



The Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (TJMDR)

Content Available at www.saap.org.in

ISSN: 2583-0317



Role of students in the movements for linguistic and cultural identity of the Assamese people: special reference to all Assam student union

Masumma Zaman

Research Scholar, Dibrugarh, Assam, India

Received: 18 Dec 2021 Revised: 08 Jan 2022 Accepted: 19 Feb 2022

Abstract

This paper is started with the formation of student's organization in Assam. This work highlights the effectiveness of youth and how they could bring drastic changes in the society. It is focused on their active participation in various socio-political and economic issues of a society and how the activities of students, influence the ruling parties, and given the shape of movements in generic socio-political circumstance and able to create awareness among the people.

Keywords: Assamese, Movement, Organizations, circumstance, awareness.

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 International License.

Copyright © 2022 Author(s) retain the copyright of this article.



*Corresponding Author

Masumma Zaman

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37022/tjmdr.v2i1.292>

Produced and Published by

South Asian Academic Publications

Introduction

Youth, basically students are considered to be a powerful force in the society. The students of Assam have been launching massive agitations on issues like cultural identity, economic backwardness and immigration. There was no student group or associations in this area before the arrival of the British. Formal education began with the initiative of the Christian Missionaries and the British colonial administration. To some extent, the youths who were exposed to modern education started playing an important role in the society. The passion of national consciousness started from this section of new educated youths. Numerous organizations were formed at that time like Jorhat Sarvajanik Sabha, Assam Association Assam Desh Hitaishini Sabha etc. to protect the interests of the peasants and to condemn the evil administration of the British. From the 1870s, the Assamese residents of Calcutta took the initiative in organizing associations for the general improvement of the state, especially its language and literature. The establishment of the Cotton

College in 1901 was a turning point for the education of the state. On 25th December 1916, under the aegis of Chandranath Baruah, Harbeshwar Sarmah Kotoky, Joynath Bora, Bireshwar Bhattacharya and Padmadhar Chaliha, the Assam Students Literary Conference was organized in Guahati under the presidentship of Lakshminath Bezbaruah. The name of the conference was changed to Assam Students Conference and later as Assam Students Federations. This federation was not limited to literary works but was also engaged in other social and political activities. There were three student organization in Assam at the time of Quit India Movement. Those were Assam Student Union, Assam Students Federation and Provincial Students Federation. The congress party leaders tried to unite these three organizations but they failed. Assam Student union became an independent organization after independence of India. In 8th august 1967, the Union established itself as a formal organization and adopted its constitution. The Union was renamed as All Assam Student Union. This conference was presided by Lakhi Saikia. It declared that its aim was to use student power for the welfare of the common people [1].

Linguistic movement paved the way for cultural identity

In 1959, the Assam Sahitya Sabha adopted a resolution to introduce Assamese language as the state language.

In 1959, the AASU started a movement for Assamese as the official language in the state. Because of the movement, 'Assam Official Language act 1960' was passed by the Assam government¹⁰. But the plains as well as the Hill tribes resented this enactment. Many Bengalis also protested and in several areas like Lumding and Mariani. Where they were in majority attacked the Assamese people. Violence between Assamese and Bengalis in several areas resulted in the loss of many lives.

A powerful movement was launched by the AASU in 1972. This was called "Medium of Instruction Movement". This movement was launched under the leadership of Pulakesh Baruah (President) and Prasanna Narayan Chaudhury (General Secretary). Besides, Abu Sharif, Purna Baruah, Khagen Saikia, Jadab Saikia, Atul Bora, Khirode Das, Satyajit Bora, Gunajit Kumar Choudhury, Gopal Bhuyan, Aswini Das etc. were actively involved with the movement. Anil Bora, Naren Mahanta, Mujammil Haque lost their lives. Sisir Phukan, Mohit Borah, Loit Borah, Mukut Bhuyan, Bishnu Kotoky were arrested. Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA) during the movement. Language oriented movement in 1960 and 1972 had complicated the law and order situation all over the state and it took a long time for normalcy to return.

Due to the demand of the movement and at the insistence of Assam government, Gauhati and Dibrugarh Universities made Assamese as the medium of instruction in their colleges in 1973. Many Bengalis along with other ethnic tribes opposed the medium of instruction. It reinforced the demand for separate state in Cachar. Besides, the ethnic groups such as the Bodos, the Deories, the Karbis, and the Ahoms who had been maintaining their cultural identity were not happy to accept the Assamese as a medium of instruction. Even some of them began to plead for either separate or Autonomous state. In this situation, the then Assam government under Sarat Chandra Sinha held a discussion with other opposition parties in order to settle the problem. A proposal was adopted in Assam Legislative Assembly to establish a separate University at Cachar. When the Assam Government adopted this proposal, AASU launched a movement in the Brahmaputra Valley and opposed this proposal. As a result, The Proposal was withdrawn. This movement ended by an agreement that from 1982 Assamese would be the medium of instruction in all schools and colleges. In 1972, AASU was also involved in transferring the capital of Assam from Shillong. Because under the 'State

Reorganization Act 1971'; Meghalaya was declared as a separate State in 1972. Rajdhani Sangsthan Samati was formed at the initiative of Digen Goswami, Lalit Borah, Gunin Gayan, Mohit Borah etc. At that time, Sarat Chandra Sinha was the Chief Minister of Assam. At last, in 1973 the capital was transferred from Shillong to Dispur.

Among these movement, Assam movement was the most powerful movement launched by the AASU. It demonstrated certain specific features for instance; the issue of foreign national is participation in the electoral process of Assam/ India that the movement wanted to stop at any cost. Simultaneously, it also aimed at protecting the very distinct socio-culture, economic and political identity of the Asamiyas, the movement was led by student organization outside the political party structure and organizations. It demonstrated remarkable capacity in mobilizing the masses.

Assam movement did not appear all of a sudden from a vacuum. It had a long background. The unabated influx of outsiders made Assam one of the thickly populated states. The situation had assumed such magnitude that the very existence of the indigenous people was threatened. Besides, it also posed a serious threat to economic aspects of the state. The gradual reduction of indigenous population had not escaped the notice of the successive Census Commissioners in charge of Assam like C.F. Mulan (1931), V. Vaghaiwala (1951) and Pakyantein (1961). The number of indigenous peoples declined from 87% in 1901 to 61% in 1951 and to 50% in 1971 [2].

In 1979 voter's list, updating began for Mangaldoi constituency for bye-election in March 1979. Out of 600,000 voters in the list, complaints were received against 70,000. At that time, Janata Government in India collapsed in July 1979 and general election was called for in December 1979. AASU and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) demanded to revise the rolls of every constituency before holding election. The leaders of the movement gave a call for 12 hours Assam bandh in June 1979 and this was the active phase of the movement and protest action. From 7th to 10th March 1979 the 8th Annual conference of AASU was held at Sivsagar. In this conference Prafulla Kumar Mahanta was elected as President and Bhriku Kumar Phukan as General Secretary. The students' union and other associated organizations succeeded in emotionally uniting the Assamese people. The AASU through their

memorandum on 2 February, 1980 to Indira Gandhi (Prime Minister) conveyed their profound sense of apprehensions regarding the continuing influx of outsiders into Assam and the fear about adverse effects upon the political, social, cultural and economic life of the state.

At first, the leaders of the movement demanded that the year 1951 should be the cut-off date for the detection of foreigners but Indira Gandhi opposed this and she proposed that 1971 as cut-off date. The Central Government tried all possible means to suppress it but failed and it turned into a mass movement under the leadership of AASU and AAGSP22. All sections of Assamese people had given their support to the movement.

Disregarding the demands of the leaders of the movement, the Election Commissioner of India R.K. Trivedi declared the Assam Legislative Assembly Election on 14,19,20 February 1983. Numerous unlawful incidents took place between the supporters and non-supporters of the movement. In the Assam Legislative Assembly election, Hiteswar Saikia came to power. After the election, the movement also lost its original fire. Dissolution of Assam Assembly also became a primary issue after the election.

The agreement with the Centre begun during the 25th round of formal talks held in New Delhi. During the Prime Minister ship of Rajiv Gandhi on 14-15 August, 1985 the Assam Accord was signed and it ended the six years Assam Agitation. The year 1966 was accepted as the cut-off date for detecting the foreigners and 1971 was recognized as cut-off date for deporting foreign nationals from India/Assam. Besides some agreement were made for speedy all round development of the state.

The Leftist parties opposed this. By this Accord, Assam accepted the huge burden of the pre-1971 entrants. However, the leaders referred it as a victory but in reality, it could not solve the foreign infiltration problem. Even now, it is a burning political problem of the state [3].

During the period of the Assam movement, discussions were held between the leaders of the movement and two political parties of Assam i.e. Purbanchanliya Lok Parishad and Assam Jatiyabadi Dal (AJD) to form a new regional political party. As a result, on 14 October 1985 a new regional political party came in to existence namely

Asom Gana Parishad (AGP). Of course, the constitution forbids its members from joining political parties but there is nothing to prevent individuals from resigning from AASU in order to contest the election. After the Accord, general body meeting of AASU was held and Prafulla Kumar Mahanta and Bhriгу Kumar Phukan resigned from AASU. Kartik Hazarika and Sasadhar Kakoti became the president and General Secretary of AASU respectively [4].

At present AASU is protesting against the influx of illegal foreigners, establishment of big dams, upgradation of 1951 N.R.C. of Assam, shelving of Lower Subansiri dam, solution of inter-state boundary dispute, sealing of Indo-Bangla border etc. It is also proposing 100% reservation of seats in local boards, Assembly and parliament for indigenous people, granting of land to the indigenous Assamese people and so on. In 2005 under the auspices of the AASU, Illegal migration (determination by Tribunals (IM (DT)) Act was scrapped which was safeguarding the illegal foreigners and applicable in the state of Assam only.

Nevertheless, the activities of AASU are not above criticism. The Official Language Act 1960, which was passed due to the demand of AASU, helped in the growth of anti-Assamese feeling among the minds of other ethnic tribes living in the plains and hills. The hill tribe elites became concerned with their oppression in undivided Assam. As result, Nagaland became a separate state in 1963. Conflict between Assamese and Bengalis took place. The medium movement in 1972 also reinforced the demand for separate state in Cachar. All tribes in Assam vehemently opposed it. Some of them began to plead for Autonomous state to maintain distinct lingua-cultural identity. The two hill districts submitted a memorandum to the then P.M of India and complained that "Assamese Junta" was determined to impose the Assamese upon them... The Bodo Peoples Action committee also complains that the Assamese people and the Assam Government were adopting policy of imposing Assamese language and culture upon the tribal's. Most of the ethnic groups of Assam regarded the Assam movement as a desperate attempt to consolidate Assamese supremacy. It was also important that the height of the Assam movement, the AASU leaders demanded an end of the 20% reservation to Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Schedule Caste (SC) in educational and Government offices. As a result, the All Assam Bodo Student's Union (ABSU) was formed under the leadership of Upen Brahma. It also gave birth to a

new organization called All Assam Minority Student's Union (AAMSU). It is said that the three movements not only gave a chauvinist edge to Assamese Nationalism but also tended to create an anti-Center if not anti-National psyche [5].

Conclusion

In short, it is said that in a state like Assam, AASU has a great importance as a non-political organization. From its formation, numerous movements were launched for safeguarding the interest of the indigenous people. North East Student's Union (NESU) which was formed under the leadership of AASU can strengthen the traditional bond among the people of the region. It also tried to solve the common problem of the region. This is undoubtedly an admirable step of AASU. In recent times, under the banner of AASU, the 26 ethnic youth organization decided to work united. If it comes into effect then in future, it is expected that it will contribute to reducing the growth of narrow nationalism in the state.

References

1. Baruah, A K(ed): *Student Power in North East India*, Regency, New Delhi, 2002, pp.1-2.
1. Barpujari, H.K (ed): *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, Publication Board of Assam, Guwahati, 1993, p.238
2. Dutta, Ajit Kumar & Goswami Pankaj: *History*, Ranu Prakashan, Guwahati, 2014, p.137
3. Hajarika, Niru: "Saduu Asom Chatra Sangtha: Atit aru Bartaman", in *Sindhara*, Smritigrantha of AASU, 1987, pp.43-44
4. Phukan, Girin: *Ethnicisation of Politics in North East India*, South Asian, New Delhi, 2003, p.21
5. *Best of Assam Movement: A Pictorial*, AASU.