MODERN STATE AND GOVERNMENTAL SURVILLIENCE THE PROCESS OF ENUMERATION AND CLASSIFICATION IN ASSAM

* NABANEETA GOSWAMI

The formation of Indian nation has a complex parallel of the end of colonial regime and partition. Partition history of India has been ghosted by the reality of communal strife which in many ways still haunts the Indian subcontinent. In Post colonial India one witnesses an extensive degree of classification of the Indian society with even greater categorization of its population. Two events in particular , the Mandal commission - leading to the rise of Caste Politics – and the Ram Janma bhoomi dispute resulting into the demolition of the Babri Mosque in the city of Ayodhya- a reincarnation of the politics of majority and minority- have been the markers of the discourses of Post Independent India. The important question that prevails however is what thus led to a climate of fractured politics of religion, caste and various other divisions that exists today in India? A deeper understanding of the Indian society, can however suffice the conundrum of representation (relating to various identity groups) and reorganization (classification of the population).

The idea of the colonial discursiveness of community and classification could also be identified with Said's concept of Orientalism which is anatomical and enumerative, and one that relies on particularization and division of things (1978). The obsession to classify Indian population was essentially to reverse the indigenous practices and ascribe its own meaning to the human group. The exercise of classification was accomplished through instruments like mapping, surveys, ethnographic studies, and various other endeavor which required enumeration and quantification. The overarching practice of enumeration related to land; forest tribe; etc. were put to practical uses like fixing agrarian tax; or settling land dispute; and for other administrative purposes, indicating the utilitarian rationale of the colonial state (Appadurai,1993).The subsequent shift in the numeric operation of the British administration reveals determining policies and political representation of the indigenous population. Pre-colonial India had a nominal subjection to process of data collection under the monarchs, the cadastral control for the purpose of revenue in the Mughal state for instance. The practice of enumeration in colonial India has consecutively rendered a deeper classification of the communities in the face of its deviance and marginality. The instrument of Census, for example, practically offered the British administration with all sorts of information about its subject population in India which aided in successfully institutionalizing and grouping its

population into several nuance criteria. Such standards can be realized in Post Colonial India too with even greater particularization and division in the society.

Many believed that numbers in the enumeration strategy of the colonial past were a part of a historical experience of literacy of the colonial elite (Money etal,1989, 1987). In case of England the imperative of enumeration, as a central technique of social control, for a powerful state to exist was realized early on (Ludden,1988). The population in the colonies by the British was viewed as different and a predicament in the heart of orientalism (Nigam,1990). The empiricist drive by the colonial state came under several crossroads of indigenous caste ideology or highly differentiated religiously "other" set of group which had to be taken into consideration for urban concerns such as occupation, class, and religion [1]. In countries like England or France statistical drive had been combined with civic control projects like sanitation, urban planning, etc. (Appadurai,1993). This could possibly had given a motive to rely on numeric data in order to initiate social control or reform projects by the European Bureaucrats in the colonies too. But at the same time, it is not an attempt to say that there was no caste and indigenous identity that existed before colonial rule and it was solely the invention of the British colonialism. Here, we partially disagree with scholars like Bernard Cohn, Nicholas Dirks and David Ludden, because their scholarship is largely fore-grounded on the Saidian idea of orientalism in an uncritical manner. Whereas this article takes insights from those studies to understand the political and administrative purposes of the census and other enumerative practices without falling into the trap of conceiving Occidentalism in an uncritical fashion

The enumeration practice in the western world like Britain or France for instance, mostly involved dealing with a set of homogenous population in order to design their civic projects, and so forth. The practice in Colonies had moved beyond the inviolable idea of government as a service provider. In colonies like India this involved mapping regions and communities of the vast landmass, or identifying the societal organisation, and recording all kinds of information pertaining to it. This introduced the colonial state with a set of heterogeneous and largely anomalous population leading to an inequitable approach of the colonial intervention. In this regard, states like Assam remains testament to the challenges in the science of classification and standardization when confronted to its multi-ethnic societal structure. The case of Assam also manifests the failure of the colonial government to bring a technical

---

[1] Cited in Numbers in the colonial imagination (Appadurai,1993,p.318).
Author name: Nabaneeta Goswami, Designation: MA in Development Studies

standard in its enumeration practice and associated policies. Finally, community and classification has been a constant determinant of politics in Assam to an extent that still remains relevant in the current context of identity politics and the question of citizenship. This study is divided into two sections, in which the first section critically examines the deep rooted system of enumeration under the colonial regime in the regional context of Assam. The use of numbers and furtherance of social stratification- one that continues even in Post Independent India- is being discussed in the final section of this article by referring to the various transitions that happened in Assam.

Section I:Numeracy in Assam

The extreme geographical location of Assam can be realized in terms of its proximity with countries like Bhutan; Bangladesh; and other neighbouring states of North East and West Bengal. Assam, thus finds itself in a strategic position as there is a no straightforward manner of encapsulating its several tribal identities, and identity groups coming from the neighbouring regions. Community and classification in Assam witness a cross-cutting of several racial identities. Comingling of racial and other identities in the Pre-colonial Assam under several dynastic rule resulted in the coexistence of multiple social identities this in itself was an enough realization for even deeper classification later in the colonial and post-colonial Assam.

Caste and Religion as a Social Category in Colonial Assam

The colonial intervention in the name of enumeration located 'Caste' as the most crucial marker to represent the Indian population. The orientalist idea of caste as viewed in the other parts of the subcontinent takes a leap in several ways when it comes to Assam. The societal organization as per the initial Census findings in Colonial Assam could not represent a fixed categorization of caste and non-caste groups (Sengupta& Bhardwaj, 2019). The census officials found several anomalies within the social groups in Assam to accommodate these groups under some immaculate classification. The 1891 Census Report reflects on the caste composition of Assam, i.e. Brahmaputra valley, which reveals that although multiple race castes i.e. the four-fold Varna System exist, however it goes beyond the modern professional castes. Caste system however was not completely non-existent rather there was a unique parallel of hierarchies in the societal organization. Many also have observed that the medieval Assamese Society was devoid of specialization along the caste lines which had a distinctive

pattern of socio-economic structure in the region (Guha,1991). Scholars like Sharma have noticed several waves of Indo-Aryan migration from North India which transmitted the Caste belief in the pre-colonial Assamese society (Guha,1991). This process was however, hardened with the British occupation.

The Census revealed some serious limitation of Caste enumeration technique in Assam like the alleged Hindus converting into Aborigines , lack of clarity on the sub-castes, wrongful entry into a higher caste position, to name a few. Caste in Assam therefore never occupied rigidity in the societal organization. The Hindus of Assam regarded the institution of Caste more of a standard of social position and less of a religious institution. In the later period, a whole range of instruction was provided to the District officers involved in the census of 1881. This entailed the process of stratifying the individuals as per their religion, caste, sect, occupational practices (Report on the Census of Bengal, 1881). The complexity however is there had been no clear understanding of the religious composition of few groups, the Koch for instance, despite these communities being declared as a Caste Hindu group in the nineteenth century (Sengupta & Bhardwaj, 2019). It is pointed out that creating a Caste label was important as there were higher number of claimants of the Hindu religion who were diverse in their practices and method of worship.

Section III: Post-Colonial Bequest

The discussion delineated in the preceding sections pointed out that the attempts of colonial enumeration in Assamese society reveals its insufficiency in the method of classifying society for a categorical representation. The failure of the state to describe a unified ideas of caste or a religion is reflected in the case of Assam which faced difficulty in bringing a standardized caste or religious classification in their enumeration system. The phenomenon of exotic understanding of a multifarious population which includes several races, religions, castes, sects, and ethnic groups in Assam is a common occurrence which gathered a lot of political attention. The practice of enumeration, and reading of exotic tendency from the information collected in the post Independent Assam have been determining one's status and claim as a citizen, illegal foreigners, and various other labels which decides the social position of an individual or a community in an Indian society.

Along with the political motive there is also an economic argument that can be attached with the practice of data collection and using numbers to represent its population. It is thus stated that historic event of territorial occupation and segregation with the associated factor of population composition in Assam being relevant to the issue of migration in the state. Colonial Assam in the nineteenth and twentieth century experienced migration from other provinces of British India, resulting into a demographic shift in some of the districts in the region. The economic logic behind this process of population arrangement facilitated by the colonial state was because migration was considered helpful. The growth of tea industry, setting up of coal and oil industry, expansion of railways all required migrant labourers who came from other provinces. Industrial growth of tea industry for instance, also led to the entry of Marwari traders from Rajasthan. Added to this, the colonial government also facilitated migration of the Bengali population who were provided jobs in the lower category of Provincial government; and other migrant groups which included people from the densely populated districts of Bengal. This group of people who came from the densely populated area of Bengal settled in Assam in the twentieth century because of the availability of cultivable wasteland which attracted peasantry [2]. The demographic restructuring facilitated by the colonial state for economic benefit resulted into the fractured politics of Assam in the later years pertaining to the discourse of migration.

Immigrant (Expultion from Assam) Act, 1950

Partition and communal strife in the aftermath of independence in India led to an inundation of migrant population in several parts of the country. Assam witnessed a huge inflow of refugees, and other migrants from East Pakistan. The earlier ordinance of 6th January 1950 was replaced by the Immigrant (Expultion from Assam) Act, 1950 .The act allowed the central government to decide if the stay of a person or a class of person was detrimental to the interest of the people ,and ordered removal of such a person or a class of person from India and Assam along with further direction as it may be considered necessary or expedient

National Register of Citizens, 1951

The practice of government to classify the population becomes a greater project in the post-colonial India which is tied with the notion of citizenship in the country, especially in the context of Assam confronted with the regional history of migration and diverse population.

---

[2] Cited in Whitepaper on Foreigners Issues (Home & Political Department Government of Assam,2012,p.5)

The census operation of 1951 was also accompanied with the preparation of National Register of Citizens (NRC) directed by the Ministry of Home Affairs. NRC was prepared by the census enumerator as an administrative document, not for everyone to access, from the 1951 census slip (Roychoudhury,1981). The very tool of NRC had information about individuals categorized by households and these information were used to analyze certain attributes of the households like size, composition, and so forth (Census Of India,1951). The NRC registers were later also used for investigations on the infiltrants or illegal migrants.

Foreigners Act,1957

The crisis of the illegal immigration in state led to the creation of other categories , in the later years we see a greater use of classifications such as foreigners in the context of Assam. The amendment of the Foreigners Act in 1957 views a person as a foreigner who isn't an Indian citizen, thus this led into wider recognition of Pakistani nationals as foreigners[3]. Besides, it is also the mandate of Foreigners Tribunals which was a major decision making body pertaining to one's legitimacy or illegitimacy as a citizen or a non-citizen in the country.

Prevention of infiltration into India of Pakistan Nationals,1962

The Prevention of infiltration into India of Pakistan Nationals , commonly known as PIP scheme ,applied as rules another such example in the scheme of stricter classification of the government. Approved by the government in 1962, the intention behind this scheme was to build a system of Surveillance- security screening- in order to keep a check on its citizens. Applicable to several districts in Assam, the PIP scheme brings the disciplinary logic into play which was seen in the enumeration practice of the colonial past (Appadurai,1993). Under this scheme the officials of the police outpost were disciplined to keep a physical check on the movement, entry of people in and around the areas of border to stop further encroachment of government reserves, and to prepare a register of all residents within the prescribed area [4].

---

[3] Cited in Whitepaper on Foreigners Issues (Home & Political Department Government of Assam,2012,p.7)

[4] Cited in Whitepaper on Foreigners Issues (Home & Political Department Government of Assam,2012,p.9-11)

The Illegal Migration (Determination by Tribunal) Act,1983

The Assam Agitation (1979-1985) which had its grounding on the alleged suspected nationalities in the voter's list of the Mangaldai constituency, the demand for detection, disenfranchisement and deportation, of the foreigners upsurge in Assam. Other demands included updating NRC, issuing of identity cards across North East, and several other broad proposals.The agitation affected the demand for a better operation to deal with the issue of foreigners in Assam. In 1983 The Illegal Migration (Determination by Tribunal) Act, was implemented exclusively to Assam for the detection of the foreigners under The Foreigners Act, 1946. Eventually after the scraping of the act in 2005 by the Supreme Court, cases regarding suspected foreigners needed to be transferred. In the lieu of that several more Foreigners Tribunal started functioning in the state.

Doubtful Voters ,1997

The conundrum between citizen and non-citizens resulted into disenfranchising a section of the population in the later years which qualifies as a prominent example of a hardened classification of the population of Assam. The category Doubtful Voters or D-voters surfaced following the circular of the Election commission of India for an intensive revision of the electoral roll of 1997 in Assam. The letter 'D' has been ascribed to individuals whose citizenship status remained doubtful or disputed. A person marked with letter 'D' is neither allowed to vote nor permitted to contest in election. The D-Voters label can only be withdrawn by the discretion of the Foreigners Tribunal. The legal encounter and the financial inadequacy of many people have made it very difficult for them to attain citizenship in this country and free oneself from the D -voters tag. Apart from that certain degree of discrepancies in names or surname, age mismatch, etc. have also been common in the voters list for decades. The other associated problem that comes with it is the announcement, regarding the status of D-Voters in NRC, made by the state coordinator of NRC that happened in the recent past in Assam. This includes if the parents/legacy person through whom eligibility is sought to be established, by the applicants of the NRC, happens to be a D-Voter then such individual would not be included in the NRC irrespective of the status of the other parent [5]. It is evident that the classification of the population as D-Voters has been an unresolved appendage and languishing in Assam .

---

[5] Cited in New NRC orders on descendents of D-Voters (The Hindu,2019)

The Aadhaar Act, 2016

Another such intervention in the recent times is the empiricist drive for creating the Aadhaar system in India . Aadhar in India has been promised to offer a fix in the unresolved problem of Identity. The practice of this 'modern identification system' plays a crucial role into more deeper classification of the population all over India.[6] A mandatory regime of data collection and documentation, with a modern attempt of 'digitization' has clearly been fixated with the process of Aadhaar in India. The drive of the government in building a modern identity-system, based on empirical information about its population, is evident from its proposal to make it a multi-stakeholder project in several places of this country. Under this scheme in Assam, it proposes to bid from firms/agencies/Companies to deploy trained official to carry out the implementation process of demographic and biometric data collection to enroll the citizen in Assam (Government of Assam General Administration). The partaking of government as well private agencies in the practice of enumerating its population is occurring in various parts of Assam.

National Register of Citizen,2016

 The postcolonial intervention of NRC in 1951 for various pedagogical; administrative; and other purposes tied to the justificatory and disciplinary dimension of enumeration practice have been repeated in Assam in the recent period as well. In a nutshell the details and particulars recorded from the 1951 NRC and the Electoral Rolls up to 24th March, 1971,   is ordered to be revisited (updated) in the present project of NRC in Assam (Government of Assam). The process of NRC is said to be accelerated with the coming of the BharatiyaJanta Party government in the state in 2016 . The extensive march to necessitate its citizen to prove its legitimacy , in projects such as the NRC in Assam, could be realized to emerge out of the politics of community and classification in a society with a long history of identity crisis . Identity crisis that has its root in the colonial intervention of population enumeration and studying exotic behavior[7] within its population, subsequently giving rise to the "Politics of

---

[6]Person willing to enroll has to provide minimal demographic and biometric information during the enrolment process which is totally free of cost. An individual needs to enroll for Aadhaar only once and after de-duplication only one Aadhaar shall be generated, as the **uniqueness** is achieved through the process of demographic and biometric de-duplication (Unique Identification Authority of India, Government of India).
[7]Cited in Number in the colonial imagination (Appadurai,1993,).

Majority and Minority"[8] and could be seen to have erupted in the quandary of Assam. The NRC in Assam is just another addition in the rigorous exercise of enumeration that is born out of a regional history of identity politics[9] associated with the confluence of several identity groups in the state.

The politics of majority and minority arises from deep -rooted crisis like migration and the related factor of alleged demographic shift that supposedly threatens the population composition. Additionally rampant changes in the territorial domain of Assam, which nested several communities can be viewed as one of the crucial factors- although not the only determining factor- in the regional politics of the which includes different racial, religious, ethnic , and other identity groups .The identity politics can also be realised from how the demand for updating NRC in the state which came out of a popular regional struggle , the Assam Agitation. Furthermore, the politics of identity can also be noted from the difficult and compulsory operation of NRC in Assam, which gives the state (Government of the day and other authorities involved in the process of NRC, Assam) ultimate power to declare one as a citizen or a non-citizen.

Conclusion

The study which is intended to analyse the discourse of community classification finds it genesis at the heart of colonialism grounded on the orientalist approach. The concept of classification of its population resulting into various categorizations could be seen to emerge from the colonial project of human enumeration, subsequently giving rise to classifications such as caste, religion, and so on. This classification however, wasn't a straightforward process when faced with the multicultural practices in the subcontinent. The classification of the colonial Assam throws light on the challenges faced by the British Administration to bring standardizations. The identification of caste and religious classification in the colonial Assam, as mentioned in the earlier section reflects the failure of the colonial state to bring a technical standard in the method of enumeration. The instances discussed above in terms of caste and religion dynamics in the colonial Assam are only few examples, there are several

---

[8]The politics of Majority and Minority can be tied with concept of communiatarian approach which has been crucial in the dynamics of Majority and Minority. The cognitive importance of caste in the census of India in the 1870s sets the ground for the communitarian politics in the later century (Appudurai,1993,p.331).

[9]Identity politics has come to signify a wide range of political activity and theorizing founded in the shared experiences of injustice of members of certain social groups (Laden, 2001).

other literature indicating the occurrence of identity politics of various others social groups because of an uncertain status and claim for most groups.

In terms of exhaustive and stricter stratification of the population, Post-colonial Assam shows the similar syndrome of categorical representation of its various communities. The pattern and tendency of the post-colonial regimes have been no different than its colonial counterpart in introducing greater classifications like D-Voters, requirement for "Aadhaar", citizenship status as per the NRC rule, to name a few. The institution of population enumeration is a firmly embedded regime which has been utilized for multiple purposes like policies, governance, and various other reasons. This inheritance from the colonial administration which is still prevalent today can be observed in the state orchestrated categorization with as recent as the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 of the government catering to religious classification, regional classification.[10]

References:

Appadurai, A. (1993). Numbers in the Colonial Imagination. Orientalism and the PostcolonialPredicament: Perspectives on South Asia .

Guha, A. (1991). Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society,Polity,Economy.

Laden, A. (2001). Reasonably Radical: Deliberative Liberalism and the Politics of Identity. Retrieved from https://philpapers.org/rec/LADRRD

Ludden, D. (1988). Caste Landscapes in Southern Tamil Nadu and the 1823 Tirunelveli Census.

Money, J. (1989). Teaching in the market-place, or Caesar Adsum jam forte: Pompey aderat:theretailing of knowledge in provincial England during the eighteenth century. The Retailing ofKnowledge in Provincial England. Clark Library

New NRC order on descendants of D-voters. (2019). Retrieved fromhttps://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/new-nrc-order-on-descendants-of- d-voters/article28764638.ece

Nigam, S. 1990. "Disciplining and Policing the 'Criminals by Birth,' Part 2: The Development of a Disciplinary System, 1871-1900." Indian Economic and Social History Review .

Report on the Census of Bengal, 1881

Roychoudhury, A. (1981). ASSAM-National Register of Citizens, 1951. Retrieved 16 January2020, from https://www.epw.in/journal/1981/8/our-correspondent-columns/assam- national-register-citizens-1951.html

Sengupta, M., & Bharadwaj, J. (2019). Caste census and the impact of colonial sociology in British Assam. *Routledge Tylor & Francis Groups.*

Unique Identification Authority of India: Government of India. (n.d.). Retrieved fromhttps://uidai.gov.in/my-aadhaar/about-your-aadhaar.html

White Paper on Foreigners Issues. (2012). *Home & Political Department. Government of Assam .*

[10]The regional state of Assam because of its territorial and migration history opposes the Act, which asserts not only the threat to constitutionality but also the essence of the Assam Accord. This particular aspect of regional struggle in the wake of the CAA, 2019.