



Fragmented and Re-Fragmented Homeland of the Bengali Community of South Assam, India

Ms. Amrita Bhowmik

PhD Scholar

Department of Mass Communication
Assam University, Silchar

&

Dr Charvak

Associate Professor

Department of Mass Communication
Assam University, Silchar

***Abstract:** The very existence of Bengali identity in North East India is contentious and complicated. A large tract of the region was part of the ancient or undivided Bengal – original homeland of the Bengali community. Can existence of a community in such areas which were a part of their original homeland be called Diaspora? We shall introduce this problematic of Bengali Diaspora in North East India, through a recollection of the historical process of identity formation and its nuances which have created a Diaspora even in such jurisdictions which were at some point of time not so long ago their original homeland.*

Keyword: Bengali Diaspora, Original homeland, North East India, Sylhet, identity formation.

Introduction

The Indian state of Assam has always been a cultural space with contesting identity. In particular the geographical region in southern Assam has been time and again fragmented and re-fragmented. Especially after the since 1874 this region has been included and excluded from various reign. As a result of this, Bengalis in colonial Assam had to shift their home from one part to other due to several reasons. It so happens that the ‘Diaspora’ community in their host land move to establish their identity and get recognition for themselves. On the other hand, the majority often considers the Diaspora community as a threat to their security.

Objective

This paper would attempt to locate the Bengali community of South Assam, India within this paradigm through retracing the formation of geo-political space and field observations. Has the fragmentation of Bengali homeland has affected the identity of Bengalis? As a result, do they find themselves alienated especially when questions related to their identity emerges?

The Theoretical Premises

The concept of Diaspora relates to such entity of a community which has spread out of their original homeland for some or other reasons. Many communities across the globe, for examples Armenians, Bengalis, Chinese, Greek, Kurds, Tamil to name a few, have such Diaspora. It is observed more recently that Diaspora community in different region face political, economic or socio-cultural cohesion (Walker J. S., 2016) The mobilization of a population from one region or country to the other conceivably happen for pre-dominantly one or many reasons which could be analysed and categorised as economic, political and cultural. However, the outcome of a Diaspora will in any case manifest economic, political and cultural impacts of the original homeland.(Safran, Concepts, Theories, and Challenges of Diaspora: A Panoptic



Approach, 2007)

The societies in almost every nation which has got parted and re-parted are becoming multi-ethnic, multicultural, multiracial and pluralistic as well. Population that migrated from a different land as minorities in a host land and are/were referred to refugees, immigrants, expatriates, asylum seekers. The term Diaspora has evolved from past two decades to be restrictedly used in considerably more ubiquitous, crossing simultaneously from political and academic discourse. The word Diaspora in academia usually has rightly or wrongly come to be applied to almost any population or group living outside their homeland or land of origin. (Walker J. S., 2016)

According to Vijay Mishra there is a “the Diaspora imaginary” which is a state of identification in which we appear likable to ourselves with such an image that represents ‘what we exactly would like to be’. (Safran, Concepts, Theories, and Challenges of Diaspora: A Pantopic Approach, 2007) Diaspora on the other hand has become communalized as people unite to uphold their community and culture even if a section is not migrants to that land. Since the end of second world so many populaces have made shifts that millions of people came to live in countries which is not their birth nation. Diaspora for a nation-state is a lens of viewing reflections of its own past, its own earlier migration patterns, traumatic moments and associated memories of settlement. (Safran, Concepts, Theories, and Challenges of Diaspora: A Pantopic Approach, 2007)

Diaspora can be perceived considering imposing predominance. This creates removals of individuals through subjection, agreement and settlement. Diasporas allude to uprooted populaces who for the most part stay in subordinate situations by laid out set rules of society like racial or subordinate cultural status in host land. (Chiang, 2010) Diaspora creates a representative group that represents a community and personality through their connection to a common land, social customs and shared history uprooting which results into a commitment to social relocation. (Chiang, 2010, p. 8)

The Colonial Past and formation of the geo-political space

Topographically, real South Assam today is the three districts known as Barak Valley and the northern link of this valley known as Dima Hasao and Karbi Anglong districts. Barak valley is marshy lowland with foothills surrounding across was included in the state of Assam in independent India. It covers now within its fold the three southern districts of the state including Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj. The hills of Jaintia, Borail, Manipur, Lushai and Tripura surround the valley with an opening on the north western side. Interestingly this gives a tortoise shape to the valley acquiring the name Kachar which means tortoise in Sanskrit. Moreover, the word Kachha means marshy land.

Before the Army of the British East India Company marched into the then North East India, medieval kingdom of Kamrupa was ruled by the Ahoms. The East India Company came into direct contact with the Ahom kingdom after their acquisition of the *Diwani* of Bengal in 1765. Ahom king Gaurinath Singh sought assistance from the British to curb the *Moamaria* Rebellion (1788). The British East India Company was happy to keep a brigade of their army in Kamrupa thereafter at the cost of Ahom King. (Goswami, 2012)

From 1822, the Burmese King of Ava and King of Kamrupa entered into fresh conflict. In 1824 that turned into a war between the East India Company and the King of Ava. The British East India Company finally entered the scenario on 5th March 1824, when Amherst (Governor-General of India between 1823 and 1828) declared war against the King of Ava and the conflict continued for next two years. Finally, the Company and the King signed the treaty of Yandabo on 24th February 1826, through which the King of Ava was compelled to renounce all his claims and abstained from of ‘all interferences’ to Assam along with its petty states including Cachar



and Jaintia.(Goswami, 2012)

The Brahmaputra valley and other areas were subsequently brought under the rule of British East India Company and a separate Chief Commissionership for the state of Assam was created by a proclamation of the Governor General. The Dimasa Kingdom of Cachar at Barak Valley went under direct Company rule by 1834. (Goswami, 2012)

Cacharis are considered to be one of the aborigines of Brahmaputra as well as Barak Valley. In Goalpara and North Bengal they are similar with Mech community and Bodos. They were known as Timisa to the Ahoms and Kacharis in North Cachar Hills. (Gait, 2013) Earlier *Khachar (sic.)* was likely to be the ancient home of Mech or the prime centre of Mech dynasty and the people belonging to that community in Assam have been called *Khachar*. (Gait, 2013) One thing is clear about the name of the tribe is that they did not get their name after the place as they were known by this name far before a section of that community took over Cachar.(Gait, 2013, p. 300)

On one hand Kacharis were a close allied of Koches and as per language is concerned to Chutiyas, Lalungs and Morans of Brahmaputra valley and to Garo and Tipperas of the Southern Hills.(Gait, 2013, p. 300) According to Fisher the Kacharis of North Cachar believe that they reigned in Kamrupa and their royal family lined their ancestors from Rajas of their country of Ha-Tsung tsa. The reliable information related to their history of is contained in *Buranjis* which mainly deals with history of Assam. The Kachari Kingdom made their extension in thirteenth century towards the southern bank of the Brahmaputra from Dikhu to Kallang and included the valley of Dhansiri and the region that forms North Cachar division. Ibid(Gait, 2013)

In the war that broke in 1536 the Dhansiri River has witnessed two battles in which the Kacharis were victorious in the first battle and were defeated in the latter. After the fight between Detsung and Ahoms in 1536, Detsung fled and then the Kacharis deserted Dimapur and established their kingdom at Maibong. (Gait, 2013)

After the destruction of Dimapur by Ahoms, the Kachari Kings established themselves at Maibong on the bank of River Mahur. The *Bansabali* of Darrang Raja narrates that Kachari king was defeated by Chilarai who the brother of Koch King Bara Narayan is. (Gait, 2013, p. 303) There is a small colony of some people in Cachar district called Dehan and they know to be the descendants of some Koches. They enjoy privilege in the days of Cachari rule. At that time the Kachari king was considered as “Lord of Hidimba” Since that time Hidimba or the Kachari Kings established themselves in Maibong after the destruction of Dimapur by the Ahoms. (Gait, 2013)

It is mentioned in the *Bansabali* of the Darrang Rajas that in between the sixteen century Kachari was defeated by the Chilarai, the brother of Koch King Nar Narayan. Himibo frequently occurred in inscriptions. It seems more likely that Hidimba was an old name of Cachar.(Gait, 2013) at times, the place was included in Tippera kingdom as it was presented by a king of Tippera to a Kachari Raja who married his daughter about 300 years ago(Gait, 2013, p. 304)

Once, Cacharis was having their capital in Dimapur. When King Deshangaraj was the ruler of Dimapur, in the year 1536 he was attacked by Ahoms and he had to leave Dimapur. He only then settled in Maibong and established his kingdom there. In order to protect from enemies, the entire kingdom was surrounded by wall.

Border of Cachar was sometimes extended from Rongpur to Tripura. (Choudhury, 2010) A large portion of Cachar was also under the possession of dynasty of Troipur at times – the ancient Tripura. It is said that around 300 years ago son of Cachar king got the plains of South Cachar as dowry by getting married in Troipur Kingdom. It is also traced that Hailakandi was also under the ownership of Troipur kingdom. (Choudhury, 2010)

The last Kachari King Raja Gobind Chandra was killed in 1830 at Haritkar. British East



India Company then took over his state. On August 14, 1832, Plain part of Cachar got officially added to the British territory with a declaration made by the Governor General. (History of Cachar | Cachar District | Government Of Assam, India, 2018). In 1854 North Cachar was added to the colonial reign and incorporated with Cachar after the death of Senapati Tularam. Cachar was brought under the Chief Commissionership of Assam in 1874 when Bengal was partitioned for the first time to create the map of Assam out of Kamrupa and annexing parts of Bengal namely Goalpara and Sylhet and Cachar with Kamrupa.

During the early period of East India Company in 1765-1782, Sylhet was under the administration of Dhaka. In 1782, Sylhet was turned into a separate administrative unit and Warren Hastings has upgraded Sylhet as a district with a land area of 3800 sq miles and population of 4, 92,945.(Mohanta, 2014) Thereafter, according to Government of India Act 1854, Assam was formed in 1874 including Goalpara, Kamrup, Darang, Nagaon, Sibsagar, Lakhimpur, Garo hills and Cachar district. In 1874, Sylhet was also included in Assam. (Mohanta, 2014) Sylhet was not a part of Assam prior to 1874.

In 1905, Bengal was partitioned second time by the then British Viceroy of India Lord Curzon based on governmental consequences. Assam along with East Bengal was taken together with new capital at Dacca to be governed by a Lieutenant Governor and separated from the remaining part of West Bengal which continued Calcutta as its capital. (Assam, NIC, 2013)

In 1912, East Bengal was re-integrated within the Bengal Presidency. Assam was again put under a Chief Commissioner. The Chief commissionership was promoted to Governors' territory in 1921. (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1998, 2009)

During the Partition of undivided India in 1947, Bengal was fragmented for the third time. Mountbatten's plan declared on 3 June 1947, proposed to a mandate to be taken for the Sylhet area of Assam to conclude whether it ought to stay as Indian region of Assam or go to East Pakistan. The Referendum of Sylhet was declared on 6 July 1947 and the outcome went for consolidation with Pakistan. Assam consequently lost a well-off region causing genuine loss of income. (Goswami, 2012) *During the third partition of Bengal in 1947, four Thanas of former Karimganj Subdivision under Sylhet District were taken under Cachar which was kept under Assam with India while rest of the Sylhet went to East Pakistan.*(Chattapadhyay, 2010)

Islam saint Shah Jalal visited Sylhet in the second decade of 1400 century. (Bhattacharjee, 2018) This brought Islam to this north eastern region of India. Shah Jalal and his disciples have converted the lower castes of the then Sanatan or traditional religion. (Choudhury, 2010)

Field Observations

A small sample of 70 families who had migrated to this region was subjected to Case Study for the purpose of this study. The authors have used snowballing sampling technique. The lived experience of senior most living member from each family was recorded, who had particularly narrated their experiences regarding migration to the researchers represented by the first author. They have migrated due to various reasons like livelihood, education, and most important cause being political situation. There are some people from the first generation of displaced who identifies themselves as East Pakistan born. Again, there are people who present themselves as people coming from a particular regional origin such as Sylhet, Comilla, Dhaka etc. "which are at present part of Independent Bangladesh".

These have resulted into various identities as the region was fragmented again. Some of them who migrated from Sylheti identify themselves as Sylheti. Those whose father have migrated have much longer before partition, identifies themselves as Cachari. Another section of people whose parents although were born in Sylhet but migrated during childhood when Sylhet and Cachar was a part of common nation. They moreover don't have any connection with their



ancestral homeland. All that they heard from their parents are their only possession of knowledge regarding their origin.

As Sylhet shares a large border with undivided Cachar, large of people from Sylhet migrated in Barak Valley. Some people also came from places like Dhaka, Comilla and Mymensingh but most of them came to this region via other places for multiple reasons. It is observed that although their origin is not in Barak Valley, but they are more focused on their present location in relation to their identity. People from Sylheti origin are more rigid about their ancestral identity than the people originating from other parts of present Bangladesh.

Conclusion

In this paper we have only considered the eastern border related fragmentation of Bengal. Since Bengali homeland there has been fragmented and re-fragmented again and again, at least three times apart from certain other overlapping annexation of boundaries, the process resulted into creation of a Diaspora of the Bengali community in the North East of India, spread significantly in Assam and Tripura particularly apart from Meghalaya. Several issues related to identity of the Bengali Diaspora arouse. First of all, most of this region, particularly Assam, present day Meghalaya as well as Tripura was part of their earlier original homeland. The fragmentation and re-fragmentation of that original homeland has left them tagged as migrants in the jurisdiction of their original homeland. It became clear from the case studies that migration has created a complex identity in relation to their fragmented homeland in each and every case, even if originally they remained within the same region of less than 100 km radius after migration.

On other hand, homeland has become an imaginary boundary holding bunch of memories related to an estranged past. The shelter-giving-host-land for them seems as a place which they have now embraced for security.

Considering the geographical history of South Assam, people of Barak Valley belonging to Bengali community had to undergo migration due to various reasons. Sylhet, which was once an important part of Assam, is now a part of the neighbouring nation Bangladesh. Again, the whole of present day Assam along with Sylhet and other districts of the then East Bengal (present Bangladesh) was formed as a new province with Dhaka as its capital for some time in the beginning of the last century by the name East Bengal & Assam.

These inclusions and exclusions of regions within a specific political boundary at different times created a certain degree of uncertainty among the population. Diaspora of the Bengali community due to fragmented and re-fragmentation of homeland are also fragmented according to religion and perceived original homeland in Barak Valley. Especially the large population of Sylheti migrants and their next generation in Barak valley who are Hindu has got an identity of their own in difference with the local Muslims of Barak Valley who did not prefer Pakistan during partition.

The shifting of mass population from their land of origin has led to Diaspora in an imagined homeland of this Bengali Diaspora. The mobilization took place due to various reasons such as political, religious, and economic disharmony. Minorities at large had to leave their house and move to host land for safety and security. Usually, they move to a land where they find a population in large scale belonging to their community.

This multiple fragmentation of the Bengali homeland generated Diaspora of the Bengali community has created different dimension of identity. The newly formed homeland for many who had migrated in, has given them a new life which has again created several aspects of identity. The Bengali speaking populace in South Assam who themselves or their ancestors have migrated are conscious of their Sylheti identity. People who migrated from other regions of present Bangladesh are less expressive about their ancestral identity as observed. In Barak



Valley, there are organizations which held different activities to uphold the identity especially among Sylhetis.

The Diaspora of this Bengali homeland in South Assam has created multiple identities like Cachari, Barak-valley, Silchari, Karimganji etc. among the Bengali speaking populace. After many years of migration, the left behind homeland has become an estranged past and their present home land is becoming the axis of their identity along with a hinge attaching Sylhet somewhere in the background. Drawing and redrawing Political boundary, changing patterns of urbanization within that backdrop and finally Partition, all these have resulted into a continuous migration which has given rise to this Diaspora in particular.

However, Sylheti as culture or language has predominantly created a sense of identity for most of the Bengalis residing in Barak Valley. It is also observed that the second generation people of migrants born in Assam have accepted Barak Valley as their imagined homeland more than Sylhet.



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