

# Re-thinking conflict in ‘Diversity’: A Study of Mob Lynching in the Karbi Hills

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**Abstract:** Diversity generally refers to a reality of coexistence of diverse knowledge, laws, religions, languages, genders, ethnicities, races, nationalities, etc, of human beings. It could extend to the way people react to this reality and the way people choose to live together with this reality.

Assam is extremely diverse in terms of ethnic linguistic and cultural composition. However, these diverse communities have had different historical and political experiences and as a result many of the communities still perceive them as unique entities. The boundary-making process in the North-Eastern region of India during the colonial rule to post-independence impacts how one defines who is an ‘Assamese’. This brings us to the question of hills and plains and the contesting life that the masses experience on an everyday basis.

This study aims to redefine and rediscover the incident in Assam back in 2018, where two young talented souls, namely Abhi and Neel, lost their lives out of collective Mob lynching. Through this case, we are significantly trying to analyze the ‘outsider’ and ‘insider’ perspectives of Assam. Alongside, we will also try to look into the everyday experiences of conflict that are present in the socio-political division of hills and plains in Assam.

**Keywords:** Conflict, Ethnic Diversity, Abhi-Neel, Hill and Plains, Assam.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

What do we mean by Nationalism and how it is different from the concept of the ‘Nation’? The subject of nationalism is extremely complex because for many the term ‘Nationalism’ stands as a synonym for ‘Nation’. But what we can understand is that Nationalism refers to a set of beliefs and ideologies of the nation. To define it more accurately, according to the words of Prof. Antony Smith -“Nationalism is an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity, and identity for a population which some of its members deem to constitute an actual or potential “nation” (Smith, 2001). In other words, it is the most potent ideology in nation-state building and consolidation. As we know, Marx and Engels divided the entire notion of ideologies into various categories, for them the second sense of ideology is that set of left and right ideologies that we hear about in day-to-day politics such as - communism, socialism, liberalism, and conservatism, etc. Nationalism represents a third type of ideology. This is because it is not easy to locate nationalism on the left-right ‘ideological spectrum’, but according to the nationalist rhetoric, it is something that has gone beyond politics and has covered the sociological boundary too.

The nation, on the other hand, is a territorial community of nativity. Guibernau (1992, p. 47) has defined the nation as a human group conscious of forming a community, sharing a common culture, attached to a clearly demarcated territory, having a common past and a common project for the future, and claiming the right to rule itself. So, for a nation, its diversity in the form of -territory, history, and culture, language, and religion matters the most. Diversity is an integral part of the nation. Diversity in a nation generally refers to a reality of coexistence of diverse knowledge, laws, religions, languages, genders, ethnicities, races, nationalities, etc, of human beings within the community. The definition could

extend to the way how people react to the quoted reality and the way people choose to live together with this reality. When we refer to diversity as a social fact, it always existed in the world at large. But it becomes a ‘problem’ mainly when it exists within the territory of a nation. There are two reasons why diversity within the nation becomes a problem. One, when the social, cultural, or racial differences become the basis of group inequality. Two, when the different groups perceive one another as inferiors or superiors.

## 2. UNITY IN DIVERSITY

The slogan ‘Unity in Diversity’ in India was destroyed by the arrival of the Crown colony in 1876. Soon after their arrival, the British realized that India was a land of social and ethnic diversity. Therefore, to exploit and control the land, it was necessary to encourage the Hindus to fight against the Muslims and the masses against the authorities, as well as provoking one caste against the other to augment caste divisions and class disparity among the Hindu community. Considering this, they developed a strategy of “divide and rule” to stir up animosity between the communities. The divide and rule policy used religion to drive a wedge between Indians which eventually resulted in the death and displacement of millions of people, as well as the destruction of key economic assets (Tharoor, 2017).

The implantation of divide and rule policies against ethnic and religious minorities continues even in post-colonial India today. Chittagong Hill-Tracts (CHT) in Bangladesh has been home to more than a dozen Indigenous communities living there at least from the fifteenth century onwards. The tribalism policy of the British colonizers divided the people of the CHT into tribal/hill people (Paharis) and the Bengalis, to ensure political control and for economic exploitation of environmental resources, such as forests. The Pakistani and Bangladeshi governments have inherited a similar colonial mindset by the continuation of land-grabbing, displacement, and imposed dominant education and language on CHT Indigenous communities (Ali and Rahman 2018). The Government’s 1997 peace treaty with the CHT peoples appears to be cosmetic as it has failed to make any significant progress in resolving the land disputes, their rights to self-recognition, and cultural identity as *adibhasi* (Indigenous people) (The Daily Star 2016). Similarly, the peripheralized northeastern region of the country, after facing over and above applying crucial issues such as power-sharing and governance, the demarcation of the territories of the federating units (states), felt alienated and exploited. Apart from a few notable exceptions, though, most of the communities of the region initially accepted the image of India that projected the theme ‘unity in diversity’. However, consistent and spectacular mismanagement of their ethnic aspirations led many of them to soon rise in revolt. Some subsequently even tried to challenge the very grounds of their inclusion within the Indian Union. Conflicts between and within communities and against the State have thus become a norm in the post-colonial Northeast. (Goswami 2014)

## 3. THE UNANSWERED DEBATE ON ASSAMESE IDENTITY

Assam is extremely diverse in terms of ethnic linguistic and cultural composition. However, these diverse communities have had different historical and political experiences and as a result many of the communities still perceive them as unique entities. The boundary-making process in the North-Eastern region of India during the colonial rule to post-independence impacts how one defines who is an ‘Assamese’. This brings us to the question of hills and plains and the contesting life that the masses experience on an everyday basis.

India’s North-East appeared in the British colonial discourse as a frontier region, initially connoting the long swathe of mountains, jungles, and riverine, tropical marshy flatlands, located between the eastern limits of British-ruled Bengal and the western borders of the Kingdom of Ava (Burma). Shortly after the Yandabo historic agreement in 1826, the British decided to explore this border region with a view to expansion, trade and commerce, and border control. The First Anglo-Burmese War that ended with the peace treaty, led to the expulsion of Burmese troops from the state of Assam and Manipur. The Ahoms didn’t help the British during the war and as a result in March 1828, the lower Assam was formally annexed to the empire. The occupation of the Brahmaputra, the Surma, and the Barak Valleys opened the way for further British expansion into the region. Upper Assam was briefly restored to Ahom rule but the arrangement failed and the whole province was made part of the British Empire in 1838. The Treaty helped the Maharaja of Manipur to restore his kingdom, and the Burmese were eased out of that province. The treaty also dismantled the Ahoms who ruled Assam for almost six centuries after subjugating the Dimasa and Koch kingdoms and had fought back the Bengal sultans and the Mughals.

Soon after the conquest of Upper Assam, the British annexed the Khasi and the Jaintia Hills in the years 1833 and 1835 respectively. With the annexure of the Maran/Mattack kingdom that surrounded the Sadiya district in 1839, the annexation of Assam was declared as 'complete'. In 1850, the kingdom of Cachar was taken over into the state and was incorporated with the state. The Garo Hills, which was a part of the Goalpara district, was annexed in 1869 and made into a district with its headquarters at Tura. The Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo Hills that cover the present state of Meghalaya were also a part of Assam until 1972. (Bhaumik 2009, Goswami 2014). Towards the second half of the 19th century, the British sent a military expedition into Naga and Lushai Hills (Mizoram) and conquered them as two separate districts of Assam. Nagaland and Mizoram remained as a part of Assam until they became a full state in 1963 and 1987 respectively. The British also brought under control the Daflas, the Abors, the Akas, the Mishmis, and other tribes of Arunachal Pradesh either for obstructing their trade or for disturbing the Great Trigonometrical Survey of 1876–77.

The Inner Line Regulations were promulgated in the year 1873, marking the extent of the revenue administration beyond which the tribal people were left to manage their affairs subject to good behavior. The nature of restrictions under these regulations includes the foothills of the Brahmaputra and the Barak Valleys which were marked as the limits of regular administration and the hills beyond and the tribal people living there were largely left alone. The insertion of the inner line portrayed the idea of frontier within a frontier that added to the seclusion of the hills and their tribe and thereby enhancing the cultural and political distance between them and the plains. In 1874, however, a year after the promulgation of the Inner Line Regulations for the hill areas, Assam was reconstituted as a province. The Bengali-dominated Sylhet and Cachar districts, the Garo and the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, the Naga Hills, and the district of Goalpara were all brought within Assam. Between 1895 and 1898, the north and south Lushai Hills and a portion of the Chittagong Hill Tracts were detached from Bengal and added to Assam. (Bhowmik 2009).

According to the Government of India Act, 1919 (Montagu-Chelmsford reforms), the governor-general has the authority to declare any tract as a 'Backward Area' and legalized the application of normal provincial legislation there. After the implication of this act, within a decade the Garo Hills, the Khasi Jaintia Hills, the Mikir Hills, the North Cachar Hills, the Naga and the Lushai hills districts, and the three frontier tracts of Balipara, Lakhimpur, and Sadiya were all declared as Backward Areas. Colonial administrators like Reid, Hutton, and Parry, who were keen on the separation of the plains and the hills of Greater Assam, were reviving the idea of a North Eastern province of British Indian Dominions—a province that would bring the vast region from the southern tip of the Lushai (or Lakher) Hills to the Balipara Tract on the border with Tibet under one administration, encompassing the Chin Hills, the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the Naga Hills and the Shan states of Burma. (Bhowmik 2009, Baruah 2008). Hence it shows that the British were too keen to aggravate the hills-plains divide.

After the independence, for the development of the tribal areas of the Northeast, the Constituent assembly set up an advisory committee with Gopinath Bordoloi as its chairperson. The fact that was established in the committee was that the assimilation of the tribes with the Indian mainstream was 'minimal' and they were very sensitive to any interference with their lands and forests, their customary laws, and their way of life.

The most concrete demand for the Assam Movement included prohibiting the influx of the immigrants who were 'bidexi' or foreigners. But with time, the demands for the movement became more aggressive and xenophobic resulting in the prohibition of all the outsiders including the *Ali Kuli Bangali and Nak Sepeta Nepali*—a derogatory term. Here Ali stands for Bangladeshi Muslim peasants, Kuli stands for the tea garden laborers, Bangali for Hindu Bengali, and Nak Sepeta Nepali for the 'flat-nosed Nepalese whose immigration had begun during the colonial period. The migrants who entered Assam in much earlier phases had already embraced the Axomiya language and the identity as their own. But the main crisis occurred when the chauvinism that was generated during the Assam Movement obliterated the distinction between the legal and the illegal migrants. With the advancement of the movement, all the outsiders that are the non-autochthonous people of the state were seen as the perpetrators and were thought of threatening the land, livelihood, language, and identity of the Assamese community in varying measures, and depriving the 'sons of the soil' of their due.

With the progress of the movement, the Assamese Hindu middle class began to propagate the idea that the 'son of the soil' referred only to the Assamese speaking Hindu community, which led to a definite conflict between the ethnic elites and the other autochthonous indigenous communities. Hence, the movement that began with a common mass base among the indigenous and non-indigenous communities of Assam turned into a battleground, defining the relation between the dominant Axomiya Hindus with all the other communities of Assam.

Moreover, among the other government policies, the Official Language Act of 1960 accelerated the process of ethnic separatism. The policy sought to impose the Assamese language upon all other communities of Assam -coupled with the expression of cultural and linguistic superiority among the Assamese Hindus. This act increased the anti-Assamese feeling among the groups and managed to widen the question of who is an Assamese and who is not.

#### 4. INSIDER-OUTSIDER PERSPECTIVE

The above discussion has created a sense of belonging of certain people in a particular sphere as well as it brings the importance of discussing the insider and outsider perspective in specific. We have discussed how certain tribes are diverse and heterogeneous but at the same time, are different from the dominant communities of the region. This not only results in competitions but also creates severe inter-community conflicts. If we focus more on the insider-outsider perspective, we can see that the tribal communities, who alienated themselves from the dominant categories, are often known as 'insiders'. However, the outsiders have invariably been described as exploiters and oppressors. Notably, we can see a massive number of movements against the influx of outsiders for the fear of becoming a minority in their regions. Along with that the demand for the establishment of an autonomous council to protect socio-cultural and economic rights has also been subjected to dialogue and deliberation.

In sync with the conversation, we can rediscover and redefine one of the heart-wrenching lynchings which took place in Karbi Anglong back on 8 June 2018. The incident took place in the background of widespread public rumors over rising child trafficking and the wave of killings known as the Indian WhatsApp lynchings. A mob of around 250 people attacked two men under suspicion of child trafficking and beat the two to death in a case of mistaken identity. Let's dive deeper into the incident and try to see how the whole arrangement of diversity and conflicts has taken a place in this diagram. On that day, Nilotpal Das and Abhijeet Nath, two young talented souls who were also related to the artistic industry, returning from Kangthilangso, a picnic spot with a waterfall in the vicinity, when they were attacked near the Pajuri Kachari village in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam.

Reportedly, a man spotted them in their SUV and started shouting that Das and Nath were child kidnappers. The man threw stones at the car and called others for help. A crowd of about 250 villagers gathered around the car, forcing the two friends out of the car and beating them to death. Pajuri Kachari village and the surrounding area had reportedly been living in shock because rumors regarding "xopadhora" were being spread through Whatsapp and other social media during that time. Xopadhora is a myth about a child abductor who, according to some folk tale, has long hair and sometimes carries bags to put children in. Other rumors suggested that two men of the Bihari community were abducting children.

In a video, which has gone viral on different social media, Das was seen pleading before the attackers that he was an Assamese and belongs to Guwahati. "Don't kill me...please don't beat me. I am an Assamese. Believe me, I am speaking the truth. My father's name is Gopal Chandra Das and my mother's name is Radhika Das....please leave me and let me go." These were Das's last words before he was killed.

This heartbreaking incident also generated protests by the residents of Assam demanding speedy justice for Das and Nath. Various rallies across Guwahati demanded effective usage of anti-mob-lynching laws, and action against police officials under whose jurisdiction the incident fell. A Facebook group called "Justice for Nilotpal and Abhijeet", which acquired around 60,000 members in 24 hours, organized a candlelight march. A silent protest in Guwahati turned violent with the police resorting to the use of a lathi charge to control the situation.

Significantly, it has been 3 years but the families of both the victims have not yet received judicial finality in the matter of Das and Nath's death. Around 36 individuals were taken into judicial custody and there have been several hearings in connection to the incident, but a final hearing is still awaited.

This confrontation has forced us to rethink all the incidents which are not new in the day-to-day life of Assam. The Abhi – Neel case raised several significant questions in the minds of the people such as why both Das and Nath were pleading for their Assamese identities. Which circumstances constituted the question of being whether they are Assamese or not?

Again, let's look into the matter through the eyes of the people from the hills. For them, identity becomes a crucial factor at any point in time. The chauvinistic nature of the majoritarian circle generates a discriminatory feeling among many smaller groups despite having a common social setup. The smaller groups seek self-expression for their respective identities demand for their interests which results in a conflict situation with the dominant group. Arguably, the smaller

ethnic groups especially the tribes of Assam are believed to have experienced a crisis about their culture and identity. Except for a few political personnel and a very small elite section; most of the tribes have unendingly experienced not only an identity crisis in Assam but also economic exploitation and social, cultural, and political oppression (Hussain1992). It also needs to be mentioned here that Assam is now experiencing an identity crisis among many of its communities based on sub-nationalistic emotions. Notably, the ethnic conflict in Assam among many other causes incorporates to a great level the politicization or political orientation that has gone wrong.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

We need to agree with the fact that a pan-Indian history for the region is not authentic enough to understand the cultural dynamics of the complex society of the Northeast in general and Assam in specific. The reasons behind the conflict can also be viewed as 'internecine' conflict which is considered to be mutually destructive for a meticulous ethnic community.

The paper has probed the issue of the ethnic diversity of the state of Assam which represents a complex mosaic nature of the social setup with both tribal and non-tribal populations. This paper also tried to see these diverse ethnic communities and their crisis situation that emerged out of the eagerness to protect and promote the respective ethnic identities and cultures. Alongside, this paper has also made an attempt to sociologically examine the nature of the Karbi Anglong 2018 mob lynching case in relation to pertaining conflicts between the hills and plains in Assam.

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