

Volume XIX ■ Issue 1 ■ January 2022

ISSN:0975-4016

Published in July 2022

SOCIAL CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT

Journal of OKD Institute of Social Change and Development

Book Review

The Muslim Question in Assam and Northeast India

The Muslim Question in Assam and Northeast India, by Manoj Kumar Nath,
Routledge, Oxon, New York, 2022, Pages-191

Bhupen Sarmah¹

Sustained academic engagement of Manoj Kumar Nath with what he has perceived as “Muslim Politics in Assam” is evident from his number of publications including the recent one - *The Muslim Question in Assam and Northeast India*. The primary concern here is to comprehend how have the Muslims been responding to the dynamics of the post-colonial electoral politics of Assam. Specifically in the context of the Brahmaputra Valley, though the community is divided into at least two distinct cultural identities, its role in the electoral politics is significant for its constantly growing numerical strength especially since the beginning of the last century. Inevitably, the author reiterates the historical process of immigration and the consequent demographic change. The Muslims in Assam, despite being a culturally and linguistically heterogenous community sharing a common religion has been projected as a political threat to the indigenous people and the process of ‘othering’, especially engineered through the Assam Movement, became an effective instrument in the electoral politics of the state during the subsequent decades.

Contesting the position taken by some scholar that the problems of Muslims of Assam are not very different from that of the socio-economic problems of the rest of the Indian Muslims, the author tries to argue that myriad historical factors have tangible impacts on construction of distinct state-specific identities of the Muslims of Assam, essentializing a sensitive position of the community in the socio-political milieu of the state. Therefore, with an attempt to analyze the process of formation and transformation of the distinct state-specific identities, besides reiterating the nuanced questions of immigration and settlement of the Muslims at different historical junctures, the author tries to theorize Islamisation in the specific context of medieval Assam. To depict the process historically, the author has broadly accepted what has been conceived as social liberation theory of Islamisation, where conversion became instrumental. The

¹Professor OKD Institute of Social Change and Development, Guwahati, E-mail: bsarmah64@gmail.com

author, therefore, finds the basis for emergence of an indigenous Muslim identity *vis-a-vis* the political identity constituted by the immigrant Muslims who started settling in the state particularly since the beginning of the last century. For the proclivity it demonstrated to become an integral part of the Assamese linguistic nationalist identity, the later assumed a new identity, Na-Asomiya Muslim after partition and independence. Nevertheless, the consolidation of this new identity, as the author comprehends it, is an outcome of an inevitable social and cultural adjustment with the Assamese linguistic nationalist ethos on the one hand and political alliance with the Congress hegemony on the other. While linguistic adjustment identifying themselves as Assamese speakers placed the immigrant Muslims in a conducive social milieu, political alliance with the hegemonic Congress ensured security in the Hindu majority political environment of Assam in absence of the Muslim League. The argument has been substantiated by analyzing the political response of the community especially during the decade before independence marked by a conspicuous political presence of the Muslim League and its unequivocal position on partition appealing the Muslims living in Assam to support the cause of Pakistan.

In absence of any stringent measure to prevent illegal immigration to Assam after independence, now from East Pakistan, the numerical strength of the immigrant Muslims in the state increased considerably. However, the visible linguistic and political position taken by the community ensured a safe political space amidst the violent linguistic movements experienced by the state. The Assam Movement, an unprecedentedly aggressive form of identity movement, nevertheless, drastically changed the political environment when the immigrants were projected as a threat to the cultural-national identity of the indigenous Assamese. Though the prolonged movement could not achieve much for the indigenous Assamese, one of the significant consequences of the movement is reinforcement of religious polarization in the postcolonial political landscape of Assam. The wider section of the immigrant Muslims started asserting themselves autonomously to start a new political discourse in the changed political milieu.

The book has extensively dealt with the process of political consolidation and reappearance of the immigrant Muslims as a distinct category to significantly influence the electoral politics of the state, paving the road for communal politics. Notwithstanding the unresolved issue of citizenship was reduced to a mere electoral issue during the decades after the Assam Movement, the contentious issue assumed a more vigorous political character when the immigrant Muslim community has been projected as a political threat to the indigenous Assamese. Now, the issue was sought to be resolved through judicial activism culminating in the process of updating the NRC.

Deeply engaging with the trajectory of Muslim politics in Assam, particularly since the later phase of colonial rule in the state, the book has tried to address many nuanced issues pertinent especially to electoral politics in the specific context. The author comes to the conclusion that the political dispensations of the Muslim League and

continuous immigration even after independence made the Muslims in Assam a sensitive political category. However, the Assam Movement created an everlasting distrust between the indigenous Assamese and the Muslims through a process of ‘othering’ of the later. Though the community did not become a communal bloc even after the Assam Movement, as the overwhelming majority of it preferred to remain secular in electoral politics, the efforts made by certain political force to mobilize the community on communal line paved the way for Hindutva political forces to grow in Assam. Moreover, as the author has tried to argue, indiscriminate characterization of the community as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh - ‘Bangladeshi’ in popular political discourse – culminated in a sense of alienation of the neo-Assamese Muslim community from the idea of Assamese. With this backdrop, the author tries contextualize some of the basic contemporary and contentious political issues such as the process of updating the NRC and the Citizenship Amendment Act etc.

The book provides an interesting account of the electoral politics in Assam centering around the immigrant Muslims, and unmistakably, it is a worth contribution of the author specially to encourage a new spate of scientific research detaching from many prejudices and stereotypes. Nevertheless, author should have taken cognizance of history before making certain generalizations. First, the author tries to argue that “While the Ahoms did not enter Assam as invaders, Muslims did” and he substantiates it by saying that “the first ever contact of Kamrupa with Muslim invaders was in 1206”. However, immediately he asserts that Muhammad-Ibn-Bakhtiyar-Khilji, was son of Bakhtiyar and a Turk of the Khilji dynasty (p.17). Second, to quote the author, “There is no government data on the population strength of the Ahoms in Assam, and it has remained a small community in comparison to Muslims in present Assam. This clearly indicates a mass Islamisation in Assam since Muslims started to immigrate to the state” (p.47). Third, “After independence, the indigenous Muslims became politically passive” (p.52). Fourth, “After independence, present Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya became parts of Assam. The central government had to face a revolt from the Nagas for sovereign state just after independence” (p.59). These are some of the generalizations/statements made in the book, which deserve adequate attention for revision.

Further, a deeper engagement with the twin processes of Islamisation and peasantisation in the specific context of Assam would have provided a stronger footing for scientific analysis of the main theme of the book i.e., what the author perceives as Muslim question in Assam. Similarly, while discussing Muslim League politics, the unavoidable question is the political role played by the Tribal League. The book is conspicuously silent on the political alliance between the Muslim League and the Tribal League. Similarly, though the book provides a detailed account of the Assam Movement to comprehend the process of consolidation of Muslim as a political identity in the subsequent period, the author prefers to remain silent on the other consequences of the movement, which have considerably influenced Muslim politics in Assam. To be more specific, the violent identity movements of the Bodos cannot be detached

from the process of political consolidation of the religious minorities specifically in the context of the Brahmaputra valley. Despite being sound in narrativizing the contemporary political questions intrinsic to the Immigrant Muslim community, the NRC and the CAA are two sides of the same coin. An informed reader would have to remain curious to know about the author's position regarding political necessity of the both, even after carefully going through the book.