

HS4.301: Environment and Politics in India

Assignment 2

**Q:**

Based on the following readings, explain the relationship(s) between politics, environment (as in riverine ecologies) and social tensions in Assam.

1. Arupjyoti Saikia, 'The Historical Geography of the Assam Violence', Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 47, No. 41 (13 OCTOBER 2012), 15-18.
2. Arupjyoti Saikia, 'Jute in the Brahmaputra Valley: The making of flood control in twentieth-century Assam', Modern Asian Studies, Vol. 49, No. 5 (September 2015), 1405-1441.
3. Debarshi Das and Arupjyoti Saikia, 'Early Twentieth Century Agrarian Assam: A Brief and Preliminary Overview', Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 46, No. 41 (8-14 OCTOBER 2011), 73-80.

Word Limit: 1000-1500 words

## Analysis of the relationship(s) between politics, environment (as in riverine ecologies) and social tensions in Assam

Assam's complex and intertwined political, environmental and social tensions often correlate with the conflicts of identity and power among various communities. However, this endless debate helps nothing in understanding the debates around the socio-political settings of Assam; instead, it contributes only to political polarity among the local population. Assam is a northeastern Indian state home to the river Brahmaputra in India. The valley's ecology plays an essential role in agrarian practices, human settlements, resource distribution, as well as the conflicts of the region. The Brahmaputra is not only a source of water in the region. Still, it is often regarded to play an influential position in the economic diaspora of Assam, as well as the politics and culture, as the river forms the core of riverine civilization and impacts the structure and relations of Assamese society.

Assam has retained its own political, ecological and social structure for centuries. When the whole country was under Mughal control, the Ahom dynasty fought against them as many as 17 times to retain their control over the region, where they had their unique political structure. Geographically, the region has hill valley regions and riverine valley ecology, and the state followed tribal economic practices as long as the start of the nineteenth century.

The region of the western Brahmaputra valley has witnessed different agrarian practices. Initially, the tribal communities such as Bodos were engaged in a self-sufficient agrarian economy, where they believed in community ownership while practising shifting cultivation. The Bodos historically lived along the lower Himalayas where the soil is primarily coarse gravel and couldn't retain water for long, making it challenging to cultivate paddy there but suitable for sal plantation situationally. Therefore, various tribes used to exchange products to facilitate vibrant informal trade relations.

However, the state's dynamics changed when the British took over the region in 1826 by defeating the last ruler of the Ahom dynasty and changing the policies to capitalize on the state's geography. The British government was against the shifting cultivation techniques as it prevented the colonial government from increasing revenue and was a symbol of refusal to enter the permanent fiscal arrangement with the state. And when the British forestry program entered the valley region, they restricted the use of various land patches, which made it difficult for the shifting cultivators to find land for the next harvest. Therefore many tribes, such as Bodo, resorted to permanent cultivation and harvesting of paddy.

The British aimed to replicate the agrarian system of the rest of India, even in the Brahmaputra valley, so that they could easily integrate Assam into a permanent fiscal arrangement with the state. The British started by investing capital in promoting tea plantations in the region. The development of prosperous tea plantations in Assam resulted in the immigration of indentured labour into Assam. After the prosperous tea plantations in the region, the British aimed to capitalize on the water of the Brahmaputra valley by starting Jute plantations, as Jute requires a significant amount of water. Jute was a more profitable cash crop that yielded. Therefore, the British decided to chop 700,000 hectares of forestland in the region to reserve it for jute cultivation. This popular cash crop was against the will of local Assamese peasants as they preferred to cultivate paddy.

Jute plantations in this region were promoted on such a large scale that Jute became one of the imperial government's significant revenue sources. This also encouraged the immigration of Muslims from the

Bengal region towards the Brahmaputra riverine civilization. And historically, the Muslims were sedentary peasants who preferred surplus cash crop production to gain more capital. However, when the price of Jute fell in the 1930s, the Muslim immigrants started cultivating paddy, so they had to move towards the valley's upper reaches. It resulted in the conflict between Bodos and Muslim immigrants for the same resources because of no interdependence between them because of the distinction like their economic policies.

Moreover, the immigration of Muslims after the partition resulted in a rapid change in population dynamics, which started the debate about cultural pollution. Muslim immigrants came to Assam as tenants and landless labourers. Still, when the population of Muslims grew from 5% of the total in 1874 to 23% in 1941, the debates around cultural pollution became evident along with the competition for jobs, land and resources. The narrative of an immigrant as a dacoit who aims to loot and corrupt the ethnic Assamese identity became popular among the natives. However, in today's world, the politics of Assam is divided into two worlds: Brahmaputra valley, which witnessed the emergence of leaders who were empathetic with the Muslim immigrants from East Bengal, and the others who want to preserve the tribal Assamese culture.

The Brahmaputra river is the source of irrigation and nutrients for the fields and provides a means of transporting men and materials. Moreover, thousands of people depend directly or indirectly on the river for their livelihood as fishermen or daily labourers. The change in British policies not only affected the ethnic distribution of the population in the region but also severely impacted the ecology of Assam. Today, Assam is the most flood-prone state in India, which has already faced 12 significant floods from 1950 to 2010. As the imperial bureaucrats entered the Brahmaputra valley, they disturbed the natural eco-balance of the region. The British's decision to increase the land cover for Jute cultivation led to an unprecedented increase in deforestation. The British policies failed in the monsoon climate when the river changed its course, turning the cultivable land into lakes.

Moreover the changing population dynamics resulted in unplanned growth, encroaching on the flood plains. Brahmaputra river, by itself, had a pretty unpredictable behaviour every year. These socio-political changes resulted in hazards of annual floods and soil erosion that create yearly mayhem that shatters the region's fragile agro-economic base, resulting in the loss of acres of cultivable land. Moreover, it is also believed that the magnitude of destruction because of Brahmaputra significantly increased after the earthquake in 1950. And now we face the results of British policies even today when we see Assam is in the news for floods annually, with thousands losing their home, livestock and life.

Therefore, we can observe the interwoven social, political and environmental tensions in the Assamese society, where one has to familiarize oneself with all aspects of Assamese culture even if one wants to learn only about one aspect.

#### References:

1. Arupjyoti Saikia, 'The Historical Geography of the Assam Violence', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 47, No. 41 (13 OCTOBER 2012), 15-18
2. Arupjyoti Saikia, 'Jute in the Brahmaputra Valley: The making of flood control in twentieth-century Assam', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 49, No. 5 (September 2015), 1405- 1441.
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