

The Evolution of Assamese Subnationalism

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Abstract :

Assamese public intellectuals argued that they were a distinctive people with a distinctive language and culture. The earliest assertion of Assamese cultural pride - well before it could be termed nationalism- grew as a reaction to the decision of the British colonials (in 1836) to make Bengali as the language of rule. This write-up traces the evolution of Assamese subnationalism.

IndexTerms - Assamese Subnationalism, Distinctiveness of language, Mobilisation.

I. INTRODUCTION

The theme of asserting the autonomy and distinctiveness of Assamese language and culture is almost as old as the British conquest of Assam. But modern political consciousness in Assam may be said to have commenced from around the year 1853 when Maniram Dewan and Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan submitted their memorials to Moffatt Mills. It would take another seventy years or so for this consciousness to develop and give shape to Assamese subnationalism.

The earliest assertion of Assamese cultural pride - well before it could be termed nationalism- grew as a reaction to the decision of the British colonials (in 1836) to make Bengali as the language of rule. In this, the efforts of Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan and of American Baptist missionaries (Miles Bronson, Nathan Brown), who had brought out the journal Orunodoi (1846-83) played the deciding role. Assamese was given its rightful place as the official language and the medium of instruction in school in 1873. The formation of the Assamese Literary Society in Calcutta one year prior to this and its activities highlighting the economic backwardness of Assam showed that modern political consciousness was beginning to take shape in the Brahmaputra valley.[1]

II. ASSAM AS AN EXTENSION OF BENGAL

The notion that Assam is an extension of Bengal, an aspect of the colonial geography of Assam had significant long-term implications for the cultural politics of Assam. This assumption led to a number of decisions of major consequence. (a) Until 1874 the British ruled Assam as a part of Bengal. After Assam became a separate province, colonial authorities once more experimented with a composite province of East Bengal and Assam from 1905 to 1912. Even as a separate province, Assam, until the very end of British rule, included the large Bengali-speaking district of Sylhet. (b) Throughout the entire colonial period, the British treated Assam as a land frontier for Bengal. Justifying the move to combine Assam and East Bengal into a single province, an official said that since Bengal is very densely populated and Eastern Bengal its most densely populated part, it needs "room for expansion" and it can expand only eastward. "Far from hindering national development," he said, "we are really giving it greater scope and enabling Bengal to absorb Assam." (c) From 1837 to 1873, Bengali was the language of the courts and government schools of Assam. While that was changed in 1873, the policy of encouraging large scale immigration from Bengal to Assam, as well as the way the boundaries of Assam were drawn, produced a demographic balance that kept Assam's language question a highly controversial one throughout the entire colonial period and beyond. (d) Colonial authorities were reluctant to spend resources on establishing educational institutions in Assam. While Assamese public intellectuals saw them as important for the "progress" of Assam as a district entity, colonial authorities saw such demands as a mark of Assamese "provincialism."

Early colonial administrators regarded the Assamese language as an offshoot of Bengali. The demand that Assamese be made the language of education and of the courts in Assam produced a major political controversy in the 1860s. Assamese public intellectuals argued that they were a distinctive people with a distinctive language and culture.[2] The other factor that contributed to regional consciousness and sub nationalism of the Assamese was large scale immigration of the Bengalis.

III. ROLE OF ASSOCIATIONS AND INTELLECTUALS

In 1888 an organization called Ahomiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sobha (Association for the Development of the Assamese Language) was founded in Calcutta by Assamese students studying in what was then the capital city of colonial India. The establishment of this organization is said to be "a landmark in the history of Assamese language and literature." Among its most important projects was the standardization of the Assamese language. One of the key figures of this phase in the history of Assamese cultural nationalism was Lakkhinath Bezbarua, who is generally regarded as the founder of modern Assamese literature. The Ahom Sahitya Sobha - in some ways a successor to this late nineteenth-century literary ferment-had its first session in 1917. Its motto is "My mother language-my eternal love." [3]

The tensions between Assamese sub-nationalism and pan-Indianism during this period are best seen through the career of the controversial Assamese literary and cultural figure. [4] A militant anti colonial activist, Raychaudhuri was a major player in the Indian National Congress organisation in Assam. In 1926 he formed the Ahom Sonrokhwini Sobha(Assam Preservation Society) to promote Assamese subnational interests. In 1936 he started the Ahom Jatiyo Moha Sobha (Assam National Assembly). Raychaudhuri brought out two influential magazines, Deka Ahom (Young Assam) and Cetana (Consciousness). The Sonrokhwini Sobha's goal was to "ensure the full control of the Assamese over Assam's land and natural resources, agriculture, commerce and industry, trade, employment, language and literature, culture and ethos." [5]

Two major issues taken up by Sonrokhwini Sobha and a number of other Assamese public organisations in the 1930s were the separation of Sylhet from Assam and the control of immigration from East Bengal. A delegation representing these organisations met Jawaharlal Nehru during his tour of Assam in 1937. Nehru's response underscores the disjuncture between the two perspectives. "The question of Sylhet's separation and immigration," he said, "may be very important to you but in comparison with other big problems that are facing us today, they are very small." [6] Yet these two issues, of which Raychaudhuri was the most articulate spokesman, were probably the most important issues discussed in the Assamese public sphere.

The formation of the Ahom Chatra Sanmilan in December 1916 marked a new stage in the growing maturity of the Assamese middle class. [7] The swift politicisation of the masses because of the Non-cooperation Movement became evident in the different socio-political organizations that sprung up soon after the non co-operation was called off. The rise in the level of political consciousness of the people was reflected in the articulation of regional demands which included the rights of the "sons of the soil" and safeguards against unchecked and unlimited immigration from nearby provinces. As early as May 1920, Chandranath Sharma who was the virtual founder of the Congress in Assam and who was known for his radical views, voiced his concern about the threat to Assamese identity from unchecked infiltration [8] of the foreign 'settlers'. The "foreign settlers" referred to are obviously the migrants from the other provinces of British India.

Assamese public opinion started to be increasingly agitated over the occupation of cultivable land by immigrants who came mainly from East Bengal. Discussing this, Guha says: "Landless immigrants from over-populated East Bengal- of them some 85 percent were Muslims...All that they wanted was land...pressed themselves forward in all directions in search of more living space in the areas held by the autochthons. It was then that an open clash of interests began to take place".[9]

Immigrant leaders like Maulana Bhasani [10] started demanding the abolition of the Line System which had been introduced in 1920 to protect the land rights of the indigenous peoples and, between just six years from 1930 to 1936, as many as 59 grazing, forest and village reserves were thrown open in Nowgong district under the Colonization Scheme for the immigrants. The land-hungry immigrants did not appreciate Assamese fears of being turned into a minority in their own land. They were in search of a lebensraum and would not stop at anything. [11] In this connection the observations of C.S. Mullan, (The Superintendent of the 1931 Census) while presenting the Census Report of 1931, are significant. He highlighted the threat posed by the immigration of Bengalis, during the two decades prior to the census, to the culture and identity of the Assamese people. [12] Describing the immigration as an invasion, Mullan declared that in the course of time the Assamese homeland would be confined to only a district or two of upper Assam. Though Mullan has been accused of harbouring mischievous intentions of setting the autochthons against the immigrants, yet the course of events in the succeeding decades has vindicated his observations to a certain extent.

It was against such a background that Assamese middle-class intellectuals like Ambikagiri Raychaudhuri and Gyananath Bora wrote about the need to defend the Assamese homeland against "foreign" incursions. Chandranath Sharma and Raychaudhuri seemed to harbour similar apprehensions about the fate of the Assamese nationality, even though their views on other issues might have differed substantially. Like Gyananath Bora, [13] a leading intellectual of Assam, A. Raychaudhuri espoused the cause of provincial autonomy within India in the earlier stages. Raychaudhuri himself outlined a constitution for an independent India that would be a federation of linguistic nationalities, one that would recognize dual citizenship.[14]

Major Assamese literary, cultural, and political figures - many of them Congress Party activists - were involved in the Raychaudhuri led Sonrokhwini Sobha. The organization has been described as Assam's "national forum"[15] by some. Whether one agrees with this characterization or not, there is little doubt that the issues taken up by Raychaudhuri and his organizations were continuous with the discourse of mainstream Assamese society. Major leaders of the Assam Congress were associated with the Sonrokhwini Sobha during its early period and they were in full support of the positions of the Sobha.[16] There were times, however, when differences between the Sobha and the Congress did become pronounced.[17] In the elections of 1946 the Congress party in Assam fought the Muslim League by fully siding with the Assamese subnationalist position on crucial issues such as opposition to immigration and the separation of Sylhet. Historian Amalendu Guha infers that by taking up Assam's national question... as its main election platform, the Congress Party succeeded in beating the challenge of Raychaudhuri's Ahom Jatiyo Moha Sobha.[18]

IV. CONCLUSION

When, after Independence the Congress government in Assam failed to provide adequate checks to infiltration from newly created East Pakistan, Raychaudhuri and the Jatiyo Moha Sobha started espousing the cause of an independent Assam. The Jatiyo Moha Sobha in a meeting held on 1 January 1948, declared that "Assam should come out of the Indian Union and become an independent country like Burma or any other country".[19]

Immigration and consequent usurping of trade and commerce formed the core of Gyananath Bora's ideas. He stressed that "freeing Assam from the grip of foreigners" is the only road to Assam's autonomy and progress". The only concern, the only responsibility that the Assamese have, he believed was "to save themselves from the grip of foreigners". [20] He insisted that Assam's regeneration would be possible only if it separated from India. Refusing to accept the agreement that a hundred years of British rule has made the plea for an independent Assam infructuous, the author stressed that national consciousness cannot be suppressed either by a hundred or and thousand years. [21] Would Thailand or Burma become a part of India just because they are brought under a single administrative unit under British India, Bora argues. He blames the educated section amongst the Assamese for having betrayed Assam's cause by trying to prove that Assam had been under British administration for so long, it would naturally be a province of British India therefore a province of India.[22]

This lengthy dwelling on G. Bora's view becomes necessary because many of the ideas incorporated in his writings found expression during the Assam movement (1979-85) on the foreigner's issue. These included the concept of economic independence, the need to bring the different tribal communities within the ambit of Assamese "Jatiatabad", the development of the state's resources for the benefit of the indigenous people and the idea of internal colonisation. Bora may, therefore, be said to

be one of those Assamese intellectuals who, in the nineteen thirties tried to project the thesis that in order to avoid being colonially exploited by India, Assam must become independent and manage her own resources.

Another voice calling for a sovereign Assam was the Ahom Association, formed as early as 1893 though not many bought its ideas as the Ahom masses had themselves integrated with the broader Assamese community and had accepted Sankardeva's Mahapurusiya Vaishnavism. The Ahom Association (known as Ahom Sabha till 1910) termed Congress as a caste-Hindu organisation. In its meeting held in September 1944, the All Assam Ahom Association declared: "In view of the peculiar position of Assam, both geographically and otherwise... Assam without Sylhet has a legitimate claim for free and independent existence in the event of India being divided territorially into Pakistan and Hindustan zones.[23]

Assamese public opinion was deeply agitated in 1946 by the cabinet Mission's proposal for an independent India that would be a confederation of two groups of provinces, one Hindu and the other Muslim. The Mission's proposal put Assam as part of Bengal (in Group 'E') To the Assamese it implied being incorporated into Bengal the perennial Assamese fear.[24] It was only with the backing of Gandhi that Assam Congress led by Bordoloi could take the stand of walking out of the Constituent Assembly if it accepted the Cabinet Mission's plan for grouping provinces.

The Assamese opposition forced the Congress to change its position. The Cabinet Mission Plan fell through. Some even blamed Bordoloi for the creation of Pakistan [25] Bordoloi insisted on "fullest possible autonomy" for the province so that Assam could utilise resources in its own interests. Kuladhar Chaliha, Rev. J.J.M. Nichols Roy, Rohini Kumar Choudhury, Omeo Kumar Das - all insisted on state autonomy in political and financial matters. Assam lost its fight in the Constituent Assembly to secure greater financial and political autonomy for the provinces.

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