A Social Construction of 'identity' among the Indigenous and Immigrants in Assam

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A complex web of representing, preserving or contesting one's identity dominates societies across the globe today. Identity, in its simplest sense, refers to the idea of how one perceives the self. Identities prescribe who one is, what role one is to enact and how one is unique from others in a society. Identity invokes the concepts of 'self' and 'other'. This paper is an attempt to study the role of 'indigenous and immigrant' identity in Assam. Identity as a contested subject was for the first time raised in 1979 when the Assam Movement began, with a demand to deport the immigrants from the region. Discords in the name of identity between both the factions of indigenous and immigrants turned hostile with time. The conflict of the Bodos with the Bengali speaking Muslims is one such example which has resulted in bloodsheds since 1993. The indigenous peoples struggle to preserve their identity in the name of being the 'son of the soil', while the immigrants try to establish an identity that helps them sustain in their adopted land. The study aims to look at identity from perspectives of the indigenous and the immigrants.

Keywords: Identity, indigenous peoples, immigrant, ethnic conflict, Assam

Introduction

The notion of identity has received enormous attention in contemporary societies lately. Identity has developed into a contentious subject, where the fear of losing and asserting one's identity (individual/collective) is at the crux. The idea of initiating movements, struggles and engaging in conflicts to safeguard or claim a distinct identity abounds today. The paper deals with the state of Assam where identity has been contested at numerous instances having varying consequences.

Identity refers to the traits and characteristics, social relations, roles, and social group memberships that define who one is. In its simplest sense, identity is the idea of how one perceives the self. An individual can have multiple identities based on situations. One can have a personal, social or role identity depending on the context

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(Oserman et.al 2012). Identity can be either based on 'relational' web or 'categorical mode'. The former type as the name suggest establishes identity in relation with others (teacher-student, father-son relation), while the latter type occurs when people organise themselves in group or communities based on shared categories (race, ethnicity, language etc) (Brubaker & Cooper 2000).

Identity refers to the social class in which an individual is eligible to be a member. Kriesberg (2003) enumerates three factors that shape collective identities: first is internal factors within each group (that includes past experience, universal human needs, fixed group attitudes against enemies and leadership); secondly relations with adversary groups, and lastly the social context of the groups' interaction. The present study focuses on identity of ethnic groups. Ethnic identity can be described as "a subset of identity categories in which eligibility for membership is determined by attributes associated with, or believed to be associated with, descent" (Chandra 2006: 3). The foremost condition for ethnicity to occur is to have a distinction between "us and them", the 'us' being the insider and the latter being the outsider to a region (Eriksen 2010). It is the similarities within a group and distinctiveness between groups that marks ethnicity.

Ethnic groups worldwide differ in the way they consider the concept of identity. In some societies ethnic identities live in peaceful co existence. While in others they are battling with other ethnic identities to preserve their own. Such difference depends on the soico- economic and the political environment to which the identities belong. The imbalance in the socio economic and power sharing in a society between ethnic identities can lead to conflicting situations (Majeed 2013).

Fearon (1999) claims that identity can be social and personal and that it motivates actions. However he makes it clear that preferences needs to be invoked to justify why one acts in a particular manner on the basis of his social identity. Identity as personal component is related to ones pride, dignity, self respect and one's action is based on safeguarding it. The feeling of being neglected, deprived of the deserving position in the society compels them to take up measures to protect their identity. Identity is "something all people/group have, ought to have or are searching for" (Brubaker & Cooper 2000: 10). A complex web of representing, preserving or contesting one's identity dominates societies. Eriksen (2010) cites three common features of identity based conflicts. According to him competition over scarce resources, modernisation, and the factor of groups being self engaged are reasons for identity conflicts.

The right to assert collective identity has mounted from time to time in the from of movements and discords. Be it religious movement, social movement, gender movement, ethnic clash, regional clash, identity have remained a factor for attaining collective goals and objectives. The 30 year old Sinhalese and Tamil identity conflict in Sri Lanka, the Hindu Muslim Gujarat riots of 1969, the Anti Sikh Riots, the ethnic cleansing of Kashmiri Hindus are just few examples of identity conflict. The Northeastern states of India have witnessed many identity based conflicts. Ethnicity is one of the main reasons behind the series of major problems faced by the Indian State.

In Assam, identity as a contested subject was for the first time raised in 1979

when the Assam Movement began. It has led to instances of discord between the indigenous and the immigrants. This discord on the issue of identity continues to perpetuate till today. The study attempts to analyse the concept of identity in relation to the indigenous and the immigrants of Assam: the former group considered for the study is the Bodo and latter category is the Bengali speaking Muslims. It further tries to understand how identity has become a prime reason behind the ongoing ethnic conflicts between these groups.

Theoretical approaches to Identity

Various theoretical approaches are put forward by scholars to explain identity. One of the early theories of identity was developed by Erik Erickson. He developed the theory of Psychological Development (1959) which involves eight stages that a person undergoes in his lifespan. The fifth stage is called the 'Identity vs Role confusion' phase. It discusses the significance of understanding the dynamics of identity in one's life. This period marks the transition from childhood to adulthood, where an individual learns what identity/role he is suppose to enact and also how they would be perceived in the society. When a person fails to determine a unique identity in society, he faces role confusion or identity crisis (McLeod 2013). Hence, identity seems to be of utmost importance in a person's development. Erickson theory on identity development explains that attaining a sense of identity makes people feel acceptable in a society.

Abraham Maslow in his "Hierarchy of Needs Theory" has identified identity as a psychological need. Belonging is a vital need that should be met in order to attain a sense of self importance (Kunc 1992). The sense of belonging to a group, feeling acceptable by a group is a need that is to be satisfied for a person to further move on to fulfil other hierarchical needs as mentioned in Maslow's theory.

Two broadly overlapping theories of identity are the Social Identity Theory and the Identity Theory. According to Stets and Burke (2000: 224) both the theories claims the "self to be reflexive, which is perceived as an object that can be classified in particular ways in relation to social categories." Social identity theory proposes that identity is an individual's understanding that he belongs to a distinct category or group (Hogg and Abrams 1988). That is, identity is an outcome of social experiences of an individual based on his group membership. In Identity theory classification of the self is based on the role one is to play and the meanings and expectation associated with the role (Burke and Tolly 1977). The former theory describes who one is and the latter depicts what one does in a society.

With the rising complexity across the globe, identity has aroused as an essential need, which when denied recognition can lead to discrepancy in society. The proponents of "Human Need Theory" believe that unfulfilled needs of individuals and groups result in conflicts. "Needs" here is not limited to the subsistence needs required for survival alone, it also encompasses needs related to ones identity, recognition and protection (Danielsen 2005).

Construction of Identity

Identity construction is determined as the practice of continuously shaping, reinforc-

ing, transforming, improving or maintaining an understanding of being constantly unique (Traavik 2010)[1]. One at all times bears an identity, which s/he either chose to have or was ascribed by the society. Now, with the concept of identity arises multiple questions. Firstly who tells what identity one should bear? Who construct identity for people? How is identity different for an indigenous and immigrant? And many such queries come into play while discussing identity.

To begin with, Stuart Hall states that it is through language that meanings are attached to things. That is, words represent concepts or things (Hall 1997) Going by the statement it is through language or words used to describe a concept (such as identity, indigenous, immigrants) by which we shape our perception about it. Therefore, language to an extent constructs concepts for us; it is through the usage of words such as 'indigenous', 'immigrant', 'outsider', 'insider' that one labels individuals or group of people. According to some theorists identity is also a mental construct, shaped by the contexts in which they develop and manipulate actions (Oyserman et al 2012).

Identity as discussed earlier operates at two levels. One is how an individual perceives the self. Secondly, how others or society perceive that self. To a great extent a person knows who he is from the feedback he gets from those around him. Charles Cooley as cited by Tatnum (2000: 9- 14) remarks that "other people are the mirror in which we see ourselves".

Citing Michel Foucault, Arce (2014) states that identity is not a product of individual freedom but is tied to socio historically available identity categories. What category of identity one is to bore during his life is often fixed by society prior to his birth; for instance a newborn's religion, caste/class identity is decided on the basis of his/her parents' religion or caste. People residing all over the world imbibe the very notions of identity as they grow up. The notion of belonging to a group, an individual's ethnic identity is constructed and decided by the society they belong to. Identity is termed as social products on three grounds. Firstly, identity is based on what matters to others; secondly people need others to endorse their selfhood; thirdly the aspects of identity is determined by matters at a particular moment (Oysterman et al 2012). For Foucault, 'identity' is not a fixed thing within a person but it is disclosed to others through communications with them. Identity according to him is a shifting, temporary construction.[2] In earlier times the concept identity was not much debated as it is now, as then identities were assigned to individuals and not selected (Howard 2000)[.3] Earlier son of a Brahmin performing rituals was expected to take up the same job as that of his father and thus bear a similar identity of being a Brahmin. But with time, dimensions of identities have changed in society. While certain aspect of identity might remain the same (eg. religion), some changes according to circumstances and choices (eg. job identity). Hall mentions that although it is claimed that "a bit of self remains always already the same, identical to itself across time, but identities are never 'unified but are fragmented and fractured'". Hence what can be understood about the prospects of identity is that, it is both a fluid and fixed notion which is dependent on the circumstances and society (Hall 1996: 17).

Sayyid & Zac (1998) as cited by Weaver (2001: 242) states that 'identities do

not exist before they are constructed'. Citing many theorists Weaver (2001) also opines that identity is constructed through an individual's relationship with other. Here the example of Assamese Muslims (known as the *Axomiya Musalmaan*) can be cited. This identity came into being only after the immigrated Muslims settled in Assam and got assimilated or adopted the culture of Assam. He also asserts that recognition also constructs their identity. Is the person recognised rightly or is he misrecognised matters to a great extent. In context of Assam, a person belonging to Muslim community, speaking Bengali is often termed as Bangladeshi (a termed used to describe Muslim immigrants from Bangladesh) although he might be a native of Assam. Such labelling of a person or assigning misnomer to a particular group harms the person or community's attitude.

Identity thus is a multifaceted concept, and is constructed by amalgamation of various factors. An individual's characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors, social and political contexts contribute towards the construction of identity a person bears (Tatum 2000). Identity is constructed and undergoes "radical historicization" and is constantly in a process of transformation in the modern times. Power operating in society plays a major role in shaping "identities"; it has moulded identity as a product of marking of difference and exclusion rather than unity (Hall 1996).

Ethnic identity, about which this study focuses on, is also a "product of historically, socio economically and politically grounded process of inter subjective understanding that sets actors preferences for particular mobilisation activity" (Saikia 2001). Ethnic identity is ascribed to oneself and others in a social structure. It is situational in nature and continually undergoes reconstruction (Nagel 1993).

Indigenous vs. Immigrant Identity

Indigenous identity refers to a sense of "peoplehood inseparably linked to sacred traditions, homelands and a shared history" (Peroff 1997 as cited by Weaver 2001: 245). "Indigenous identities are emergent; a process of becoming rather than being." It is a continuous process in response to the changing demands of the society. Nevertheless even indigenous identity face contestation though they belong to their homeland, their assertion to a particular identity may be contested, if others in the society has an objection (Haris et al. 2013:5)

The process of immigration refers to the flow of population to a new country of which they are not native of. Migration within a country or outside can occur because of an array of reasons such as social, political, economic, natural or climatic (Nandi 2005). An immigrant faces a complex situation. As they may have two sets of identity constellations, one of their native land and the other of the land they have migrated to (Frideres 2002). Bhugra (2004) explains the relationship of migration and mental stress. He states that while migrating to a new place migrants bring along expression of distress with them. The process of acculturation that a migrant goes through has influence on how one perceives their identity.

Alongside immigration comes the concept of acculturation. The development of cultural change and adaptation that occurs when individuals from different cultures come into contact is termed as acculturation (Gibson 2001). The immigrants in

this process adopt few of the markers of the host country and at the same time retain their distinct beliefs as well. Schwartz and his colleagues, based on literature and theories, have recognised four barriers to personal identity development and accul-turation of immigrants. Firstly, according to them immigrants faces socio-economic disadvantages in a new country that leads to negative behavioural outcome. Sec-ondly, immigrants that respect and adopt values of the host country have prospects of identity development and appreciation than those who do not accept the values. Thirdly, there is a lack of collective support for identity development in their adopted societies. Lastly, ethnicity of the immigrant group also hinders in identity develop-ment as they are often the minority. In some circumstances native ethnic groups also faces acculturation challenges "because they have been involuntarily subjected to the dominance of a majority group" in their native land (Schwartz et al .2006: 2).

It is a challenging task on part of immigrants to come to a new place and adjust, as they bear their native identity and at the same time has to get accustomed to a new structure. However their arrival disturbs an already settled societal structure. Immi-gration is a major engine of new ethnic group production in a new place (Hein 1994). To the existing communities of ethnicities a new outsider group is introduced. In a society that provides resources to its native, unexpectedly receives an added popula-tion to it. The resources that were earlier shared by the natives now have to be shared with an additional populace. This interrupts the flow of society and makes it un-stable. It is a dilemma on both the arriving and receiving population. The immigrants generally move out from their native lands for a better livelihood but in a new land they face challenges to survive, sustain and to ascertain their identity.

However it cannot be judged that just because an indigenous lives in his native land and therefore his identity is not contested. This might not be true in all situa-tions. There are many indigenous identities who are struggling to safeguard their identities in their homelands. Some indigenous feel oppressed and neglected in the composite society they are a part of and mobilise collectively to assert their identi-ties.

Identities are intrinsically political in nature. The "politics of identity involves the construction, reconstruction or disruption of notions about what it means to claim particular identities" (Harris, et al 2013).[4] The complexity involved in constructing and sustaining an identity in neither easy for indigenous nor for immigrants. The identity aspect of both indigenous and immigrant are woven in distinct historical and social institution and in contemporary times anchored by political requirements. When these two identities come across each other, there arises enquiry of being the "in-sider"/"outsider", distinction of being us against them. The identity groups find measures to uphold their respective identity in the combined society where they meet.

Role of Identity in Assam
The state of Assam has witnessed intricacy around the issue of indigenous and immi-grant identity for decades now. The convergence of both the identities in the com-mon ground of Northeast have often resulted in confrontation and bloodshed. Immi-gration to Assam was encouraged by the Colonial rulers to fill the scarcity of man-

power in various booming sectors and also to fulfil their imperialist goals (Sharma 2014). Nag asserts that the 'incipient Assamese middle class' also favoured immigration. For instance many intellectuals of Assam like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua favoured the decision that immigrants could be welcome to improve the demographic structure and workforce in Assam (Nag 1990)

It was during the Assam Movement where the anti-outsider sentiment was raised for the first time. The agitation during 1979 to 1985 raised concern about the large scale illegal immigration from Bangladesh and how it has posed serious challenge to the politico-cultural identity of the Assamese and the other indigenous communities (Sharma 2012).

The rapport between the indigenous and immigrants of Assam remain delicate and disputed till date. Identity factor has led to creation of autonomy movements, armed groups and conflicts. The highly contested indigenous immigrant identity issue in Assam primarily revolves around the Bodo and the Bengali speaking Muslims, who are claimed to be immigrants from the neighbouring Bangladesh. The Bodos and the immigrant Muslims of Assam has since independence struggled in their own ways to sustain and establish their identities in the region.

Considered as the largest plain tribe of Assam, the Bodos since 1987 has been demanding for a separate state to emerge out of the perceived 'crisis of identity' due to Assamese hegemonism in every sphere of their life (Bhattacharjee 1996). The Bodo movement began as a socio-economic and religious reform movement, but in due course of time it turned political and eventually became a movement that led to instances of conflict (Brahma 2013).[5] The Bodos have witnessed a history of negligence from the larger Assamese society. The state too has failed to address issues that confront the indigenous Bodo tribe since the dawn of Independence in 1947 (Mahanta 2013). The signing of the two accords in 1993 (George 1994) and 2003 (Nath 2003) attempted to address various political- economic and development issues of Bodoland. However, the accords failed to fulfil the aspirations of all segments of Bodo society. The agenda with which the Bodos demanded for a separate state (Bodoland) remains unresolved and hence the demand continues till date.

The advent of Muslims to Assam dates back to 13th century. They came as invaders to conquer Assam, but after their failed attempt a section of Muslim invaders stayed back in Assam. This section eventually got assimilated in the Assamese society creating a new status as Asomiya Musalmaan in the adopted land (Mishra 1999). However the history Muslims immigration from the neighbouring Bangladesh to Assam dates back to the colonial days (Baruah 2003). It started when the Britishers allowed them to settle in wastelands area of the Brahmaputra valley to earn more revenue. There were also various push and pull factors that accelerated immigration. The migrants from Bangladesh saw Assam as economically thriving land in compared to their native land, and hence migrated and settled here. In the long run, in the post-independence period the immigration process got politicised; it was encouraged to earn more votes from the migrated population (Nandy 2005 ,Sharma 2012).

The two factions pose different outlooks to the same problem of identity crisis. On one hand there is an aboriginal tribes who have contributed a lot towards the

greater Assamese society but were not given the position they deserve. "Constitutional discrimination', 'deprivation from legitimate rights in their homeland", encroachment of their land by government and immigrants, has propelled the Bodo community to struggle in order to protect their identity by creating Bodoland, a state of their own (Das 1994, Dash1989). Their demand to have a separate identity in the form of a state is not acknowledged by other identity groups of the society and the Government. This implies how an indigenous group faces objection to establish a distinct identity in their native land.

The immigrant populace from Bangladesh have spread from wastelands to the land of the indigenous tribal people of Assam. They have also turn into a considerably strong population to contribute in the political course of Assam in the form of vote banks. This is one of the main reasons of conflict between the indigenous–immigrant group (Sharma 2012). The Bodo tribe faces identity crisis; they fear of becoming a minority in their own native land because of the encroachment of the Muslim immigrants in their area. The immigrants are taking a share of their land and resources.

The huge population who came long ago from the neighbouring country in a hope to have a better living are in a state of flux. In the crisis of being an insider or outsider the Muslim population is leading an unstable life. The entire population despite being settlers in Assam for decades are in constant fear of ethnic cleansing by the dominant groups. The immigrant Muslims in Assam are always seen as a threat to security and labelled as land snatchers in various writings. It is also equally important to consider the fact that they were once a majority in their native country, but due to push and pull reasons migrated to another land. Ironical as it is, the immigrants were once credited for contributing towards the economic prosperity (Nag 1990); but they are now are seen as a threat to economic life of the indigenous population. In the "us" and "them" syndrome it is the migrant Bangladeshi Muslim that is demonised and dehumanised as the "other" (Nandy 2005).

Whenever illegal immigrants settle in a new country the battlegrounds of "identity politics" is shaped (Schendel 2005). The anxiety of the indigenous and the immigrants leads to the adoption of hostile measures to maintain their respective identities. The quest for identity among Bodos and the immigrant Muslim has resulted in ethnic conflicts and bloodshed. Ethnic violence is a phenomenon whereby violent attacks propagated along ethnic lines (Fearon and Laitin 2000). There are instances of ethnic conflict that has been fought between both the factions. The first ethnic conflict occurred in the year 1993, where about 50 people lost their lives; in 1994 an estimated 100 people were killed; in 2008 about 70 people were killed and more than 100,000 were made homeless; and in the year 2012 atleast 40 people died in five days of violence that displaced approximately 200,000 people.[6] These identity induced conflicts have created a mayhem in the state and destroyed the relation of indigenous and immigrant communities. The frequent conflicts resulted in loss of innocent lives, property and have rendered thousand homeless who even now live in refugee camps in pathetic conditions. Such identity conflicts destroy the peace in any society and builds up more resentment among ethnic identities.

Conclusion

It is interesting to note how a particular identity shape the lives of people and creates the rift on the binary us/them, insider/outsider or indigenous/immigrant. From the simple concept of realising who one is; to the collective movements demanding recognition of identity by ethnic groups, the concept "identity" has transformed. Blame modernisation, politics or just time; identity in the contemporary world can be labelled as being responsible for a lot of instability that races undergo. Identity as it stands in societies today is the result of various factors into play for years; the crisis people face today and their quest cannot be resolved in a day. As mentioned earlier identity clash has its roots in history, it is not possible to put an end to it all at once. Effective and planned measures should be undertaken to reduce its influence on the already tensed relationship between indigenous and immigrant in Assam. The concept of indigenous and immigrant identity is complex and vulnerable and needs to be handled carefully without hurting sentiment of any group. Although every section in the society is equally responsible to check that the identity conflict doesn't take a toll on humanity, the intervention of Government remains most essential in this matter.

What the society of Assam has faced as an outcome of identity conflicts is beyond description. But further identity conflicts can be prevented. The region needs a collective support for identity development of both the Bodos and the Bengali speaking Muslims. Social interaction or dialogue can be one measure to arrive at solutions. Religious and other social leaders can facilitate interaction between the groups to discuss about issues that affect their ethnic relations. Also interaction with experts, policy makers and government should be initiated. India and Bangladesh needs to have more dialogue to end the hostile situation in Assam. Intellects from both sides should discuss about the immigration issue and its consequences and then reach at conclusion.[7]

Since identity issue engulfs the immigrants, who supposedly came from the neighbouring Bangladesh, the Indian government is obliged with the responsibility to safeguard the interest of the indigenous Bodo identity. However the government intervention has so far failed on this front too. In 2015 the government has begun the update of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) 1951 in Assam that would help to identify the indigenous citizens of Assam.[8] The indigenous people hope that the upgraded NRC data will help deport the illegal immigrants. Whether the government will ever be able to deport the immigrants with the completion of NRC is uncertain. But further influx should definitely be checked. The porous Indo-Bangladesh borders should be fenced to prevent illegal immigration.

The government being the policy makers should reassess what has been done to enhance the indigenous-immigrant relation and accordingly new accord and policies should be implemented accommodating the requirement of both the identities. Power politics should be avoided by politicians while dealing with the immigrants and indigenous.

Media is the fourth pillar of democracy; it shapes people's perception to a large extent. People's idea of reality depends on media's representation of every day events. Hence what aspect of identity does it represents, and how does it represent identity

conflict and the actors of conflict matters a lot. Media's representation has the power to instigate conflict; therefore it needs to be careful on reporting conflict situations. It needs to be objective in its coverage and should not be biased towards a particular group.

As mentioned earlier immigrants have also contributed towards the development of Assam, and also not all Bengali speaking Muslims are illegal immigrants hence there should be policies to accommodate immigrants that can reduce conflicts. Scholars have presented opinions on how should the immigrants be treated in a host society. Nandy proposes an approach on "accepting the migrants of longstanding as "guest workers" with right to employment only but no political rights. He also urge for an effective immigration policy (Nandy 2005). A study titled "Politician Identity and Religious Conflict in India" (Bhalotra et .al 2002) claims to have found a solution to the Hindu–Muslim conflict. The authors suggest that positive representation of minority Muslim leaders in state assemblies have, to a certain degree, contributed towards the decline of Hindu-Muslim riot. Majeed (2013) also suggest a similar opinion that can minimise ethnic conflict. He states that equal opportunities should be provided for ethnic identities to work in decision making process. Hence equal positions and political representation of ethnic groups in Assam can be a way to minimise conflict since it will provide a sense of being accepted and honoured in the society. However agreeing to what Foucault favoured, the dissolution of identity should take place rather than its creation or maintenance. Foucault saw "identity as a form of subjugation and a way of exercising power over people and preventing them from moving outside fixed boundaries".[9] It is only when people transcend from the clutches of identity politics there can be development of humankind. In the identity battle of who an indigenous or immigrant is, it is the common people who suffer. In today's politicised world the powerful few are directed towards exploiting people in the name of identity to make political gains out of it. It is time to take a look on what the world has lost in the name of identity and who have gained from it and at what stake. Identity which celebrates recognition of "self" has in course of time engaged in destruction of "others". The notion of identity needs to be reconstructed in the contemporary times with an objective to maintain cordial relations between the outsiders and insiders. The mounted antagonism between the "us and them" needs to be diminished for a better future.

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