



Assam Movement: A Reflection of Identity Crisis of the People of Assam

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Abstract:

Assam had to fight many times to protect the economic interest, social interest and national identity of the people of the region. Though the region has immense potentialities of economic development, but it stills a poor region comparatively to other states of India. Besides economic problem, foreign infiltration problem is a burning problem of Assam which has become a threat to social- cultural identity of the people of the region. The influx of outsiders started from the British rule is still continuing and now it has become a apolitical agenda of the Central as well as the state government. The census report of India always showed the high growth rate of population of Assam. The students of Assam had a long history of struggle since independence, After independence, a series of massive movements had been launched by the students on the issue of ethno-cultural identity. Among these the Assam Movement was the most massive movement which rocked the state polity, economy social activities from 1979-1985. The chief objective of the movement was to detect, delete and deport the foreigners from Assam. The movement was spearheaded by AASU and AJYCP and it got support from almost all socio- cultural and other tribal organizations of Assam. On the other hand other Northeastern states of India also had given their support to the movement. After a a long gap of six years the Asssam Accord was signed which ended the historic movement. It has a far reaching impact on the people of Assam.

Key Words

Foreign infiltration, identity crisis, student politics, regionalism, communalism.

Introduction

Assam is a land not only comprising beautiful scenarios and natural resources but also a place which is inhabited by various races and communities. Throughout history people of different stocks have been migrating into this land and merged into a common harmonious whole by the process of assimilation. The present Assamese society is the assimilation of tribal, non tribal, indigenous and outsiders. The entry of outsiders onto Assam is not a new chapter. Almost all groups living here seem to have come to the region in different time for different purposes. The *Ahoms* (one of the ruling dynasties of Assam) also encouraged the outsiders but it is

worth mentioning that these outsiders gradually merged with the indigenous people. The demographic scenario had taken a new turn after the entry of the British into this land. The colonial power had opened the door to the people from other parts of India to fulfill their colonial motives. Tea cultivation, coal mines, establishment of railway line, oil refinery etc. encouraged the landless laborers from other parts of India into this land. With the objectives of increasing state revenue and bringing barren lands under cultivation the British government with the support of Assamese *zamindars* encouraged the Bengali Muslim peasants from East Bengal to migrate to this land. The census reports of India showed that the growth rate of population in Assam has been much higher than that of other parts of India. After independence the infiltration of foreigners from Bangladesh has contributed largely towards the growth of population in the state. It had affected not only states economy but also national identity of the people of Assam. From 1979 to 1984 The Assam movement was launched in order to detect, delete and deport the foreigners specially Bangladeshis which is the longest regional movement of India after independence.

Objectives of the work

The main objective of the paper is to analyze how far the Assam movement was successful in protecting the national identity of the Assamese people. An attempt has been made to critically analyze was the characteristics of the movement. It also deals with the background and different phases of the movement.

Methodology

Methodology of the paper is descriptive. For the work both primary and secondary source materials have been consulted.

Key Words

Foreign infiltration, identity crisis, student politics, regionalism, communalism

Background of Assam Movement

No doubt Assam got materialistic development under colonial rule. During this period, Industrialization, development of transport and communication helped in ushering a new path of modernization in Assam. Introduction of tea plantation has a far reaching impact on the people of Assam both from economic and socio-cultural point of view. In the 2nd half of the 19th century it created a huge demand for unskilled laborers from outside the province. Because the owner of the tea plantation was compelled to import laborers from outside as the local people were not willing to work as wages laborers. On the other hand their economic demand was high. This led to the importation of huge unskilled laborers from outside the province. But they never posed economic, cultural and political threats to the Assamese society. Instead they tried to integrate themselves with the Assamese culture.¹ The tea garden laborers are one of the community of outsiders in the 19th century who celebrated *bohag bihu*, *magh bihu* and *kati bihu* with great pomp and show. During the British rule the first flow of immigrants started from 1826 and continued up to 1905. They were mostly English knowing Hindu Bengalis from Bengal. They monopolized the professions like doctors, clerks, teachers in the early part of the 20th century. So, we have seen that the first issue of generating sub nationalism was the protest against the Hindu Bengalese who occupied the posts.² The Assamese middle class had no conflict with the Muslim peasants who occupied the uncultivable as well as the wasteland land. But when the educated Bengali immigrants started to occupy jobs under British administration the Assamese aristocratic class has become

dissatisfied. It is important to note that they never realized that actually the land grabbers were more dangerous than the job seekers for future generation of Assam. On the other hand this is also the phase of the entry of landless peasants. Vast tract of uncultivable fertile land and jungles attracted many peasants particularly from Mymensing (Bangladesh).³ The continuous infiltration of outsiders became a great threat to the Assamese society in due course of time. They entered in the three undivided districts Goalpapara, Kamrup and Nowgon. Completion of Assam Bengal and Eastern Bengal railway project provided facility to landless peasants of Mymensingh, Rungpur etc to enter into Assam. 5 C.S Mulan , the census Commissioner of India in 1931 in his census report opined that the “ the immigration was likely to alter permanently the whole future of Assam and to destroy more surely than the Burmese invaders of 1820the whole structure of Assamese culture and civilization⁴. Muhammad Sadullah’s government during the pre independence era was characterized as the policy of invitation of landless peasants from Bengal. His land Development and Colonization Scheme were responsible for the growth of immigrants. During the 2nd world war, under the policy of “grow more food” many Muslim immigrants were settled here. This policy was described by Lord Wavel, (Viceroy of British India as ‘Grow more Muslims’)⁵. His ministry gave 1 lakh bigha land patta to the infiltrators of East Bengal. As a result, 943552 numbers of Muslim people in 1931 increased to 13,03,962 in 1941.⁶

The wave of immigration continued even after independence. After independence the people of Assam hoped for all round development of the state. But there was hardly any difference in attitude of the independent government and the colonial government towards the state regarding the all round development of the region. There occurred a difference of attitude between Jawaharlal Nehru (then P.M of India) and Gopinath Bordoloi (P.M) of Assam regarding the infiltration of foreigners who came to Assam after independence.⁷ On 7th May, 1949, Bordoloi had written a letter to Jawaharlal Nehru describing the infiltration issue and it’s possible threat to the Assamese society. Unfortunately, Nehru only ordered him to adopt liberal attitude towards the infiltrators give them the land nearer to train line. Though he tried to save Assam from the grip of the immigration but a section of Congress party leader treated the minorities as their vote bank. So, they refused to take action against the minorities which would affect the interest of this community. The Sino- Indian border of 1962 also led to the influx of Muslim refugees into Assam. In the wake of Bangladesh independence war, 1971, several lakhs refugees entered into the Northeastern states and large number of them stayed here even after the war had ended. The natives who failed to compete with the new immigrants began to worry about the domination by later in all spheres. The sense of insecurity and felling of alienation made them conscious of their own identity. The new emerging educated elite of most of the ethnic groups started forming political platform like *Ahom Tai Mongoloid Rajya Sabha, Plain Tribal Council of Assam etc.*

In 1978, , a conference was held among the Chief election Commissioner from 24th to 26th September, at Ootacaamund, S.L Sakdhar, the then Chief Election Commissioner said that, ‘alarming situation in some states specially in the Northeastern region where from disturbing reports are coming regarding large scale inclusion of foreign nationals in the electoral rolls.’ The census report of 1971 recorded an increase as high as 34. 98% over the 1961 figures and this increase was attributed to the influx of a very large number of persons from the neighboring countries.⁸

Phases of the Assam Movement

The students of Assam have a long history of struggle since the colonial rule. They had been involving the polity as well as the socio –economic and cultural aspects of Assam. After independence a series of massive movements had been launched by the students of the region on the issue of ethno- cultural identity, economic backwardness and migration. AASU (All Assam Students' Union) AAGSP (All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad) AJYCP(Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad after its formation has become very active and aware of every aspects of Assam. The students' movements in post colonial Assam may be broadly categorized into three categories i. movement on economic issues such as oil refinery movement in 1957, on the issue of crisis of food in 1966, second oil refinery movement in 1969, ii. Movements for linguistic and cultural identity of Assamese people such as Official Language movement of Assam in 1960, medium of instruction movement in 1972, iii Movement on the issue of foreign nationals (1979-1985)⁹.

A large number of foreign nationals were enlisted in the Voter's list in the Mangaldoi Constituency where a bye election was held because of the death of Hiralal Patwari. AASU demanded the postponement of bye election till the names of the foreigners were deleted from the existing voter's list. It was demanded that there were 70,000 foreigners name in it. Among them 45,000 were deleted.¹⁰ The movement was started with a mass rally in Guwahati demanding immediate settlement of foreigner's issue. This was lead by Prafulla kumar Mahanta President of AASU and Bhrigu Kumar Phukan General Secretary of AASU. One of the important characteristics of Assam movement was that it was spontaneous in nature. Gradually the non violent Gandhian method of the tuned into violence and numerous incidents of violence had taken place in different parts of the state. The movement had drastically changed the direction of subsequent political development in the state. The then socio-cultural associations also had given their support to the movement such as PLP (Purbanchaliya Loka Parishad), AJD (Assam Jatiyatabadi Dal, Nibarani Bora was the chairman of the association with Communist ideology) ASS (Assam Sahitya Sabha), Bodo Sahtya, Upper Assam Chah Mazdur Sangha etc. The Northeastern states of India also had given their support to the movement.¹¹ The movement was spearheaded by AASU and AAGSP.

At first 16 point Charter of demand was put forwarded in 1979 by AASU. These were stoppage of influx of foreigners, state flood control, employment of local people in various sectors, proper implementation of Official language Act 1960, the tribal belt, government *khas* lands and village grazing reserves and char areas should be made free from encroachment of foreigners. The basic issue of the movement was preservation of national identity. The AASU demanded that the bye election should be postponed till the names of all foreign nationals were deleted from the electoral rolls. The leaders of the movement gave a call for 12 hours Assam *Bandh* and this was the active phase of protest actions and mass mobilization. The period from 1979 to 1983 can be regarded as the first phase of the movement. The means of struggle were squatting throughout Assam in front of offices of deputy Commissioners, sub- divisional offices, sub deputy collectors and Block development offices. These actions affected the functioning of the government order and establishment including bank, Insurance Corporation, railways post and telegraph. Though these actions were largely peaceful however in some places, picketers clashed with the police.¹² The Union Home Minister of states for Home , P Venkatisubaiyah informed the House that there were about 120 incidents of arsons and 127 cases of assaults between August 1979 and January 1980. 320000 houses in 40 villages have been burnt and 15000 people rendered homeless. ¹³ In the first phase of the movement that means from 1979 to 1983, 150 people lost their lives due to police *lathi* charge. Though it is regarded the phase as peaceful. ¹⁴ The AASU'S stand was that as foreign national issue originated

with the partition, the year 1951 should be taken as cut off year and all post 1951 immigrants were to be deported and expelled. But it was difficult for the Central government to accept the demand and Indira Gandhi proposed that 1971 to be the cut –off date. The leaders through their arguments in the memorandums and other writings in media successfully placed the problem before the whole nation. AAGSP In their memorandum to newspaper stated that “We are ready for blood bath, but whether government is prepared for or not, we do not know. All sorts of attempt were made for a practical solution from AAGSP but due to the lack of courage and sincerity on the part of the government the solution is remained unsettled. If the government does not like to solve the foreigners issue, they have not right to rule Assam.”¹⁵ In 1982 the President rule was imposed in Assam. Between January, 1980 to 1983 the government and leadership had no less than 50 rounds of talks at various levels. Disregarding the demands of the agitationists, the election commissioner of India , R.k Trivedi declared the Assam Legislative Assembly Election on February, 14,17 and 20, 1983.¹⁶ In the meantime, the government and non government press all were unwilling to publish electoral rolls for the election. Bharatiya Janata party opposed the holding of election in such circumstances. On the other hand the Communist parties gave their support in favor of holding of election. During this time the leaders of AASU and AAGSP put under the National Security Act after the failure of the 1st rounds of talks.

Assam had the bloodiest election after attainment of Independence. Even the employees of the Assam government refused to perform election duties. On 18th February, 1983 over 2000 people died mostly women and children at Nellie (Nowgong) due to clash between the Lalungs and the Bengali Muslims and Bengali Hindus. The Nellie Massacre was one of the largest and severest incidents that contemporary world had recorded. The Nellie Massacre was followed by another Massacre in Darrang district at Gopher and Chalkhowa Chapori between Assamese and Bodo – tribes.¹⁷

Inspite of these election was held about 150 supporters of the movement died as a result of state violence when they tried to resist holding election.¹⁸ In the election, Hiteswar Saikia, (Congress I) party formed the government after winning in the election. It was declared as illegal by the supporters of the movement. After the election, the 2nd phase of the movement was begun at the instance of Cabinet Secretary Krishna swami Rao Sahib. The centre’s view is that 1965 should be the cut- of date to detect the illegal migrants and those who entered Assam after 1966 should be identified and disfranchised for 5 years. AASU agreed with the cut- off year but they wanted expulsion and disenfranchised for 20 years. As a result nothing came out as a solution. The movement also took a new turn. Publicity campaigning team were sent to various states of Indian such as Chennai, Bangalore, Pune, Hyderabad, Mumbai, Mysore, Delhi, Chandigarh, Jammu Kashmir etc to analyze the aims and to answer the false propaganda arouse against the movement. They brought the folder of 8 pages “Save Assam Today to Save India, An Appeal from the People of Assam” that was published in Hindi and English.¹⁹ After the election, dissolution of Assam Assembly headed by Hiteswar Saikia was another main demand of the agitationists.

Arrival of Rajiv Gandhi as Prime Minister of India gave a new turn to the Assam Movement. He assessed the matters not only in the consideration the losses sustained by the country during the period. It was said that the six years agitation cost the people and government exchequer roughly Rs.800 cores due to stoppage of crude oil supply, rehabilitation of over three lakhs affected people, maintenance of the CRPF and BSF, air lifting poll personnel from outside Assam for 1983election etc.²⁰ He agreed to the demand of AAASU that a fruitful solution would be reached at on the controversy of the cut-off year.

Following a joint AASU and AAGSP meeting on 3rd August, P.K Mahatma, Bhriku kr. Phukan, ,Biraj Sarmah with 30 members of AAASU and 20 members of AAGSP had gone to New Delhi. The last rounds of talks between Central government and the leaders of the agitation held on 14th August, 1985 in the secretary's office in the North Block and ended at the Prime Minister's race course road residence before small hours of Independence Day at 2.45 a.m. A memorandum of understanding known as the Assam Accord was signed between between the government of India and the leaders of the Assam Movement. On behalf of the Chief Secretary P.P Trivedi, Union Home Secretary, R.D Pradhan, Cabinet Secretary P.K Kaul, Prime Minister , Rajiv Gandhi and the student leaders P.K Mahanta, Bhriku Kumar Phukan, Biraj Sarmah signed the Accord.²¹ Both the parties arrived at a mutually acceptable cut off year for detecting the foreigners and 1971 was recognize as cut off year for deporting foreign nationals from India/ Assam. It was agreed that those who entered Assam between 1st January, 1966 and 24th March, 1971 would be detected, allowed to stay in Assam and disfranchised for 10 years, after which they would be given back their right to vote once again. Besides on the foreigners issue some agreements were made for prevention of future infiltration by erection of barbed wire and other obstacles at appropriate places. The term was made that the ministry of Home affairs would be the nodal ministry for the implementation of the Accord. Hiteswar Saikia , the then Chief Minister of Assam advised the governor to dissolve the legislature and to order a fresh poll. He agreed to lead the caretaker government till the Assam Legislative Assembly election 1985.²² 26 N22 During the six years agitation 3500 numbers of people died as a result of state violence according to the government record and the number was over 5000 according to the non government record.²³ The immediate result of the Assam Accord was the formation of a new regional political party Asom Gana Parishad on 14th October, 1985. In the Assam Legislative Assembly election, 1985, this party formed the government in Assam. The youth leaders of the Assam Movement became the Chief Minister, Cabinet Ministers and Members of Assam Legislative Assembly. The people of Assam regarded the movement as their government and the government also assured the people that they would implement the terms of the Assam Accord.

Was the movement a communal one: The movement was the spontaneous in nature. The leaders of the movement were successful in utilizing the sentiment and emotions of the Assamese people. The people of Assam gave immediate response to the the slogans of the leaders which was, 'Ah Oi Ah Ulai Ah' and participated in numerous means of struggle. One of the prominent thinkers and intellectuals who studied deeply the characteristics of the movement told that, ' The agitation in Assam is not anti- Muslim, anti- Bengali or anti- Nepali but rather pro Assam and that too very valid reason'.²⁴ But some political parties, minority organizations and some intellectuals regarded the movement as communal one. The Communist party of Assam called the movement as secessionist. During the first phase of the movement from 1979 to 1985 the members of Communist party Marxist and Communist party of India Communist Party of India became their targets. During the six years 18 numbers of workers of Communist party lost their lives at the hands of the supporter of the movement.²⁵

It is said that AAMSU (All Assam Minority Student's Union) emerged as a protector of Minorities specially the Muslims in the womb of the Assam Movement in 1980. It launched rallies at Barpeta, Hauli, with the flag of Bangladesh and gave Slogans like 'joy Bangla.' One of the leaders of Assam movement said to the advisor of the the Governor of Assam about the rally in this way " Those who are genuinely Indians are all with us in our agitation it is the foreigners who have planned the March to lend legitimacy to their illegal stay."²⁶ The Muslims wrongly interpreted that the movement was against the Muslims. So the AAMSU acted as

counterforce against the supporters of Assam Movement. The state or Central government got the chance to use this mentality to spread communalism in the state. It is true that the nature of Assam Movement was not communal, the supporters of Assam Movement stood against them who protested the movement. They targeted the members of ruling party. On the other hand AMSU had close relationship with the Jami at (Jami at ul Ulema I Hind) one of the oldest religious organization of the Muslims spread the propaganda as it was run under the guide ship of RSS (an Hindu association). It took the leadership of uniting the minorities of Assam against the movement. From this time the Muslim community of Assam had given importance and aware about their dresses and began to use loud speaker during *azan*.²⁷ Leaders of Jamiat from other parts of India came to Assam to spread propaganda and united the immigrant Muslims. It termed leaders of the movement as extremists and secessionist. On the other hand the native Muslims always supported the movement and they stood against the ideology of AAMSU and Jami at. Ansonia Muslim Public Relation Committee, which represented the indigenous Muslims, argued that AAMSU will bring division between indigenous community and Muslim community. While AASU was demanding 1951 as the cut –off date for detecting the foreign nationals, AAMSU demanded 1975 25th March as cut-off date on the basis of Anglo – Bangladesh treaty of 1972. AASU regarded the AAMSU as agents of the illegal immigrants who are living in Assam. Several incidents of violence had taken place between the AASU and AAMSU in Dalgaon, Sonitpur etc. AAMSU blamed AASU leaders as they have close connection with RSS and the movement was guided by RSS but they never realized that AAMSU also had close connection with Jamiat and controlled by it.²⁸ AAMSU had taken the initiative of uniting all the immigrants against the movement. Minority organizations and a group of intellectuals also condemned the AGP government that it was forced to run the administration according to the direction of AASU. On the other hand AGP government was not successful in gaining cooperation from the Central government. Even Homen Borgohain, one of the brave intellectual, journalists, novelist, essayist, who opposed the Assam movement, also support the issue exposed by the movement. He also worried and realize the future threat that will be brought to socio –cultural identity of the Assamese people by the unabated immigration from Bangladesh. He strongly criticized the politics of minority leaders in Assam. They tried to increase the number of Muslims in any ways. So, it is seen that leaders never they indirectly supported immigration because those leaders never shouted their voice against the unabated immigration voice of Assam.²⁹ Their opinion was always like that there was not a single name of foreigners in the ER without a through scrutiny they opined in this way. There is a question why minorities especially the AAMSU did not gave their support to the movement though the aims and objectives of the movement was clear that to detect, delete and deport the illegal immigrants. They also opposed the proposed cut-off date of the AASU. It clearly focussed that they were not whole heartedly integrated with the Assamese culture.

Assam movement gave birth to a minority organization namely, UMF (United minorities Front.) representing the interest of the minorities especially the Hindu Bengalis. So, the period of Assam movement created the sense of insecurity among the outsiders. ABSU, UTNLF vehemently opposed the 6 and 10 no. clause of the Assam Accord.

Against whom the movement was launched?

The leaders of the movement regarded the Assam Accord as historical one which would be able to safeguard the national identity of the people of Assam. They declared it as a great victory. But some political parties and some

intellectuals of Assam did not regard it as a victory. The communist party of India regarded the movement as secessionist.

Although the aim of Assam movement was clear that to detect, delete and deport but there arise a question the Assam movement was launched? Against the foreign infiltrators, against the Central government or against the state government?

But it also important from political, social and cultural point of view that in any country, the foreign infiltration problem was not tackled through massive movement, every government or country took the issue when their inhabitants had faced the problem of national identity. This is the duty of a particular government. But either central or state government did not worry about this problem. This issue of great concern for national security has been made into a partisan affair and a matter of vote bank. Hiren Gohain, one of the intellectuals of Assam said that the movement itself is by no means secessionist, but it holds in its womb teeming secessionist ideas and attitudes. Although he raised his voice against the strategy of the movement but he opined that “No doubt deep and genuine feelings have been raised, and we shall be monsters indeed to condemn this event expression of loyalty to one’s national identity.”³⁰ One group of intellectuals of Assam blamed the Central leadership for their negligence towards the economic development of the region. The Assam movement was seen as displeasure and impassions of the son of the soils. After independence, during the last two decades, there was only one industry in Assam- the Numaligarh refinery. By the accord, Assam accepted the burden of pre- 1971 entrants. No need of a long 6 years movement to commit the Central government to revive the sick industries and establish some educational institutions which was seen after the Assam Accord. In reality the movement was not successful in solving the foreign infiltration problem. It is said that the only apparent result of the Assam movement was the capture of political power of Assam by the AASU leaders after receiving verdict from the people of Assam to Asom Gana Parishad in the Legislative Assembly Election of Assam, 1985. One of the sole objectives of the party was to implement the terms of Assam Accord. There are so many differences of past voice and present voice regarding the foreign infiltrators between the leaders of the Assam movement and M.L.A and ministers of the AGP government. It is worth mentioning that the former leaders of the Assam movement had become the M.LA and ministers of the AGP government. After forming the government they had become tolerant towards the infiltrators. The AGP government also failed to resist the entry of the foreigners into Assam. In the first phase of their rule i.e. from 1985-1990 they could not deport even 1000 foreigners from Assam and did not give importance in the protection of international boundaries from foreign influx. Joynath Sarmah, the minister in charge of Assam Accord implementation claimed that more than 10,320 persons had been expelled for illegal entry into Assam and more than 60,000 cases were referred to the Tribunals until November, 1989.³¹ AGP government was not successful in gaining cooperation from the then Central government in the implementation of Assam Accord especially with reference to the foreigner’s issue. It is to be noted that during the first phase of the AGP rule, (United Liberation Front of Assam) ULFA also ran a parallel government. The radicals who supported the Assam movement formed this armed wing in 1979 with the aim of revolutionary changes of political and economic life of the people of Assam.

Conclusion

To sum up it can be said that the Assam movement was a movement of national awakening of Assamese people. No doubt there are genuine national elements in the movement. When the Assamese people faced identity crisis due to the unabated influx of foreigners into Assam, than the aims and objectives of the movement stood as a savior of indigenious of the region. But it is also worth mentioning that most of the ethnic groups of Assam regarded the Assam movement as a desperate attempt to consolidate Assamese supremacy.. It was also important that in the height of the Assam movement, the AASU leaders demanded the end of 20% reservation to STs and SCSs in educational and government offices. As a result, ABSU (All Bodo Student's Union) was formed under the leadership of Upendra Nath Brahma, which was later inspired by secessionist ideas and demanded separate Bodoland for them within Assam. The movement also reflected the importance of Non political organization in Assam such as AAASU and AAGSP. After independence, the policy of Central government blind eye to the serious issue of immigration was also responsible for the influx of foreigners into Assam. There are so many examples in history of the disappearance of indigenious people in the world due to foreign infiltration. The Assam movement and the formation of AGP was the outcome of the grievances of the Assamese people.

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