

# The Uprooted Consciousness: Indigeneity and The Hindu Bengalis of Barak Valley



**Panthapriyo Dhar**

Associate Professor,  
Deptt. of English,  
Gurucharan College,  
Silchar, Assam

## Abstract

The geo-political construct of India's North East region is largely construed to be a homogenic entity by 'mainstream' India in terms of its inhabitants which in fact, belies the diverse ethnic mosaic that the region encompasses. The North East is home to people of Mongoloid or Tibeto-Burmese origins, of the Austro-Asiatic lineage and even of Aryan stock. This heterogeneous medley has often spawned a host of palpable cracks which have threatened the fragile peace of the region. Ethnic assertions have often manifested into indigenous movements centering on the question of identity. The Hindu Bengalis of the Barak Valley area of Assam, a populace that has grown up in the shadows of the partition effected in erstwhile East Pakistan in 1947 largely occasioned by the Sylhet Referendum, continues to be haunted by a sense of rootlessness with no homeland or a state to call its own. This populace scattered in different parts of the North East due to various reasons have often been at the receiving end of different ethnic groups thereby perpetuating in them and cementing the sense of rootlessness. There has been very little resistance or so to say in Lytoardian terms no discourse in which the Hindu Bengalis could assert themselves in this increasingly assertive environment. Ethnic groups of the North East have grouped under aggressive indigenous movements as a result of which the Hindu Bengalis has been marginalized further and its interactive space has reduced significantly. The paper is an attempt to deconstruct the notion of indigeneity that has aggressively manifested of late in the North East and how Hindu Bengalis of the Barak Valley have been systematically marginalized by being labelled as 'outsiders' inside their own country igniting a 'us' – them' discourse thereby prolonging the sense of uprootedness that has haunted them since partition.

**Keywords:** North East, Ethnic, Indigeneity, Sylhet Referendum, Discourse.

## Introduction

The geo-political construct of India's North East region is largely construed to be a homogenic entity by 'mainstream' India in terms of its inhabitants which in fact, belies the diverse ethnic mosaic that the region encompasses. Presently constituted of eight states, the North East region of India has often figured in terms of the 'mainland-periphery' discourse connoting the myriad associations of the very term 'nation'. The discourse is articulated at different levels of difference thereby attributing a distinct exotic touch to the region, most often than not, at variance from the actual ground reality. The ethnic mosaic of the region, unique in its own respect is often viewed as a homogenous entity belying the fact that there are diverse ethnic groups who constitute a negotiative cultural space called the North East. In contemporary times, when assertive manifestations of identity has become the norm rather than an aberration largely occasioned by globalization and modernization, it is apparent that India's North East should also be swayed by identity concerns. The fragile negotiative space has often cracked and shrunk considerably due to aggressive identity movements often centering on questions of ethnicity and indigeneity. Ethnicity has been a strong feature of the North East due to the fact that most groups of the region claim their lineage from the Mongoloid or Tibeto-Burmese, the Austro-Asiatic and the Indo-Aryan stocks. Thomas Hylland Eriksen has termed ethnicity as "*an aspect of social relationship between agents who consider themselves as culturally distinctive from members of other groups with whom they have a minimum of regular interaction*" (2002; 12) implying that an ethnic group is united by a common heritage and

culture which differentiates it from another group. The heterogeneous ethnic medley of the North East has often spawned a host of palpable cracks manifested in bloody internecine conflicts, a strong sense of hatred, violence and loss of human lives mainly centred on questions of territory and assertion of supremacy. While territory is a political construct, assertion of supremacy transcends political boundaries and is often cultural in nature. In an environment of palpable tension, claims of indigeneity has assumed centre-stage in the North East in recent times marking a transition from erstwhile ethnic movements to indigenous movements for rights. Like ethnicity, indigeneity also presupposes the 'other' and so the indigenous – non-indigenous debate transcends the cultural or racial domain and assumes political undertones. Eriksen defined indigenous groups as *"non-state people, and they are always linked with a non-industrial mode of production... they represent a way of life which renders them particularly vulnerable in relation to modernisation and the state"* (2002; 125). Indigeneity is thus opposed to the modern state which espouses egalitarian principles and harps on industrialisation for development. The United Nations declared 1993 as the International Year for the World's Indigenous People *"to strengthen international co-operation for the solution of problems faced by indigenous communities in areas such as human rights, the environment, development, education and health"*.<sup>1</sup> The late 20<sup>th</sup> century declaration by the United Nations raises pertinent questions and concerns about the status of indigenous groups who find themselves increasingly alienated by the modern state igniting aggressive identity concerns. In the light of the above discussion, the paper is an attempt to analyse how a community has to negotiate its existence in relation to the 'Other' over claims of indigeneity.

#### **Aim of the Study**

The aim of the study is to focus on the Hindu Bengali community scattered in parts of North East India and explore how its identity is threatened by aggressive assertions of indigeneity. The Barak Valley area of Assam is one of those fringe areas of the North East deriving its nomenclature from one of the major rivers that flow through the state. Presently comprising of the three districts of Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi, a significant populace of the valley comprises of the Hindu Bengalis many of whom or their forefathers had migrated from the Sylhet district of present day Bangladesh, after partition occasioned by the Sylhet Referendum in 1947, and settled in large numbers in the Barak Valley. The once fertile and sprawling Surma Valley was suddenly truncated as Sylhet was amalgamated with East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) as a result of a flawed and biased political brinkmanship of the Assamese political leadership and the Assamese intelligentsia who visualised the threat of Assam being a Bengali majority state. In this connection, Tanmay Bhattacharjee comments that, *"Sylhet figured prominently in the provincial and the national politics in the penultimate years of the Raj and the emerging Assamese nationalism could not accommodate Sylhet*

*any more"* (2014, 184). The parochial and myopic outlook of the then Assamese leadership and intelligentsia resulted in Hindu Bengalis becoming aliens in their own land resulting in large-scale migration and settling down in the Barak Valley in huge numbers. This uprootedness was the outcome of an anomalous political exercise called the Sylhet Referendum whose outcome was decided even before it was held. According to Bhattacharjee, *"Nobody uttered the term Barak Valley separately and it was part of the Surma Valley before the independence... the truncated portion of the old Surma Valley now called Barak Valley remained in India"* (ibid, 64). The Hindu Bengalis of the undivided Sylhet district found the Barak Valley ideally suited for settlement not only because of its contiguity to Sylhet but also because of its natural geographical affinity to Sylhet. The fact that some police station areas of erstwhile Sylhet were transferred to India being Hindu Bengali majority areas, was the only silver lining of partition. Sanjib Baruah observes that, *"In colonial times Cachar was considered along with Sylhet, as part of the mostly Bengali-speaking Surma Valley as opposed to the mostly Assamese speaking Brahmaputra Valley. It is a district where Bengalis are in a predominant majority. When Sylhet became a part of Pakistan, a number of Hindu-majority areas were amalgamated to Cachar"*. (2008; 101). Thus, Barak Valley became the natural habitat of the displaced and uprooted Hindu Bengali population whose fragile link with their erstwhile homeland was merely sustained with the proud "Sylheti" nomenclature attached to food, dress, language, cultural-religious connotations and so on.

Though comfortably settled in the Barak Valley, the uprooted consciousness of the Hindu Bengalis has not completely subsided and the pangs of trauma effected by the partition still lingers though in much lesser proportions in the present generation. The phenomena can be gauged from the fact that since the Hindu Bengalis have no state or homeland to call their own, the sense of rootlessness effected by the Sylhet Referendum continues to haunt and is manifested in the tendency to relocate and forage for relatively "safer" places outside Barak Valley to settle down. It thus makes sense to consider the Indian Hindu Bengali as the *"hyphenated national": minorities and marginal groups that might be part of the nation but 'never quite'.*" (Pandey: 2012; 152). The predicament of the Hindu Bengali is compounded in other parts of the North East through the insider-outsider, indigenous-non-indigenous discourse which accentuates and perpetuates the sense of insecurity and rootlessness. In the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam, in Meghalaya, Manipur or Mizoram where the Hindu Bengalis of Sylheti origin had a significant presence, the nomenclatures of 'bongal', 'dkhar', 'mayang' or 'bhai' are all steeped in a discourse of hate and contempt designed to psychologically alienate and eventually evict the Hindu Bengalis out of what the local inhabitants term as their 'own land' harping vociferously on the theme of indigeneity. The debate on indigeneity in the North East has to be viewed in the light of historical facts because the so

called indigenous groups take recourse to history to substantiate their claims. The mainstream Assamese people of the Brahmaputra valley claim themselves to be indigenous having been descended from the Tai or Shan race of China and Upper Burma, the progenitors of the Ahoms. The renowned historian Sir Edward Gait traces the Ahom invasion of the eastern extremity of the Brahmaputra Valley in the early part of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Likewise, Sir Gait also records in his book *A History of Assam* about the Manipuris who emigrated from the north-west borders of China in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries to what is now known as Manipur. The Khasis and Syntengs who came to India in the first Mongolian overflow to India are suggested to have 'drifted to their present home in more recent times.' (Gait, 2013; 311). History is testimony to the fact that Hindu Bengali kings ruled parts of Sylhet well before the North Western portions of Sylhet fell to the first Muslim invader, Sikander Khan Ghazni in 1303, as is evident from records based on inscriptions. These historical evidences of ethnic settlements in the North East has to be viewed in the light of the debate on indigenous-non-indigenous raised in different parts of the region since among other attributes, indigeneity is also a temporal marker. The indigenous peoples are "those groups especially protected in international or national legislation as having a set of specific rights based on their territorial rights based on their historical rights to a particular territory and their cultural or historical distinctiveness from other populations ... A defining characteristic for an indigenous group is that it has preserved traditional ways of living, such as present or historical reliance upon subsistence-based production and a predominantly non-urbanised society."<sup>2</sup> Claims to indigeneity therefore has political, territorial, historical, cultural and traditional connotations. From the point of view of available historical records, it is evident that most ethnic groups who claim to be indigenous to the North East, settled in their respective territories of the region not before the 13<sup>th</sup> century whereas undivided Sylhet which included the present district of Karimganj in the Barak Valley was populated by the ancestors of the Hindu Bengalis at least from the 5<sup>th</sup> century if not earlier as is evident from Kamalakanta Gupta's book *Copper-Plates of Sylhet* (quoted in Jayanta Bhusan Bhattacharjee; 1992': 135-144) Indigeneity claims in the North East by different groups of people to claim territorial supremacy to the exclusion of so called "outsiders" is a misnomer and therefore contestable. By the same yardstick, the Hindu Bengalis claim to be indigenous to areas of erstwhile undivided Sylhet cannot be an exaggeration, only that the same claim has not been voiced strongly enough. Thus, "a scrutiny of the entire range of signification that the term 'indigenous' is expected to cover brings home that most discursive concepts are perennially contestable" (Devy et. al.; 2009: xi) implying the tangible nature of illusive constructs to assert dominance.

#### Conclusion

The North East has witnessed aggressive manifestations of indigeneity by different groups which has targeted educational institutions, trade, socio-

religious aspects, livelihood and even common life of the Hindu Bengalis settled in different parts of the region more so because a counter-discourse has never been articulated. Jean Francois Lyotard terms this phenomena as a "differend - a wrong or injustice that arises because the discourse in which the wrong might be expressed does not exist" (Critical Theory : 2010; 133). The stigma of being an 'outsider' inside their own country makes the situation of the Hindu Bengalis precarious prolonging in them the sense of uprootedness. In the North East, indigenous movements have gained centre-stage marking a transition from erstwhile ethnic movements on very flawed logic. Urvasi Butalia in her book *The Other Side of Silence* very succinctly describes the pangs of partition as "how families were divided, how friendship endured across borders, how people coped with trauma, how they rebuilt their lives, what resources, both physical and mental, they drew upon, how their experience of dislocation and trauma shaped their lives, and indeed the cities and towns and villages they settled in – find little reflection in written history" (1998; 9) and this statement sums up what the Hindu Bengalis of erstwhile Sylhet have encountered as a result of partition. The trauma is manifested in the insecurity and the resultant search for 'safer' places which remain elusive mainly because the legitimate voice of protest and assertion of rights is singularly absent. Sanjib Baruah is right when he says that, "the Barak Valley has nurtured very different memories of partition and its perspective on the question of citizenship of cross-border migrants – of Hindu migrants to be precise is – fundamentally different from that in the Brahmaputra Valley." (in Butalia ed. *The Long Shadow*: 2015; 88), testifying to a strong vindication of the plight of the Hindu Bengalis of the Barak Valley. And unless an aggressive and assertive counter-discourse of indigeneity is strongly articulated, they risk further alienation and ghettoisation belying the concept of the nation as Ernest Renan says "a large scale solidarity" (2006 : 19).

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