

ETHNIC IDENTITY AND BELONGING: UNDERSTANDING THE POLITICS OF INTEGRATION AND DISINTEGRATION IN ASSAM

Nagendra Nath Gogoi

Research Scholar, Department of Political Science,
Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh, Assam, India.

Abstract: The understanding of identity politics has shifted over time and are still evolving in response to the rapid socio-political changes in society. Today, identities and the sense of belongingness have been argued as a matter of choice. In the wake of various ethnic conflict and strife centering on identity politics in the Northeast region of India, particularly in Assam, it is imperative to re-examine the identity formation process of ethnic groups in their own socio-political setting so as to understand the process of integration and disintegration of various ethnic groups in Assam. This paper takes a retrospective view of the integration and disintegration process of ethnic groups in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial period in the context of Assam. This paper shows that different interests of the elites and certain events, particularly the disintegration of the various ethnic groups, have contributed to the increasing rise of identity driven tension and conflict in Assam. The main focus of this paper is to identify the root causes of ethnic tension in the context of Assam which are to be found in the historical pattern of colonial legacy, state-formation processes, marginalization of ethnic groups, uneven distribution of resources and political mobilization of ethnic groups. This paper concludes that the long-standing antagonism among ethnic groups arises from various colonial policies and continuation of these practices with little or no modifications by the post-colonial state that marginalizes and alienates different ethnic groups in the state.

Keywords: Assam, Belonging, Conflict, Colonialism, Ethnicity, Identity.

1.1. Introduction

There has been an increasing scale and intensity of identity driven tension and conflicts among ethnic groups in Assam. The ethno-political process in Assam is characterized by the endless protests of ethnic minorities over structural imbalance, domination, marginalization, sharing of power, uneven distribution of resource, and autonomy among other issues. The rich cultural mosaic in Assam has turned into a political catastrophe which overwhelmed the state in a sequence of conflicts and violence. Assam today is a stage for several ongoing ethnic conflicts, the majority of which have their roots in identity assertions. In the contemporary period, the resurgence of ethnicity in Assam witnessed with unexpected consequences of hatred, division and conflict. Thus, the primary objective of this paper is to make sense of identity formation process of ethnic groups and claims of ethnic belonging in an ethnically transitional society and contemporary reflection of it in unique conditions of socio-political turbulence.

1.2. Methodology

The qualitative approach to the study has been undertaken in this research paper. The paper is based on historical, analytical and descriptive method to understand the issues of identity driven conflict in a multi ethnic society and increasing politicization of ethnic identity. For the purpose of this study, secondary data are used. The secondary sources were collected from the available related literature. The researcher began the research by collecting and reading the relevant secondary literature on identity formation process of different ethnic groups in Assam and current trend of ethnic conflict in multi-cultural societies that helped in explorations of relationships between ethnic identity and conflict in the context of Assam, and linking these ideas with the present study. For desk research, the researcher visited a number of libraries and gathered materials pertinent to this study.

1.3. Conceptual Clarifications

Identity is defined as a combination of some common socio-cultural characteristics which individuals share or presumed to share with others on the basis of which one group may be distinguished from others. Identity of a particular group based on certain common set of narratives, symbols as well as a shared sense of belonging¹. In broader sense, it is a state of physical, psychological, social, cultural and spiritual being of an individual or group of individuals. It is considered as one of the most crucial catalyst for political mobilization and a critical factor in occurrence of conflict in a multi-ethnic society.

Donald Horowitz² outlined that “ethnicity is based on a myth of collective ancestry, which usually, carries with it traits believed to be innate. Some notion of ascription, however diluted, and affinity deriving from it are inseparable from the concept of ethnicity”. Similarly, ethnicity is a social and psychological process whereby peoples come to identify and affiliate with a group and few aspects of its culture³. Thus, ethnicity and identity have some common elements including language, faith and national origin. In fact, what makes them common is that each may become a good means of group mobilization for political ends⁴.

Ethnic identity inevitably occupies a great space within the political arena and also it is a easy way for people to mobilize around basic human needs such as security, physical needs, economic well-being, inequality, land distribution, autonomy and recognition⁵. Elites and Political leaders often manipulate ethnic identity for their own interests or electoral purposes. In certain circumstances, the elites exploit ethnic identity to the extent that it becomes a source of conflict. Conflicts occur in a society when people pursue goals that clash against each other. Thus, ethnic identity is one of the most significant factors to be considered when analysing conflicts in a multi-ethnic society, because of its ability to be mobilised and potentiality to manipulate. Along with identity, the importance of the specific socio-political, cultural, administrative, environmental and economic conditions cannot be undermined that transform identities into instruments of conflict.

1.4. Ethnic Upsurge and Politics of Identity and Belonging in Assam

The identity formation process and territorial belonging among ethnic groups in Assam is very complicated due to its colonial legacies and post-colonial developments. A distinguished feature of the recent political history of the region is the intensification of ethnicity centric identity politics as well as territorial belonging. At the theoretical level, ethnicity in Assam often constructed illusively where identity and belonging take an exclusive turn. It has been argued that that since ethnicity has become a part of the political jargon of intensity, its characterizing components in its most extreme form are manifested in the form of exclusion of the 'other'. In order to create and consolidate their own identity, every ethnic group tried to construct its 'other'. This ideology of the 'other' influences and guides the identity politics in the entire Northeast region⁶. Articulating ethnic identity in singular and exclusive terms have taken some of the most violent forms in Assam. The problem emerges when this sort of ethnic assertion seeks to deny the 'other'.

The current trend of politicization of identity in Assam is deeply connected with the ethnic diversity of the region. It is interesting to note that the ethnic diversity of the region was used by British rulers to exercise their power more effectively during the colonial period. Many colonial legacies have been playing active roles even today with slight modification. The colonial desire for a single governable entity through the integration of a diverse land lead to the formulation of imperialist policy which used diversity features to exercise more effective control over the people and land. Interestingly, it became a standard norm to hold a 'nation' together in the post-independence period. Post-colonial Indian state use 'diversity' as a unifying mechanism through which identities can get homogenized. For instance, the continuations of these colonial practices found in present official accounts and scholarly studies which appear to be entirely objective but are revealed to be in thrall to the same rhetoric⁷. Such kind of colonial fabrications continues to influence the conceptual foundation of the identity politics pursued by the post-independence Indian state. Academician Sanjib Baruah argues that the prevalent notions of territoriality and indignity are significantly shaped by colonial spatial order and therefore, the continuing influence of colonial knowledge is still reflected in both conventional policy discourse as well as the political vision of local activists. As a result, there emerge various ethnic upsurge in Assam centering on identity and territorial belonging during last few decades. These ethnic upsurges not only led to lawlessness or challenge the nation-building process, but they also present critical questions relating to the future of social formations and

development in a multi-cultural society like Assam. The massive spurt of ethnic strife centering identity politics in Assam has posed a severe challenge to the socio-political landscape of the region. Almost every ethnic group in the region today asks for a specific territory to be exclusively attributed to it in the name of its right to self-determination. The intensity of demands for a particular identity and ethnic homeland is increasing rather than any sign of decline among ethnic communities over the years.

1.5. Process of Ethnic Integration and Disintegration in Assam

The process of political integration and disintegration of ethnic groups in Assam is bringing about significant change in the understanding of ethnic conflict and political dynamics. The strain between ethnic identity formation and territorial belonging cannot be denied. The severe political mobilization of ethnic groups on the basis of ethnic exclusiveness or specific territorial belonging assumes the dimensions of pressing conflict, leading to conflict and bloodshed undermining the democratic space and integrative capabilities of the socio-political structure. The integration and disintegration process of ethnic groups in Assam could be understood through the different phases of developments which are discussed below.

1.5.1. Pre-colonial and Colonial Period

Since the ancient period, Assam is the meeting place of various groups of people. The political integration of Assamese society can be traced back to the period of the advent of Aryans in Assam. Because, prior to their advent, various groups of Mongoloid origin were lived as an isolated political unit with no or little interactions. The process of Aryanization of Assamese society initiated after the arrival of Aryans in this land. In order to influence Hinduism among indigenous Mongoloid communities, they adopted various tactics such as inventing myth and legend in the Hindu religious text. They were successful to the extent that royal sections of some of these indigenous communities embraced Hinduism and extended royal patronage to these Aryans in the form of grant of lands as well as other privileges⁸. This kind of frequent interaction between Aryan Hindus and Mongolian groups led to the development of a common Assamese language. Mongoloid groups of Assam significantly contributed towards the development of Assamese language, though it evolved out of a dialect of Indo-Aryan origin. As a result, the Assamese language gradually became the common language of the region⁹. This process of integration of Assamese society further amplified with the establishment of Ahom rule in Assam. The process of political unification by Ahom ruler through bringing diverse groups and kingdom under single authority helped to transcend the isolation and separation of various communities. The neo-Vaishnavite Bhakti movement initiated by Sankardev (1449-1568) in Assam in the early part of the 15th century further reinforced the integration process and gave a new direction to the Assamese society. At that time, Assam was inhabited by people belonging to different castes and communities was an abode of Saktism and Tantricism¹⁰. The Bhakti movement initiated by Sankardev did not confine only in preaching of '*ekasaran nam dharma*'¹¹, because he made a systematic attempt through the media of art, literature and culture to spread the ideals of Vaishnava cult. The egalitarian nature of the Bhakti movement attracted a large number of people and brought cross-sections of people belonging different caste and creed under single religious perimeter. Thus, it reduced the gap between different communities and acted as a cementing force for social unity in the region. The composite Assamese culture was the result of these interactions between diverse communities which was contributed by different integrative forces. Many tribal groups renunciate their mother tongue in favour of the Assamese language and assimilate with Assamese culture. However, though the integration process was successful to bring different communities into a composite fold, yet the process was not disrupted due to several reasons and hence was incomplete. The caste hierarchy of Hindu religion was among those factors which hampered the integration process. Those indigenous groups who accepted Hinduism were placed at the bottom of the social structure¹². The Aryan Hindus beard a kind of negligence attitude towards these indigenous Mongoloid groups and that attitudes have not changed so much even today¹³. The failure to integrate the indigenous Mongoloid groups through the process of this cultural exchange, they were not able to break the isolation and separation. As a result, the integration process was not complete due to this orthodox and conservative tradition.

In the nineteenth century, the annexation of Assam by British brought political unification in the region. They integrated different territorial areas into one geographical unit but created some arbitrary boundaries for their administrative convenience. Their policies and practices interrupted the ongoing integration process among the ethnic groups. The introduction of different administrative mechanisms to rule hills and plains areas separately

further widen the gap between tribals and caste Hindus. Two parallel developments had been witnessed during that period. A process of political and territorial consolidation was happened in the region and a process of alienation was developed among ethnic groups simultaneously. The colonial policy of grouping and regrouping of areas under Excluded Areas and Partially Excluded Areas developed a sense of isolation among ethnic groups. The colonial ruler devised such type of different administrative arrangement because they thought that people of these Excluded Areas and Partially Excluded Areas were different from the rest of the people of Assam. This kind of colonial understanding was not based on solid ground reality as they had a lack of understanding of the ethnic relationship and historical reality in the region. Thus, the colonial policy of separation had deeply affected the ongoing integration process in the region.

The colonial legacy of isolation and separation has created a problem for integration in the post-colonial period. The Britishers devised the policy of gradual segregation of the tribals and non-tribals, distinction between hills and plains, introduction of 'Inner Line Regulation', creation of 'excluded' or 'partially excluded' areas was responsible for breakdown of centuries-old historical, cultural, social and religious continuum and connectedness¹⁴. This kind of colonial design and misinterpretation of culture and history; the lies of exploitation and hegemony further sharpened and encouraged the divisive trends among various ethnic groups in the region. Thus, the intervention of colonial ruler has disrupted the long process of formation of multi-ethnic society. The intriguing effect of these trends is the gradual disintegration of various communities in the region.

1.5.2. Post-colonial period

The efforts of the post-colonial state towards homogenization and assimilation of different ethnic communities within the composite Assamese nationalism opened the floodgates to a sever torrent of ethno-nationalist movements¹⁵. Despite the fact that there exists distinct culture and tradition among ethnic groups in Assam, they have been living in co-operation and mutual co-existence for many centuries. Of course there exist conflict among ethnic groups in the past, but these conflicts revolve mostly around land and power¹⁶. But in the recent past, the region breaks down surprisingly well by many criteria, with the regions showing strong connections in language, culture, tradition, history, religion and so on. Many groups that had since the late middle ages formed part of composite Assamese society as ethnic castes, more or less loosely integrated, have sought to break away from that identity¹⁷. From idealizing 'unity in diversity' to acknowledging 'troubled diversity' is the trajectory that people accept the notion of 'diversity' in public life that has taken in colonial and post-colonial period¹⁸. Diversity becomes a problem when the inequalities are based on ethnic differences or when groups perceive each other as a threat to their identity. The forceful identity assertion of a dominant community adds the threat and results in an atmosphere of mistrust and fear of domination. The imposition of Assamese language and culture antagonized the elites of minority ethnic groups in the post-independence period. The tribals were no longer wanted to merge with Assamese mainstream; instead, they aspired to preserve their separate identity¹⁹. They were gradually refuse to accept the Assamese language due to the fear of losing their distinct identity. As a result, initially, hill people launched a separatist movement which paved the way for gradual disintegration of the states from Assam in the post-colonial period²⁰.

Since the period of colonial rule, the competition for socio-political and economic spaces was also responsible for the growing hostilities among the ethnic groups. During the Indian nationalist movement, educated Assamese middle class take an active part in the freedom movement and raise voice to the sub-nationalist aspirations of people. However, instead of undertaking positive efforts to remove the prejudices and assimilate the sub-nationalist groups, the leaders of Assam were engaged in forming an Assamese nationalism relied heavily on the anti-Bengali sentiments. The fear of Bengali domination drives the Assamese leaders to overemphasis on the language and immigration issue, and thus there was less emphasis on winning the confidence of tribal people and involves them in the nationalist movement. As a result, certain tribal groups could not fully identify themselves with Assamese culture. In the post-independence period, the Assamese leader's efforts towards the imposition of Assamese hegemony over the tribal groups proved counter-productive, leading to the disintegration of ethnic groups and consolidation of different ethnic identities in the state. As Udayan Misra said, Assamese leaders did little to diminish common fears of tribals of being outnumbered within their own state. As a result, various groups make an effort to construct its 'other' in order to formulate the specific identity. According to H. Srikanth, this ideological construction of 'other' drives the identity politics in Assam. Thus, ethnicity and identity politics has shifted over time and are still evolving in response to rapid socio-political dynamics. The nation-building process that has been initiated in the post-colonial period, aimed at forming a homogenous

Assamese identity²¹, encounter serious resistance from different ethnic groups. Different ethnic groups perceived such kind of attempt as a threat to their distinct identity and thus opposed such move.

Thus, in recent years growing self-consciousness among the ethnic groups in the state has been witnessed which are being manifested in the form of assertion of distinct identity and demands for autonomy. The demands of various ethnic groups for autonomy such as the Bodo autonomy demand, Karbi-Dimasa autonomy demand, Mishing's demands for autonomous Council etc. are some of the reflections of this trend. Many tribes in Assam who were silent in the past, are now taking a militant turn. In fact, some ethnic groups are adopting a racist position of their own. These may result in much unnecessary violence and strife. Thus, in Assam, the ethnic relations are now assuming a new significance. In a society where multiple ethnic groups co-existed since ancient times, the notion of 'identity' and belonging has now become problematic. The things that once regarded as a matter of hurt feelings, conscience, and personal conviction has now become a question of gaining the support of strange peoples. With the increasing politicization of ethnicity, the grievances that had once been of concern primarily to leaders of an ethnic group, they are now becoming matters of vital concern to everyone.

1.6. Roots of Ethnic Tensions: Ethnic Claims and Colonial Legacy

Most of the ethnic groups in Assam did not experience the state formation process in the historical times²². The state formation process experienced by various ethnic group in Assam in the late medieval period only. In fact, most of the ethnic groups were living a sedentary life and they migrated from one place to another in search of food and security. Thus, the exclusive claims for particular territory owned from historical times by ethnic groups found to be far from reality. Demands for exclusive territory in the form of Autonomous Council by various groups in Assam can be exemplified in this regard. For instance, the Karbi-Dimasa clash in Karbi Angling in 2005 were inextricably linked to exclusivist sentiments with territory. Both the tribes were the inhabitants of the competing land since long past. Dimasa, being an ethnic group which experienced state formation process of their own, they had been a politically dominant group in the area despite majority of Karbis. The persistent conflict forced the exodus of the Dimasas to outside areas resulting marginalization and browbeaten in their ancient land. Similarly, the proposed Mishing Autonomous Council(MAC) of Mishings over a large tract in the north bank of the Brahmaputra showing the elements of space-centric identification. This demand of Mishings has arisen resentment among the large non-Mishing population due to the inclusion of non-Mishing villages within the MAC. The Mishings were migratory to Assam from the hills of the present-day Arunachal in the medieval period. Now, their demands for MAC assumed the form of the protest movement in the region. Thus, the historical facts provide some interesting points regarding the exclusive claims of the territory. The historical claims of belonging to a particular territory gradually lead to the creation of a rigid boundary, involving conflicting claims. Historical facts show that the medieval Assam ruled by different kingdoms at different point of time, such as Brahmaputra valley was dominated by Koch and Ahom kingdom. Besides these, there exist a number of principalities throughout the region where territorial boundaries of these units were quite fluid. The fact is a sizeable group of the population belonging to other ethnic origin were lived under the Ahom kingdom or the Koch. Moreover, the Bodo movement which demands divide Assam fifty-fifty could be exemplified under such context. Though Bodo-Kacharis had their small kingdoms and principalities in Assam, yet a large number of them lived outside these principalities. In fact, many of them were the inhabitants under Ahom and Koch kingdom. The present demand of Bodoland claimed a large territory of Assam which they claim as their traditional habitats. While it is true that the Bodos are one of the aboriginal groups of Assam it is also true that many Bodos in today's Assam have been migrant from Nepal, North Bengal and Bhutan continuing up to 20th-century²³. The existence of various non Bodos within their proposed territory adding complexity to the situation. Their claim of historical legacy for an exclusivist territory by ethnic groups adding more complexity to the ethnic relations in a multi-ethnic society.

This trend of conflictual ethnic relations has its root in the creation of arbitrary boundaries by colonial cartography in the region for their administrative convenience. Because the boundaries created by colonial cartography was hardly in conjunction with the flow of lives of the different ethnic groups. Since a long period, various ethnic groups exist and co-exist in Assam and there exists a considerable extent of heterogeneity in terms of presence of various ethnic groups. However, after the colonization of the region, the British rulers created some arbitrary politico-administrative boundaries which were fixed in nature and total disregard of the actual distribution of people. The result of this kind of system was the complete mismatched between the cultural and political boundaries in states. In due course of time, these two factors- the heterogeneous nature of the society

and arbitrary fixation of territory by the colonial regime have constituted a ground for ethnic disintegration and conflict in society. The same trends were continued in the post-colonial period. The leaders that inherited power in Assam from the colonial rulers could not transform the state in accordance with the democratic aspirations of the people, rather they ruled in the same manner to some extent that colonial rulers ruled. After the end of British rule, the post-colonial state immediately initiated the nation-building process. In order to consolidate and legitimize their existence, the state tried to forge a national identity irrespective of the diverse ethnic cultures. This has contributed to the increasing intensity of ethnic identity conflict in the region. Further, the colonial ruler misinterpreted history and culture of the region as well as created the myths of race²⁴. They invented the myth of core-fringe conflict which lead to the development of a sense of isolation among ethnic groups. According to B.B. Kumar²⁵, this tradition of the colonial ruler was parroted and over-emphasized by the Indian historians and ethnographers. Moreover, the creation of arbitrary boundary between the hills and the plains through Inner Line Regulation in as early as 1973 is the reflection of ignorance of colonial historiography regarding the age-old links between the hills and the plains of the region. The colonial ruler defined the identity of the ethnic groups in the region in terms of fixed habitants²⁶. The main reason for this space-centric identification of ethnic group by the colonial ruler is to make their administrative system convenient to run. Thus, the idea of 'exclusive' ethnic boundary was the product of colonial legacy. Prior to the emergence of nation-state idea, ethnic groups belonging to the same linguistic or racial background used to live in diverse territories. The colonial system of typecasting ethnic identities with specific territories had made a disjunctive effect on the traditional system of inter-ethnic relations and the situation snowballed from mutual co-existence to that of exclusivist identity. In fact, the colonial system of 'Excluded Area', 'Partially Excluded Area' and 'Inner Line Regulation' made a profound impact on ethnic polarization. The continuation of the same damaging policy by the post-colonial state system leads to the result that colonial vision of spatialization of identities has caught the vision of contemporary exclusivist ethnic homeland movements²⁷.

Thus, an important reason for the spread of inter-ethnic conflict and violence in Assam was the division and weakening of the sense of ethnic belonging generated by an arbitrary barrier and the myth of race. The racist interpretation by colonial ruler created divisions in Indian society. For instance, Edward Gait in his, 'A History of Assam' has provided a racist interpretation in terms of Aryan and Non-Aryan dichotomy²⁸. Apart from fabricating and reinforcing the myth of race, the colonial scholar over-emphasized the migration of races²⁹. Their perception was that Indian land masses was empty till the arrival of the Austric, Dravidian and Aryan and thus pointed out that only the Indo-Mongoloid people were the immigrants. According to B.B. Kumar, this was just absurd and mischievous proposition. It is interesting to note that prior to the state formation process, ethnic groups were migrated from one place to another in search of food and security. With the process of nation-building and creation of space-centric boundary in the colonial and post-colonial period, this process of migration or assimilation was hampered. The ethnic groups were forced to confine themselves within a particular boundary or territory. Moreover, colonial ruler patronized immigration to a particular area for the economic benefits. This type of colonial policy creates a complex ethnic problem with various consequences in the post-colonial period. Many older ethnic group turned minority in their old habitats and find themselves in competition with the newly settled groups. In order to protect their way of life and reap economic benefits, they started demanding their old territory as their ethnic homeland. Because their presence as a minority group within an area having fixed kind of boundary makes them vulnerable to disadvantaged and marginalized. Thus, apparently, the current trend of complex ethnic relations which are pressing conflicts in Assam has been the consequence of conflicting ethnic claims as well as colonial policies.

1.7. Concluding Remarks

An attempt has been made in this paper to understand how the concept of ethnic identity and territorial belongingness has played a dominating role in the politics of integration and disintegration in Assam. It also illustrated how the colonial ruler set the blueprint for identity divisions in Assam that have been aggravated by the politics of reward in the post-colonial period. Thus, ethnic tension is shown to be a consequence of a lingering identity problem, aggravated by colonial policy and elite manipulation based on their complex historical relations, conflicting claims as well as equivocal responses of the state. The continued manipulation of historical events and policies of the state towards ethnic groups intensified ethnic tensions in the state. Further, this paper has argued that ethnic conflicts in Assam have emerged due to the imposition of the arbitrary territorial barrier by colonial ruler that led to initial identity tensions. Of course, there was conflict between ethnic groups in the pre-

colonial period also. But in the post-colonial period, the resurgence of ethnicity in Assam witnessed with unexpected consequences of hatred, division and conflict raised the questions of colonial policies. The arbitrary lumping of different territories together by the British ruler for their administrative convenience in the North-eastern part of India led to the interminable conflicts in the post-colonial period. After independence, the Indian state decided to maintain the inherited colonial boundary. Although the post-independence state tried to structure their polity and society concerning the concept of the nation with severe implications for different ethnic groups, this structure failed to satisfy the aspirations of all the ethnic groups. In fact, post-independence Indian state were unable to establish a political structure which reflected the diversity of the society. Thus, the autonomous and secessionist demands of various ethnic groups in today's Assam were rooted in the failure to grapple with the challenge of nation-building process. Assam has not been able to overcome the challenges of ethnic identity issue even today that underpinned the ethnic tension and conflict. Many ethnic groups are now in the process of dissociating itself from the larger Assamese society and aspiring to create its own ethnic space denying others the right to exist. This trend of ethnic identification creating conducive condition for ethnic conflict in a multi-ethnic society. This process of exclusive ethnic identification requires a fresh academic perspective.

Analysis of contemporary ethnic conflicts, especially, in the post-colonial period has pointed towards more complex reasons like uneven distribution of resources and unequal sharing of power within political systems and the dynamism of ethnic relations. Thus, a holistic framework that takes cognisance of the legacy of colonialism, the post-colonial developments of political structure, the dynamism of ethnic relations, and its attendant effects on the larger Assamese society should be considered. The nature of identity-based conflicts calls for greater attention to political and the economic causes of identity construction and mobilisation, as well as to the crises that intensified conflicts. These conflicts and tension are closely related to the nature and role of the state. In other words, the deep-seated antagonism among ethnic groups that arising from deliberate state policy which marginalizes and alienates minority groups in the state are generates conflict. As long as this socio-political and economic inequality remains in the body politic of the state, identity conflict will continue to manifest. The prevention and resolution of ethnic identity conflict must be linked to the underlying causes of those conflicts. Any attempt to neglect the root causes of conflict will amount to entrenching more violence in the society. The damage done by the colonial structure and past policies of the state now cannot be undone, but such insights will be helpful in defining the goal of ethnic considerations as well as the response of the nationalists towards ethnic demands. It is high time to readdress the ethnic conflicts not merely as a contemporary phenomenon, but need to recognize as the symptoms of a serious disease that was developed during the colonial period.

Notes and References:

- ¹ Rothbarth, D. and Cherubin, R.(2009) "Causation as a Core Concept in Conflict Analysis," In J. Dennis and D. Sandole(Eds), Handbook of Conflict Analysis and Resolution (pp 59-70) New York: Routledge.
- ² Horowitz, D.L. (1985) Ethnic Groups in Conflict. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- ³ Eller, J.D. (1997) "Ethnicity, Culture and the "The Past", Michigan Quarterly Review, 36: pp-552.
- ⁴ Conner W. (1996) "A Nation is Nation, is a State, is an Ethnic Group". In J. Hutchinson. and A.D. Smith (Eds) Nationalism (pp 36) Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- ⁵ Kelman, H. (2007) "Social-Psychological Dimensions of International Conflict," In I. W. Zartman (Eds) Peacemaking in International Conflict: Methods and Techniques (pp 64-65) Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace.
- ⁶ Goswami, Sandhya (2015) Troubled Diversity. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- ⁷ Vinod K. Jairath (2006) "Homogenization of Shared Spaces: Interrogating Celebration of Differences," In M.N. Karna (Eds) Democracy, Pluralism and Conflict, ed. M.N. Karna, New Delhi: Rawat Publications.
- ⁸ Patgiri, Rubul (2013) "Nation-Building Process and The Question of Ethnicity in Postcolonial Assam." PhD Thesis, Dibrugarh University. pp-172.
- ⁹ Pathak, Ramesh(2008) Asomiya Bhaxar Itihas. Guwahati: Ashok book stall.
- ¹⁰ Patowary, K. (2014) Bhakti Movement and Sankardev. Retrieved from <http://singerkalpana.blogspot.com/2014/06/assam-bhakti-movement-and-sankardev.html>

- ¹¹ ekasaran nam dharma literally meaning shelter-in-One religion' is a panentheistic form of Hinduism propagated by Srimanta Sankardeva in the 15th century which rejects Vedic and other esoteric rites of worship and replaces them by a simplified form which requires just uttering the name of God.
- ¹² Mahanta, P. (2009) *Axomiya Madhyabitto Shrenir Itihas*. Guwahati: Lawyer's Bookstall.
- ¹³ Gohain, Hiren (2004) *Axomor Jatiya Jibonat Sangati and Sanghat*. Guwahati.
- ¹⁴ Kumar, B.B. (2007) *Problems of Ethnicity in the North-East India*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company.
- ¹⁵ Pahi Saikia, Pahi (2011) *Ethnic Mobilization and Violence in Northeast India*. New Delhi: Routledge.
- ¹⁶ Ryngnga, P.K. (2013) "Ethnic Tensions and Community Conflicts in North-East India: A Challenge to India's Integrity and Unity". In Kousar J. Azam(Eds) *Conflicting Ethnicities: Locating the Local in the Global* (pp 133) New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors.
- ¹⁷ Gohain, Hiren (2008) "Once More on Ethnicity and the North-East", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 43 (21): 18-21.
- ¹⁸ Vinod K. Jairath (2006) "Homogenization of Shared Spaces: Interrogating "Celebration of Differences". In M.N. Karna (Eds) *Democracy, Pluralism and Conflict*. New Delhi: Rawat Publications.
- ¹⁹ Gohain, Hiren(1997) "Ethnic Unrest in the North-East", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 32 : 18-21.
- ²⁰ Goswami, Sandhya "Ethnic Conflict in Assam", *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 62 : 123-137.
- ²¹ Patgiri, Rubul (2013): "Nation-Building Process and The Question of Ethnicity in Postcolonial Assam," *OP. Cit.* 170
- ²² Sharma, Chandan kr.(2008) "Nationalism, Ethnicity, Collective Rights and North East India." *Souvenir, North East India History Association 29th Session*. pp-214
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ B.B. Kumar (2011) "Alienation and Insurgencies in Northeast India". In Madhu Rajput (Eds) *Understanding Northeast India: Cultural Diversities, Insurgency and Identities* (pp-128) New Delhi: Manak Publications Pvt. Ltd.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*
- ²⁶ Baruah, Sanjib (2008) "Territoriality, Indigeneity and Rights in Northeast India." *Economic and Political Weekly*, _43: 15-19.
- ²⁷ Sharma, Chandan kr, (2008): "Nationalism, Ethnicity, Collective Rights and North East India", *OP. Cit.*, 219.
- ²⁸ Gait, Edward (1994) *A History of Assam*, Reprint, Guwahati: EHB Publishers. Pp-11-14
- ²⁹ Kumar, B.B. (2011): "Alienation and Insurgencies in Northeast India," *Op. Cit.*, pp-131