

Partition, Migration and Identity Formation: Narratives from Southern Assam

Anindya Sen

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Assam University, Silchar

&

Debashree Chakraborty

PhD Scholar

Department of English

Assam University, Silchar

ABSTRACT

Partition related migration into Southern Assam (comprising of the districts of Cachar, Karimganj, Hailakandi, Dima Hasao and Karbi Anglong) has been characteristically different from that in the Western border where migration often followed as a result of abject violence and was mostly a temporally limited affair. Migrations across this North Eastern border started long before Partition and continues (in very insignificant numbers) till date with various peaks and troughs across the decades relating to National and International developments. The narratives/ memories (both primary and secondary) of these migrations vary significantly depending on when, from where (which part of East Pakistan/ Bangladesh), and why as well as on the class and the caste of the subject concerned. Early (upper class/ upper caste) migrations from Sylhet (the immediate bordering district of this region), for instance, where the Sylhet Referendum, which took place on the 6th of July 1947 acted as a sort of premonition and which historically did not witness much communal violence, is starkly different from later migrations (lower class/ lower caste) migrations from Noakhali or Kumillya. Personal interviews with refugees and their families across Southern Assam who migrated at different points of time has revealed an array of

narratives which go beyond the usual trope of violence to include economic, strategic, ideological and even emotional accounts as their reasons of migration.

This multiplicity of narratives, among other factors, is perhaps one of the reasons for the failure of the development of a collective post- Partition identity in the region. The ‘Bhasha Andolon’ in 1961 and the Assam Movement during the 70s and 80s added some impetus to the growth of a collective Bengali identity, yet, there seems to be constant flux in the way people in the region identify themselves. Identity formation process in Southern Assam therefore hinges on strategic essentialism where people choose those identities which they deem fit for political and cultural recognition as and when needed. Rather than a stable identity category based on language or ethnicity we find people straddling a multiplicity of identities based on linguistic variations, religion, caste, memory of migration, distance from the chosen center, etc. Thus, following Bakhtin’s theorizations, on the one hand we have centralizing forces trying to unite the population in the name of a pan-Bengali identity, or a pan-Indian identity; and decentralizing forces that is bringing to the forefront distances from the centers (Guwahati, Kolkata, Delhi) or linguistic variations (Sylheti) or religion (Hindu/ Muslim).

This paper proposes to present, analyze, assess and theorize the different, alternative (and often divisive) narratives/ memories of migration that form the foundation of the ‘Bengali’ identity politics in Southern Assam. This paper further proposes to attempt a theorization of this complex identity formation – at times reactionary, at times opportunistic, and at times progressive – process among the migrant population of Southern Assam.

Keywords: Partition, migration, Southern Assam, identity, strategic essentialism

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