



## **Ethnicity and the Role of Congress Government: A Study at the Historical Juncture of 1980 to 2000 A.D.**

**Mrs. Namita Devi**

Assistant professor, Barbhag College, Kalag, Nalbari, Assam, India

**ABSTRACT :** *Ethnic issues and question of ethnicity is a nineteenth century phenomenon. The growth of ethnic consciousness led to self-determination directed by various factors in different parts of the world according to their own historical background. In contemporary Assam, ethnic issues or complexity of ethnic political assertion has been an overwhelming issue in politics. To understand that complexity with its historical dimension, it is necessary to analyse the role of the government in tackling that issue within the ruling procedure of the country.*

*Ethnic issue is a living issue in Assam politics since the colonial rule passing through a historical dimension. This is an attempt to study the different dimensions of ethnic question of Assam with its basic causes and measuring the performances of the Congress Party as a ruling party of Assam with the analyses of some performances indicators.*

**Keywords:** Congress party, causes, ethnic issue, government, performance.

### **I. Introduction:**

Ethnicity and ethnic consciousness is a nineteenth century phenomenon. The Oxford dictionary defines the term ethnicity as 'relating to a group of people having a common national and cultural tradition'. The term derived from the Greek word 'ethos' which generally means 'nation'. It currently refers to people who thought to have common ancestry and shared a distinctive culture, again the members of an ethnic group are conscious of belonging to an ethnic group may be termed as ethnicity which is further marked by the recognition from others.

In modern times ethnicity emerged a counter effect of encounter and conflict with external groups such as immigrants and indigenous people. From this point ethnicity comes to stand in opposition to 'national' to refer people with distinct cultural identities, who through migration or conquest had become subjects to a



nation or state with a different culture from the mainstream which can be termed as sub-nationalism .[1]

As per the meaning of the term , North East India in general and Assam in particular is a bunch of ethnic groups and by the time becomes one of the most conflicting zone of India. However the term ‘Ethnic’ is not used to denote ethnic groups of India, instead the term tribe is used in the Indian Constitution. The Article 342 of the Indian Constitution simply says that ‘the president of India can specify tribes and tribal community ...to schedule tribes’. The Indian government do not make several criteria to justify the enlistment except tribal language, animism, primitiveness, hunting and gathering, carnivorousness in food habits, naked and semi-naked, fond of drinking and dance’. The North eastern tribes are neither possessed all the enlisted criteria rather they are rich with their unique socio-political culture.

Again the socio-political issues which we can call as ethnic identity issues that evolved in Assam are related to those constitutionally recognised tribes. Here the issue of ethnicity means the issues of various tribal groups which are the living issues of Assam politics as well as the growth of self-determinism among the Assamese people.

As per the census of 1971 and 1991, there were 23 schedule tribes and has increased to 30 in 2011. The increasing lenience towards the political right or autonomy creates the situation of ethnic complexity in Assam since independence.

Ethnic issues with its different dimension has discussed by various researchers from different parameters. Most of the studies are ethnic community oriented and from the standpoint of the aspirationof the ethnic people in a composite or fractional manner i.e. sometimes single community oriented and sometimes spiral analysis on all the ethnic community. Chandan Kumar Sarma [15] analyse the ‘actual character of the much- vouched government initiative towards the tribal development up to the period of 1980. ManirulHussain[12]also gave a picture of the growth of ethnicity by analysing the government initiative towards the development of ethnic community. The Bodo ethnic assertion has been studied by many more writers from the point of historical evolution of



ethnic movement for autonomy assertion. DadulDeuari, Bitasta Das, JaikhlonBasumatari, [7],[8],[4], discussed on the performances of autonomous council as a mechanism for tribal development, ethnic fragmentation of the Bodos, ideological clash with the government of Assam. ParthaPratim Bora [3] discussed the relation between the land and tribes and the process of land alienation of the tribes and also on the grievance and demand of the various tribal organisation from the colonial to post-colonial period for their ethnic assertion. The 'Asom' series of MrinalTalukdar and Kishore Kalita [16] discussed chronologically the ethnic situation of Assam. N. K. Das [9] discussed, how the various brand of identity politics since colonial days have served to create the basis of exclusion groups and suggested pre requisite for distributive justice. SanjibBarua[1] also analysed the situation of ethnicity as ethnic sub-nationalism in Assam with its background and inter-ethnic rift.

However the question of ethnicity bears the continuance of colonial legacy. Therefore a historical study on this very issue during the Congress rule in Assam would help in making the history of the contemporary period and have provide better understanding from the perspective of historical outcome of the issue with the performance of the Congress in tackling that issue.

**II. Objectives of the Study:** The main objective of this research are –

1. To identify the basic point of ethnic assertion in Assam
2. To examine the Congress Government role in accumulating those point of ethnic assertion through historical analyses.

### **III. Methodology:**

The methodology of the study is historical, qualitative and analytical method is used. To find out the basic indicators or points of ethnicity, various secondary data are consulted and to examine the performances in compliance with the indicators of ethnicity, various government documents information and assembly debates report are used as primary data. The data are analysed deductively, i.e. from the elaborate analyses, the results are inferred. The study is historical in nature; thereby cover up a period of 20 years of the political situation



of Assam concentrating on the specific issue of ethnicity. Although Assam is malty- ethnic statewith a variety of ethnic assertion from the separatist to the autonomy demanding groups, the study will specially deal with the autonomy demanding groups with reference of the Bodo, the Tiwa and Karbi and the Mising. The indicators of the ethnic assertion have been framed out from the various demands of the ethnic groups. The performances of the Congress government will be analysed covering the ruling period of the Congress government from 1980 to 2000. The following table showed the ruling tenure of the Congress government in chronological order.

**Table-1: The tenure of Congress government in Assam polices from 1980 to 2000**

Year	Serial no. of Assembly	Chief Minister
1980-81	6 <sup>th</sup> Assembly	AnawaraTaimur
1981-82	-	<b>President Rule</b>
1982	6 <sup>th</sup> Assembly	KeshabGogoi
1982-83	-	President Rule
1983-85	7 <sup>th</sup> Assembly	HiteswarSaikia
1985-90	8 <sup>th</sup> Assembly	Prafulla Kumar Mahanta
1990-91	-	President Rule
1991-96	9 <sup>th</sup> Assembly	HiteswarSaikia/ Bhumidhar Barman
1996-2001	10 <sup>th</sup> Assembly	Pfulla Kumar Mahanta

Source: [www.assamportal.in](http://www.assamportal.in)

#### **IV. Result and Discussion :**

##### *Ethnicity- History and Issues:*

Historically and demographically, Assam is a place of wide ethnic variety. Since the colonial rule the tribes were recognised as marginalised groups from the



administrative point of view. During the colonial period they are treated separately by keeping them within some specific administrative procedure. It was not only for the development of those groups but in the plea of preserving their specific identity of culture and status. Many scholars accused these measure as the policy of segregation [1] which have kept them underdeveloped with the other parts of non-tribal area as well as creates a sentiment of aloofness. This has been regarded as the historical basis of the ethnic assertion of the north eastern states particularly.

The British government introduced some special administrative provision for the protection of the tribal peoples of India to minimise their grievances at the new administrative structure such as—the Frontier Tract Regulation of 1880. The Eastern Bengal Frontier Regulation of 1873 known as Inner Line theory, the scheduled District act of 1974, the declaration of backward tract excluded and Partially excluded tract by the Government of India Act 1919, and 1935 respectively. Again by the Assam Land Revenue Regulation 1886, tribal Belt and Block was formed for the protection of land in tribal areas. Above all, the government of India after independence has incorporated various constitutional safeguard for the development of the tribal community such as—programme with special focus on STs (1951), adoption of *Panchasheel* of the process of Tribal development (1956), opening of multipurpose development blocks for intensified development of STs (1961), introduction of special strategies of Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP), introduction of special strategies of TSP, special central assistance(SCA-1974), poverty elevation programme (1985), setting up of special financial institution and development corporation etc. .A scrutiny on the implementation and outcome of those benefits will reflect the performances of the government. The political assertion of various tribal communities of North East and greater Assam is a long term antiquity. It is almost contemporary with the institutionalised nationalist efforts of the non-tribal community of India. The study on the various ethnic efforts of the tribes of Assam reflects that from 1930 onwards, they were come forward for political self-determination. Initially they are grouped as hill and plain tribes' and later on, they were fragmented into various sections like Bodo, Mising, Karbi, Tiwaetc due to the changing political scenario. Gradually the political ethnic assertion has been diverted to many fold



directions like autonomy within the state, separate political unit from the state and again followed both democratic and extremist military path for the fulfilment of their ideology. Thus ethnicity in Assam took many dimensions till 2000 A.D.

However the pivotal issues of ethnicity during the post-colonial period rounded with some specific points which can be inferred from the memorandum submitted by different ethnic groups before the Indian Government. In January 1929 four memorandums were submitted by a group of plain tribes to the Simon Commission demanding the protection of rich identity and other socio-economic rights [7]. In 1933, the Tribal League demanded protection from the clutches of migration, land revenue policy, reservation of 7 seats in Assam Legislature. In 1946 Karbi tribes demanded a separate district with functional autonomy [6]. The Plain Tribal Council of Assam demanded the rights of the tribal people over their land, resist economic exploitation.

Thus ethnicity in Assam was based on the two important points- (a) land rights of the tribes, (b) development of their community with the others. Performances of Congress Party will rely on ethnic grievances on land and developmental issue.

### **Land policies towards the tribal area:**

The first land policy towards the tribal areas was the introduction of Line System but this did not work properly. However the enquiry committee under Mr. Hockenull recommended the enlargement of the Prohibited areas for the protection of the backward communities. In 1939 the government decided to constitute protected areas inhabited by the tribes. In early 1945 a Para is included in the resolution of land settlement published under no. RD68/44/52 dated 15<sup>th</sup> June 1945 for providing protection of tribal people and other backward classes. [13]

But all the Provision would not be successful 'because of the apathy of government officials and partly because of the weaknesses in the regulations themselves' [5]. Tribal land policy of the Assam government is based on the following Acts—



- (a) The Assam Land and Revenue Regulation 1886 with amendments in 1964 and 1981. By the first amendment 'registration of deed or document evidencing any transaction for acquisition or possession of land by way of transfer, exchange, lease forbidden, if it appears to the registering authority that such transaction of land would be in contravention of this Chapter X'. In 1981, it is again made the provision that 'person cannot acquire rights or title on land by length of possession, if such land is transferred to him in a belt or block in contravention of the provision of the chapter.' [13].
- (b) The Assam tenancy act 1935 with its amendment in 1948, 1953 and 1956.
- (c) The ceiling Act of 1956

***Loopholes and implementation scenario:***

The land policy taken by the Congress government during from 1981 to 1990 were the 'appointment of three more additional Deputy Commissioners (revenue) with specific duties on land revenue matters in the Belt and Block (notification no. RSD36/76/84 dated 30 July 1983). [13]. All the land rules and policies could not prove to be protective for the tribal people of Assam as there are many more loopholes in the policies and well as implementing procedure. In the amendment of the Assam land Regulation Act, the protection for tribal was omitted from the title of the Chapter X. again 'clause 160(2) empowered the government to take decision on which classes of people would get the benefit of protection, thus living elbow room to bureaucracy' [13]. The Para 3 of the 6<sup>th</sup> schedule empowers the state government to acquire any land whether occupied or unoccupied for public purpose.

There are various intensifying factors for the promulgation of land issue for the growth of ethnicity such as the lack of knowledge for land right, lack of proper documentation of land deed, different land laws among the various tribes, and no codification on the customary laws of the tribal keep the land issue for ethnic assertion. So besides enacting special laws for the protection of tribal land, it is the duty of the government to make them aware of about their rights on land as well as educating them in that direction. But no such effort has been seen in all



the government policies of the whole tenure of the Congress rule. They just followed the policy of the allotment of ceiling surplus land and allocation of evicted land. But that too is not in a justifiable way. Again very much land are alienated by the government itself.

In a memorandum dated 30<sup>th</sup> July 1992, the all India Tiwa student union mentioned that 3,256 acres of Tiwa land passed on to non-tribal and other particulars are- Land acquired from Tiwa land holders for reserve forest 24039 acrs, for heavy and small scale industries 1,327acrs and for Tea industries 16,971acrs. By 1990, the total area of the government land under encroachment in all plain district of Assam including of protected belt and blocks is 20995 lakh bighas or 5.81% of the total areas of land, including forest and proposed reserved forest. Approximately 85000 bighas of land in Plain district are cleared from encroachment. This is and very meagre area in comparison with the encroachment areas. [2]

However, the tribal are basically forest dwellers and their lands are mostly based on the common property resources. But the forest policy during the tenure of the Congress rule is not tribal oriented. The forest conservation Act 1981 did not make any provision in the interest of the forest tribal.

Thus it seems clear that in following and implementing the land and forest policy the Assam government under the Congress rule is not so much tribal friendly. Even eviction and allocation of land among the tribal are not satisfactory and for that ethnic alienation is continuing.

### ***Performance in tribal development:***

For enhancing the development process of the Scheduled Tribes (ST), all over India, the National Commission for SC and ST was appointed under Article 339 of the Constitution in 1960. Under the chairmanship of U. N. Dhebar assigned the task of investigating and reporting on the problems of Schedule Tribes. Then after 42 years later another Commission was appointed under DilipShingBhuriya. 'ThePlanning Commission Survey report reveals the developmental picture of the ST people of Assam state. It was estimated that 40.9% of the population of the state is below poverty line in 1993-94. ST families



below poverty line were estimated as 426337 which are about 21% in the State. It is also stated that the state failed in the full utilisation of the Special Central Assistance programme for Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP). The following table shows that. [Dhebar Commission Report]

**Table-2 : Statement showing releases under SCA to TSP and utilization during the plan period of Assam (Rs in Crores).**

Year	Amount released	Expenditure reported	Unspent balance
1992-93	107761	956.61	121
1993-94	1087.57	1038.75	48.82
1994-95	1112.67	1110.27	2.40
1995-96	1545.19	823.80	721.39
1996-97	1524.71	939.89	584.82
1997-98	1460.00	938.11	581.82
1998-99	2089.56	215200	82.44
1999-2000	2443.50	1913.00	530.50

Source: Fourth Report of National Commission for SC/ST. URL- <http://ncsc.nic.in>, retrieved on May 2016.

Again, the TSP outlay funds are not in proportionate to the percentage of the tribal population. However, the Bhuriya Commission recommended that 'all states/UTs should make provision in the divisible component of the Plan outlay for TSP not only in proportion to the ST Population but in a higher proportion to their population percentage in view of their extreme backwardness and their having been deprived of development benefits' [11].



**Table-3: Percentage of ST population and flow of funds from state plan and tribal sub-plan during 1994 to 2000 of Assam (Rs in crores)**

Year	ST population % census 1991	State plan outlay	TSP outlay	% of TSP outlay
1994-95	12.82	978.83	109.75	11.21
1995-96	“	1326.40	147.00	11.08
1996-97	“	1183.74	113.68	9.60
1997-98	“	1192.97	132.65	11.12
1998-99	“	1128.70	108.66	9.62
1999-2000	“	1306.23	126.35	9.67

*Source: Annual Report- Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment.*

But the table shows that, TSP outlay was not proportionate to the ST population. Thus it seems clear that the congress government for the last ruling years from 1991-1996 is not succeeded in implementing the tribal development programme and therefore they also cannot be accredit for minimizing the ethnic assertion by earning the faith of the tribal people.

## **V. Conclusion:**

Assam is historically and demographically an ethnic prone zone. Before independence, the tribal or what today is called as ethnic groups were kept in isolation from the mainstream administrative procedure which has risen up the ethnic political and economic assertion. After independence the government of India had introduced many administrative and developmental provisions to minimise their grievances. But it seems that Congress rule was not proved to be successful enough to implement those provisions as per the directions of the central government although the data reveals a portion of its ruling period. The study on the causes of their failure would further clarify it.

## **References:**

- [1] Barua, Sanjib. (1999). *India against Itself Assam and the Politics of Nationality*. New Delhi, Oxford Publication.



- [2] Bodoland Watch, Chapter V, Retrieved from <http://bodolandwatch.word.press.com>.
- [3] Bora, ParthaPratim. (2014). Development and Marginalisation: Sociological Study of Tribal Land Alienation in Assam. *Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, 2, 78-84.
- [4] Basumatary, Jaikhleng.(2014). Quest for Peace in Assam: A Study of the Bodoland Movement. Retrieved from <http://www.claws.in>
- [5] Benarjee, Nirmalya, (2011). Tribal Land Alienation and Ethnic Conflict: Efficacy of Laws and Policies in BTAD Areas. Retrieved from [www.merc.ac.in](http://www.merc.ac.in).
- [6] Dutta, P. S. (1993). *Autonomy Movement in Assam (Document)*. New Delhi. Omson Publication.
- [7] Deuri, Dadul. (2015).Bodo Movement and Identity Assertion in Assam.Pratidhanithe Eco, 56-62.Retrieved from <http://www.eco.in> .
- [8] Das, Bitasta, (2014).Bodo Movement and situating Identity Assertion in Assam. . *Prgmata: the Journal of Human Science*. 2, 173-184. Retrieved from <http://journal.tumkuruniversity.ac.in> .
- [9] Das, N.K. (2009). Identity Politics and Social Exclusion in India's North East: the Case of Redistributive Justice. *Bangladesh e-Journal of Sociology*. Retrieve form [www.bangladeshsociology.org](http://www.bangladeshsociology.org).
- [10] Department of Education Assam. (1986, 16<sup>th</sup> July), Handbook on Government Land policy.
- [11] Government Of India, (2002-04). Report of the Schedule Areas and Scheduled Tribes Commission. Vol 1.
- [12] HussainManirul, (1987). Tribal Movement for Autonomous State in Assam, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1329-1336.
- [13] Ministry of Revenue, Assam Government, (1990, 11 July). *Land Administration in Protected Belts and Blocks of Assam*.Retrieved from <http://revenue.nic.in>.
- [14] Ministry of Tribal Affairs, (2002-04) Fourth Report of National Commission for SC/St. Retrieved from <http://ncsc.nic.in>.
- [15] Sarma, Chandan Kumar, (2001). Assam Tribal Land Alienation : Government Role. *Economic and Political Weekly*.4791-4795.
- [16] Talukdar, Mrinal&Kalita, Kishore. ( 2014). *Asom*. Guwahati, Nanda Talukdar Foundation.