

THE IMPASSE OF *KHILONJIA* IDENTITY ASSAM: THE ACCORD, THE DISCORD, BY SANGEETA BAROOAH PISHAROTY (GURGAON, PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE INDIA, 2019)

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Of all the boundary lines that were drawn arbitrarily for administrative convenience without taking cognizance of the socio-cultural and linguistic homogeneity of the inhabitants living therein, those drawn by the British during their rule in North-East India have proved to be some of the most problematic. They have continued to have the most debilitating effects on the lives of the people living in this region for close to two centuries. The exploitation of resources in North-East India by the British also opened the floodgates to the incessant immigration of culturally and linguistically disparate groups that pose a threat to local communities, or *khilonjia* (the lexical meaning of this Assamese word is “people living in one place for many generations.” However, the writer uses it loosely to accommodate the people who lived in Assam prior to 1826). Immigrants poured in in large numbers and, since 1826, stories of loss and deprivation have represented the cornerstone of discourse on North-East India. Even after India’s Independence, post-1947, social turbulence has prevailed owing to the conflict between the *khilonjia* and these immigrant communities. Initial sporadic protests later on galvanized the consolidation of multi-ethnic communities in a fight against the immigrant communities following 1979, and in 1985, on 15 August, the Assam Accord was signed to assuage the grievances of the *khilonjia*. The Accord was seen as a milestone in asserting Assamese identity and included provisions for protecting the “*jati, mati, and bheti*” (Community, Land, and Identity) of the *khilonjia* community. However, even three decades following the signing of the accord, the clauses therein have not been implemented in letter and spirit. The need for the Accord, the strife of ethnic communities, the rise of militancy as a means of resolving contention, and many more such issues have been addressed by Sangeeta

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Barooah Pisharoty, an award-winning journalist in her book entitled *Assam: The Accord, The Discord*. The book will be a useful resource for readers and researchers who are working on issues related to militancy, minority rights, immigration, and electoral politics.

Pisharoty has unearthed vital information relating to the incidents that propelled the signing of the Assam Accord by collecting data from various agencies and people who have proffered their testimony. She examines the positions of all the stakeholders engaged in bringing the Accord to life, and recounts the immediate trigger of the “six-year-long” Assam agitation and the role of Hiranya Kumar Bhattacharyya, an Indian Police Service officer. Pisharoty’s interviews of the leaders of the movement and signatories of the Assam Accord also reveal the disagreement among various leaders that prevailed regarding the cut-off date. Whereas some of the latter did not want the Accord to come into being at all, some wanted 1966 as the cut off year for immigrants, while others preferred 1971. Pisharoty also analyses the effect of the Nehru-Liaquat Pact of 1950 on the 1951 National Register of Citizens (NRC).

The years preceding the Assam Accord were ones of turmoil and uncertainty, with every political party wanting to fish in the murky waters. Pisharoty reveals some major findings about how Congress tried to use “illegal immigrants” as their dedicated voting bank, and how the opposition tried to exploit the opportunity in the 1977 election. The role played by Rashtriya Swayam Sevak (RSS, a right-wing Hindu group) and Jamat-e-Islami and Jamat-E-Ulema (both right-wing Muslim groups) to woo the Hindu and Muslim immigrant population (respectively) opened up space for polarization along religious lines. The role of the Communist Party of India (CPI) and their support for Congress-I in relation to helping Anwara Timur form a government in Assam shows the ambivalent ideological stand of the political parties in India.

The book reveals the politics behind the violence and bloodshed that occurred during the period of agitation. The “Assam Agitation” that began on the basis of a peaceful “Gandhian model” turned ugly and claimed many innocent lives for political reasons. The infamous Nellie Massacre of 1983 remains a dark chapter in the history of Assamese nationalism. The inception of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) added another chapter to the infamous killings in Assam, and what started out as an ideological war ended up as killing for extortion.

On one hand, the Assam Accord does not elaborate a definition of “Assamese People”; on the other hand, Pisharoty tries to define the Assamese/Khilonjiya identity in a very flat manner by overlooking synchronic and diachronic influences on their identity formation. Different academics, politicians, and members of civil society have tried to define “Assamese” in different ways; however, one

peculiarity has never been elaborately explicated while addressing this issue. This peculiarity is that the word Assamese has three connotations: It can mean (i) a language, (ii) a community with a specific culture, or (iii) an autochthonous individual/community domiciled within the geographical space of Assam (which is gradually shrinking). Failure to distinguish between these three different significations of the term has led to irreconcilable disputes and the Balkanization of the region in the wake of Assamese nationalism. The term “*Axamiya*” is used for the language proper; a language that predated this nomenclature as the term was derived from the word Ahom. In Tai, the root *cham* means “to be undefeated.” With the privative Assamese affix *ā*, the whole formation (*Āchām*) means undefeated. Nandana Dutta, in a seminal book entitled *Questions of Identity in Assam*, cites Kanaksen Deka’s finding that indigenous communities existed in the area, such as the Koch, Ahom, Tiwa, Mishing and others; however, there were no “Assamese.” It was only with the advent of the British that the term “Ahom” became Assam, and later a standardized version of the Sibsagar dialect came to be recognized as the Assamese language. The second connotation of the word is related to the community, which has a distinct culture. The cultural specificity of the Assamese community can unequivocally be traced back to their cultural life, which subsumes all kinds of socio-cultural and religious practices. The Ahom and the Koch rulers in this region, over the course of time, accepted the Hindu deities and manner of worship, thus the origin and foundation of Assamese culture during its formative years was predominantly Hindu. At a later stage it subsumed the autochthonous tribal communities and their cultural practices and the Muslim community too, to create the present-day composite Assamese culture. However, there is overlap between the first and the second definition, which has made it necessary to create a third signification to solve this problem: i.e. the identification of the autochthonous people living within the geographical space of Assam. But this third signification of the word has created another problem: Since the definition of autochthonous, according to Levi Strauss, means being born from the earth/soil, or something that is indigenous to a place, it brings forth many unsettled questions. The various tribes (such as the Bodos, Mishings, Karbis, Rabhas, Garos and others) who have lived in this region since time immemorial may be considered autochthons and are thus some of the non-tribal communities who have settled in this valley over the past few centuries, the aggregate of which make up the Assamese people. This category excludes those immigrants who have settled there comparatively recently, and are therefore new entrants into the territory, culture, and language. In order to accommodate these later entrants into the fold of Assamese identity, many cultural icons such as Bhupen Hazarika, Bishnu Rabha, and Jyoti Prasad Aggarwala have played a decisive role, according to Pisharoty, which she elaborates on in a chapter entitled *The Discord*. It can

be surmised that a culture is not a fixed entity, but a dynamic and ever evolving process.

However, Pisharoty's definition of khilonjia has serious political implications because one organization in Assam, called *Mahasangha*, is demanding a quota of eighty percent of all assembly seats and government jobs for the Khilonjia population. People whose descendants entered the territory of Ahom Kingdom (excluding the Goalpara district) after 1826 are not considered khilonjia by the author, as she conveniently overlooks the annexation of Goalpara District which was earlier under the suzerainty of the Koch kingdom (1515), then the Muhammadans, and finally the British (1793). Technically, it would be erroneous to identify a group of people as khilonjia by excluding the population that lived in Goalpara region because the present-day Assam also includes Goalpara. Neither the khilonjia nor the Assamese identity should be seen through this monolithic perspective, as Assamese identity is a composite identity to which all communities have contributed to varying degrees. As Suniti Kumar Chatterji pointed out in his book *The Place of Assam in the History and Civilisation of India*, "Bodo and Austric and Dravidian with Aryan-speaking elements from Bengal and Bihar, and with [the] Siamese-Chinese section of [...] mongoloids in their Thai tribe of the Ahoms [are] finally becoming transformed [into] the Aryan-Assamese-speaking masses of the valley...This can be looked upon as Assam's great contribution to the synthesis of cultures and fusion of races that took place in India." In such circumstances, pushing for a Khilonjia identity on the basis of 1826 will forever represent discrimination.

The efficacy of the Assam Accord seemed to have tapered off with the passage of time, and the central issue has been hijacked by the right-wing forces of proponents of both the major religions, Hindu and Muslim. In contrast, politicians have drawn rich dividends over the years by delaying the implementation of the accord; with the updating of NRC, the same politicians are now trying – or rather, have tried successfully to some extent – to stoke religious sentiment, thereby attempting to cloak the entire NRC/Assam Accord exercise in a religious hue. Pisharoty examines how the fault lines of the NRC process, the victims trapped in "paper identities," the introduction of the controversial Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB), and the flow of illegal immigrants have proved disastrous. She further narrates the ordeals of people who have been left out of the draft NRC. The heart-wrenching stories of these people show the failure of the state mechanism, as there are many people whose cases have been cleared by the Foreign Tribunal Court (FT Court) and are eligible to be included into the NRC, but who, because of a lack of adequate knowledge, have repeatedly become victims. Pisharoty does not deny the presence of illegal immigrants, as the study reveals that there is a well-organized cartel involved

in helping illegal immigrants to enter India. However, with the BJP government pitching in to support the CAB, the Hindus of Bangladesh may find an excuse to infiltrate into Assam that would not only be debilitating for Assamese language and culture, but will also seriously impair the economic condition of the state.

The strength of the book lies in the unbiased approach of the author in representing the facts as they are. She appeals for social cohesion by citing examples of Hemanga Biswas and Bhupen Hazarika and rejects partisan politics. Although there are also some omissions on the part of the author, the book will nevertheless remain an important research document that brings out much vital information that was hitherto unknown. The strength of the work lies in its unbiased and unprejudiced analysis of the historical incidents, and in its proposal of a solution to the cankerous problem in Assam.

