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POLITICIZATION AND MOBILIZATION OF THE COMMON PEOPLE AND THE ASSAM MOVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Movements for space and identity have been a significant feature of the political developments of the recent past. In post war countries like India, which were victims of colonisation, the inherent socio economic disparities played a role in shaping the political discourses of the region. The Assam Movement which took place from 1979 to 1985 to oust the illegal immigrants saw large scale support from all classes of people. From peasants to the land owners and middle class, everyone took up to the roads and joined the movement. The mobilisation of such diverse sections of the society for a common objective was a task left to the leaders of the Assam Movement. From the colonial period till the early decades of post independence the peasants of Assam were continuously protesting against high land rents and also evictions by the landlords. These movements became much volatile in the 1960s. On the other hand the slow economic growth, lack of industrialisation and unemployment created problems for the middle sections of the society. Land reforms introduced by the government reduced certain privileges of the elite landlords. In such an uncertain scenario, competition in a limited economy led to the rising tensions between different groups of the society. Contemporary international events and the immigration of East Pakistan Muslim peasants to Assam worsened the situation as no one was willing to share resources with a new group of people. Such was the socio political and economic background of Assam before the Assam Movement. With the various developments that followed the illegal immigration became a serious problem. In such a situation Assamese Nationalism was directed against illegal immigration. People from all classes identified the immigrants as threat to their identity and resources and it at last outburst as the Assam Movement.

1. Introduction

It is often said that fundamental human problems are rooted in social contradictions. To explore the social contradiction of a particular historic event it is essential to go through the socio-economic and political background of the phenomenon. As Marx claims- man make their own history, but do not as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under the circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. (Marx: 1937) Therefore, in depth discussion on the context of the Assam Movement is essentially important before us to understand the six years long Assam Movement. People across the class, caste and ages took part in this movement and thus the movement attained its massive character. It should be mentioned here that the main objective of the movement was the detection and deportation of the illegal immigrants from Assam. As it is observed that the Assam Movement was one of the largest mass movements of the post-colonial Assam. Hence, the scholars across the discipline of the social sciences as well as the social activists have been trying to understand the Assam Movement. Thus several dimension of the Assam Movement have already come out. However, some aspects are yet to be explored. Thus, this paper is an attempt to understand the process of the politicization of the rural masses and the agrarian issues of the state. The context of the Assam Movement is considered as the scope of the research. Besides, the work will be also covering the studies as well as the debate on the agrarian issues of the state through which it is being tried theorize the whole question of politicization of the rural masses.

Study on the above mentioned aspects can be first observed from the writings of Tilottama Misra. It was stated that the growing awareness among the Assamese people of being subjected to gross economic exploitation. This according to her was quite similar to the system of colonialism. (Mishra: 1980) Scholars other than Tilottama Mishra as well as social activists in this regard have been also dealing this issue and it was said that the issue of economic backwardness was instrumental behind the growth of dissatisfaction among the people. The land issues, unemployment, growing rift between the rich and poor were the main part of the issue economic backwardness of the state. The statement of Assam State Unit of Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M) ahead of the Assam Movement found relevant in this regard. CPI-M stated- 'the numbers of landless peasants in the state were increasing. They could not even find an alternative source of income as the state was lagging far behind the industrialization process. The issue unemployment at this juncture became a serious threat. The gradual growth of both the educated and uneducated unemployed youth created a major challenge before the state government. The crisis of job and the acute competition among the unemployed youth also acted as a means behind the contradiction within the middle class of the state. (BNHHMCPB: 1980) Bhuban Baruah wrote- economic backwardness of the state was result of the Central Government's negligence towards this region. (Gohain & Bora: 2001)

The Question of Land

To analyse the land issues of the state we have to look back to the colonial period of Assam. As early as in 1834, the British began tea cultivation in Assam. They formed Assam Tea Company in 1840. For this purpose the British granted huge swathes of land in Assam to the planters. Special rules, like the Waste Land Grant Rules of 1838, Old Assam Rules of 1854, Fee Simple Rules of 1862, Revised Fee Simple Rules of 1874 and New Lease Rules of 1876 enabled the British planters to own large tracts of the most fertile land of Assam at highly concessional rates. The British planters became the owners of almost seven lakhs acres of tax free land in Assam, while the local Assamese peasants paid two or three rupees per acre as land revenue to the British masters. (Ahmed: 2006) The British also brought tea plantation labourers from various parts of India like Bihar, Orissa, and Jharkhand. On the other hand a few numbers of Assamese planters like Maniram Dewan, Jagannath Boruah, Manik Ch. Baruah came into the scene during that period. But the area of the tea cultivation of the Assamese planters was accounted for a small fraction of the total area of the tea gardens of the state. Such instances were perceived as for the discriminatory policies of the British government towards the native planters. Tilottama Misra opined that Maniram's plantation land was assessed as ordinary land similar to land used for cultivation of paddy, resulting in Maniram's having to pay very high rates of land revenue. (Ahmed: 2006) The colonial relationship with the tea industry of Assam remain almost same even after India's independence. The masters of the large numbers of tea gardens of the colonial period have been enjoying their ownership even in the present days and the head offices of the tea gardens as well as the auction centres are still located in Kolkata outside Assam. Even in the post-independent era the government of Assam continued the process of land grants to the planters. The government grabbed the grazing land of the state and granted it to the planters as well as to the industrialists. Many such instances were seen in the Upper Assam region. The peasant movement in the decades of 1960s and 1970s guided by the communist parties under the banner of the All India Kishan Sabha (AIKS) were directed against such policies.

Question of sponsored Immigration

Apart from lakhs of tea garden labourers brought by the British tea planters, the Assamese gentry too have been in the habit of bringing hardy Muslim peasants from across the border to turn thousands of acres of native land into smiling and luxuriant fields of jute and paddy. (Ahmed: 2006) In the name of Colonization scheme at the first half of the 20th century, land was granted to the immigrant families in Kamrup, Nowgaon, Darrang, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur districts of Assam. Under the schemes a small family was to be given about 20 bighas of land on payment of a premium. Guha provides information that the areas allotted under the Nowgaon scheme to 1,619 Muslim and 441 Hindu immigrant families amounted in all to 47,636 acres till March 1933. (Guha: 1977) He further argues, the total area of waste land shown as cultivable was somewhat over estimated. For, in 1924, the proportion of settled to total area exclusive of reserved forests was officially stated to be 21.75% in

Nowgong, 41.12% in Kamrup and 44.86% in Darrang. In Goalpara, it was nearly 100%. (Guha: 1977) Colonization scheme, Sadulla's Land Development Scheme or Grow More Food Scheme enormously encouraged the immigration process in Assam and which on the other hand, created tremendous pressure on the land holding process. Thus it initiated a sharp contradiction between the native and the immigrant peasants. The said contradiction continued even after the India's independence. Regarding the contradiction between the native and immigrants peasants Akhil Gogoi argues- the immigrant peasants used to cultivate crops for commercial purposes, while the native peasants were habituated with the self-sufficient agrarian economy. As far as the market was concerned the immigrant peasants became prime competitor to the native peasants. They successfully established their supremacy over the crops cultivation and gradually extended their cultivable areas. They even bought cultivable land from the native peasants. (Gogoi: 2012)

The Tribal Land

The land question among the tribal people is one of the most significant issues to be discussed. It is said that Assam is known for its rich ethnic diversity having numbers of ethnic groups. They were basically divided into two groups as the plain and the hill tribes. The plain tribal groups of the state are scattered across the Brahmaputra valley. Regarding the livelihood of the plain tribes Indibor Deori opines, the uncultivated land of sub-mountain, grazing (char), and the jungle were considered as their main source income. But due to the gradual increase of tea plantation and the sponsored immigration the resources of the plain tribes were come under attack. (Deori: 2001) He further writes- the simplicity, backwardness and the economic inadequacy of the tribal people become an advantage for the non-tribal people where they used to occupy their cultivable land. Under the act of Assam land and revenue of 1947 the Line System was created. The line system was there to ensure non transfer of the land ownership from the tribal people. Hence, 33 tribal belts and blocks were created. But in the later course of time those tribal belt and blocks came under the attack. According to him such factors were, rehabilitation package of refugees from East Pakistan (Present Bangladesh) and victimize of natural calamities i.e. earthquakes, flood, erosion etc. Second important factor was that the process of industrialization. In the process large sections of the tribal people were discharged from the belt of South Kamrup (Guwahati). (Deori: 2001) The Tribal Sangha, Plain Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA), All Assam Bodo Students' Union (AABSU) several time sent their deputation in this regard. Even the All Assam students' Union (AASU) in a memorandum submitted to the prime minister of India on 1982 mentioned as- the problem of immigrants is effecting the tribal people of Assam by large. 33 tribal belts and blocks reserved for the tribal people of the state are about to ruin. Gradual growth of the economic pressure led to compress the area of the reserved blocks of the tribal people. The forest resources of the state were also decreasing. These happened to some extent due to the illegal occupation of land by the illegal immigrants. (Nath: 2015)

Tracing the Resistance

The movement over the land issues gained its momentum after the India's independence. Numbers of movements were organised against the increased land revenue, eviction, occupancy rights and against the atrocities of the landed aristocratic class over the tenants. Movements were organised under the leadership of All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) in various parts of Assam against the hike in land revenue rates. At the same time a new organization called 'Assam Youth Association' was formed in 1965 with an objective to forge unity among the youths of Assam, to work for all round development of the state against foreign aggression, to wake the state free from the illegal immigrants from East Pakistan. (SPR: 1965) Besides, several other peasant movement of this period can also be drawn where the left political parties and organisations played a significant role by organising the peasants over the genuine issues of them. Under the pressure of these militant democratic movements of the peasants the government also enforced several land reforms which aimed to address some of the genuine problems of the peasants. Thus, as a part of this process the Tenancy Act (Temporarily Settled Areas) was implemented on 1971, 10th December. (Tenancy Act: 1971) According to which a peasant can claim his right as an occupant over a land 3 years after continuous cultivation. Consequently in later part of 1970 and first part of 1980 a chaos was created among the Assamese land owners where they were challenged to hold their tenancy. The most significant impact of the land reform, beginning with the Assam Tenancy Act of 1971, was on the Assamese nationalist landlords. Many of them failed to maintain their socio-economic privileges derived from landed property. They began to seek their economic and social support from other alternative resources. It was at this crucial historical juncture that they came to compete with other stakeholders, including the non-Assamese traders, in the state economy. Competition over limited economic resources faced by a new Assamese middle class devoid of its landed interests turned out to be the background for the popular mobilization beginning in 1979. (Saikia: 2014) According to Guha,- under colonial constraints, Assam failed to develop a viable capitalist class of its own. By now North Indian big bourgeoisie, in collaboration with foreign capital, are well entrenched in and at the top of Assam's economy, but there is no Asamiya (for that matter even Bengali) big bourgeoisie to share the market with them. Asamiya business houses that could be ranked as middle bourgeoisie would hardly exceed half a dozen in number. The Asamiya middle class is therefore virtually constituted of small capitalists and other sections of the petty bourgeoisie including professionals and service holders; many of them are also simultaneously small landlords. They and their Assam based Bengali rivals (mostly long settled in Assam or son of soil in Cachar), operate at the margin of the big capital-dominated economy- in petty industries, petty trade, professions and administrative services. It is this economic circumstances, and not land relation, that largely explain the traditional anti Bengali edge of Asamiya Little nationalism.(Ahmed: 2006) Communist parties, the firm organisers of the peasant movements stated that they have been fighting for the

fundamental change and re-structuring of the economy of the state by resisting the monopoly and imperialist capital onslaught and by uprooting the zamindari system. (BNHHMCPB: 1980) Hiren Gohain writes- in the decades after independence the law of uneven development of capitalism prevailed to the detriment of Assam which remains a backward and underdeveloped state. Neither agricultural development nor industrialization kept pace with the needs of the growing population. Since the 60s unemployment has been acute. 77% of the local peasantry found themselves either completely landless or owners of uneconomic holdings. Since planning and development all over the country have been largely in the interest of monopoly capital, there has been no attempt to establish major industries to the point of burning up every year large quantities of natural gas. The situation has thus become explosive. Popular discontent and indignation against the centre have simmered long enough and class organisations and class politics have become more and more familiar. (Ahmed: 2006)

Politicization of the Masses

It is said that the ideas starts bubbling just before the transition from one system to another. And the very result of the process of battle of ideas led to polarize the group of intellectuals and social activists into two main groups, one whose are in support of the movement and had tried to carry forward the movement and other who opposed the manifestation or the nature of the movement. Hence we have to advance through these two perspectives to understand the theoretical construction of the Assam Movement based on the agrarian issues. The question of class and caste of the state were the main structure on which the battle of ideas was performed.

It is seen that the social activists like Nibarán Bora, Nagen Hazarika, Marien Weiner etc. tried to enthuse the people of Assam through the sense of Assamese nationalism. They had a radical approach to the people to form a platform to fight against the foreign nationals. Assam Sahitya Sabha, the Assam Jatiatabadi Dal and the Purbanchal Loka Parishad (PLP) first formed an alliance where All Assam Students Union (AASU), and Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AGSP) joined later on and they came to the forefront of the movement. A statement of PLP was published in daily “Dainik Asom” on 3rd January 1979, perhaps this was the first statement which ever talked on the danger of the immigrants. The statement was as- the ministry of the state is being controlled by the communalist of the linguistic minority people of Cachar and Brahmaputra valley. They are feed by the foreign nationalists of Bangladesh occupying a large portion of land in Assam. (Gohain & Bora: 2001) Asom Sahitya Sabha in its Sualkushi conference raised the voice to expel the illegal immigrants from Assam. In the contemporary time several others started to focus into the issues of the immigrants. The newspaper of Assam in this regard played a significant role. The weekly paper Nagorik edited by Homen Borgohain published a series of articles related to the issue of illegal immigrants. In an article published on 3rd November ’77 titled- “Incomplete Liberation war of Bangladesh” the gradual growth of the numbers of the Muslim Immigrants in Assam was discussed. The writer tried to portray

the economic aggression and its possible challenges in the article. (Gohain & Bora: 2001) In 1978 AASU in a memorandum submitted to the then chief minister of Assam demanded that- the incessant flow of outsiders should be stopped. All foreign nationals illegally staying in Assam should be deported from Assam. (Sharma: 2012)

Regarding the question of land and the agrarian issues Nibarban Bora the leader of Purbanchal Loka Parishad (PLP) for the first time wrote a series of articles in vernacular language entitled-“Islamabad Bonam Dhaka Aru Delhi Bonam Dispur” (Islamabad vs Dhaka and Delhi vs Dispur). Bora through this article tried to expose the colonial relationship between the Centre’s and the Assam. He blamed the central government for the economic and industrial backwardness of the state. He even argues- the only main objective of the policies of the central government was to exploit the forest and natural resources of Assam. Therefore a continuous appeal had been made – “The Guwahati today is going to be a base camp as it was during the period of the battle of Saraighat.” (Gohain & Bora: 2001) It is stated that through the process of analysing the discriminatory policies of the central government towards Assam. Bora tried to trace the idea of regionalism on Assamese nationalism where the importance have been paid on the issue of foreigners. (Gohain & Bora: 2001) Marien Weiner one of the American fellow contributed a lot to the process of the theoretical development of the movement. Weiner in his thesis “Son of Soil” devoted some pages to discuss on the issues of Assam on the context. (Weiner: 1988) The whole thesis was translated and was published in the Nagorik. Regarding the question of economic backwardness and immigrants problems he wrote the process of the economic development in Bangladesh and other neighbouring states of Assam are equally as important as for Assam. Otherwise Assam would attract numbers of outsiders to take the advantage of the employment or something else. This would have resulted into competition between the Assamese people and the outsiders and in the process native would definitely fail. (Gohain & Bora: 2001) While a group of people who wanted to wage their struggle on the basis of the nationality question appealed to all sections of the people of Assam to unite and to fight against the all foreign nationalists. With the help of such theoretical background the leaders of the movement created Xenophobia among the people and through their repetitive vicious campaign they created a perception that the Assamese community is in danger. AASU in a memorandum submitted to the prime minister of India mention that the issue of immigrants is challenging to the national integrity and sovereignty. It is also stated that- the problem of immigrants is affecting the tribal people of Assam by large. 33 tribal belts and blocks reserved for the tribal people of the state were about to be ruined. Gradual growth of the economic pressure led to the shrinkage of the area of the reserved blocks for the tribal people. The forest resources of the state were also fast decreasing. It was said to be only due to economic aggression of the illegal immigrants. (Nath: 2015) It was also stated that under such a context the identity of the Assamese nationality was in danger and it is only because of the hegemony of the large community such as Bengali. They urged to save Asomia

Jati (Assamese nationality) first, rather than thinking about other nationalities. Even Weiner wrote- one should not even think about the economic prosperity of Assam because the dynamic Bengali people were lurking nearby them. (Gohain & Bora: 2001) Hence, rather than the economic empowerment, the nationality question became their prime task. In the meantime the idea of Fourth World Countries also influenced the intellectuals as well as the social activists of the state. According to Cambridge school of Historiography- these are the most underdeveloped region in the world. The Fourth World is used to describe the most poverty stricken, and economically troubled parts of countries in the third world. These areas include tribal and nomadic communities. They may be fully functional and self-surviving units, but based on their economical performance as a whole they are placed under the Fourth World status...Perhaps the concept fourth world was one of the most powerful weapon of criticism on the prevailing socio – economic and political condition of the state . J. Jana argues- the movement based on the idea that the fourth world would threaten the integrity of the state. The separatist movement i.e. the movement for separate Bodoland, Tailand, Rabhaland would gain strength. It would also question the developmental process of the small ethnic groups of the state. (Gohain & Bora: 2001)

The second group of intellectuals as well as the social activists criticized and challenged the manifestation and the nature of the movement. Most of them blamed that the leadership of the movement had diverted the attention of the masses from the basic problem of economic underdevelopment of the North-Eastern region. The assessment of the CPI(M) was as “according to the agitators the zamindar and capitalist exploitation was not responsible for poverty and backwardness of common people but the workers from the outside. Hence the primary duty is to uproot the outsider or the foreigners to ensure land, job and prosperity of the state.” (BNHHMCPB: 1980) Regarding the background of the phenomenon CPI(M) summed up as-“ the influence of the land-lordism and semi-feudalist economy is quite visible over the industrially backward economy of Assam.” (BNHHMCPB: 1980) It was also stated that the hegemony of the monopoly capital, feudalism and imperialism over India has been challenging the path of development of Assamese nationality and other nationalities as well. (BNHHMCPB: 1980)

Simultaneously CPI, another mainstream left party of the country also noted regarding the existing socio-economic and political condition of the state. On the basis of such understanding of the context it is claimed that the various left organisations including communist parties had built their organisations among the students-youth, working class and peasantry. They approach, to have their struggle against the semi-capitalist and semi-feudalistic policies of the government of India. To quote Amalendu Guha- the movement was started by the Asamiya capitalist and gentry through the communication media they control, and the students and other section of the petty bourgeoisie including section of peasants were gradually down to it. Ethnicity was not a given factor to which politics responded; rather, ethnicity awareness was encouraged and exploited by the upper classes for political end. (Ahmed: 2006) Generally the

economic discrimination at the one hand and the nationality question on the other were two main causes which led to have birth of the trend of secessionism. According to Hiren Gohain- the failure of the capitalistic development and slow process of the capitalistic development led to acute emergence of nationality problems. (Gohain: 1981) The emergence of the secessionist group like United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) was also product of such context where, they championed the slogan of sovereign Assam with armed struggle. J. Jana wrote- the most influential idea among the people of the period was the internal colonialism. Which created a prejudice among the psyche of the agitators as- all immigrants to the Assam were one of the faithful army of the colonial exploitation. (Gohain & Bora: 2001) Therefore the leadership of the movement paid more attention to expel the immigrants and this was their primary objective.

In the book “A Century of Protests, Peasant Politics in Assam Since 1900”, Arup Jyoti Saikia says that the 21 point charter of demands submitted by AASU to the government included demands for the cause of the peasants. It thus gave a platform for the nationalist to mobilize the Assamese peasants along with the landlords and middle class. In the meantime the idea of xenophobia and the danger of the immigrants had been continuously published among the people through the means of some documents of AASU, AGSP and through the work of some intellectuals and the social activists whose are in favour of the movement. Perhaps this particular circumstance gave rise to the process of the communalization in Assam. J. Jana stated, there formed a coalition among the nativism and the communalism in the movement. (Gohain & Bora: 2001) Moreover instances of various communal clashes at Neli, Gohpur and Chaolkhuwa were seen during this period. It is also opined that the idea of xenophobia and the question of ownership of land were the prime factors for these communal clashes.

2. Conclusion

Thus from the above discussion we can say that though the basic objectives of the movement was to detection and deportation of the foreign nationals. Yet the specific issues were related to the life and livelihood of the common people which accelerated to form the context to have a fight on the question of Nationalism. The agrarian issues helped to develop the sense of economic nationalism. People of the state were organised and empowered them to wage their political fight against the government of India. The anguish, anger and anxiety of the common people were channelized properly through the means of bubbling ideas and in their module of struggle which may be called as Little Nationalism. By which the six years long Assam Movement took place in the history of post-independent Assam. The class who participated in the movement were dreamed to expand their both cultivable and non-cultivable land and to have employment for the youth. The agitators fixed their target as- to remove the immigrants first and which will be followed by the economic development. So the peasant and working class were mobilised in the name of the Nationality Question.

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