

POLITICS OF ETHNIC IDENTITY IN ASSAM: A STUDY OF TAI AHOMS

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Abstract

Quest for identity of self and one's own ethnic group is a natural human behaviour. The identity assertion of the different ethnic groups has emerged as a strong force in Assam through which different ethnic groups try to fulfil their aspirations, demands, rights and to protect ancestral soil or ethnic homeland, safeguard and maintain their distinct ethnic identity. The ethnic group Tai Ahoms of Assam has been asserting their ethnic identity more than a century old today. The Ahoms who once ruled over Assam seek to maintain their distinct identity within the larger Assamese society. With the growth of their numerical strength, and democratisation of political system and universalisation of education, there emerged educated elite among the Tai Ahoms who realised their backwardness and underdeveloped. As a measure to solve their multifold and multifaceted demands, the ethnic group Tai Ahoms have been struggling through their organisations. The Ahom elites, with the growing consciousness and organisational strength began to urge upon the government to fulfil their demands in a bid to establish their community in to a rightful place in the contemporary socio-economic scenario of state. As a means of maintaining distinct identity, they demanded the constitutional safeguards of their distinct ethnic identity. The present study, intends to understand the historical roots of Tai Ahoms ethnic identity struggle and role of different organizations in the construction of ethnic identity of the Tai Ahoms in Assam.

Key Words: Constitutional Safeguards, Democratisation, Ethnic identity, Identity Assertion, Political System.

I.Introduction:

Quest for own identity is a universal political character of every ethnic groups found in every nation-state. The ethnic groups are struggling in all over the world against their states for legitimate share of political power, lingo-cultural rights, self-government, control over resources and territorial factors. This fighting of ethnic groups against their states is a common political feature irrespective of developed, developing and under developed states, democratic and non-democratic states. Whatever may be the reason, conflicts and movements based on ethnic identity are increasing throughout the world and forces are felt more in multi-ethnic and multicultural societies like India. Since its independence, India has been facing the crisis and troubles based on language, religion and ethnic/caste identity. Far from satisfying the regional aspirations, the lop-sided socio-economic growth and complexity of India's nationality formation process have given birth to more ethnic demands. One region in India which has witnessed such a trend and is most complicated in terms of ethnic demands for self and autonomy has been the northeast region of India. The region has been very sensitive and conflict ridden due to the growing consciousness and assertion of distinct ethno-cultural identity of numerous ethnic groups. The cultural fabric and the demographic pattern of northeast India have always provided a congenial atmosphere for the growth of ethnicity and identity politics of the region. It is found that the process of identity formation becomes very active in those areas where multi-ethnic groups exist with in a political boundary. North East India is the homeland of numerous ethnic groups living in the plains as well as in the hills. Each ethnic group has its own culture, heritage, tradition, history, literature (oral or written) and identity. The identity assertion of various groups have been articulated through language, culture, religion, caste and it has been marked that there are variation in the degree of assertion among them. Northeast India became a hotspot of number of ethnic movements, extremist activities and identity assertions for homeland, autonomy, secessionism etc.

During the past, the environment of mutual understanding and co-operation was primarily dominating the various ethnic groups. But gradually due to the forceful assertion of Assamese nationalism upon the indigenous tribes and rise of the question of rights upon the natural resources of their homeland and impact of globalisation and modernity bring a gap of communication and mutual understanding among various ethnic groups. The unequal treatment of the centre and unsatisfactory results of development schemes of the government are the primary allegations of the ethnic communities of the region. Thus, some of them have

been struggling for special treatment such as recognition of Schedule Tribe status and some other have been stressing for Autonomous Council under the Sixth Scheduled of the Indian Constitution for preserving their respective identities and all round development. As a means of maintaining their ethnic identity some of them have even demanded separate state on the basis of their respective ethno-cultural identity within the Indian union.

Assam, being a major part of Northeast India has been experienced a number of such movements of such nature over several decades. In many respects, Assam is a miniature India with different national, ethnic, religious, linguistic and tribal groups living together in the region. It was never a monolingual or single nationality region at any point of time. The population of Assam is a broad intermixture of Mongolian, Indo Burmese, Indo-Iranian and Aryan races. Many tribal, racial, ethnic and caste groups have composed the greater Assamese society and there began a process of socio-cultural fusion among them. The ethnic communities of Assam, who used to view themselves as integral part of Assamese society, are now following a familiar pattern of cultural revivalism manifested itself in the demands for political autonomy, protection of linguistic and cultural identity and preferential treatment in employment. The reasons behind such ethnic uprising lie in the differentiated socio-economic and political status between the caste Hindus and non-caste people of Assam. The caste Hindu became politically powerful, economically dominant and socially advanced in comparison to other ethnic groups of Assam. As a result, the other ethnic groups of Assam society remained economically, socially, culturally and politically much more backward than the Assamese caste Hindus. The identity assertion of the different ethnic groups has emerged as a strong force in Assam through which different ethnic groups try to fulfil their aspirations, demands, rights and to protect ancestral soil or ethnic homeland, safeguard and maintain their distinct ethnic identity as well as want to create a political space for all round development for themselves within the existing polity. In Assam the Bodos, Karbis and Dimasas wanted separate states through over ground movements as well as insurgency. Karbis have been granted an autonomous state council and Dimasas have been granted autonomy under District Councils while Bodos were recently given Autonomous Council. The other tribes like the Rabhas, Hasong, Tiwa, Mising, Sonowal Kachari, Thangal Kachari and Deuris have been granted autonomous district councils to satisfy their autonomy aspirations. There are demands from other ethnic groups like the Konch, Ahom, Moran, Mattok, Chutia and the various ex-tea plantation labour populations for the grant of Scheduled Tribes status as well.

The Tai Ahom is one of such ethnic groups of Assam who has been asserting their ethnic identity throughout colonial periods to today onwards. The Tai Ahoms have own

culture, tradition, religion, language etc; thus forming a distinct community in Assam. Infected, they don't want to merge their culture completely with the dominant Assamese caste Hindu culture and for this purpose, they want to preserve their customs, tradition, religion and language etc. As a means of maintaining distinct identity, they demanded the constitutional safeguards of their distinct ethnic identity. The Ahom elites, with the growing consciousness and organisational strength began to urge upon the government to fulfil their demands in a bid to establish their community in to a rightful place in the contemporary socio-economic scenario of state. More importantly the Ahoms, who made immense contribution in the formation of greater Assamese society, have been struggling for maintaining distinct Ahom identity. The Tai Ahoms of Assam have been struggling to place their community at par with other forward section of population. For this purpose the Tai Ahoms believed that certain constitutional status as indispensable. They concerned with the demands such as introduction of Tai language, preservation and protection of historical monuments, Scheduled tribes status and even creation of an autonomous state comprising the upper Assam districts etc.

II. Theoretical perspective of the Concepts:

Identity whether of individual or communities is not a rigid or static phenomenon. Identity is a complex, multilayered and multidimensional structure, which involves self-identification as well as ascription by others. The great liberal tradition would recognize human being as human being and all other identities as socially constructed and obviously transient. The process of identity formation has important cognitive, affective and volitional dimensions and is significantly influenced by changing situational contexts. Politics of identity is generally understood as a phenomenon which leads to a counter movement to protest against oppression and injustice that is met out to various communities on the basis of their racial, religious, cultural, gender or ethnic identity. Among different forms of identity politics, politics of identity based on ethnicity is one of most serious kind. The primordialists see the ethnic identity as being grounded in primordial characteristics or attachments deriving from place of birth, kinship relationship, language, race, religion and other such factors and social practices that are natural, fixed and given and that provide a basis for an easy affinity between people from the same background.(Geertz 1967:108-110,128). Instrumentalist, on the other hand, believe ethnic identity as a socially constructed phenomenon and the product of human choices and actions. It is the creation of elites who draw upon, distort, and

sometimes fabricate materials from the cultures of the groups they wish to represent in order to protect their well being or existence or to gain political and economic advantage for their groups as well as for themselves (Paul Brass 1999:8). According to them, the process of ethnic identity formation always involves competition and conflicts among the elites for political power, economic benefits and social status both within and among different ethnic groups. Thus, the two approaches emphasize different factors as responsible for the formation and persistence of ethnicity and ethnic identity movement.

In case of Tai Ahoms, both the approaches bear relevance. Tai Ahoms have been clamouring long to preserve their distinct identity which is rooted in their history, religion, culture, customs and traditions. The apprehension of losing their distinctiveness to the assimilationist force of Assamese nationalism has been, to great extent, responsible for the rise of ethnic identity consciousness among Tai Ahoms. On the other hand, this sense of distinctiveness and belonging of Tai Ahoms was also utilized by the political elites for their self interest and support.

III. Objectives of the Study

To conduct the study following objectives have been formulated.

1. To study the historical roots of ethnic Tai Ahoms in the context of ethnic politics in Assam.
2. To study the role of different Tai Ahoms organisations in organising the identity movement in Assam.

IV. Methodology of the Study:

The study is based on secondary sources. Books, journals, newspapers, reports, memorandums are used for collecting the secondary data. The present Study is covered the Tai Ahoms of Assam and their demand and the role of the organisations in ethnic assertions of Tai Ahoms of Assam.

The study is carried on by following descriptive and analytical method. The analytical approach helps to analysing the various aspects of the study. At the same time, descriptive method is also adopted to have a clear and a thorough vision in this study.

V. Analysis

There are Six Tai families of the Northeast India namely- Ahom, Khamti, Phake, Khamiyang, Aiton, and Turung. The Ahom occupy a rather exceptional position amongst the Tai peoples. The Ahoms, one of the foremost ethnic communities in the North east India are a branch of the Tai or Shan people who migrated from Southeast China to Maulung in upper Myanmar (Burma) from where they passed through the Patkai range and the Naga Hills and entered in to Assam in 1228 A.D. They succeeded in setting up a kingdom in the Brahmaputra valley, which lasted till 1826, when it was overtaken by the British Empire. Their leader Sukapha established a small kingdom in upper Assam entering round Charaideo district with Sivasagar in the South-eastern extremity of the area, as its capital. By 17th century, this small kingdom covered almost the entire Brahmaputra valley excluding Goalpara. By defeating the mighty Mughals in the battle of Saraighat fought near Guwahati in 1671; they consolidated their power as the most powerful state in the entire northeast. The Ahom Kingdom laid the foundations of an Assamese nationality. This kingdom lasted six centuries and could successfully withstand the onslaught of different forces including those of Mughal imperialism. It was the identity of interest regarding driving out the Mughal invaders that largely contributed to the formation of a civil society, a state with a common overlord. It was under these circumstances that a state called Asam or Assam, with a common overlord in the person of the Ahom king and a civil society to be identified as Assamese grew up. From the very beginning of their reign, Ahoms followed a policy of assimilation and peaceful co-existence with the Morans, Mottocks, Barahis, Kachari, Chutiya and other indigenous communities of Assam. The people of the different communities were made part of a greater societal framework. It was the liberal outlook of the Ahoms and their policy of assimilation that formed the bedrock of their political hegemony. It was in this way that the Ahom kings from the time of Sukapha wanted to unify the various tribes and communities of Assam to form an Assamese nation. They were very advanced in culture and literature and for the first times in Assam the Ahoms started writing history. The 1912 census of India enumerated approximately 197,000 people identifying as Ahom in Brahmaputra valley of Assam. According to Tai Ahom National Council of Assam (2007), there are approximately 20,93,299 Ahom peoples live in Assam. At present Sivasagar, charaideo, Jorhat, Golaghat, Dibrugarh, Tinisukia, Lakhimpur and Dhemaji that comprise upper Assam have the

concentration of Ahom population. Tai Ahoms are also found in Lohit District of Arunachal Pradesh.

The consciousness about the distinct identity of the Tai Ahoms of Assam is not a new concept; it is set back from British era. The Tai Ahoms who have their own perceived history of deprivation, backwardness and sufferings in British rule, have started various demands for securing their ethnic identity. The first major articulation of the identity assertion was visible in the constitution of the Ahom Sabha on 13 May, 1893 under the leadership of the noted Assamese litterateur Padmanath Gohain Baruah(who also happened to be first president of the Assam Sahitya Sabha). The other dominant members of the this organisation were Panindra Nath Chetia Gogoi, Padmeswar Gohain Phukan, Krishnananda Gohain Phukon, Ghinaran Gohain Boruah, Kanak Chandra Gogoi etc. All of them were members of the Ahom elite produced by the western system of education. The programmes of the Ahom Sabha must be understand in the light of prevailing political situation when Indian Constitutional development was at its nascent stage, and Indian National Movement was just beginning. Its primary objective was, therefore, to amend a situation in which the Ahoms had fallen. It wanted to give a healing touch to a deep wound that the Ahoms had been suffering. The Ahom Sabha was subsequently renamed as All Assam Ahom Association(AAAA) in 1910. The All Assam Ahom Association was the only articulate organisation in the Brahmaputra valley to fight the election battle against the congress till independence. The All Assam Ahom Association fought the election on the issue of minority status for the Ahoms. These organisations tried to overcome some amount of the social lag by pleading services, reservation of seats in local bodies and provincial legislature. In the event of independence, when the constitution was being framed the Ahom leaders collaborating with other ethnic elite pleaded for adequate constitutional safeguards to preserve and protect their distinct ethnic identities. Gradually, the All Assam Ahom Association merged itself with the congress the leaders of the All Assam Ahom Association soon were disillusioned since they failed to secure the rightful place in the political set up of Assam. Negligence of the state and Union Governments in the maintenance of the Ahom monuments and palaces, large scale destruction of the historical ramparts, government's failure to make necessary arrangements for proper research into the Tai Buranjis and other literature deeply wounded the psyche of the Ahom community and aroused once again their ethnic consciousness. Thereafter, the political articulation of the Ahoms took the form of a demand for a separate federal unit in Assam comprising the then Sibsagar and Lakhimpur districts. The Ahom Tai Mongoliya

Rajya Parishad (ATMRP) which was established in 1967 through merger of several Ahom organisations spearheaded this demand. The Ahom Tai Mongoliya Rajya Parishad (ATMRP) was the first political organisation of the Ahom which demanded a separate state. The Parishad maintained that the problem of political stability in the North Eastern region would find its solution only when Assam was reorganised on a basis acceptable to all sections of its people. The Parishad supported the reorganisation of Assam on Federal basis provided the Sibsagar and Lakhimpur districts were made a federating unit. In 1968, the Ahom Tai Mongoliya Rajya Parishad in its comprehensive memorandum forcefully claimed that the Ahom of Upper Assam have their own culture, language and distinct tradition which need to be preserved and developed. It claimed that the Ahom have a strong desire to save their socio-cultural institutions from political and cultural domination of outsiders. The ATMRP was rechristened as Ujoni Asom Rajya Parishad (UARP) in 1970. It contested the mid-term parliamentary election to the Lok Sabha in 1970 to back up the demand for a separate state. This organisation virtually became extinct after its election alliance with the Janata party in 1970. Besides the basic demand of a separate state, the UARP also made some other demands for socio-economic development of the Ahom Tai Mongoloid people of upper Assam. Some of these demands were, setting up of a refinery in upper Assam, extension of broad gauge railway line upto Dibrugarh, a Board of secondary education for upper Assam, improvement of schools, colleges and other educational institutions of the region, introduction of Tai language in schools, preservation of ancient monuments built by the Ahom kings. Quite a few of these demands have since been fulfilled. But the Parishad did not vigorously pursue its demand for the creation of a separate state. The demand for a separate state has also lost its strength in due course of time. However, the other demands are raised today

The Tai Ahoms of Assam faced a lot of problem after independence in different aspects. Moreover, though once Tai Ahoms ancestors were ruling race but today they have been squarely backward. They have been recognized as one of the Other Backward Classes (OBC) category. The socio economic status is not suitable at all majorities of the Ahoms. With the growth of their numerical strength, and democratisation of political system and universalisation of education, there emerged educated elite among the Tai Ahoms who realised their backwardness and underdeveloped. As a measure to solve their multifold and multifaceted demands, the ethnic group Tai Ahoms have been struggling through their organisations. In present time, All Tai Ahom Student Union (ATASU) founded in 1988 (Formerly All Assam Tai Students Association in 1964) has been very much concerned about

the various problems of Tai Ahoms community. While struggling for the overall development of the Tai Ahom community, rightly or wrongly the All Tai Ahom Student Union has been raising political issues and thus got involved in the politics of the state despite being a non-political organisation. From the very beginning the ATASU had raised a host of demands before the government of the state as well as the centre which were both non-political and political in nature. Some of such demands were to reserve seats for the Tai Ahom Students in higher educational institutions, to recognise Tai language and make it as an elective subject in educational institution, to include the Tai Ahoms in the list of Scheduled Tribes, to census Tai Ahom population separately and to give reservation in the government jobs according to the proportion of the total numerical strength, to reserve those seats of Assam Legislative Assembly where 25 percent or more voters belonged to the Tai Ahom community, to create Legislative Council in Assam on the basis of equal representation of different communities, to create an autonomous region comprising the districts of upper Assam and so on. Now, ATASU is spearheading the demand of the Ahom people for being granted the Scheduled Tribe status to the Tai Ahom people. The ATASU has been using various forums and forms of protest and agitations such as road blockades, bandhs, strikes etc to demand the ST status for the Ahom people in the state. In the year 2007, ATASU has been demanding that the renaming of Assam to Asom be cancelled on the grounds of historical claims that echo the pride of the Ahoms as a potent ethnic group. All these inspire some people of the group to tend to search for an alternative to the label of Assamese. But by and large, the Ahoms are not deviating from what is known as Assam and Assamese culture even though they have a sense of injured pride. Like the All Tai Ahom Student Union, All Assam Tai Ahom Juba Parisahad, Ahom Sena, Tai Ahom National Council, Ahom Students Federation also put forward similar demands now. They argued that since almost all other communities belonging to the Mongoloid stocks had already been included into the Scheduled Tribes list there is every justification for the inclusion of Tai Ahoms into the sixth schedule of the Indian constitution.

Ahoms also became much concerned with their lingo-cultural identity through various lingo-cultural organisations such as The Tai Historical and Cultural Society of Assam (THCSA) in 1955, All Assam Mohan Deodhai Bailung Sanmillon (AAMDBS) in 1962, All Assam Phuralong Sangha (1975), Purbanchal Tai Sahitya Sabha (PTSS) in 1981, Society for Tai Ahom Resurgence (STAR) in 2014, and so on for establishing their community in to a rightful place. These organisations have been pursuing agendas that led to

considerable awakening among the people with regard Ahom revivalism. The methods adopted by these organisations are many and all contributing to the chief cause of creating a definite space for the Tai Ahoms. While doing so they have also been keeping in mind that the development of the socio-cultural traits of the Ahoms would ultimately enrich the composite Assamese culture and society.

The All Assam Mohan Deodhai Bailung Sanmilon (AAMDBS) established in 1962 strongly pleaded for the development of Tai Language and culture. As a measure of maintaining distinct identity they started emphasising more on socio-cultural and linguistic demands in order to generate a sense of identity among the Ahoms. In view of this, the Ahom intellectuals constituted an academic forum under the name and style Tai Historical and Cultural Society of Assam (THCSA) in 1955. The THCSA organised seminars, symposia and talks on Tai Ahom and Tai culture. The THCSA organized a series of talks on the Treaty of Yandabu, 1826 at different parts of Assam. The main substance of the talks was that Assam was never conquered by the British, but she was strongly tagged by the Britishers with the rest of India under the pretext of the treaty. Another literary organisation of Tai Ahom named Ban Ok Pup Lik Mioung Tai (North Eastern Tai Literary Association) was established in 1981 for the promotion of Tai language and literature was equally significant so far as their urge for distinct identity was concerned. They are demanding protection of socio political right of Tai Ahom people. This organisation has also been demand separate census of the Tai Ahom population spreading over the Northeast region of India. That the Tai Ahom population spreading over this North east region be considered, in the true spirit of realisation of these people, has a separate and distinct ethnological and socio cultural group having its own time honoured rituals, language, script and culture. Besides these, Ban Ok Pup Lik Mioung Tai demanded to central government financial and other aids to the Tai Ahom language education and cultural centres in Assam. This organisation is not only to be Tai Ahom Organisation but an organisation of all factions of Tai people such as Tai Phake, Tai Khamti, Tai-Turung etc who are living scattered all over the North-eastern region of India. At present the Ahom and other Tai tribes in Assam are very active in the study of Tai history and language. The government of Assam has a policy to teach the Tai language. A budget has been allocated to hire 200 Tai language teachers for elementary schools in upper Assam. The revival of the Tai language, both spoken and written and promotion of Tai culture has been going on forcefully in the upper Assam area. The spearhead of this movement is the Ban Ok Pup Lik Mung Tai. The Association arranges cultural meetings, researches and publishes

books. Research on Tai History and culture in Assam has significance beyond its academic role. It contributes to the foundations of a new Tai nation in India on an age-old heritage. The Tai people of Assam also constituted a religious forum named the Buddhist Society of Phralong culture (BSPC) in 1963. BSPC tried to popularise religious rites and customs which the priestly class jealously guarded. In the subsequent period however, the BSPC was converted in to another religious organisation: All Assam Phralung Sangha (AAPS) in 1975 with similar objectives. Now it is increasingly felt necessary to popularise the religious traits by performing their traditional rites like Om-Pha, Sai-Pha and Me-Dum Me Phi in an increasing scale. Thus the Ahom elite seek to generate a religious sentiment for the purpose of uniting the community.

However, after a protracted agitation the Ahoms along with Six other ethnic groups- the Matak, Moran, Koch-Rajbangshi, Chutiya, Gorkha, Adivasi, who demanded Autonomous Council status under the framework of the Indian Constitution, were only given Development Council status. For this purpose an amount of Rs.12 corers was provided in the state plan budget of 2008-09. The primary objective was to provide maximum participation of the people belonging to the backward communities for their social, economic, educational, ethnic and cultural advancement. The Development council was intended to provide the people with the opportunity to make their own development plans and execute them. The Tai Ahom Development Council was constituted in 2010 along with 13 other such development councils for different communities in Assam by the Government of Assam under the framework of the Constitution of India (vide govt. notification No. TAD/BC/491/07/120 dared.11/10/2010.). But it needs mention here that the Tai Ahom Development Council did not reflect the hopes and aspirations of the Tai Ahoms populace of Assam. The student union had made it clear that the demand for Scheduled Tribes status and Autonomous council even after the formation of the Tai Ahom Development Council. They wanted constitutional safeguards to basic rights, and ensuring their welfare and development.

VI.Conclusion

Throughout the colonial and post colonial periods, the Ahoms have been asserting their identity for various reasons. Different organisations of Tai Ahom he have been pursuing

agendas that led to considerable awakening among the people with regard Ahom revivalism. The methods adopted by these organisations are many and all contributing to the chief cause of creating a definite space for the Tai Ahoms. The community's demand is not the formation of a development council, but the Tai Ahom Development Council (2010) was formed by the government. Though it is said as a landmark for the identity movement of the community but it serves only a elite group where the necessities of the common people seems to be deprived. Therefore, it can be said that they lives amidst backward in the grounds of economy, political and social aspects. Thus, their demands or aspirations have still remained unfulfilled. As a result, their efforts in this direction are still on.

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