

How do you think modern politics in Assam is affected by the geographical/ecological factors

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Introduction:

The political atmosphere in any region of the world is closely tied to its economic and demographic conditions. Assam is no exception to this rule. From historical times, the unique geography of this region has posed challenges, as well as provided opportunities for the people. The defining geographical features of Assam are the Himalayan mountains in northeast, Brahmaputra river and its valleys in the centre, and the Garo and Khasi hill regions in the south. The mighty Brahmaputra is one of the largest rivers in the world in terms of the water that flows through it and the silt that is deposited in its floodplains. Usually, floodplains of rivers are magnets for human settlements and agriculture. But the Brahmaputra valley is unique in this respect: the frequently changing course of the river and annual heavy flooding has created unique challenges for settlements, which is why even by the 20th century only 60 percent of the valley is used. In order to account for the effect of ecological factors and significantly the Brahmaputra valley's role in shaping of the modern day politics in Assam, it is essential to

understand that the laws and policies that are helping in managing the state of affairs of present day Assam are a result of politics emerged over time and that it is historically constructed. For the same reason, the we will look at the history of politics and various governing groups of Assam in the past few centuries, ranging from Ahom dynasty's rule and their laws relating to land, agriculture and habitation organization until the nineteenth century, after which the British colonial rule and their trade, land distribution, agriculture patterns and especially the ecological laws inducing migration are looked at in detail. It is necessary to look at the British policies and laws in order to study present day politics since much inspiration is drawn from them. An effort was made to relate the age-old political strategies concerning ecological factors, with the present day laws which are still prevalent either in exact or modified form.

The Ahom Dynasty:

During Neolithic times, human settlements in Assam were primarily in the southern hills. The hills provided an area that was safe from the flooding of the river valley and erratic rainfalls. In the hills, food was easier to collect, and the population adapted to the hill and hill-river environment. Highland areas followed a system of shifting agriculture and terrace farming. Rice was one of the first crops to be cultivated

in the terrace cultivation mode on the hills of Assam. Gradually, in the first few centuries CE, movement from hill regions to river valleys started. One of the principal reasons for migration from the hills to the plains was the gradual disappearance of edible plants, scarcity of food stuff, and replacement of primary forest cover with new forests such as bamboo in highland areas. First settlements started on the banks of smaller rivers before reaching the plains of Brahmaputra. From the 11th century CE, there is evidence of sporadic attempts to move to floodplains, but the settlements were repeatedly destroyed due to flooding and changing the course of the river. The transition from highland shifting cultivation (terrace rice cultivation) to lowland wet and dry rice cultivation was facilitated by settlers' familiarity with the physical environment of the floodplains and simultaneous growth in population.

As various tribes and communities fought for control over the floodplains, the older inhabitants like Chuthias and Barahis were pushed back into the southern hills. The Kacharis and Jaintias were in turn pushed back to hills in the early era Ahom

wars. These tribes hold rights to the hilly forest regions till date. The rights of the hill tribals are being protected by the Sixth schedule, which gives the indigenous tribals' autonomy in controlling their territories. Exchange of commodities and land between hillsmen and floodplain rulers continued over time, when the tribals failed to assert control over the floodplains.

A few centuries later, the Ahom migrants to the valley vigorously pursued wet rice cultivation to establish their political claim there. During the rule of the Ahom kings, attempts were made to study and familiarise themselves with the larger landscape. They were the first people to be able to build stable settlements on the Brahmaputra floodplains because of their familiarity with wet-rice cultivation practiced in fields surrounded by bunds. In fact, it took them two centuries of developing expertise in hydraulic engineering, and repeated shifting over the floodplains to stake any claim over the area. To survive and thrive in the floodplains, they had to make intelligent choices based on the ecological setting. The reclamation of floodplains involved a life of living with water. The volatility of the river caused the new Settlers to be in awe

of the floods. They frequently moved to hillocks and higher grounds when required. This is reflected even in recent history- in the aftermath of the great Earthquake of Assam in 1950, annual recurring floods in the Brahmaputra and its tributaries, changing river courses and erosions result in lakhs of displaced people. During the Ahom era, Embankments were built over vast areas to hold the rain water for rice cultivation, and to prevent flood water from entering the fields. These embankments were in the form of raised roads, and served the dual purpose of connecting places via roads at a height to prevent flooding, as well as boundaries for the fields. Large areas of undulating landscape were converted to flat fields in order to create rice fields. This task took centuries of effort from the people.

The Ahoms created the Paik system for land organization, where people from the general population had to mandatorily spend effort on construction activities for the common good. The Paiks' labour built boats, levies, roads, bridges and water tanks. This extensive investment of time and effort during the Ahom rule contributed significantly to the

habitation of the floodplains as well as the lowlands in Assam. The different types of land were categorised and named as per their nature and contribution to agriculture. The people had adaptations specific to the geography to cope with the frequent flooding situation. Houses were built on stilts (machans) and a system of rehabilitation was set up for people and cattle affected by flooding. The people faced challenges from flooding as well as extensive weeds due to the humid climate. Both these were addressed by following shifting cultivation. When the fields were flooded, the people would shift to non flooded areas for cultivation. Similarly, when the fields were overgrown with weeds, the fields were abandoned for a couple of years, and shading techniques were used to get rid of weeds. The Ahoms' nuclear, fragmented human habitation based on type of land facilitated the adaptation to floodplain living. However, the system of shifting cultivation was not looked upon favourably by the British rule, because the revenue from tax was more difficult to track. The tribals in the plains as well as tribals in the hills had unique issues when the British ruled India, and some of these issues persist to this day.

Even in present times, annual recurring floods in the Brahmaputra and its tributaries, changing river courses and erosions result in lakhs of displaced people. The reserved forest of Assam throughout the 60's, 70's and even today seem to be targeted as the most suitable space for the rehabilitation of human as well as cattle population. Rehabilitation of flood and erosion affected people in the forest land for settlement in the past as well as aggressive and organized group encroachment under compulsion of such vagaries. The Assam forest policy addresses these issues. The encroachers who belong to the ethnic communities of Assam and who have traditionally and characteristically depended on the forests are motivated to join the forest protection activities as economic stakeholders. Providing sustainable livelihood support to the people who live in the fringe villages is a major thrust activity of the forest department so that fringe villagers would work as real protectors of forests. The difficult geography of the Brahmaputra valley delayed the habitation of the floodplain region and there were vast tracts of uninhabited land for a longer duration, as compared to the surrounding areas. The fertility of the floodplains and their potential value attracted

Mughals kings. They tried to expand their kingdom eastwards towards Assam, but were not able to gain a foothold in the region. The local inhabitants put up a stiff fight, and their deep knowledge of the river and local geography gave them an advantage in the wars. Resistance towards immigrants settling in the plains and gaining control of land has been there in the past, and some of the tribals in the floodplain regions demand protection of their rights in current times as well.

British Colonial Rule:

After the success of British colonial rule in Bengal during the eighteenth century, they sought to extend their land control over Assam, which happened in the nineteenth century after a series of battles along the characteristic Brahmaputra valley. But it wasn't until soon after, did they realize that political control could be firmly established in the valley only after taming down and befriending the uncertainties of the river Brahmaputra. Because the river and its associated floodplains or highlands are not only geographical entities providing sustenance to the Assamese people, but also serve as units of

cultural centrality in the valley by providing identity through crops cultivated and its generationally developed strong ties with the land. The East India Company, which was looking after the administrative and military functions in Assam then, had a primary goal of increasing the revenue generated, which predominantly happened through the taxation of land, settled agriculture and production taxes. The geographic location of Assam, as opposed to other places like Bengal, made the process of revenue collection a huge challenge to the Company and forced them to look out for a new set of political rules ranging from taxation, administration to diplomatic relations and even trade. The Brahmaputra river plays a crucial role in the lives of the Assamese people, because its direction in the monsoon season helps in fixation of the fertile floodplains, the silt it brings about decides the crops to sow and its swift helps decide on the habitation patterns and the flood nature decides the agricultural patterns and cycles. These uncertainties associated with environmental vulnerability made it difficult in applying the rules used elsewhere in Assam, instead new sets of political rules in fields mentioned above were created by

specialized political masters, some of which still continue to present day modern politics of Assam.

The current politics of modern day Assam, ranging from the rising of multiple insurgency groups to its commercial significance for jute and tea cannot be seen in isolation from the British political practises which were drafted exclusively for the state of Assam. The ecological boundaries helped establish political identities, especially amongst the floodplain dwellers and hill tribes of Assam. These identities were solidified by the Empire, as opposed to the fluidity maintained by the Ahom's, in the late nineteenth century. This distinction was necessary for the British, in order for revenue collection which is the sole purpose of political domination. The floodplains consisted of silt and finer micronutrients accumulated by the river and fertilized the land rendering it more profitable in growing crops like mustard, paddy and even jute which were also exported, as opposed to the hill areas and their less profitable products. Their administration of identification of settled agricultural hill tribes through various policies(Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Law, 1886) continued through

independence and helped in protection of tribal rights and creation of hill tribal policies and even helped in creation of reserved forests. Where a strong political play on its counterpart, the much more fiscally valuable floodplains, was long sought after due to the hardships put forward by the fluid landscape criss-crossed by turbulent and unsteady rivers. Some of these policies and laws of excluded versus included regions and Inner Line regulations, helped frame frontiers for modern day Assam as well. Moreover improvement of floodplains meant better road access to outsiders, more human settlement and therefore more land under agriculture. For this purpose, Scott and various other following governors worked considerably to revive the embankment system of the Ahom times to help curtail inundation of the fertile lands of *chaporis*, which happened by a series of failed attempts, a contempt administrative power, a drain of treasury and a crowd of unpaid labourers. The embankment system, used as a ridge to trap water and a cross connection of roads, has a set of administrative and financial policies attached which are still operational in certain places of Assam where bunds need repairing.

Another significant policy of the British that continues till date is the land policies of the period, which started as a result of the unique ecological distribution of the valley. The ever-changing path of the Brahmaputra river creates a land of utmost fertility but is always at the peril of inundation, called as char whose location keeps changing from monsoon to monsoon each year. In order to reduce the burden of annual revenue demand, the British started leasing out huge areas of chars to people on basis of rental agreements, and formed committees to lease out chars, resolve disputes over them, allocate at times of contestation and take on litigation, which increased the collection of revenue. This allowed them to bring chars under the Imperial tax regime and bring stringent laws for the governance of chars which was a formidable challenge. The modern politics around land are a variation of these land regulation policies put forward by the British in terms of allocation, distribution of surplus land, taxation of such lands whereas hereditary rights is a new addition put forward after Independence. But later in colonial rule, the *chars* didn't drastically jump locations from one district to another,

thanks to the measures of British policies of growing cash crops and uncontrolled influx of immigrants. The leasing out of chars was done through bidding, which attracted a large immigrant population from neighboring areas of Bengal, Dacca, Bangladesh and even Nepal who were in search of fertile lands of cultivation. This change in patterns of agriculture encouraged immigrants to indulge in growing a variety of crops other than mustard, jute or rice like tea, and oil and eventually facilitated in changing the composition of soil and its surrounding and helped in curtailing inundation to an extent. Due to the controlled inundation, the British developed policies such that the land between floodplains and the hills, through a process of land grab, was given up for commercial plantations of tea which allowed more immigrants to come in and set up tea gardens which helped the British in expanding their treasury. Because of this there was a rapid population expansion in Assam in around 1920s which fuelled the apprehension already existing in the indigenous Assamese populations about the ethnic identity. The consequence of which is of utmost prominence on modern day politics of Assam, which fuelled in indigenous people fighting many

separatists war and insurgencies due to increased “Musalman Cultivators” from neighbouring Bangladesh.

The colonial commercial policies of trade gave a drastically new dimension to Assam's trade relations with its bordering regions. Especially the frontier trade of Assam with neighboring states of Bengal, Bhutan and Tibet through the Brahmaputra river traffic transport channel boosted export of material such as tea, mustard and jute which furnished the British with a bag of revenue and good foreign relations. Along with this, the Company's trade officials set up *bazaars* along the valley's floodplains which resulted in sale of surplus and filling of treasury but also caused erosion of the floodplains. This however strengthened the ties between the plains of Assam and the hills of Bhutan, Tibet and Northern Bengal and helped in a stream of immigrant workers to work in Assam's tea plantations. After independence, the sea route through Bengal had taken a back seat, but the consequences of the earlier Brahmaputra based traffic trade struck a cord of discord and further agitated the insider versus outsider quarrel.

Another conduct of Assamese politics is rooted in ecological factors of wildlife and their conservation. The modern day fauna diversity of Assam is partially an effort of the British policies put forward in the twentieth century. The British had indulged in large scale mono-plantation programmes like those of commercially viable species such as sal and timber on one side, while on the other hand the increase in land under cultivation left little space for the naturally occurring wildlife corridor and led to wild animals destroying the crops. In order to protect the floodplain grasslands, expand the halted agriculture and increase the government revenue, the forest and revenue department together initiated the flagship programme of Karigange National Park. Which is today, one of the finest wildlife refuge parks of the world, serves as a hot seat for government funding, political support and more importantly in public discourse.

Geography - Jute - Political Tensions

Another critical observation to make in Assam politics is how they are affected by the increase in the amount of land that cultivates jute. If you wonder how it is connected to

Geographical factors, in these following few paragraphs, we will briefly describe the required connections involved to understand the impact of geographical factors on Assam's modern-day politics.

Before going into the details, let us first understand how the geography of Assam has favoured the cultivation of jute. Compared to other primary crops such as rice, cotton, silk, etc., jute had lately entered India's trade market in the first half of the 19th century. Eventually. The British were also searching for methods to export jute from India due to the regular rising demand for jute worldwide. Bengal has a humid climate accompanied by its loamy soils and cheap labour. These conditions in Bengal made it the first preference for boosting jute cultivation. By the later half of the 19th century, Bengal became India's primary source for jute production. However, by the 1870s, the amount of jute that could be cultivated from Bengal had reached its limit, and the colonial government started looking for other alternatives for jute cultivation. Given the context of the given readings, One can easily guess the next option. It is nothing but cultivating jute in Assam's flood

plains, but that was not obvious in colonial India. Experimenting with alternatives like the Krishna Godavari delta failed because of the poor quality of fibre caused by dirt in the river water. The Brahmaputra flood plains were hypothesised ideal for jute cultivation because factors favourable for jute cultivation such as the abundance of clear water for better fibre quality, deep soil texture, flood and rainfall patterns were all satisfied these floodplains. This hypothesis is indeed correct and verified by the soil scientists of India.

Now that the British realised the importance of Assam's floodplains, it is essential to choose a new set of cultivators for these floodplains. There are some debates around induced migration (forced migration triggered by the British) that might create controversies among the other class of peasants in Assam, the tea labourers. Luckily at the same time, due to unfavourable conditions in east Bengal, many peasants migrated from there to Assam with rising demand for jute given the number of jute mills and change in vision for the flood plains. Eventually, the population of Assam gradually

increased due to the favourable conditions mentioned above. But this whole migration modified the demography of Assam by giving rise to two different classes in Assam. The first one is the native Assamic peasants, and the second one are the people who migrated from East Bengal to work under jute farms. In the context of this essay, it is essential to identify the link between Geography and the migration of these peasants. The primary motivation for the peasants to migrate comes from the ability of Assam's geography to provide what British men desire. If we look at it, we can clearly notice a view of Man trying to conquer nature by exploring it. That's just another solid piece of evidence of the standard environmental narrative that blames the British for playing around or altering the existing resource use patterns in India, which in the long run influenced the social structure as well as the geography of India.

All these migrated peasants used to work in the available floodplains, which they used to rent from the wealthy landlords of Assam. Along with this, they also extracted additional floodplain area, which was not used for any cultivation before.

Due to their dominance over floodplains which in turn is a consequence of the increasing demand for jute, the total flood plain area increased from 38,000 Acres to 300,000 Acres from the 1900s to the 1930s. Now let us understand why there are tensions between the two classes over natural resources; the flood plains. Before the arrival of these migrants, even before the increased demand of jute, they were not completely treated as wastelands. Native Assamese tribes never settled in the flood plains but they used to make use of the condition offered by them occasionally. For example, in winters they used to camp in the floodplains for further utilisation of natural resources such as hunting, fishing, local markets and vendors taking this to their advantage etc. But Once the demand for jute increased, two things happened. Peasants from East Bengal migrated to Assam which has been our major discussion so far, But apart from this one more important observation worth noting is that the British government initially for the sake of Increasing jute production the British government kept things for these hard-working peasants. They collected minimal taxes from them as well as allowed them to arrange permanent settlements in these floodplains. They also provided these peasants with

fertilisers and pesticides. Although never mentioned in the given readings, one can inductively reason the fact that this free supply of pesticides would have affected the environment of Assam in a non-deterministic manner.

Let us recollect the idea of modes of production and the difference between resource use patterns. Now the British intervened with the resource usage patterns or more precisely, changing the hunting or nomadic lifestyle (Wilderness or Primitivism) of native Assamese people to organised Agrarianism where they regulated jute production. Thus this whole focus on maximising jute production constrained the Native Assamese people to enjoy their occasional common freedom over the flood plains. The worst part for the Assamese peasants is that they are treated as naive working-class following simplistic ideas and often famous for being lazy. At the same time, the migrated people were praised for their hard-working nature to thrive. Due to all these reasons, there has always been political tension in the Assam atmosphere. It is essential to understand the sequence of events that caused

these events. To summarise the above few paragraphs in simple terms, one can build this sequence map.

- Demand for jute increased all over the world.
- The British started looking for jute alternatives and failed miserably.
- Assam geography: favours production of jute. Wastelands are actually valuable.
- This revelation encouraged peasants of West Bengal to migrate
- British saw this as an opportunity for maximising commodity and supported these peasants in different ways mentioned above
- Cultivation in floodplains with the state's intervention made it difficult for the local Assamese people to enjoy natural resources. Thus creating tensions in Assam's atmosphere.

Conclusion:

On the whole it is not difficult to see that the politics of Assam either historically, contemporarily or in the modern era are

intertwined to the geographical environs of the place, to greater extent than the rest of India. Ranging from the tea plantation based economy in the area between the floodplains and hills, the citizenship and cultural identity issue of NRC due to migration from Bangladesh and separate statehood demand, all of the politics can all be attached to the ecological factors of Assam and its unique geographic location. The uncertainty of the Brahmaputra and its ever changing course, the fertile floodplains, the altitudinous hills, unique flora and fauna species and the rest of the ecological factors are deeply interwoven with the culture, identity and day-to-day lifestyle of the Assamese people generationally and therefore indisputably have a considerable effect on the modern day politics of Assam.

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