

Ethnicity and Nationalism: Some Gleanings from *Mor Sowanrani* by Padmanath Gohain Barooah (1871-1946)

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Abstract

The expression of ethnic consciousness is quite a commonplace experience in Assam. Issues of history, tradition and politics intermingled to form an ideology of ethnic identification. Padmanath Gohain Barooah (1871-1946) was one of the leading pioneers of Assamese language and literature. He tried to generate a distinct social identity for the Assamese people in general and the Ahom ethnic identity in particular. Equipped with modern education and an awareness of their past glory, power and privilege, the Ahoms organized themselves in 1893 to idealize their self-perception and aspirations. Gohain Barooah involved himself actively with the social, political and literary forums of the period. His concern and patronage for the Ahoms is reflected in his autobiography '*Mor Sowanrani*' (1971). This paper proposes to study this revelatory account of Gohain Barooah's life and the agenda behind his literary and social career. The other political forces and cultural factors in Gohain Barooah's social milieu will also be studied in this context.

KeyWords: Life Writing, Social Identity, Nationalism, Ethnicity, Ahom Community

Main Body of the Text

Ethnicity in Assam in the last few decades is concerned with several ethnic assertion movements. But the expression of ethnic feeling is not at all new in this part of the country. It developed initially as a part of identity consciousness or identity assertion

from the late nineteenth century. Identity is a matter of performance in interactional terms[1]. It is produced and reproduced during interaction which is contextual.

In this paper, an attempt shall be made to understand the problems of ethnicity and nationalism as can be found in the memoirs of Padmanath Gohain Barooah. Gohain Barooah comes from a respectable Ahom family from North Lakhimpur. He was the founder president of the *Sodou Asom Sahityik Sanmiloni* (later came to be known as *Asom Sahitya Sabha*) in 1917. He was the first literary pensioner of the state. His autobiography, *Mor Sowanrani* (My Reminiscences) is the revelatory account of his life and the agenda behind his literary and social career. Emphasis will be given on the aspects of ethnic consciousness of the time. The other political forces and cultural factors in Gohain Barooah's social milieu will also be taken note of.

The nineteenth century under colonial dispensation brought about a train of changes in life and culture of the Assamese people. There was political and cultural awakening in the British ruled province. With spread of Christianity and introduction of western model of education, there was considerably increase of literary and educated elites in Assam. The students who went to Calcutta for studies were the harbingers of new ideas. They pioneered the making and spreading of an identity-consciousness among their brethren in Assam. Under the new circumstances, Assamese language and literature acquired a new stage of development. There are enough things to be studied and interpreted from a crop of select lives. The notion of the secular individual, spread of print culture, new conceptions of personal and cultural identity and imperialistic exploration were a few factors giving birth to a new genre of Assamese literature, life writing. John Eakin had his own way of approaching autobiography not only as a literary genre but also as an integral part of a lifelong process of identity formation [2]. A subject while portraying his self-image is very sensitive to his audience. He would consider all its social significance and, therefore, narrate himself as possessing culturally valued characteristics. His conducts would also be told to create his desired impression on others. Identity has been used to refer both to those attributes of an individual that maintain the consistency of his personal presentation in encounters with others and to the 'place' that he occupies in a community [3]. An autobiography by its nature help in understanding the interplay of culture and politics and ethnicity per se. '*Mor Sowanrani*' may, therefore, be considered as a reliable source to trace the origin of ethnic awareness of the Ahoms.

By the end of the nineteenth century, different components of Assamese life and culture were incorporated into the larger discourse of nationalism. Organisations like the Ahom Sabha or later ssthe All Assam Ahom Association tried to mobilise the ethnic communities of the region among themselves. The motive behind was more of identity formation than of any political nature. The organisational focus on non-political issues was augmented by the social condition of the day. This sentiment was close to ethnonationalism. Walker Connor used the term 'ethnonationalism' to denote identification with and loyalty to one's nation [4]. He meant by nation a group of people who believe they are ancestrally related. Ethnonationalism does not refer to loyalty to one's country or state. Dictionary defines state as 'a legal concept describing a social group that occupies a defined territory and is organized under common political institutions and an effective government.'[5] On the other way, a

nation is defined as 'a social group which shares a common ideology, common institutions and customs, and a sense of homogeneity.'

Until the past few decades, the Indian masses mostly rural and illiterate were unaware of national sentiment. The early Indian nationalists took years of deliberate efforts to extend their notion of nation to the masses. They utilised their linguistic and cultural resources to build up a feeling of pan-Indian nationalism. Nationalism is a rhetoric for speaking about too many different things for a single theory to explain it [6]. Linguistic affiliation, common cultural heritage and shared ethnic components were rhetorically constructed as nationalism. There are historical and local dimensions of nationalism and hence it is connected with ethnicity. Acquaintance with Indian nationalism generated in Assam concepts of ethnic and cultural identity. Llobera also observes, a reservoir of ethnic potential is necessary precondition of nationhood [7].

The ground for self-assertion or Assamese patriotism was prepared in the face of dominating central political power. In 1836, Bengali was introduced in local schools and law courts replacing Assamese which was not thought of an independent language. In its reaction Assamese consciousness emerged through the pioneering activities of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan (1829-59), Hemchandra Baruwa(1835-96) and Gunabhiram Baroah(1834-94) in addition to the efforts of the American Missionaries. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan offered strong arguments in favour of Assamese language. Hemchandra Baroah prepared the first dictionary in Assamese. Gunabhiram Baroah wrote a history of Assam, *Assam Buranji* in 1884 to inspire a feeling of pride among the people. After these efforts, Assamese was recognized as the official language for Assam in 1873. The new class of educated people had passionate attachment for their mother tongue. Chandrakumar Agarwala(1867-1938), Lakshminath Bezbaroah (1868-1938) and Hemchandra Goswami(1872-1928) were the first group of Assamese students studying in Calcutta who had the zeal to found the *Asamiya Bhasha Unnati Sadhini Sabha*, (the Assamese language improvement society) in 1888. A literary magazine, *Jonaki*, (1889) was also brought out in this connection. This consciousness was partly a part of a resistance to the process of cultural subordination of Assamese and partly a part of past heritage being revived and revisited. This articulation of regional identities was no way exception in the Assamese literature. It was common to be seen in various Indian language literatures from the nineteenth century. Padmanath Gohain Barooah was one among those leading youths in Calcutta. His endeavour to place Assamese language in an esteemed position is well recorded in the history of Assamese literature. His concern and patronage for his own Ahom community is reflected in his '*Mor Sowanrani*'. He reminisced about the worth of his stay in Calcutta, the city that he called the ideal place of the world. There he could imbibe deep sense of love and respect for his mother land as well as his mother tongue. With their new ideas and a new emerging world-view, the Assamese student generation of those days appreciated social transformation. In his first year in Calcutta itself, the annual session of the Indian National Congress was held in Calcutta. Gohain Barooah's acquaintance with Sir Surendranath Banerjee inspired the formation of a group of Congress volunteers from among the Calcutta residing Assamese students. After returning to his native land, Gohain Barooah thought out to consolidate his patriotism. In Sibsagar, he followed

and received help from Dinanath Bezbaroah, Jagannath Baroah, Gangagobinda Phukan among a few others. With all good intentions, the *Asamiya Jatiya Unnati Sadhini Sabha* was established to work for the all round development of Assam. Gohain Barooah was greatly disturbed by the plight of the Ahom Community. Once a mighty ruling community, the Ahoms were reduced to a lowly status. He made a very poignant statement about it.

The Mau branch of the Tai founded the Ahom kingdom of Assam in 1228 A.D. and was henceforth styled as Ahom in this country [8]. The Ahoms are credited for their ability to sustain the longest period of dynastic rule in the Indian sub-continent. Assam came under the British in 1826 following the terms of the treaty of Yandaboo. The Ahom king who ruled the Brahmaputra valley for several centuries disappeared. The *paik* system which had been the socio-economic order behind their efficient administration faced with extinction. The Ahom gentry lost their importance. They were gradually sidelined from polity. The British built up a new system of administration with its paraphernalia. . The old royal aristocracy was deprived of everything. The deplorable condition of the erstwhile ruling race was recorded by the historians of medieval Assam. It was noted by W. W. Hunter, 'They(Ahoms) are a strong and healthy race, and although the country and they have freely intermixed with the people of the land they yet retain many of their ancient habits and institutions. They have now sunk to the level of poor cultivators.' [9]. Purandar Singha and his successive Ahom kings made repeated representations to the British government asking for some concessions to ameliorate the situation but there was no adequate positive response. On the contrary, the Ahoms were not taken for recruitment into the good ranks in the administration. Jobs in the government establishments were filled by recruits from outside Assam. The labourers for the tea gardens were also brought from the other provinces. The government's policy deprived the Ahom community from any sort of benefit of the new economic order. Their social status also deteriorated. Educationally they lagged behind the caste Hindus. The affluent communities under the new regime could not appreciate the positive traits of Ahoms. There were grievances and stray attempts of resistance against the colonial rulers, but none could succeed against them. Behind it was the economic motive in the face of employment scarcity for the newly educated people of the land. The Ahoms were a constituent of the great Mongoloid stock. They also had a territorial identity. Besides having an identity of community and locality, the Ahoms had common cultural stuff in way of tradition, customs and social norms. All these made for a strong ethnic identity. Gohain Barooah's association with Padmeshwar Gohainphukan and other leading personalities of the community helped him to form the *Ahom Sabha* in 1893. This is the beginning of the mobilisation of the Ahoms on ethnic line. They spoke of the glories of the Ahoms in the past and their degrading condition . This injured their sense of self esteem. Padmanath Gohain Barooah involved himself actively with the social, political and literary fora of his time. The *Ahom Sabha* was later known as the Ahom Association in the style of the Assam Association. Gohain Barooah insisted that he was as much Ahom as he was an Assamese. Ethnic identifications and their expressions were in parallel line with nationalism. The regional consciousness could be described as national consciousness

but it did never contradict Indian nationalism. A number of material and ideological factors combined to bring in national and communal identities. These collective identities were found in a relationship of coexistence and confrontation [10]. There was no tension between intense regionalism and a wider nationalism. Initially the representative leaders of ethnic-roots identified themselves with the larger Assamese society [11]. In his own way, Gohain Barooah said that of the sixteen *anna* rupee, he was a two *anna* Ahom and a fourteen *anna* Assamese. He asserted that his identity and commitment to his community is total but never at the cost of any harm to his identity as an Assamese. With such a bent of mind, he made manifold public services. He worked for organisations like the *Asamiya Bhasha Unnati Sadhini Sabha*, the All Assam Ahom Association, the Assam Association, the *Asom Sahitya Sabha*, the *Asom Chatra Sanmiloni*, the Tezpur Assamese Club and the Indian National Congress . In 1912, Gohain Barooah was appointed a member of the Assam Legislative Council as a representative of the Ahom Community. He proved himself in the floor of the legislative council. He records in *Mor Sowanrani* that his maiden speech in the council was appreciated by one and all. Because as an organiser of the Ahom Sabha, he not only spoke for the Ahom community but he spoke for the larger interest of the people of Assam.

Issues of history, tradition and politics intermingled to form an ideology of ethnic identification. Ethnicity can be understood as the social organization of cultural difference as was originally proposed by Fredrik Barth [12]. Barth observed that ethnic identity is something to be generated or transformed through interaction between decision-making individuals. There is no fixity in ethnicity, it is situational. It involves political manoeuvring. One should acknowledge that any kind of national or ethnic consciousness is a mass phenomenon. The definition by Clifford Geertz on ethnicity is a world of personal identity collectively ratified and publicly expressed [13]. It also hinted something of wider than a group decision. Ethnic membership does not constitute a group as such, it only facilitates group formation of any kind, particularly in the political sphere. Ethnic categorization can be meant the identification of others in contrast to self and group identification [14]. Though politically motivated, the Ahom community was organized and inspired by their common cultural heritage and ethnicity. This suggests that belief in common ancestry is a consequence of collective political action.

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