

## 2 Ethnicity, Ideology and Religion

The North East is seen as India's 'Mongoloid fringe', where the country begins to look less and less like India and more like the highland societies of South East Asia. Many argue that this racial element makes the North East very different from the rest of the country.<sup>1</sup> One of the last areas of the subcontinent to be conquered by the British, the 'North East' was never part of any trans-Indian empire in ancient or medieval times. Migration from the Indian mainland was limited to preachers and teachers, traders and soldiers of fortune. The mainland's 'Sanskritic' cultural influence touched only Assam, Manipur and Tripura, where the kings adopted variants of Hinduism as the state religion. But these kings also fought back attempts by the Bengal sultans and the Mughals to conquer their territories.

Before the advent of the British, successive waves of Tibeto-Mongoloid tribes and nationalities from north western China, northern Burma and even Thailand and Laos came and occupied various parts of the 'North East'. They fought each other, traded with each other, built small empires, but never allowed the area to be run over and controlled by anyone from the Indian mainland. That uninterrupted freedom for a great length of historical time and the region's racial distinctiveness gave its people a sense of being different from the rest of India.

All of India's major religions are practised here. Christianity dominates the hills; Hinduism and Islam are the major religions in the plains. Animistic faiths and Lamaist sects also thrive both in the

hills and the plains. Assamese and Bengali speakers are the most numerous, but scores of other languages and dialects are spoken. Although ethnicity has dominated the social and political processes in the North East, the region has also been subjected to the complex interplay of ideology and religion before and after 1947. The tangled web of ethnic alignments has continuously influenced the evolution—and ruptures—of generic identities, with both political ideology and religion playing a part.

#### TRIBES, NATIONALITIES, CHANGING IDENTITIES

In parts of the North East, including Assam, Manipur and Tripura, language has sometimes served as the basis for ethnic identity, but often it has not. In the hill regions, the absence of a common language has actually forced evolving generic identities to develop pidgin lingua francas like Nagamese. Political expediency and the constant realignment of ethnic groups have also helped create new identities. The Paites were seen as part of the great Kuki-Chin family of tribes not so long ago. But in their quest for self-assertion, the Paites started projecting themselves as Zomis since the late 1980s, insisting they were not Kukis. When the militias of the Kuki and Naga tribes started fighting each other in the 1990s, the Paite militants sided with the Naga rebels against the Kukis. The Kukis and the Paites, however, speak variants of the same language and have more in common amongst themselves than with the Nagas.

In India's North East, where emphasis on ethnicity has often produced splintered identities, the Paites are a classic case of a break-away identity, of a smaller tribe challenging the larger tribe within a generic formation, fragmenting the process of nationality formation. The withdrawal of the Lais and Maras from a 'Mizo' identity to avoid Lushai domination is a similar case. The reverse process has happened as well. Smaller tribes have identified with a bigger tribal or generic identity for self-preservation during conflict between battling ethnicities. In Manipur, smaller tribes like the Anals have identified with the broader Naga identity, reporting themselves as Nagas in successive censuses. And several tribes in Tripura have grouped themselves into an *Upajati* (literal meaning: tribal) identity just to prevent being subsumed by the dominant Bengali culture.

So while the autonomous councils for the Lais and Maras in Mizoram are coterminous with the boundaries of their ethnic homelands, the autonomous council for the tribals in Tripura covers the entire hill region barring the state's western plains and is called 'Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council'. In such an arrangement, the tribes have not moved towards a generic identity like the 'Naga' or the 'Mizo'—they have retained the distinct identity of the tribe but sought to project a broad tribal unity stressing their ethno-cultural differences from the Bengali settlers. The ruling Manikya dynasty of the state, despite their tribal roots, had accepted Bengali language and culture instead of promoting a generic identity of the tribes. But that's what the tribes of Tripura are now trying to undo—because unless they stress their ethnic difference from the Bengalis, they are likely to be absorbed by the Bengali nationality like the tribes in north Bengal. Even the Koch-Rajbongshis of northern Bengal are in a phase of retribalization, stressing their distinct ethnicity. This upsets the Bengalis who see their assimilation as final. Even senior Marxist politicians from north Bengal like the state's Urban Affairs Minister Asok Bhattacharya are no exception. In a television chatshow anchored by me in February 2006, Bhattacharya referred to the Koch-Rajbongshis as *Amaderi Moto Bangali* (Bengalis like us).

The royal houses of Tripura and Cooch Behar (in North Bengal) consciously adopted Bengali language and culture as the language and the culture of the court—and they expected their tribal subjects to follow. But later generations of tribals, feeling marginalized in their own homeland, began to consciously distance themselves from the dominant Bengali language and culture to preserve their distinctive ethnicity. The over-arching *Upajati* identity served the purpose in Tripura—it did not dilute the distinct tribal identities but it did provide a basis for 'we' and 'other' vis-à-vis the Bengalis. In North Bengal, the *Kamtapuri* identity has been whipped up by tribal movements—both by armed groups and those who follow the path of mass agitation—to fight for a separate state and break away from West Bengal. The *Upajati* identity in Tripura also has a close parallel with the evolution of the *Jumma* identity in the neighbouring Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh. The circumstances were quite similar and the tribes of CHT needed an 'identity shield' against the country's majoritarian assimilationist

drive, best exemplified by Sheikh Mujib-ur-Rehman's advice to Chakma leader Manabendra Narayan Larma in 1972 to *go home and become Bengalis*. Larma and his followers later took the path of armed movement against Bangladesh's successive military-driven governments.

In recent years, all across North East, generic identities that emerged during the last days of colonial rule and consolidated in the early years of the Indian republic have tended to splinterize. The material advantages that follow recognition as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) in India have encouraged retribalization. Reservations—like those for Scheduled Castes—in education and employment, legislatures and parliaments, have often prompted smaller ethnic groups in northeast India to seek recognition as STs. The Deshi Tripuras or the Lashkars in Tripura were happy to be recognized as 'local Bengalis' during princely rule but have subsequently sought recognition as a ST. The Meiteis in Tripura have done the same and their ethnic cousins in Manipur rue at not being able to get the same material benefits that Kukis, Nagas or Zomis tend to enjoy in Manipur.

The Bodos have long been denied the benefit of autonomy because as 'plains tribals' they were not covered by the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution, which provides autonomy to tribal areas. Now that the Indian government has finally signed an agreement with the Bodoland Liberation Tigers Force (BLTF), the Sixth Schedule has been amended to include the Bodoland Territorial Council in western Assam, and the Bodos have begun to enjoy the benefits that the Scheduled Tribes status brings. That has prompted the millions of *Adivasis* in Assam to demand recognition as Scheduled Tribes. Their ancestors were brought to work on the tea gardens of Assam by the British from what is now the state of Bihar, Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh. In those states, their ethnic cousins enjoy ST status—so the *Adivasis* of Assam say they must get it.

Even linguistic preferences in India's North East have often shifted due to political considerations, concealing ethnic and religious divisions. In Assam, the migrant Muslim peasantry of Bengali origin chose to register themselves as Assamese speakers in every census since independence, so that they could assimilate into the local milieu. Unlike the tribal communities or the Bengali Hindus, these Muslims, mostly poor landless peasants, chose assimilation to secure

their economic and political future in an adopted homeland, even when their co-religionists back in East Pakistan were fighting for the Bengali language and culture. And when Hindus of East Bengali origin fought for their linguistic rights in the Barak Valley of southern Assam, these Muslim migrants looked the other way, registering Assamese as their mother tongue in successive censuses.

The Assamese caste-Hindus co-opted these East Bengali Muslims into their fold as *Na-Asamiyas* or neo-Assamese only to ensure that Assamese speakers remained the largest linguistic group in the state. Constantly haunted by the perceived Bengali domination, the Assamese-caste elite were keen to retain the numerical preponderance of Assamese speakers in the state, since linguistic predominance ensures ethnic hegemony. With the support of the *Na-Asamiyas*, Assamese remained the major language in Assam and the caste elite sought to impose it on the Bengali-dominated Barak Valley, leading to the language agitations between 1960 and 1975.

Every year in the Barak Valley, Bengalis observe 19 May as their Language Martyrs Day in the memory of the eleven killed in police firing on that date in 1960. Nineteenth May has become somewhat like 21 February of Bangladesh—a Language Martyrs Day. In recent years, 19 May celebrations in Silchar have been graced by the visits of leading poets, writers and singers from both West Bengal and Bangladesh. The Muslims of Bengali origin in the Brahmaputra Valley, however, have largely stayed away from these celebrations to emphasize their linguistic preferences and have rather used their religious identity as the defining point of 'we' and 'others'.

Physical security and fear of eviction from the land they own are the obvious priorities for the Muslim peasant migrants from the erstwhile eastern Bengal who settled in the Brahmaputra Valley. Unlike their brethren in Bangladesh, West Bengal, Tripura and the Barak Valley, their passion for the Bengali language has been limited to the occasional folk song choirs in the *char* areas (river islands) during the harvest season. But the most popular singer of the *chars*, Aklima Akhtar, emphasizes the *Na-Asamiya* identity when she sings *Ami Charua, Kintu Na hau Bangladeshi, ami Axomiya*. (We are poor *char* dwellers but we are not Bangladeshi, we are Assamese.) *Na-Asamiyas* are richly contributing to contemporary Assamese writing and literature, though most of them continue to speak East Bengali dialects at homes, or within their villages or towns.

Only after these 'East Bengali' Muslims were specifically targeted by the Assamese militant student and youth groups during the bloody riots of 1982–83, did some of them register as Bengali speakers during the 1991 census in what was seen as a return to roots. This led to a fall in the number of Assamese speakers in the last two censuses of 1991 and 2001, but the *Na-Asamiya* identity, bestowed on the Muslim migrants and gratefully accepted by most of them, has not withered away even after the 1982–83 riots and the subsequent violence they have often faced from Assamese vigilante groups. Though the migrants, or at least many of them, now back aggressive minority parties like the Assam United Democratic Front led by Maulana Badruddin Ajmal to protect themselves and seek their piece of the political cake, moderate minority groups such as the Assam Mia Parishad seek minority protection through reconciliation with the Assamese sub-nationalist groups such as the All Assam Students Union (AASU) or the Assam Jatiyotabadi Yuba Chatro Parishad (AJYCP).

The six-year long Assamese movement against 'foreigners' and 'infiltrators' ruptured the ongoing assimilation process of the Muslims of East Bengali origin. The same Assamese who had called them *Na-Asamiyas* were now derisively calling them *Miyas* or 'Bangladeshis' and asking for their expulsion from Assam. The 1982–83 riot during the Assam agitation, of which the high point was the massacre at Nellie (police death-count: 219, press reports: 3300, unofficial sources: 5000), kickstarted a process of minority consolidation for self-preservation that has been reflected in the formation of minority political parties like the United Minorities Forum and now the Assam United Democratic Front. But as the East Bengali Muslims asserted themselves more as Muslims in recent years, the Muslims of Assamese origin (descendants of the Mughals who came to conquer Assam and then settled down in the state) have challenged the *Na-Asamiyas* in the state's minority space by aggressively promoting their *Khilongjia* (indigenous) credentials. The indigenous Assamese Muslims emphasize their roots in Assam not just to prove they are not 'infiltrators' or 'foreigners' but also to challenge the preponderance of the East Bengali Muslims in the state's minority political space.

In recent years, the question of illegal migration from Bangladesh has overshadowed other political issues in Assam. This, along with the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has ensured that the linguistic mobilization of the 1960s has been replaced by the politics

of religious fundamentalism. Bengali Hindus in large numbers throughout Assam have started supporting the BJP and Assamese Hindus have joined them because they feel regional parties like the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) cannot deliver on their promise of deporting illegal migrants (read: Muslim migrants). The AGP-BJP political alliance in the 2001 state assembly elections, engineered by the state's governor, Lieutenant-General S.K. Sinha (retired), marked the high point of this new trend, but it prompted Muslims to group together and vote Congress to victory. The alliance has been renewed again in Assam before the 2009 Lok Sabha elections.

With north Indian migrant communities like the Biharis and the Marwaris supporting the BJP in ever-increasing numbers, the process of religious consolidation has begun to affect the politics of Assam more significantly than ever before. After all, Assam has the second highest percentage of Muslim population among Indian states after Kashmir and the impact of global and national realities on Assam's politics cannot be wished away. This has weakened the support base of Assamese separatism because the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) has been operating from its bases in Bangladesh and its soft stand on the migration issue has not gone down well with Assamese upper-caste Hindus. The ULFA is opposed to the politics of religious fundamentalism, but when it went to the extent of supporting the 'Kashmiri freedom struggle' during the Kargil War, the Assamese saw in it a not-so-subtle attempt to please the ULFA's main external sponsors.

In the pre-British era, the population flow into what is now northeast India originated almost entirely from the east. Closer to the highlands of Burma and south western China than to the power centres of the Indian heartland, this region was exposed to a constant flow of tribes and nationalities belonging to the Tibeto-Burman and the Mon-Khmer stock, one settling down only to be overrun by the subsequent wave. The direction of population flow changed with the advent of the British. The colonial masters brought peasants and agricultural labourers, teachers and clerks from neighbouring Bengal and Bihar to open up Assam's economy. Traders from north India followed. The trickle became a tide, spreading to Tripura, where the Manikya kings offered Bengali farmers *jungle-avadi* or forest clearance leases. The move was intended to popularize settled agriculture in a largely hill state and improve the state's revenues.<sup>2</sup>