The Neo-Assamese Muslims and Politics of ‘Othering’ in Assam

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In recent times, the politics of Assam witnessed attempts to ‘othering’ the neo-Assamese Muslims from the Assamese nationality, who by adopting Assamese language in Brahmaputra valley became ‘neo-Assamese’ after independence. These neo-Assamese became the savior of Assamese language in Brahmaputra valley and became an integral part of Assamese nationality. However, BJP, in recent times, has openly tried to ‘othering’ the neo-Assamese from the idea of Assamese, and has tried to create an idea of Assamese nationalism based on Hindu identity. Against this backdrop, this paper tries to understand how, during last seven decades after independence, these immigrant Muslims emerged as neo-Assamese and became an integral part of Assamese nationality, and now the community is emerging as an enemy of Assamese people in politics of Assam, as portrayed by BJP. It also tries to understand why BJP’s politics of ‘othering’ the immigrant Muslims is gaining ground among the Assamese people.

[Keywords: AIUDF, BJP, Enemy, Neo-Assamese, Threat]

1. Introduction

The neo-Assamese Muslims, living in the Brahmaputra valley, have remained integral to Assamese nationality. However, after BJP emerged as a force in politics of Assam after 2014 Lok Sabha election, it has been trying to prove the entire immigrant Muslim community as the ‘enemy’ of Assamese people. By
establishing the immigrant Muslim community as the enemy, the party wants to keep intact the Hindu alliance under BJP between the Assamese from Brahmaputra valley and Bengalis from Barak valley which was formed during 2014 Lok Sabha election. This political alliance helped BJP greatly to come to power in Assam in 2016. But BJP’s politics of Muslim enemy in Assam for its political gain, on one hand, is pushing the entire immigrant Muslim community of Assam into margin, and on the other has started to weaken the Assamese nationality.

2. The Neo-Assamese

Neo-Assamese are those immigrant Muslims living in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam who migrated from East Bengal and then East Pakistan. The Muslims in Assam can be divided into two broad categories on the basis of their time of immigration into the state: indigenous and immigrant. The Muslims who immigrated to Assam till the state was taken over by British in 1826 A.D. are known as indigenous Muslims. On the other hand, Muslims who immigrated to the state during British colonialism and till March 24, 1971 after independence are known as immigrant Muslims. This should be noted here that Assam Accord (1985) fixed 25th March 1971 as the cut off date for identification and deportation of illegal foreigners in the state of Assam. The indigenous Muslims living in Brahmaputra valley are culturally Assamese and their mother tongue is Assamese. They are categorized as Assamese Muslims in society of Assam. On the other hand, immigrant Muslims of Assam can be divided mainly into neo-Assamese and Bengali Muslims. These Muslims were immigrated from East Bengal/East Pakistan and were Bengali speakers. However, a large section of immigrant Muslims living in Brahmaputra valley has been identifying Assamese as mother tongue in consecutive census enumerations since independence, and they have accepted Assamese language and culture. These immigrant Muslims living in Brahmaputra valley are called neo-Assamese Muslims. The language of Barak valley is Bengali and the immigrant Muslims living in the valley are Bengali speaker. The mother tongue of indigenous Muslims living in Barak valley is also Bengali. Entire Muslim population from Barak valley, including both indigenous and immigrant, are called Bengali Muslims (Ahmed and Yasin, 1997; Hussain, 1993).

Muslim immigration from East Bengal, and then East Pakistan to Assam has a long history. In 1874 Assam was constituted into a separate province along with the two Bengal districts of Sylhet and Cachar under a chief commissioner which made the Muslim immigration from East Bengal to Assam an internal affair within a province. British wanted to grow some kind of cash crop for profit purpose in present lower and middle Assam of Brahmaputra valley after it grew tea as a cash crop in upper Assam within a decade after Assam was annexed. By last quarter of nineteenth century, British administration identified jute as the cash crop for lower Assam which suits the climate of Assam and the large tracts of sandy alluvium on
both sides of river Brahmaputra. However, to grow jute, British administration faced lack of cultivators. It was because Assamese population was declining when it thought of a cash crop like jute. Assam experienced depopulation during the last decade of the 19th century. The black fever (kala azar) was the cause of this depopulation in several districts of Assam (Guha, 2006 : 30-31). Then the British administration encouraged immigration of Muslim cultivators from East Bengal to Assam as these Muslims were familiar with and trained in jute cultivation and they were known for hard labour (Saikia, 2001 : 88-91). The abundance of waste land in Assam provided the colonial administration the opportunity to import Muslim cultivators from East Bengal and to settle them in Assam. In the beginning, the cultivators from East Bengal were not interested to migrate to Assam as from where Muslims migrated to Assam in large number in later phase, did not come under pressure of population which could induce people to migrate (Misra, 2011 : 104-105). However, the situation changed from the beginning of the last century. The fast growth of population in East Bengal districts, from the beginning of the last century compelled them to migrate to Assam in large number. The government’s patronage to allot land and to help them settle started to attract more and more Muslim peasants to migrate to Assam. Gradually the Brahmaputra valley of Assam emerged as the destination for those Muslims in East Bengal who were poor and landless. Indebtedness with high interest rates among the cultivators and inhuman exploitation of moneylenders also contributed to this immigration from East Bengal districts. The immigration of Muslims from East Bengal got a new lease of life after Muslim League formed a coalition government in Assam under provincial autonomy in 1937. The League government in Assam encouraged large scale Muslim immigration into the state in the name of ‘Grow more food’, but in an intention to make Assam a Muslim dominated province so that it could be included into the proposed Pakistan. The partition of India and inclusion of Sylhet into East Pakistan halted the Muslim immigration from East Pakistan to Assam. But, the process resumed after sometime as India did not make any effort to seal its international border with East Pakistan. Muslim immigration continued to Assam from East Pakistan, and then Bangladesh because of this porous border. It should be noted that India decided to seal its border with Bangladesh only in 1985 when the Assam Accord was signed. The fencing work at India-Bangladesh border was started only in 1987, after four decades of independence, and till today the fencing work has not been completed.

3. ‘Becoming’ of Neo-Assamese

The British colonial administration introduced Bengali as the medium of education in Assam in 1836 and it remained so till 1871. The newly educated Assamese considered it as a manipulation by the Bengali officers under British administration to make Bengali the language of Assam. This created a panic among the Assamese people against the aggression of Bengali language. Because
of separation of Sylhet from India in partition, the Assamese language got the opportunity to be the majority language in Assam. In 1951 census, for the first time, Assamese became the majority language in Assam with 56.29 per cent of speakers. This percentage rose to 57.14 in 1961 census and then 60.89 in 1971 census.

Indigenous Assamese became happy with the majority status of Assamese language in 1951 census. However, it became possible only with the help of Muslims immigrated from East Bengal and living in Brahmaputra valley. A large section of immigrant Muslims living in lower and middle Assam of Brahmaputra valley, who were originally Bengali speakers, started to identify Assamese as mother tongue in census enumerations since 1951. As Amalendu Guha noted - The separation of Sylhet alone would not have sufficed to bring in this change. It was the census figures for the district of Goalpara that tilted the balance. In all the census operations up to 1931, Bengali was returned as the mother tongue of more than half of the district population. The figure came down to less than 18 per cent in 1951 and 12 per cent in 1961 (2006 : 273). The undivided Goalpara, from lower Assam of Brahmaputra valley, was the bordering district of East Pakistan.

This was the background of Assamese becoming majority language in Assam. The Assamese people were grateful to the immigrant Muslims in Brahmaputra valley for declaring Assamese as mother tongue and thereby ensuring the majority status of the Assamese language in Assam. The Assamese society and socio-cultural organizations led by indigenous Assamese started to term these Muslims living in Brahmaputra valley as neo-Assamese, the same immigrant Muslims who were considered as a threat by the indigenous Assamese before independence because of their immigration in huge number and grabbing of large amount of waste land. A large section of these Muslims, during last decade of freedom struggle, supported Muslim League against Congress mainly for the party’s campaign for land rights for them. However, the term na Asomiya (neo-Assamese) was first used by Jyotiprasad Agarwala, one of the doyens of Assamese literature and culture, in 1943 in his poem Asomiya Dekar Ukti to refer the Mymensinhias (people who migrated from Mymensingh district of East Bengal and settled in Brahmaputra valley).

It is really interesting that the immigrant Muslims in Brahmaputra valley accepted Assamese as mother tongue and adopted a new group identity by shedding their distinctive linguistic-cultural heritage. However, to become Assamese by shedding own distinctive identity, for immigrant Muslims in Brahmaputra valley, was largely a political decision. Assam had not experienced any major communal clash in pre independent period although it became a playground for both Congress and Muslim League politics. But in March 1950, it experienced a major communal clash as a consequence of attacks on Hindus in East Pakistan who took refuge in Assam. Nearly a lakh Muslim immigrants had to quit riot affected lower Assam for East Pakistan in search of security (Guha, 2006 : 271). Most of these displaced immigrant Muslims returned to their home after
Nehru-Liaquat Pact was signed in April, 1950. This communal clash occurred in lower Assam of Brahmaputra valley which made the immigrant Muslims of the valley to realize that security was their main concern. Already, after independence, most of the Muslim League leaders who fought for the rights of these Muslims in Assam left for Pakistan and those who remained, either joined Congress or became politically inactive. In that situation, the immigrant Muslims of Brahmaputra valley wanted to marginalize their security concerns. At that point of time, in Brahmaputra valley, they were both linguistic and religious minority. They realized that by accepting Assamese as mother tongue, they would remain only religious minority, which would marginalize their security concerns considerably. Again, they realized the importance of accepting Assamese and to side with indigenous Assamese in Brahmaputra valley where Assamese-Bengali linguistic divide has always remained very sharp in pre-independence days. Moreover, after independence, Congress became the sole political force in Assam and the party was Assamese dominated. So to marginalize security concerns both socio-culturally and politically, to become Assamese emerged as the most effective way in front of immigrant Muslims in Brahmaputra valley. However, it would be wrong to consider the acceptance of Assamese language by immigrant Muslims in Brahmaputra valley only as a political opportunism. Even before independence, many Assamese medium primary and secondary schools were set up by immigrant Muslims in their areas. For example, in Alitangani, an area near Nagaon town, the immigrant Muslims established LP school in 1902 and imported teacher from neighbouring Dhing to teach Assamese. These Muslims established Assamese medium ME school, which became a High School, in 1924. In that period when these immigrant Muslims established Assamese medium ME/High schools, many ethnic Assamese dominated areas of Nagaon districts did not have such educational institutions. This proves, the immigrated Muslims in Brahmaputra valley tried to become Assamese just after they immigrated to the valley. There was a widespread feeling among the immigrant Muslims in Brahmaputra valley that they should accept the language and culture of that land which has given them shelter and livelihood.

4. **Assamese - Neo-Assamese Alliance**

The Congress led Assam government accepted the Assam Official Language Act, 1960 which made Assamese the state language of Assam. The Hindu Bengalis revolted against this decision of the Assam government and there was a mass movement in Barak valley demanding Bengali to be accorded also an official language of Assam (Goswami, 1997: 49-66). In 1972, Gauhati University decided to introduce Assamese as the medium of instruction in colleges under its jurisdiction from the academic year 1972-73 with some exceptions. However, demand was raised from Bengali speaking Barak valley that Bengali should also be introduced as one of the medium of instructions in entire Assam. In 1960 and 1972, while
Hindu Bengalis of entire Assam opposed the decisions of the Assam government and Gauhati University respectively, the immigrant Muslims living in Brahmaputra valley stood behind the Assamese language in both the occasions. In 1972 medium of instruction movement, there were clashes between Hindu Bengalis and immigrant Muslims at different places of Brahmaputra valley like Dhing, Dabaka, Lahorighat, Kharupetia etc. (Goswami, 1997 : 74).

The declaration of Assamese as the official language of Assam by the Assam government created resentment among different tribal groups in Brahmaputra valley as they considered the move as an imposition on them. Opposing the decision of the Assam government to declare Assamese as the state language, All Party Hill Leaders’ Conference was formed by leaders of different hill tribes in 1960 itself and demanded separation of hill areas from Assam. The tribal groups started to alienate themselves from the Assamese language. They began to identify their own language/dialect as mother tongue in census enumerations instead of Assamese since 1961. Still, the percentage of Assamese speakers rose continuously in 1961 and 1971 census as more number of immigrant Muslims from Brahmaputra valley identified Assamese as mother tongue. This has created a peculiar situation before the Assamese. While the original inhabitants of Assam, the tribals, started to leave the Assamese language, the neo-Assamese, a recently immigrant community, voluntarily became a part of Assamese language and nationality. This has made the neo-Assamese very precious for the Assamese speaking people of Brahmaputra valley, at least, to maintain the majority status Assamese language in Assam. However the Assam movement changed the situation significantly for both Assamese and neo-Assamese.

5. The Divide : Assam Movement

The neo-Assamese Muslims emerged as the savior of Assamese language for maintaining its majority status in Assam. However, suddenly, Assam movement (1979-1985) identified these neo-Assamese as the threat to the existence and identity of indigenous Assamese people. The Assam movement demanded to identify and to deport those illegal foreigners migrated to Assam after 1951. The movement started at 1979, and there was no denying that a section of neo-Assamese living in Brahmaputra valley migrated from East Pakistan. In that situation, the whole neo-Assamese section was targeted by the Assam movement leaders and supporters as illegal Bangladeshis. This has, on one hand, threatened those who immigrated after 1951, and on the other hurt those who immigrated during pre-partition era and became Assamese by sacrificing their own identity. In that situation, they stood against the Assam movement and participated in the Assam Assembly election 1983, which was forcefully held by then central government and was opposed and boycotted by Assam movement leaders. And, the participation of neo-Assamese Muslims in this election in huge number posited them at the opposite to Assamese people. And Nellie massacre on February 18,
1983, in between the second and third phase of election, which was considered as an attack on neo-Assamese Muslims by movement supporters as a revenge for their participation in election, made the situation worse for future for both Assamese and neo-Assamese communities.

It is interesting to understand how Assam movement could suddenly change the outlook of Assamese people towards the neo-Assamese and the latter emerged as the threat to the former. It was because, the movement leadership successfully campaigned that the indigenous Assamese would lose political dominance over the state at the hands of immigrant communities as both Hindus and Muslims were continuously immigrating from Bangladesh to Assam because of open India-Bangladesh border. The threat of becoming subordinated politically in their own state at the hands of recently immigrated, thus, acted as the rationale for the Assamese people to consider the neo-Assamese as the threat to their existence and identity. This was the first time, after independence, when Muslims emerged as a threat in the society and politics of Assam. It can be said that Assam movement changed the whole question of Muslims in society and politics of Assam for future.

Assam accord (1985) fixed 25th March, 1971 as the cut off date for identification and deportation for illegal foreigners in Assam, which made all immigrated to Assam till this cut off date since independence legal citizens of India. This cut off date compelled Assam to bear the burden of illegal foreigners for two decades after independence. To compensate this burden imposed on Assam, Assam Accord, in clause 6, made the provision for Constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards for the Assamese people to protect their culture, social and linguistic identity and heritage. The neo-Assamese did not have any problem with the cut off date fixed by the accord, as this date was demanded by the students organizations like All Assam Minority Students’ Union (AAMSU), formed by neo-Assamese student leaders as a counter to All Assam Students’ Union (AASU) led Assam movement. However, the clause 6 of the Accord emerged as a big concern for the neo-Assamese as it talked about special constitutional safeguards for Assamese people.

6. **After Assam Movement: Alienation of Neo-Assamese**

The communal clash in lower Assam that took place in 1950 forced the neo-Assamese Muslims to realize their security threat in Assam. To marginalize their security threat the community became Assamese and became a support base of Congress, the party in power in Assam continuously till 1978, in consecutive elections. The Assam movement proved that the security threat for the community remained same, despite they became Assamese by leaving their own language and culture. This realization brought about new consciousness to the community to retreat any attempt to marginalize them further. This realization encouraged the community to bounce back politically and linguistically. After 1950 communal clash, the community became dependent on Congress for protection. After Assam
movement and the signing of Assam Accord, it aligned with the Hindu Bengalis of Assam politically for their own protection. The Assam movement leaders formed Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), a regional political party, in an objective to implement the Assam Accord. As a counter to AGP, United Minority Front (UMF) was formed by a section of immigrant Muslims and Hindu Bengali leaders. The Citizens’ Right Preservation Committee (CRPC), an organization of Hindu Bengalis, led the process of the formation of the party. In 1985 Assam Assembly election, a large section of neo-Assamese Muslims supported UMF against overwhelming ethnic Assamese supported AGP. In this election, AGP got majority and UMF became third largest party in Assam Legislative Assembly by winning from 17 constituencies (Assam Legislative Assembly consists of total 126 constituencies).

The neo-Assamese regretted that they were not trusted by the Assamese people during Assam movement despite they voluntarily assimilated with Assamese society and culture. During 1991 census enumerations, a section of neo-Assamese expressed their dissatisfaction over the treatment meted out by the community during Assam movement and decided to go back to Bengali language (Ahmed and Yasin, 1997 : 148). As a consequence, the percentage of Assamese speakers declined from 60.89 in 1971 to 57.81 in 1991 (Census could not be held in Assam in 1981 due to Assam movement).

7. The Reconciliation

In 1990s, a process of reconciliation started from both the Assamese and neo-Assamese communities. The euphoria created by the signing of Assam Accord came to an end after five years of AGP rule. The AGP government (1985-1990) proved inefficient and corrupt. In 1991 Assam Assembly election, Congress came back to power under Hiteswar Saikia who tried to suppress Assam movement with brutal force during 1983-1985, when he was chief minister of the state. With the euphoria of Assam Accord came to an end, the Assamese people started to realize that a section of neo-Assamese is leaving their language as a consequence of Assam movement.

The neo-Assamese also had to reconcile their decisions to compete with Assamese people both politically and linguistically. It was because their political alliance with both Hindu and Muslim Bengalis from Barak valley in 1985 election proved as failed. A Hindu Bengali organization, CRPC, led the formation of UMF. The neo-Assamese from Brahmaputra valley, in 1985 election, supported the UMF overwhelmingly. But, both Bengali Hindus and Bengali Muslims from Barak valley did not support the party in large number. Barak valley is home of Bengali Hindus and Muslims and it has total 15 Assembly constituencies. However, not a single UMF candidate could win from Barak valley in this election although the party won 17 constituencies from Brahmaputra valley. This has brought about the realization to the neo-Assamese Muslims that Bengali Hindus and Muslims from Barak valley were not ready to align with them politically. The neo-Assamese
Muslims were the worst suffer of Assam movement as it was concentrated mainly in Brahmaputra valley and Barak valley did not have much influence of the movement. The neo-Assamese rallied behind the UMF against the Assam movement and Assam Accord. But Hindu and Muslim Bengalis did not come forward to align with them under UMF which was a political formation against Assam Accord. This proved that a political alliance between the neo-Assamese and the Bengali Hindus and Muslims from Barak valley could not be effective. The failure of UMF experiment helped the neo-Assamese to realize that, ultimately, they would have to live with Assamese people in Brahmaputra valley. This realization influenced the neo-Assamese during 1991 census enumeration also. Although there were appeals from a section of neo-Assamese leaders to the community to alienate from Assamese language and to identify Bengali as mother tongue, overwhelming majority of neo-Assamese remained with the Assamese language, although a very small section shifted to Bengali language.

By the middle of 1990s, the dividing line created by Assam movement between the Assamese and neo-Assamese became very thin. Even in 1996 Assam Assembly election, a large section of neo Assamese voted for AGP, the party which was formed by Assam movement leaders. In this election, AGP candidates won from constituencies like Dalgaon and Jamunamukh from Brahmaputra valley, which are neo-Assamese Muslim dominated constituencies.

8. Neo-Assamese as Threat

After Assam movement, the neo-Assamese again emerged as a threat for the Assamese people in Brahmaputra valley after the formation of Assam United Democratic Front (AUDF) in 2005 which relaunched itself as All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) in 2009. The Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunal) [IM(DT)] Act, which was an anti-immigration act and was operational in Assam since 1983, was repealed by the Supreme Court of India in 2005. The IM(DT) Act was considered as a safeguard to the recently immigrant communities from neighbouring countries to Assam, as it made the process of identification of illegal foreigners in Assam very complex, by putting the onus of proof on the prosecution. And after repeal of the IM(DT) Act, the Assam unit of Jamiat-ul-ulema-e-Hind (Jamiat) formed AUDF by bringing together more than 10 Muslim political and non-political organizations of the state. In 2006 and 2011 Assam Assembly elections the AIUDF showed continuous success and won from 10 and 17 constituencies respectively.

Two things made the Assamese people very concerned about the AIUDF vis-à-vis neo-Assamese Muslims. First, both neo-Assamese Muslims from Brahmaputra valley and Bengali Muslims from Barak valley came together and rallied behind the AIUDF. In case of UMF, Bengali Muslims did not align with neo-Assamese Muslims. But in 2006 election, AUDF won from neo-Assamese Muslim dominated constituencies like Dhubri, West Bilasipara, Dhing,
Jamunamukh, South Salmora etc., and won from Bengali Muslim dominated constituencies like Hailakandi, Badarpur, Katigora etc. This proved that the AUDF became a platform of both neo-Assamese and Bengali Muslims in Assam. The leader of AIUDF, Maulana Badruddin Ajmal, was a neo-Assamese from Brahmaputra valley and emerged as a popular leader among the Bengali Muslims from Barak valley also. After 2011 Assembly election, AIUDF emerged as the main opposition party in Assam Legislative Assembly by winning 17 seats.

The second concern was increasing role of Jamiat in electoral politics of Assam. Jamiat has been playing a political role in Assam since independence. Till Assam movement, Jamiat worked as an agent of Congress in Assam to gather Muslim vote for the party in elections. During Assam movement, it increased its influence among the neo-Assamese Muslims by actively opposing the movement. After the movement, it joined CRPC to form UMF. Because of such activist role during and after the Assam movement in favour of entire immigrant section of Muslims from both the valley, relevance of Jamiat increased substantially among both neo-Assamese and Bengali Muslims in post Assam movement period. With its growing influence, Jamiat started to openly lend its support to political parties and formations during elections after UMF disintegrated into several groups after 1985 election. It supported Congress in 1991 and 2001 Assembly elections and supported AGP led alliance in 1996 election (Omar, 2005 : 12). A large section of immigrant Muslims from both the valleys followed the dictates of Jamiat in elections. Against this backdrop, when Jamiat, a religious organization, came forward to play a purely political role to unite all sections of Muslims under AIUDF, Assamese people became aware of on one hand, strengthening of Muslim communal politics in Assam like pre partition days under Muslim League, and on the other of becoming politically marginalized at the hands of united Muslims. The result of 2011 Assembly election, when AIUDF emerged as the second largest party in Assam Legislative Assembly, became a reference point of Muslim political aggression for the Assamese people.

While on one hand, AIUDF was growing in politics of Assam, on the other reports of fast population growth among Muslims were coming. Muslim population has been continuously growing in Assam since independence. In 50 years during 1961-2011, Muslim population in Assam grew by 9.52 per cent. In 1991, total four districts of Assam were Muslim dominated. Muslim dominated districts grew to six in 2001 census and to nine in 2011 census. In a single decade 2001-2011, Muslim population in Assam grew by 3.3 per cent. After 2011 census, Muslims constituted more than one third of total population of the state (34.22 per cent). Out of five districts which became Muslim dominated after 1991, four (Nagaon, Morigaon, Bongaigaon and Darrang) were from Brahmaputra valley where predominantly neo-Assamese live. Only one district, Karimganj, became Muslim dominated in 2001 from Barak valley. This has brought about unprecedented fear among the Assamese people that neo-Assamese, in alliance
with Bengali Muslims, would take away the political power from them with fast growing population. There were reports that election after election, more constituencies were becoming Muslim dominated because of high growth of population among entire immigrant Muslim population in Assam (Nath 2015: 153). It is worth mentioning here that during 2016 Assam Assembly election campaign BJP campaigned that Muslims dominate at least 35 constituencies in Assam. In the mean time, with the growth of AIUDF, Assamese people also faced the fear of losing majority status of Assamese language. A neo Assamese Congress leader Abdul Khalek, during 2011 census enumerations, argued for recognising ‘Miyan’ as the mother tongue by neo-Assamese Muslims in census (Nath 2015: 282). How this issue of Miyan language affected Assamese language in 2011 census could not be known yet as the language statistics for Assam has not been published till date. All these have brought about unprecedented distrust between the Assamese and neo-Assamese in Brahmaputra valley. And the growing fear among the Assamese people towards the neo-Assamese people was smartly exploited by BJP in recent years after the party came to power at the centre in 2014.

9. Neo-Assamese: From ‘Threat’ to ‘Enemy’

The existence and success of AIUDF during 2005-2011 greatly helped BJP to grow in Assam. The party tried to unite all in Assam against the immigrant section of Muslims. During 2016 Assam Assembly election, BJP promised implementation of clause 6 of Assam Accord, safeguarding of land, settlement and nationality of indigenous Assamese, forming of an indigenous government; and argued for reservation of right to contest election in Assam only for the people of Indian origin. All these went against entire immigrant community in Assam. Then it tried to segregate the immigrant Hindu Bengali community and promised to give citizenship to them who crossed over to Assam from Bangladesh after 1971. In the process, BJP tried to single out entire immigrant Muslim community as the enemy for the Assamese people.

BJP has tried to establish its theory of Muslim enemy after it came to power in Assam in 2016. The central government pushed the Citizenship Amendment Bill 2016 which seeks to allow illegal migrants from certain minority communities in Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan eligible for Indian citizenship. This proposed bill has been strongly opposed by ethnic Assamese organizations. Arguing for this proposed amendment, BJP’s strategist and minister in Assam Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarmah asked the people of Assam to choose their enemy - ‘the 1-1.5 lakh people or the 55 lakh people?’ While the minister did not elaborate these figures, he seemed to be referring to Hindu and Muslim migrants in Assam. He surely referred to Muslim immigrants by 55 lakh as he added that if Assamese community continued to remain this way, six more districts would go out in the 2021 census and more would go out in 2031 (Kashyap, 2016). As has already been mentioned, more and more districts became Muslim dominated in Assam in
consecutive censuses from 1991 to 2011. The ethnic Assamese organizations has not subscribed this enemy theory of BJP led Assam government. However, this discourse of BJP is gaining ground in politics and society of Assam as entire immigrant Muslim community has already emerged as a threat to political existence of the indigenous Assamese people for their fast increasing population. The strategy of BJP to label the entire immigrant Muslim community is a political game as, by alienating them, the party wants to keep alive the Muslim based party like AIUDF among them. The existence and success of Muslim based party like AIUDF can only help BJP in Assam to return to power in future, where both social fabric and demographic equations are not favourable for BJP.

The Assam BJP is mostly consists of former Congress, AGP leaders and ex-AASU leaders from Assamese community who used to identify neo-Assamese as an integral component of Assamese nationality before they joined BJP. Now they have led the process to ‘othering’ neo-Assamese from Assamese nationality. This has made the situation very complex for the neo-Assamese Muslims. They are now in a crisis of whom to believe and rely on.

10. Conclusion

The neo-Assamese Muslims, in present situation, are in a trap created by political parties and consecutive governments led by Assamese people. Just after the independence, these Muslims from Brahmaputra valley became Assamese by accepting Assamese language and culture. This has marginalized the security concerns of these Muslims no doubt, but this has also helped the Assamese language to achieve majority status in the state. The mainstream Assamese acknowledged the greatness of these Muslims for becoming Muslims. But, the consecutive governments in the state led by mainstream Assamese has never tried to address the perennial problem of underdevelopment among this section of Muslims. Opposite to it, every political party has always tried to use the community only as a vote bank during elections in the name of security. As a result, the community remained poor and illiterate. The Sachar Committee Report, 2006 and Assam Human Development Report, 2014 clearly show how this community has lagged behind in every aspect of social life. Because of widespread poverty and illiteracy, marriage at very early age and polygamy have remained very common among them. This has kept population growth very high among the community. And this high growth rate among the community has always remained a controversy in Assam since the days of Assam movement. However, no government in the state in post Assam movement period has initiated any special programme to contain this high growth rate among them. During this period, the high population growth among the community has been ignored, which has created an impression among the indigenous Assamese that this high growth among neo-Assamese Muslims is due to continuous large scale Muslim immigration from Bangladesh. It should be noted that continuous immigration of
Bangladeshis, both Hindus and Muslims, to Assam is a reality. But it must also be acknowledged that very high growth rate among the neo-Assamese Muslims is also responsible for the fast growth of Muslims in Assam. Only in 2017, the BJP led Assam government has adopted the Population and Women Empowerment Policy which mainly targets 11 particular districts in the state that have recorded a sharp increase in population (Dutta 2017, 20).

If the high growth among the neo-Assamese Muslims was addressed just after the Assam movement, the present situation would not have emerged. The present situation has pushed the neo-Assamese Muslims in a peculiar situation. They are living under an all powerful BJP regime which has constantly tried to prove them ‘enemy’ of indigenous Assamese people. On the other hand, the fast growth rate among the community, its increasing influence on electoral equations of the state because of this growing population strength and success of political party like AIUDF which claims to represent Muslim interests, have made the community a cause of fear for the indigenous communities. The whole situation is creating a background for more divisive politics, communal polarization and ethnic clashes.

This is really alarming for Assamese nationality. Neo-Assamese has remained an integral component of Assamese nationality formation. Every aspect of Assam’s social life has been enriched by their contribution. In that situation, the communal politics of ‘othering’ the community from Assamese nationality must not be encouraged at any cost. A community cannot be considered as an ‘enemy’ for its high population growth. The high growth rate among a community can be contained and stabilized through proper family planning measures. Assamese mainstream now should demand for proactive policy from the government to address the high growth of population among the neo Assamese community, rather than to push them away from the Assamese nationality. Then only, Assamese nationality too will survive. The politics of creating an Assamese identity on the basis of Hindu religion will destroy the very structure of Assamese society and nationality.

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