas, Koch Rajbongshis, Adivashi groups in upper Assam and smaller speech groups from other parts of the

country belong to this second category. "Assamese", while taken as a linguistic identity, thus, includes both categories of speakers. In fact, linguistic Assamese nationalism, being open ended, has played a significant role in incorporating people from other cultures and providing them the much needed umbilical cord to be a part of the Assamese society. It is the common Assamese language that acted as the bridge between early and late migrants and galvanized them to form a single speech group.

The word "Assamese", in the third sense, refers to the ethinc Assamese. Besides a shared language, the idea of ethnic Assamese involves some elements of descent and shared culture between the members of the group as well as with their ancestors. Thus, while the civic Assamese nationalism based on territorial identity is inclusive in nature, ethnic Assamese nationalism is exclusive as it can exclude groups of people not conforming to the cultural norms of the Asamiyas including the language, religion and shared history. As the Muslim and Hindu Bengalis, Marwaris and other minority migrant groups, tribals and Adivasis have their separate history, language, religion and culture, they will not be considered as members of ethnic Assamese community in the strict sense of the term.

In the fourth sense, the word Assamese is used to mean the *bhumiputras* (sons of the soil) of Assam. It is only recently, particularly after the Assam Accord (1985) that attempts are being made increasingly to define the term "Assamese" in this sense. The English equivalent of the Assamese word "*bhumiputras*" may be taken as synonymous to indigenous people. The term "indigenous people" lacks precision. It's meaning differs from context to context. The term is often used as synonymous to the aborigines, natives or the autochthons. From the anthropological point of view, "indigenous people" are those who rely upon subsistence-based production and live in non-urbanized society. United Nations and International Labour Organization use the term to mean "any ethnic group who inhabit the geographic region with which they have the earliest historical connection" (www.wikipedia.org). Thus the principle of first occupation is often used to claim the status of indigenous people. In some cases, the term is also used to mean categories of people who "by a variety of historical and environmental circumstances have been placed outside of the dominant state system and whose traditional practices and land claims often come into conflict with the objectives and policies promulgated by governments , companies and surrounding dominant societies" (www.wikipedia.org). As such, as per the nuances in which the term "indigenous people" is generally used, tribal communities in India largely fit into this category irrespective of the fact whether they have been recognized as scheduled tribe or not by the Indian constitutional-legal framework. If one goes by the strict sense of the term which involves the principle of first occupation, then the Bodos, Cacharis, Chutias, Dimasas, Karbis, Deuris and Koch Rajbongshis better fit for the term than the ethnic Assamese including even the Ahoms. Of course, if the term is interpreted *a la* Amrica, where it refers to those groups and their descendents who inhabited the region before the arrival of European colonizers and settlers, then ethnic Assamese including the Ahoms as well as the Goria Muslims also fit into the category as far as the Brahmaputra valley is concerned. Although both Muslim and Hindu Bengalis, the Adivasis and other speech groups who have migrated into the Brahmaputra valley during the colonial period would not fit into the category of indigenous people, however, people of both Goalpara and Barak valley (undivided Cachar district) can not be left out.

Identity Politics and Identity Retrogression

Having discussed the four different conceptual categories in which the word Assamese has been and is being used, it is important to delineate the role of identity politics in creating the identity dilemma in post colonial Assam. The metamorphosis of the Assamese identity from territorial to *bhumiputra* , in order of sequence as has already been cited, may be analyzed in terms of two propositions. First, there may be four different parallel schools of thought among the Assamese, viz., liberal, moderate, conservative and extremist who, explicitly or implicitly, define the Assamese identity boundary by way of territorial, linguistic, ethnic and indigenous terms respectively. Second, there may be shifting of position over time by the same stock of people in a retrogressive direction from territorial to indigene. These two propositions may be interlinked in more than one ways. The first might result from the second. The political expediency of making Assam a nation province for the ethnic Assamese warranted this shifts over time, as has already been discussed, which, in turn, might have left the legacies of the past practice of identity politics. The second might result from the first either through the transfer of power from the protagonists of one school to another, assuming that all the four schools exist parallelly, or through mobilization of masses by the competing non-state agencies, like civil society organizations, conforming to one or the other of these four constructs of Assamese identity. The sequence of shifting of the Assamese ethnic boundary, while read along with political development in post colonial Assam centering around the aspiration of making Assam a nation province for the ethnic Assamese, lends support to the second proposition. The distinction between these two propositions gets blurred in case the above four-fold ideological categories are mere positional rather than real. A political position may sound liberal while in power (as supra-ethnic image helps to govern multi-ethnic polity) and conservative while out of power (for mobilizing the single largest community for electoral gain). In such a case, both the first and second propositions work in an interactive mode to regress the identity boundary. Thus the boundary of the ethnic Assamese identity is being retrograded over time setting a clear trend towards adjusting the territorial boundary to conform to social identity, albeit unintended, instead of enlarging the social identity to fit with the territorial boundary, albeit intended, of post colonial Assam.

As the ethnic Assamese nationalism defines nationality by *jus sanguinis* (i.e., descent from a person of that nationality) the claim to make Assam a nation province for the Assamese nationality is neither just nor desirable due to the non-coincidence of the political boundary of Assam to that of ethnic boundary of the Assamese. As the population of Assam belongs to different nationalities where no single group has the absolute majority, nationalism in Assam needs to be defined not by *jus sanguinis* but by *jus soli* (i.e. birth within Assam) *a la* Indian citizenship. We need a separate term to capture the idea of "people of Assam", say *Asamian* , like Indian, to make a distinction between the people of Assam and ethnic Assamse people. As the term "*Asamian*" will refer to the permanent residents/citizens of Assam it will include the members of all the ethnic groups including the ethnic Assamese. If the state vows to protect the interest, and promote the welfare, of the "*Asamian* ", not only of the ethnic Assamese, then it will have wider legitimacy across the social groups. It will largely eliminate the crisis of legitimacy that the governance in Assam is facing currently as the non-ethnic Assamese social groups view the state symbolizing only the interest of ethnic Assamese in Assam. If the identity problem is to resolve without compromising on the present political and territorial boundary of Assam, multiculturalism has to be inculcated instead of singular identity. The word *"Asamian*" captures this multicultural basis of the regional identity of the people of Assam in more

unambiguous terms than the word "Assamese", which is primarily used to mean the ethnic Assamese group. The shift from singular identity to multiculturalism calls for looking beyond the Assam Accord (Datta:1990).

Looking Beyond Assam Movement and the Assam Accord

Assam movement has been the result of the perceived threat to the identity of the ethnic Assamese arising ostensively out of the growing political power of the Muslims in post reorganized Assam. The strategy of accommodation of the Muslims under the linguistic Assamese nationalism has lost its relevance in post reorganized Assam. With the reorganization of the political boundary along ethnic lines in 1972, the ethnic Assamese community suddenly found themself in a precarious position, sharing the Brahamuptra valley with a large Muslim population. For them, the valley became too small to accommodate the Muslims. Dissents against the policy of the ethnic Assamese power elites to bank on the Ali-Cooli (Muslims and the Adivasis) constituency to sail through the electoral politics have been institutionalized through ethnic Assamese civil society organizations like All Assam Students Union (AASU), Assam Sahitya Sabha (ASS) and Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AGSP). Ethnic Assamese civil society realized that the use of the Muslims as vote banks by the power elites tacitly encourages the illegal immigration of Muslims across the border. The Muslim conspiracy of making Assam a part of Pakistan on the eve of the partition was revoked and the theory of Islamization of Assam was brought into the sharp focus to build a mighty anti-foreigner (anti-Muslim) movement which in due course transformed itself into anti-non-Assamese agitation. Events and dimensions of the movement have already been studied (Hussain: 1993, Gohain: 1980, Guha: 1980, Gupta: 1983, Murty: 1983), we only intend to dwell on the two important lessons having significant bearing for the post-Assam Accord politics of Assam.

First, in spite of the popular support that has caused a regime change in favour of the movement why did it fail its mission in terms of detection and deportation of foreign nationals from Assam? The answer to this question lies, perhaps, in the diametrically opposite compulsions of the politics of ethnicity and parliamentary politics. While the movement has mobilized the masses based on ethnic Assamese identity against illegal Bangladeshi immigrants (read Muslims) without drawing any distinction between the Muslims who are as old in Assam as the ethnic Assamese are and the infiltrators on the one hand, the expediency of parliamentary politics on the other has called for protecting the Muslim interest as without their support it would be difficult for any political party to stake the majority claim in the state legislative assembly. Thus the dilemma faced by the ethnic Assamese political elites is that while, on the one hand, they intend to keep the Muslims out of their ethnic boundary and, if possible, deport them lock stock and barrel to ensure their political and cultural security, on the other hand, they need the support of the Muslim legislators to continue to remain in power as the ethnic Assamese community is divided into several political constituencies. This dilemma largely explains as to why the political elites, parties, and even civil society movements only exhibit positional opposition to infiltration. While in power they go soft, while in opposition they cry hard.

The Muslim factor, indeed, has long been rhetoric in Assam politics. What is to note is that there has not been any appreciable change in this position even after the movement and Assam Accord. Even if the Assam Accord is implemented in letter and spirit in terms of identification and deportation of foreign nationals, it will have little impact on the present electoral strength of the Muslims in Assam. As the peak period of immigration of the Muslim peasants from Mymensingh and other parts of Bengal into Assam had been the first decade of the 20th century

who by 1947 had acquired the domiciled status in the independent India and constitutional-legal framework has already recognized them as Indian citizen, there hardly exists any legal covenant to deny them their rightful place as Indian citizen. Similarly, the Hindu Bengalis, who entered into India including Assam prior to or after the partition have also been provided with automatic citizenship due to the 'national commitments'. Moreover, as per the Assam Accord, the anti-foreigner movement has also settled for March 25, 1971 as the cut off date for the identification of illegal foreigners. Only those who had entered Assam illegally on or after this date will be labeled as "illegal foreigners". While nobody knows how many illegal foreigners (read Muslims) are there in Assam, based on fictitious rhetorical figures, the movement branded the whole Muslim and Hindu Bengali groups in Brahmaputra valley as foreigners, but by agreeing to March 25, 1971, as cut off date, ultimately only legitimized all illegal immigrants entering Assam prior to that date. According to one estimate, total number of illegal foreign migrants during 1951-1991 was about 13 lakhs (Saikia, et al: 2003) of which about 7 lakhs entered Assam during 1951-1971 and another 6 lakhs entered during 1971-1991. Even if we go by these figures, Assam Accord has legitimized more than half of the illegal foreign immigrants, majority of whom are expected to be Muslims as during 1951-71 ethnic Assamese power elites had tacitly encouraged them for the sake of electoral gains as well as for proving linguistic Assamese majority in order to make Assam a nation province for the Assamese. As far as the Bangladeshi immigration into Assam during 1971-1991 is concerned, majority of them are expected to be Hindus who migrated following the Bangladesh war of liberation and subsequent official declaration of making Bangladesh an Islamic state. Political developments in Bangladesh and Assam during the post-1971 period do not lend any strong support for large scale immigration of Bangladeshi Muslims into Assam particularly in view of reorganization of Assam (1972) that has eroded the *raison d'etre* of political support for cross border Bangladeshi Muslim immigration into Assam as well as Assam movement (1979-85) that has made Assam a hostile region for the Muslim immigrants. Given India's "national commitments", it is not a politically feasible proposition to identify and deport the Hindu Bangladeshi immigrants entering Assam during 1971-91. Thus the anti-foreigner Assam movement has rather legitimized the illegal foreigners instead of ousting them from Assam. As soon as the movement assumed the political power by giving birth to a powerful regional ideology rooted in the identity crisis of the ethnic Assamese and institutionalized in Assam Gana Parishad (AGP), it had to confront with the dilemma of wining the support of the Muslim legislators for ensuring the stability of the government and immediately accommodated the Muslim interest.

An anatomy of the ethnic composition of the present Legislative Assembly of Assam (formed in 2006) reveals that out of 126 MLAs, 25 are Muslims, 24 are tribals, and another 22 are non-ethnic Assamese Hindus belonging to Hindu Bengalis, Biharis, Adivasis, Nepalis and others (The Assam Gazette: 2006). Together non-ethnic Assamese representatives constitute about 56 per cent of the total Assam Assembly strength. These figures evidently demonstrate the strategic importance of the Muslims in Assam's parliamentarian political matrix particularly in view of the fact that while the Muslims of Brahmaputra valley are ready to shift their ethnic affiliation in favour of the linguistic Assamese identity , the tribal groups are increasingly distancing themselves from the ethnic as well as linguistic Assamese identities by reconstructing and asserting their own identities. Thus, while the electoral politics of Assam makes the Muslims a natural ally of the ethnic Assamese, the identity politics makes them their adversary. Resolution of this dilemma lies at the root of building peace in Assam.

Second, the singular identity approach of the ethnic Assamese has not only helped the Muslims of Assam to organize as a political community but also generated "demonstration

effects" for other ethnic groups including the tribals to transform themselves as ethno-political groups, many of whom hitherto considered themselves as part of the larger Assamese society, on the one hand, and strengthened the nascent identity movements on the other. The retrogression of Assamese identity from *Asamian* to linguistic Assamese identity and then to ethnic Assamese and finally to *Bhumiputras* has rung the identity alarm bell for others. Following the ethnic Assamese model of identity movement, other indigenous groups like the Bodos, Karbis, Dimasas, Koch Rajbangsis, Morans, Muttocks, Deuris and even the Adivasis are also organizing themselves either to establish or to protect their own respective identities. Besides this, orthodox ethnic fundamentalists of other non-Assamese populations of Assam like the Muslims, Hindu Bengalis and other speech groups have been provided with increased pace to play with the feeling of insecurity that has been magnified manifold due to the assertion of ethnic Assamese identity. All these have resulted into the creation of numerous "identity boxes" increasingly posing greater challenge towards social stability and polity management in post-Accord Assam. As the constituency of the political parties cut across the ethnic boundaries, it is difficult for them to take up the cause of a particular ethnic group for redress particularly when the demands of the groups are conflicting in nature. As a result, intense feeling of deprivation looms large within the group and it is left to itself to protect the interest of the members of the group. Moreover, in a multi-ethnic setting the smaller groups could hardly influence the political decision making through democratic conflict resolution mechanism as their respective political representation in the legislature is too meager vis-à-vis others (Das:2005) . This results in the adoption of violence as a strategy to reach out to the authorities that matter. A uniform structure of the organization of the ethnic movements has been observed which includes a ethnic civil society forum led by the students and youths of the community acting as the democratic façade and an ethnic insurgent army ruling the roost from behind. The formation of ethnic insurgent army often gets support from the members of the community due to the failure of the state to provide security to them. This, not only, erodes the legitimacy of the state but transforms the movement into a war between the state and the community. Post-Accord Assam is trapped into such an inter-ethnic stratagem where the values of multiculturalism are fast giving way to singular ethnocentrism. Thus mending the identity barriers to transform the social processes from plural monoculturaliism to multiculturalism is another key for the restoration of peace in Assam.

Identity and Underdevelopment

There are two way linkages between identity and development. Identity conflicts in multi-ethnic Assam have led to political instability, which in turn adversely affected economic development. Conversely, lack of economic development has led to the creation of limited economic opportunities, which in turn has sharpened inter-ethnic competition for access to resources and avenues for livelihood. Economic development in multi-ethnic Assam appears to have been largely biased in favour of the dominant group, i.e., ethnic Assamese. As all major public sector investment decisions are political in nature, the group wielding greater political power is only expected to be the largest beneficiary. Most of the public projects relating to health, education, and infrastructure are located in regions inhabited by the dominant group. The members of the dominant group have grabbed the most of the government jobs. Most of the public welfare schemes are serviced in areas populated by the dominant group. Minority ethnic groups have little say over public decision-making. This ethnocentric view towards development has made the state incapable in playing the buffer role where the market forces have failed to usher development and as a result has created inequality across social as well as territorial spaces. This

inequality, in turn, has given birth to ethnic assertion by the peripheral groups suffering from intense feeling of relative deprivation, real or perceived (Das: 1997). Once the ethnic movements have adopted the violent tactics to redress their grievances, this has vitiated the whole business environment where risk premium of investment in general and private investment in particular appeared to have become higher than the expected rate of return. As a result not only businesses investments have shied away from the conflict zones, flight of business capital to other profitable regions has also become prominent following the persistence of the identity conflict. Ethnocentric *developmentality*, an attitude towards development which favours the members of a particular ethnic group and excludes others, coupled with ethnic militancy have created multiple layers of loops which have kept the economy of the state at a low level equilibrium trap.

Unlike market governed development, ethnocentric development leads to inefficiency. While ethnic criterion is used as a choice variable in hiring a person or in allotting a contract, efficiency is sacrificed on the alter of ethnicity. This breeds inefficiency and leads to poor decision-making particularly in public service providing sectors where selection process is largely subject to ethnocentric bias. Inefficient public servants, in turn, contribute to the overall underdevelopment of the economy and society.

The most harmful effect of the ethnocentric *developmentality* is the destruction of social capital. It has vitiated the inter-ethnic relations to a large extent. Trust, bonding and networking across the communities have largely disappeared with the formation of identity boxes. This has not only adversely affected the growth of multiculturalism by reducing the cultural capital, but also stood on the way of building shared opportunities for material wellbeing of the members cutting across communitarian barriers. The banishment of cultural interdependence has led to some sort of economic isolation as well. This has added further impetus to the demands for positive discrimination. The movements by Koch Rajbongshis, Muttoks, Morans, Chutiyas, Ahoms and Adivasis for scheduled tribe status while seen from this perspective make this point self evident. As the Muslims in Assam, majority of whom are peasants, are subject to distrust and suspicion, capital formation in agriculture is certain to suffer. The feeling of insecurity about their *locas standi* as a bonafide citizen of Assam appears to have crippled their economic motivation. Had this air of suspicion been removed and necessary support services ensured by the state, the Muslim peasants would have made a significant contribution towards the growth of the agricultural sector in Assam. Similar is the case of the Adivasis who have created wealth in the tea gardens of Assam for centuries. Had the well being of the Adiasis were taken care of, the tea industry in Assam would have done much better than what it is today.

The phenomenon of insurgency in Assam may be viewed, to a large extent, as the by-product of identity movements. Following the adoption of strategy of violence by the identity movements their adverse impact on the economy have increased manifold. Rent seeking behaviour of these movements not only has jeopardized the prospect of private investment; they also helped in breeding as well as justifying corruption in the society. Extortionist demands from the insurgent groups have encouraged and legitimized corruption in public domain. The wrong doers are in turn protected by the gunrunners. Businesses buy peace by coughing up a part of their profit which is again compensated by raising the prices of goods and services ultimately leading to the decline in consumer welfare. Insurgent-politician-contractor-supplier-nexus siphons the bulk share of development funds leading to the poor quality of development projects, which in turn drastically reduces the rate of return from them. Kidnapping for ransom has made it difficult to get expertise personnel for project implementation. Failures of the state to provide effective and adequate security for the development project agencies have resulted in extraordinary delay and hence escalation of project costs often making many a project

economically and/or operatively unviable. As the profitable enterprises are being targeted for extortion, insurgency, thus, has created disincentives for motivation and accumulation. This has caused migration of even local talents and entrepreneurs. All these have made the enterprises non-competitive vis-à-vis their counterparts from other regions by way of higher production and delivery costs leading to the perpetuation of underdevelopment in Assam.

The proliferations of identity movements and, their offshoots, insurgency have made conflict management as the prime focus of polity management pushing the development agenda to the back seat. Popular mandates are sought based on the performance of the political managers on conflict management rather than their ability to deliver goods which are valued for material well being of the people. As a result, the agenda of governance has been misplaced in the state of Assam. Often insurgency and identity conflicts are made scapegoats for the non-performance of the political elites in development front. Identity movements, thus, not only retard economic development, they also provide legitimacy for the perpetuation of underdevelopment in Assam.

Concluding Remarks

If Assam is to maintain its territorial boundary, it is important for the state to work for the welfare of the "Asamian", a term used here to mean residents of Assam, instead of only for the Assamese, the single largest of the numerous linguistic groups in Assam. The areas of commonality cutting across the ethnic boundaries need to be strengthened instead of focusing on the singularity of communal identity. Instead of harping on the "Assam Accord" type solution of the vexed problem of infiltration, all the members of the Muslim community particularly in Brahmaputra valley may be accepted as the bonafide citizen of Assam based on the day of issuance of identity papers in order to prevent future flow of illegal immigration. This option is far better in view of political acceptability, migration history, social ethics and above all legal complicacies than the Assam Accord option. It will be easier to identify future illegal immigrants once identity for the existing stock of people is issued rather than finding the illegal immigrants of the past. Thus accepting the present as the cut off to prevent the future infiltration is, no doubt, the most viable option rather than digging the past and keeping the future open for illegal immigration. Moreover to dig the past the whole Muslim population of the present has to be bracketed as the suspect. It will not be acceptable to those Muslims who have arrived in Assam even before the ethnic Assamese and who have already been naturalized as Indian citizens by virtue of being British citizens in colonial Assam. While the Muslims of these categories could not be denied the citizenship by bracketing them as suspect, Assam Accord type solution would only make them hostile to the political goals of the ethnic Assamese. Instead, since the issue of infiltration is a common concern, it can only be addressed by taking all the ethnic groups into confidence particularly those who reside along the Indo-Bangladesh border. As the Muslims inhabit the Assam-Bangladesh border areas, it is unlikely that any anti-infiltration measure would meet with success without taking them into confidence (Das: 2006). Thus, a fair deal to the existing Muslim population can only prevent the unfair immigration, which the ethnic Assamese views as the threat to their identity.

Besides resolving the Muslim question, polity management in Assam has to be inclusive so that minority tribal and non-Assamese ethnic groups can play some role in decision-making. Practice of consociational democracy (Lijphart: 1989) instead of electoral democracy based on majoritarian principle may be an option to accommodate the interests of the smaller identities in a multi-ethnic society like Assam. Given the existing political process, although it does not appear to be feasible, creation of the Upper House of the state legislature based on consociational

principle may bring some respite. This will help in restoring the legitimacy to the governance, which has reduced to a large extent as the tribals and non-Assamese minority ethnic groups view the governance as an instrument of imposition of the will of the dominant ethnic group. Thus, secularizing the political space by way of accommodating the diverse interests of the different groups is the key for the restoration of socio-political stability and economic development of Assam.

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