

THE TIWA MOVEMENT FOR IDENTITY IN ASSAM AND THE ISSUE OF LAND ALIENATION

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This research work is intended to study the issue of land alienation of Tiwa tribe of Assam which is the key factor for the Tiwa autonomy movement in post-colonial Assam. An attempt has been made in this paper to highlight the autonomy movement of the Tiwas which they are fighting to preserve self-identity in North East India. The Tiwas which are one of the major tribe of Assam had started the autonomy movement in post-colonial Assam under various organizations. They had demanded an autonomous Tiwa district to preserve the identity of the Tiwa tribe. After the Assam movement the Tiwa autonomy movement gained its momentum in 1989, when the All Tiwa Student Union was formed, it took the shape of a mass movement. This movement had forced the state government of Assam to create the Tiwa Autonomous Council on 13th April, 1995. In the autonomy movement of the Tiwas, the issue of land alienation was a key factor for Tiwa identity movement which was mainly caused due to large scale immigration to Assam both in colonial and post-colonial period. There had been a continuous flow of migration into Assam ever since the British occupation in Assam. During the time of British administration the company brought its servants from outside Assam to run its administration. The colonization of land by settlers from East Bengal began in a big way in the second decade of 20th century. In the post colonial period also the migration to Assam was continued creating more problems to its local people. The flow of migration into Assam had changed the demographic as well as socio economic and political spheres of life among the inhabitants of Assam. The tribal people of the region, who were the sons of soil had to lose their land and were forced to shift to other places as they failed to compete with the immigrant people from Bangladesh and even some parts of India also. The issue of land alienation resulted tribal unrest in North East India resulting various forms of demands for autonomous state or districts to preserve ethnic identity and safeguard their land and other rights. Along with other tribes of Assam, the Tiwa tribe also started the autonomy movement to preserve

their identity in the state. Land alienation which was due to large scale immigration in the state was the key factor for the Tiwa autonomy movement. Loss of land to the outsiders who were advance in all sides brought many complexities to the society of Tiwa tribe in post colonial period. An attempt has been made in this paper to study the problem of immigration into Assam and the issue of land alienation of tribal people particularly of Tiwa tribe which precipitated in the form of autonomy movement in Assam.

The post colonial period of North East India witnessed several forms of autonomy movement for separate state or autonomous districts by the ethnic tribes of the region. In Assam also along with the Bodos the Tiwas, Rabhas, Mishings etc. had launched autonomy movement demanding creation of autonomous district within the state. The Tiwa people of Assam had started their movement with an identity consciousness to fulfill their aspirations after the Assam Accord. The issue of immigration and land alienation was the main cause for this autonomy movement in the region. Land alienation of the Tribal people had deteriorated their economic condition. The Tribal Belt or Blocks failed to protect the land of the Tribal people. The non-tribal people had explicated the economy of the tribal people in Assam. As the tribal people were easy going and peace loving, they easily became victims by the non-tribals. Most of the Tiwa people of Sonapur, Jagiroad, Morigaon and West part of Nagaon lost their roots in their own villages for non-protection of their land within the exiting belts and blocks. This situation compelled the Tribal people to the path of movement in various forms.

During the colonial period the British officers regarded the people of Assam not suitable for colonial administration and encouraged immigration in order to manage the colonial administration and to introduce modern industry in the state. It appears that there was a number of spheres where migration was large in numbers with diverge origin as Tea garden labourers and other labourers from Bihar, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and Orissa, settlers on agricultural land from Eastern Bengal, Hindu Bengali migrants in service sectors, Marwari migrants trade, business and industry and migrants from Nepal as agriculturist and livestock farmers.

The colonial states designed large areas of vacant land in Assam as 'Waste Land' available either for tea plantation or for settlement of migrant peasants. The widespread occupation of land for tea plantations consolidated the foundations of 'planter's Raj' in Assam. By 1901 tea plantation had occupied one fourth of the total settled areas of Assam. This adversely affected the traditional agriculturists as well as the shifting cultivators of the tribals. A number of public places like the market where the villagers brought their farm products either for sale or exchange came under tea plantation. Even the rural communication system was disrupted as most of the public roads were

fenced off and the people were denied access. In many places the agriculturist villagers had to walk a number of miles around the tea gardens. The use of roads that went through the tea gardens was restricted. The occupation of land for tea plantations did not create much trouble to the tribals as they were basically familiar with paddy cultivations. The situation became critical when large number of Muslim migrants began to flow from East Pakistan into Assam in search of land. First they occupied the *Chaar* areas and then began to occupy the government land and encroached upon the grazing reserves. Since 1920 they began to occupy the areas inhabited by the tribal people of Assam. The leaders of the Tribal League had criticized the land policy of Md. Sadulla government which encouraged the immigration of people to Assam to produce more foods. It appears to them that the increasing number of non-tribals in the tribal Belts and Blocks were posing a threat to tribal identity. The Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act, 1886 provided protection of the tribal land under section 160 to 170. The main objective of this section was to protect the interest of the tribal people. Large scale encroachment in the Tribal Belts and Blocks have assumed alarming proportion and the situation has obviously led the tribals to a pitiable state of landlessness and homelessness within the very Belts and Blocks.

The main background of the Assam Movement of 1979 was the issue of expulsion of migrants to Assam. This movement saw mass mobilization in the state and people from all section participated in the movement. One of the reason of the mass mobilization in the movement was the demand of deportation of illegal migrants to the state which was related to the issue of land, a major concern for the indigenous tribes of Assam. The Muslim migrants from East Bengal origin occupied a vast tract of land in lower and middle Assam. If the movement would be successful and the demand for deportation of foreigners fulfilled, the land they owned would be abandoned.

This was especially a crucial issue for the indigenous tribal groups such as the Tiwas of Assam. The plains indigenous communities of Assam once had a vast tract of land, but now had lost most of the traditional land. Many parts of land were settled by the Muslims of Bengal origin. After India's independence the tribal belts and blocks were created by government in order to reserve the land of the tribes and to prohibit non-tribals to acquire land in tribal areas. But these belts and blocks failed to function and the tribals gradually lost land to the immigrants.

Prior to colonization, there existed a Tiwa kingdom called Gobha in the Nellie region of present Nagaon District. In the colonial period the Bengali speaking Muslim peasants from district like Myemnsingh were allowed to come and settled in Brahmaputra valley. Encroachment of the illegal migrants was so spread that just in Morigaon district where large number of Tiwa population are there, the Tiwa inhabited areas like Bakolibori, Baminzari, Rongapara, Kacharijan, Gagolmari,

Gahjan, Panikauri, Kalikajuri, Hariapar, Raomariand Sukutiputa Habi etc. came under the dominations of the non-tribal settlers. The original Tiwa people of these areas were compelled to live in the various forest and hill areas. According to the 1971 census, 39.39% of the population of the district was muslim. In 2001 the number of Muslims exceeded half the population both in Naggaon and Morigaon district.

The tribals are agriculturists and as such their economic structure was based on agricultural productions. The encroachment of tribal areas not only devastates the tribal economy but adversely affected the socio political life of the tribals. It brought a sudden change in demography of the state. In many places the encroachers and immigrants outnumbered the tribals. In some areas they became minority and they were exploited and discriminated buy the outsiders. Thus immigration leads to disequilibrium of various kinds of socio economic life of the tribals.

It appears to the tribals that the problems including the problems of land alienation could be solved only in a separate state of their own. The emerging elite of the tribal middle class and the youth student force of the tribals began to mobilize their people demanding autonomous state or districts. The Tiwa autonomy movement which first started in 1967 and was organized under the banner of Lalung Darbar was the result of land alienation to the immigrant people.

Although the Tiwas are the original inhabitants of the state, but in many places they are losing their lands. Land alienation is one of the major factors for the discontentment of the Tiwas for which they are agitating to achieve an autonomous district. In the plains, the tribal Belts and Blocks were constituted under the provisions of the chapter X of Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act, 1886. But non-tribal people are occupying the land belonging to tribal people. The upper class people belonging to other caste are taking lands in low costs. The Tribal Belts and Blocks failed to protect the land of the Tiwa tribe. In the name of factories also the state government took land from the Tiwa people. In Jagiroad area under the Gova Tribal Block in the name of Hindusthan Paper Mills thousands of hectors of land were given to private company. The Tiwa people of the region had to forcefully shift to other hilly areas. The land alienation from tribal to non-tribals has gone to the worst extent producing hundreds of thousands of landless people. It becomes the colony of non tribals.

The Bench Mark Survey in the tribal sub-plan areas of Assam conducted during December 1978 to February 1979 by the Directorates of Economics and Statistics, Assam, at the instance of the Home Ministry has thrown up data on the socio-economic conditions of the tribal people of the state. The Survey covered 4420 villages with 8347 Hamlets recording a total population of

22.87lakhs of which plain tribals numbered 12.57 lakhs. The survey showed that out of the total area of 4.89 hectors only 0.22 hectors (4.5%) were irrigated. Of the total tribal households (1,79,395), 13,029 households (7.8%) transferred land to non-tribals during the ten years period prior to the that of the survey.

The survey revealed that out of the 3.51 lakhs households 26,711 households (7.6%) had transferred land to non-tribals. In spite of the strict provisions in the Revenue Regulations, large scale encroachment in government waste land, reserved lands including transfer of *patta* lands have taken place by fraudulent means with the Belt and Block areas. The survey also reveals that out of 3,50,894 households, 19.2% were found to be indebted in the project areas. The indebted householders were indebted to money lenders.

The government of Assam constituted a sub-committee of Advisory Council in 1974 to review the working of the tribal Belts and Blocks. In its report which was made public in 1976, the Committee states that large scale encroachment both in reserved and government lands including unauthorized purchase is taking place in various Belts and Blocks. According to the report of the Sub-Committee 8259 hectors of government waste lands and reserved lands had been encroached by 11,464 persons who were not eligible to get settlement in Belts and Blocks and 2,039 hectors of land had been transferred to 2,371 ineligible persons. The report also highlighted that the provisions of the Chapter X of Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act have not been implemented sincerely. On the other hand it appears to the Committee that the officials responsible for the implementation of the provisions have instead of safeguarding the interests of the tribal people of the region in such Belts and Blocks have been themselves frequently infringed the provisions and allowing illegal encroachers and transfer of lands to non-tribals by corrupt means. Many of such infiltrators have been able to get either settlement or mutation of lands and also registration of sale deeds etc. through the collaboration of these corrupt officials. For instance, although there are hundreds of encroachers in the Belts and Blocks, none these were evicted from the Belts. Due to the negligence on the part of the government officials to evict the encroachers, their number is increased day by day causing a serious threat to the existence of the tribal people. The Tiwa people living in various Belts and Blocks have been facing the same problem and they are losing their lands.

The Committee had given several suggestions and have the opinion that the first and foremost duty of the revenue administration should be to eject all the in-eligible encroachments both from *Sarkari* as well as *Patta* lands in all Belts and Blocks within a definite time period. All such land made free from encroachment should be simultaneously hand over possession to eligible landless people of the same Belts and Blocks. For that purpose, police forces have to be deployed, if necessary to maintain peace and order in such areas.

The growing number of Muslim population in rural areas and the expansion of their settlements led many people to believe that Muslims were the ones who grabbed the lands from indigenous tribal groups. Indeed the focus of land alienation of indigenous peoples by the movement leaders may be the main reason why the indigenous tribal groups supported or sympathized with the movement. The Tiwa people of Assam also participated in the Assam movement only to expel the foreigners from their areas. Majority of the tribal youths supported the movement launched by the AASU. The six years from 1979 to 1985 saw a heightened prominence on the issue of foreign nationals in Assamese society mostly East Pakistani and Bangladeshi. The student organization had started a large scale movement against the inclusion of foreigners in the electoral rolls. They had called a general boycott of the general Assembly elections of 1983. The movement emerged against the backdrop of continued immigration to Assam from the East Bengal region since the colonial period. The increasing numbers of foreigners in the voter list had compelled the AASU to launch this movement. The leaders of the anti foreigners movement demanded the deletion of the names of the foreigners from the voters' list and deportation of the illegal migrants from the state.

The All Tiwa Student Union (ATSU) and Autonomous Lalung District Demand Committee (ALDDC), the two active organizations of the Tiwas who had launched the autonomy movement had submitted various memorandums to the state and central government of India regarding the issue of land alienation and urged the government to create autonomous district so that land and other rights of the Tiwas could be preserved in the state. It was the the issue of immigration and land alienation by the Tiwa tribe that they compelled to launched the identity movement. The movement of the Tiwas had forced the state government of Assam to create Tiwa Autonomous Council in 1995 without a fixed boundary. The Autonomous Council has taken some measures to preserve the land of the tribes.

Autonomy movement in North East India is the result of relative deprivation of the tribal people of the region. The Tiwa tribe of the region appears to have started the autonomy movement

mainly to develop their socio-economic and political conditions as well as to preserve their identity. The foremost problem of the Tiwas is the economic problem. Economically most of the Tiwa people are backward. Entire community is dependent on agricultural activities for their livelihood. They were far away from the use of modern technology in the field of agriculture. Their per capita income is among the lowest in the country. In the hilly region there is no sufficient cultivable land for which hill Tiwa people are forced to use the high lands on hillocks for their agricultural purpose. The Tiwa people living in hills involve themselves in *Jhum* cultivation. Due to shortage of cultivable lands as well as lack of modern machineries of cultivation the production is not sufficient for their maintenance. Permanent land settlement for the Tiwas in the hilly regions has not been done. As a result most of the Tiwa people in the hills don't have their '*Patta*' though they have been possessing a particular plot of land since immemorial. The rapid decreased of forest areas in the hills brings many problems to their cultivation. Beside this, they have to depend mainly on rainfall. There is no irrigation facility to use it to boost their economic condition. The condition of the Tiwa people living in plain areas is somewhat better than those living in the hills areas.

The state government of Assam and central government of India should take measures to stop continuous flow of immigration to Assam. Otherwise it will jeopardize the demographic situation of the state and will arise more clashes with the ethnic communities of Assam. The large scale immigration had brought a change in the political, economic and social structure in Assam. All illegal land transfer of the tribal people should be cancelled and land transferred illegally should be restored to the tribals. Machinery should be created involving non-officials to look after the implementation of the Assam Land and Revenue Regulations.

Every tribe in North East India has had their own distinct history, culture and language, which have formed very important factors in the formation of their identity and a sense of ethnicity different from others. Preservation of identity or their own culture is the basic reason for tribal movement in North East India. The tribal movement although apparently political in character, agrarian issues and economic aspirations gave a new dimension to their movement. It is a conflict between actual wielders of political and economic powers with those who want to be master of their soil and destiny. As aspiration rise and economic development is slow, militancy is found in increase.

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