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The Assam Movement: Beginning of a New Political Consciousness among the Muslims of East-Bengal Origin in Assam

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Abstract

The Assam Movement is the most popular mass movement that Assam experienced during the post-colonial period. A large section of the Asamiya people supported the movement because it was embedded in the question of identity. The movement, in its first inception, was a protest movement against the government policy of giving political rights to alleged foreigners. But gradually it transformed with the emphasis being shifted on the issue of identity construction by drawing upon various ethnic stands and ultimately leading to ethnic disorder. The movement brought a distinctive political awareness amongst the Muslim community in general and the Muslims of East-Bengal origin in particular of Assam. Though the Movement at its initial phase was against all the illegal foreign nationals residing in Assam, yet gradually it seemed to be stood against the Muslims of East-Bengal origin and the Hindu Bengalis living in Assam. It propelled a deep polarization between the Asamiyas and the Muslims of East-Bengal origin.

Keywords: Assam Movement, Communal Polarization, Identity, Muslims of East-Bengal Origin.

Introduction

The Assam Movement was the largest mass movement that occurred in Assam during 1979 and it lasted for six years till 1985. All communities irrespective of their religious and political affiliation



supported the movement as it was a movement against all illegal foreign nationals staying in Assam. Realization of identity crisis due to influx of foreign nationals to Assam pushed a large section of Assamese to join the movement to stop the influx of foreign nationals and to protect their identity from those illegal foreigners. In the politics of Assam, the issue of migration remains a dominant phenomenon. It is believed that, the migration of population from outside Assam has been posing serious challenges towards the socio-cultural life of the Assamese people. A large section of Assamese believed that the migrant communities particularly the Muslims of East-Bengal¹ origin constituted an important vote bank in the state would have changed the politics of Assam. GirinPhukan argued that the Assam Movement was the manifestation of such apprehension (Phukan 1996:34).

In Assam, the struggle for protection of Asamiya identity had a long history but it got its boost along the Assam Movement. Hussain argued, “The leadership popularized the idea very strongly that the Asamiyas were losing their identity. The fear of losing their identity in their own homeland propelled the mass movement and many participants made immense sacrifice in order to fulfill the demands...” (Hussain 1993:166-167)

The Asamiya bourgeoisie also strongly supported the movement. The Assamese middle class, along with vernacular press popularized the idea that the Assamese were losing their identity and their control over the state politics in the face of unabated influx from Bangladesh.

After six years, the Assam Accord was signed in 1985 marking an end to the movement which still takes the centre stage of controversy. But the entire movement infected the age-old relationship between the Hindus and the Muslims in Assam in general and the Asamiyas and the Muslims of East-Bengal origin¹ in particular.

There are always some sensitive issues in a mass mobilization which may turn into harmful explosion in the society. Tilly, (2004:3-4) argues that, social movements are sophisticated forms of ‘collective behaviour’. The collective behaviour guides group actions. Group actions play a vital role in a movement. Tilly recognized social movements as a major vehicle for ordinary people’s participation in public (electoral) politics. By participating in a movement, ordinary people are able to attain direct power through collective effort. Collective participation of a large group of people has been able to bring about changes in such a manner that can bypass the established procedures and lead to dramatic changes. The Assam Movement in post-independent Assam brought about such changes in society and politics of Assam. After the Assam Accord, the leadership of the movement formed a regional party and entered to the politics of Assam. Later, that party formed government in Assam.

What forced the movement to surface so strongly was the by-poll process in Mongoldoi parliamentary seat which fell vacant following the death of Lok Sabha member Hiralal Patwari, a Janata Party MP who died on March 28, 1979. The declaration by India’s Chief Election Commissioner of that period S.L. Shaktihar on the issue of inclusion of foreign nationals in the electoral rolls in the states of north-east India added to apprehension. Alleged sudden increase in the number of voters in the electoral rolls was taken off by the All Assam Student’s Union (henceforth AASU) to launch the movement. All the leaders of the ASSU demanded the



postponement of the by-elections in Mongoldoi till the names of the alleged illegal foreigners were deleted from the electoral rolls.

Subsequently a number of complaints were filed from members of the civil society demanding a correction of the electoral rolls. The foremost planned protest was with the call of a twelve hour general strike (Assam Bandh) by the AASU on 8th June 1979. They demanded “Deletion, Disenfranchisement and Deportation” of the foreign nationals (Baruah 2001:121). They also demanded that all who had entered the state after 1961 should be excluded from the state’s electoral rolls. The demand was whole-heartedly

(Note 1 Muslims of East –Bengal Origin were migrated to Assam during British period and they settled mostly in the river line areas. They settled both in Brahmaputra Valley and Barak Valley. They came from East-Bengal(now Bangladesh). Their mother tongue was Bengali. The Most important fact is that the Muslims of East-Bengal Origin of Brahmaputra Valley is known as ‘ Na-Asamiya’(new-Assamese) Muslims as they have declared themselves as Assamese by accepting Assamese as their Medium of Education.)

Supported by a large number of people of Assam and there was positive response to the bandh. That was said to be the beginning of the Assam Movement.

Communal Polirization and the Assam Movement

The veneer of non-violence and secularism peeled off as soon as big and small incidents of group clashes rocked the movement where a section of the people belonging to a particular religion was targeted. These incidents finally resulted in a yawning gap between the Hindus and the Muslims in Assam.

Quoting Isfaqul Rahman, Nandana Dutta writes “In the movement to push back foreigners one of the primary directions was that of Hindu fundamentalism. At the one point a BJP-RSS sentiment entered the movement and an anti Muslim feeling emerged. Muslim was equated with foreigners. As a result, the people of Assam were divided into a majority and minorities” (Dutta 2012:86).

Aggressive nationalism dominated the state’s socio cultural and political spheres during the movement, where thousands died, scores sustained injuries and communal harmony between the Hindus and the Muslims started falling apart at an incredible speed. Quoting Hiren Gohain, Nandana Dutta writes, “for five years the Assamese people have had their lives laid waste. A catastrophic cyclone came and spoilt hundreds of lives, destroyed age-old inter-community relationship sowed the seeds of poisonous barbs and thorns for the future” (Dutta 2007: 91).

The leaders of Assam movement demanded their detection and deportation from Assam. The leaders also demanded the deletion of their names from the electoral rolls because foreigners do not enjoy the right to vote.

Kimura depicted the picture how the migrant Muslims of East-Bengal became the illegal aliens when she stated,



“...before independence, the movement of people from the areas was regarded as interprovincial migration, as Sylhet was a part of same political unit as the rest of India. However, after, partition, the Muslim migrants became “illegal immigrants” or “foreigners”, whereas the Hindus were regarded as “refugees” (Kimura 2013:45).

Though the leaders adopted peaceful collective protest activities to achieve their demands right from the beginning, yet frequent outbreak of confrontations between the supporters and the opponents sometimes resulted in ethnic and communal violence. Such incidents stained the course of the movement from a non- violent to a violent one. Such confrontations became much more widespread especially during the time of Assembly Elections in 1983 as the leaders demanded the revision of the state’s electoral rolls before going in for the Assembly Elections. The attitude of the Central government was not very supportive towards the movement. There was conflict between the leadership of the movement and the Central government on the issue of the cut-off year for detecting and deporting the illegal foreigners. While the leaders demanded 1951 to be the cut-off year to deport the foreigners, the Government of India proposed 1971 as the cut-off year. This sharpened the conflict between the leadership of the movement and the Central government.

In 1980 an incident of mass killing occurred in North-Kamrup in which, “it was estimated that 200 to 300 persons died as a result of mob violence”(Hussain 1993:116). This pogrom occurred during the mid-term poll to the Lok-Sabha in 1980. The leaders of the Assam Movement showed their strong determination and demanded the deletion of names of foreign nationals from the state electoral rolls before holding any elections in the state. They adopted all possible means to stop elections in Assam. Gradually, the Central government took tough stand towards the movement. In 1983, the Election Commission of India announced the dates of elections for the state legislature in Assam. The leaders of the movement again demanded the revision of the electoral rolls before going in for the Assembly elections. But the government went ahead with the election procedures without revising the electoral rolls. The leadership of the movement called for the boycott of elections in Assam which resulted in the occurrence of a number of violent incidents during that period. Armed forces were deployed to hold the elections successfully. All these deteriorated the law and order situation in Assam. The situation further led to unwanted and unexpected occurrences of communal riots. The victims of these communal riots were mostly of religious and linguistic minorities² particularly the Muslims of East-Bengal origin living in Assam for generation. The progression of the movement had brought a new wave in the political course of Assam. Several rounds of talks were held between the Government of India and the leadership of the movement that ultimately paved the way for ‘Assam Accord’. The ‘Assam Accord’, brought a new form of polarization for power between the leadership of the Assam Movement led by AASU and the leadership of the counter –movement led by the All Assam Minority Students’ Union (henceforth AAMSU). While the leadership of the Assam Movement accepted the ‘Accord’, the leadership of the AAMSU opposed and criticized it. Two new regional political parties came into existence in the politics of Assam. The formation of Asom Gana Parishad (henceforth AGP) a regional party formed by the movement leaders and the formation of the United Minority Front (henceforth UMF), a regional by the leadership of the AAMSU, changed the political equation of Assam in the post-Assam movement period.



(Note 2 The Constitution of India has acknowledged only two kinds of minorities -religious minority and linguistic minority. In, India Muslims are the largest religious minority group. In Assam also Muslims are the largest religious minority group comprising 34.22 % (Census report 2011). The Bengali –Hindus are the largest linguistic minority group in Assam).

Towards A New Political Consciousness: The Assam Movement brought a new political consciousness to the Muslims in general and Muslims of East-Bengal origin in particular in Assam. Lots of events contributed towards the growth this new political consciousness.

Birth of All Assam Miority Students' Union: The Assam Movement failed to distinguish between East-Pakistani refugee and foreign nationals in Assam (Hussain 1993:131). The Muslims of East-Bengal origin and Hindu Bengalis residing in Assam bear their origin from East-Pakistan. Therefore they were easily labeled as Bangladeshi foreigners during the movement. After the North Kamrup incident of 1980 against the Muslims of East-Bengal origin and Hindu Bengalis, they became aware regarding the real motive of the leadership of the Assam Movement on the issue of foreign nationals. It seems that, the labeling of foreign national was done consciously. All these phenomena compelled them to organize themselves against the move to detect and deport the foreign nationals. The AAMSU came into existence as a counter organization to the AASU. Both the AASU and the AAMSU were dead opposed to each other. The AASU and the AAMSU activists clashed with each others in many places.

“As an antithesis to the AASU, The All Assam Minority Student Union came into existence, and similarly as an anti-thesis to the AAGSP; the Citizens’ Right Preservation Committee (CRPC) of Assam came into existence” (Hussain 1993:131). The Centre did not miss the advantage and invited AAMSU leadership for talks in New Delhi along with the AASU leadership. The minority students further demanded citizenship to those who came to settle in Assam before 1971. But the AASU leadership was dead opposed to the idea and remained firm on 1951 as the base year. The simmering difference finally resulted in an orgy of clash which later took the communal turn. “The Assam Movement and its resultant counter movement behaved in such a way that it sharply divided the masses of Assam” (Hussain, 1993:132). It led to a total collapse of the communal fraternity and harmony between the Hindus and the Muslims in Assam.

Udayan Mishra argued that, “Though in earlier populist agitations like the one for making Assamese the state language, the Assamese Muslims had played a significant supportive role, yet it was during the anti-foreigners stir of 1979-85 that they felt somewhat alienated and insecure for the first time in the state's post-independence history”(Mishra 1999:1269).

The attack and counter-attack between the AASU and the AAMSU further intensified the communal polarization.

Confused Regime: Assam’s sphere of politics kept taking new trend since Anwara Taimur took oath as Assam’s Chief Minister in 1980. At the outset she got tougher with the leadership of the Assam Movement and disallowed the Government employees from participating in the movement. She patronized some bureaucrats to nip the agitation in the bud. “The process appeared to be one of the de-Assamesization of state bureaucracy and it reinforced the fear of Assamese minoritization and of immigrant power” (Baruah 2001:129). Her course of action created doubt among the native



Assamese people towards the Muslim politicians and it enhanced the gap between the Hindus and the Muslims in Assam. Though Asamiya Muslims estranged from the movement after Taimur became Chief Minister, yet a large number of Asamiya Muslims stood with the Assam Movement. Examples were there, where Muslims leaders such as, Nurul Hussain became the vice president of the AASU, Nekibuz Zaman became the president of Kamrup district of the AASU, and Safiqul Hussain became the president of Jorhat district of the AASU and helped in the continuity of the Assam Movement.

Violence against Muslims of East-Bengal Origin during State Legislative Elections in 1983: The sixth Assam Legislative Assembly failed to complete its stipulated term and was dissolved on 19th March in 1982. The dissolution of the state legislature indicated that according to the constitutional provision Assam would have to go in for election before 18th March 1983 (Hussain, 1993:147). The Centre was keen to hold the Assembly elections to safeguard their political interest and announced the polling dates as 14, 17 and 20th February. The AASU and the AAGSP opposed the move to hold the Assembly polls without deleting the names of the suspected immigrants. Let us follow Sanjib Baruah who divided the Assam movement into five phases. The first phase took place from June 1979 to November 1980 which he calls festival of protest while the second phase lasted from December 1980 till January 1983 to be named as Confrontation. The third phase that includes the Assembly elections in February 1983 was marked as period of increasing violence. These include the assassination of E.S. Parthasarathy, a civil servant and an entry of paramilitary forces to the politics of Assam. Baruah names it as total breakdown of order. More than 3000 people were killed, divisions in Assamese ethnic society emerged (Dutta 2012: 84). The fourth phase that existed from March 1983 to May 1984 was marked by the contest between the state and the movement. The final and fifth phase which began in June 1984 and ended in December 1985 was the phase of accommodation (Baruah, 2001: 115-126). Each of these phases reflected the happenings of the time. The deadly incidents of violence erupted as soon as the Election Commission announced the Assam assembly poll schedule from February 14, 1983. The socio-political scene was dominated by incidents of police firing, attack on polling booths, setting vital bridges on fire.

“Clashes, which were essentially of political nature to begin with, thus ended up largely as communal massacres-even genocide at Nellie for instance-as it had happened on a smaller scale even before in North Kamrup in the early part of January 1980. The outbursts of violence both then and later were apparently preplanned” (Dasgupta and Guha, 1981:844)

Police lathi-charge on the agitators, incidents of group clashes, explosions, setting buildings and bridges on fire became burning issues of the media every passing day. Voters stayed away from exercising their franchise, willing voters were forced to confine themselves in their homes. The election was marred by many incidents of violence where the turnout was very poor. The victims of violence mostly were the Muslims of East Bengal origin. More than three thousand people, mostly Muslims of East Bengal origin, were killed during this period of skirmish before the elections (Baruah 2001:131-132) .

Nandana Dutta quotes G.B. Verghese who, has clearly depicted the picture of the outcome of the Assam Movement. “The state was racked with bomb blasts ... over 1600 bridges and culverts were damaged or destroyed. The climax came with the ghastly Nellie Massacre ...” (Dutta 2012:63).



The Nellie massacre was followed by series of massacre at Chaulkhowachapori in Darrang district ,Silapathar in Lakhimpur district. In Chaulkhowa Chapori ,the victims were the Muslims of East-Bengal origin and in Silapathar the victims were Hindu Bengalis. At Gohpur in Darrang district, many people died because of the conflict between the Asamiyas and the Bodos. More than 109 people, were burnt alive at Nagabandha of undivided Nowgong district. The victims were the Muslims of East-Bengal origin. The ordinary people became the direct victims of those massacres occurred in different places of Assam. Among those victims, the majority were the Muslims of East-Bengal origin.

“The large number of Muslims who were victimized in violence during elections and the national and international press coverage of it as a case of Muslims being killed, strained the ethnic Assamese Muslims’ attitude towards the movement”. (Baruah 2001:136). “Several Muslim members within the AASU issued an ultimatum to the AASU leadership demanding a correction of a “pro-Hindu communal tilt”. Their memorandum demanded a “firm definition” of a foreigner” (Baruah, 2001:136).

Thus, the movement which was launched peacefully came to be marred by murder and mayhem. One of the factors responsible for these murders, mayhem, communal riots was the Assembly election of 1983. The repeated occurrence of communal riots widened the gap between the Assamese and the Muslim community and particularly Muslims of East-Bengal origin in Assam.

Illegal Migrant (Determination by Tribunal) Act

To find out a way to reduce the occurrence of communal riots and to protect the genuine citizens from harassment, Indian authority introduced the IM(DT) Act and imposed this Act on Assam in 1983. The act was imposed to protect the interest of genuine citizens of India, from atrocities and harassment. The Act set the qualifying date for identification of foreigners as 25th March 1971 under its section 3c(i) of the Act. The act was deliberately framed for Assam to deepen the communal polarization. The most interesting reality was that only Assam followed the IM(DT) Act,1983,till 2005. The remaining part of the Indian nation was operated under Foreigners Act of 1946. But the Act remained controversial because of its several discriminatory provisions.

These have put the popularity of the movement at stake. The assassination of Indira Gandhi had marked a change in the course of the Assam Movement. Rajiv Gandhi took oath as Prime Minister and renewed talks with the AASU leaders to find a solution to the impasse. Then the AASU leadership agreed on 1971 as the cut -off year and Gandhi promised of measures to detect and deport the illegal settlers who came after 1971.The agitation ended on August 15 in 1985 after the AASU and the AAGSP leadership signed the Assam Accord with the Centre where the primary task was to detect and deport the immigrants who came to Assam after March 1, 1971.

Assam Movement and Assam Accord: The ‘Assam Accord’ a memorandum of settlement was signed in 1985 between the Central Government of India and the leadership of the movement in New Delhi on 15th August 1985. Various political parties and organizations stood against the Accord. Purbanchaliya Loka Parishad rejected the accord and condemned it, saying that it was “made only for political power”. (Ahmed1999:167). The Accord fixed 25th March 1971 as the cut-



off date for identification and deportation of illegal foreigners from Assam, as demanded by AAMSU and determined by the Central government.

Birth of Asom Gana Parisad: The end of the Movement marked the beginning of the regionalism in the field of politics. “The AASU part of the leadership took initiative to form a regional party in Assam with the help of the supporters of the Assam Movement.” (Hussain 1993:155). Accordingly the AGP came into existence as a regional party on 10th October 1985. The formation of AGP inspired leaders of the AAMSU to form United Minority Front in Assam.

United Minority Front: After the formation of AGP, the leaders and supporters of counter movement against the Assam Movement formed UMF. While the AAMSU and CRPC(henceforth the Citizenship Right Preservation Committee) were the organizational counter to the AASU and the Assam Movement, the UMF remained as a counter political group to AGP formed by the leadership of the Assam Movement. Ahmed argued, UMF “a political party for the minorities, by the minorities and of the minorities” (Ahmed 1999:174). The main support bases of UMF were the Muslims of East-Bengal origin and Hindu Bengalis. The formation of UMF added a new chapter in the development of new political consciousness among the Muslims of Assam.

Assam United Democratic Front: A new political party was formed in Assam in the late 2005. The formation of Assam United Democratic Front (henceforth AUDF) gave a new direction to Muslim politics of Assam. Later on AUDF remained as All India United Democratic Front (henceforth AIUDF). Assam Jamiat played an important role behind the formation of AIUDF. For the first time in independent India, Jamiat (Jamiat-Ul-Ulema-E_Hind) came to play a direct role in the politics of the country” (Nath 2011:157).

Conclusion

The whole atmosphere of Assam was covered by slogans like Mare Asom, Jiye Kon, Jiye Asom Maare Kon, Jai Aai Asom, (if Assam dies, who will live? if Assam lives, none will die; long live mother Assam:), Jodi Nuhua Asomiya, Asom eri gusi jua (if you are not an Assamese, leave Assam). These slogans cohered thousand of Assamese to detect and deport illegal foreigners from Assam. AASU spearheaded the movement with several objectives to protect the interest of the Asamiya people. But in due course, acrimonious differences, fratricidal clashes took a huge toll which converted the environment during the movement to a violent and communal one. The issue of detection and deportation of foreign nationals, the participation from RSS, Jana Sangh, leaders of BJP to the Assam Movement, occurrence of communal riots during 1983, birth of AAMSU, CRPC, the introduction of IM (DT) Act, all these led to communal polarization and the developed a new political consciousness among the Muslims in Assam in general and Muslims of East-Bengal origin in particular.

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