

The Assamese Middle Class and Integration

The Role of the Assam Sahitya Sabha

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The theme of national integration both National as well as intra-regional, as in the case of the North Eastern region, has become a favourite with the Indian ruling classes and other political forces in the past decade or so. As the trouble spots in the country have multiplied, the cry for integration has also become louder. But the question of integration, national or regional, cannot be an emotional one alone, because "the degree of integration of a community is related to several factors, including the dominance of the political culture of the community or system over the sub-cultures within it". When the community fails to receive its expectations from the system then the forces of disintegration set in. Thus coercion becomes necessary to enforce law and various sections of a community begin to make demands for secession. It is therefore not enough merely to seek integration, but what is far more important is to first analyse why that integration is necessary and what role various socio-political forces have to play in the integration or disintegration of a system. The role of the dominant political and economic group in a community can therefore never be underestimated and the responsibility of such groups must be studied very carefully while trying to understand the problems of a political system or a community.

In the context of the North Eastern region of India and particularly Assam the Assamese middle class has a very important role to play in the development and integration of the region, and no study of the problems of the various communities of this area can be complete without understanding the role of the Assamese middle class.

The Assamese middle class, as we have discussed elsewhere³ is composed of the old and the

new petty bourgeoisie i.e. the traditional petty bourgeoisie that Marx wrote about and the new petty-bourgeoisie that developed with the growth of capitalism and colonialism. his combination of the old and new petty-bourgeoisie forms one class, the Middle class, keeping in mind the totality of the Marxist concept of class⁴. This middle class which emerged as a class in Assam at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries has been a very important force in the socio-economic and political development of Assam. In keeping with the general character of a middle class, the Assamese middle class has also played a progressive role at times but conservative and reactionary at other times. One of the most unique features of the Assamese middle class is its strong and definite rural links, and this has made it an even more important force. In its struggles for various demands of Assam beginning from the pre-independence period, it has been able to mobilise not only its own ranks but also to take along with it the peasantry of Assam, which has given a new dimension to even such movements which were launched primarily⁵ to fulfill Middle class interests and aspirations⁵.

In the North Eastern region the Assamese middle class has emerged as the hegemonies class owing to various factors. The format of these reasons is the fact that till very recently there was hardly any growth of a regional bourgeoisie, which could have played a dominant roles in socio-economic relations. The other important reason is the late emergence of other middle classes in this region. This second factor has not only made the Assamese middle class the most advanced middle class of the North-East, but it is also the root cause of many of the travails and tensions of the region - tensions which arise out of antagonisms between the less advanced and more advanced middle classes of the area⁶. Leaving aside these later developments, going but to the question of the dominance of the Assamese Middle Class,

it is necessary to note that like all other dominant classes the Assamese middle class has a dominant role to play in the socio-political developments of the region and particularly so in the question of development and integration of the various smaller nationalities in North East India.

What role has the Assamese middle class played in this respect? The assessment of the role of a class has to be made through an analysis of the activities of various organisations and mouth-pieces of that class. As such the Assamese middle class's role can also be understood through an analysis of the activities of various middle class organisations in Assam. One of the most important and effective organisations of the middle class in Assam is the Asom Sahitya Sabha which has by and large strived to represent the interests, ideas and aspirations of the Assamese Middle class. Therefore an analysis of the Asom Sahitya Sabha's role vis-a-vis the smaller nationalities of this area will provide us an understanding of the part that the Assamese middle class has played in the integration of North East India.

The Asom Sahitya Sabha, as formed at Sibsagar in 1917 was no doubt conceived of as a literary organisation initially. However, as a mouth piece of the emerging Assamese middle class and the educated elite the Sabha was destined to play a political role also as time went on. Besides this, most of the Presidents and members of the Sabhas were politically active. In the pre-independence period many of them were actively associated with the freedom movement and as such it was inevitable that the Sabha would have some political colourings and in this it obviously reflected the value premises of the class it represented. The Presidential addresses of the Asom Sahitya Sabha bears enough evidence of this point. Beginning from the address of the first President, Shri Padmanath Gohain Baruah, through the addresses of the succeeding presidents one clearly sees

how the views, interests and ideas of the Assamese Middle Class were upheld by the Sabha. For instance most of the addresses of the early years till about 1930, besides highlighting the history and development of the Assamese language, emphasised the issue of the recognition of Bengali as the official language of Assam in the nineteenth century. While discussing this matter all the presidents obviously reflected the views of the Assamese Middle class on the subject because it was the recent Assamese Middle class and educated elite which was most deeply disturbed by this linguistic development. One other point to note about the Sahitya Sabha's preoccupation as reflected in the Presidential addresses was that during the pre-independence period there was not much interest shown in the language and cultures of the plain's tribes and hill tribes of British day Assam. This was because at that time these ethnic groups were still at a very backward stage of development and forces had not emerged amongst these groups which might rival the Assomiya culture and language. But from about the time of independence we gradually begin to see a consciousness in the Sabha about the surrounding areas of the Brahmaputra Valley. At this time the theme that was constantly reiterated by the Sabha was that of assimilating the various hills tribes and others into the Asomiya culture and language. It was also at this time that for the first time the Sabha highlighted the threat to the security of Assamese peasants because of large scale peasant immigration from erstwhile East Pakistan. These subjects were definitely such issues which helped to serve Middle class interests.

From 1947 onwards we see that the sabha begins to take an interest in the tribes of the NEFA (now Arunachal Pradesh), Nagaland and in the affairs of the tea garden labourers. This interest was shown in the nature of spreading Asomiya language and culture in these areas and bringing them within the fold of the Assamese

nationality. The different tribes and ethnic groups at this time did not strongly oppose this move first, because in the euphoria of independence Assamese was considered a lesser evil than the British and secondly because an educated elite of consequence had not developed in these areas then. All through the 1950's till the end of the 1960s and even in the 1970s the Sabha constantly reiterated the view that all the hills and plains tribes of Assam's neighbourhood must be assimilated with the Asomiya social and cultural milieu. For instance, Ratna Kanta Borkakoti, president of the sabha's 1963 session said that if Assamese in the Assamese script was taught to all the hill tribes of Assam then they too would like the plains tribes of Assam, without doubt, become assimilated with the Assamese before very long. In the case of the NEFA the Sabha particularly emphasised the fact that the people of the NEFA should never be alienated from the Assamese and that it should be made into one administrative Unit with Assam. Only by such an action would there be an all round development of the NEFA and the tribes of that area could then become one with the Assamese and they would also realise that there was no difference between them and the dwellers of the plains.¹² The same type of sentiments were expressed again and again by Presidents of the Sabha right till the 1970s. As the political division of Assam gradually began to take place and new states were formed the Sabha expressed its unhappiness over these developments. But even then, this idea that Assamese should be the dominant nationality in this region and that its language should try and strengthen linguistic Assamese regionalism, persisted in the expositions of the Asom Sahitya Sabha. Even when from the late 1960s onwards stirrings began amongst the plain's tribes for a separate identity, the Sabha still held fast to its earlier sentiments. As late as 1985 Samsing Hanse, editor of the

Asom Sahitya Sabha Patrika wrote that even at the critical juncture when Bodos, Karbis, Mishings etc. of Assam were not wanting to live within the political boundaries of Assam, the Asom Sahitya Sabha's attempt to unite the various ethnic groups through till of goodwill and brotherhood was indeed a very laudable one¹³.

This big-brotherly attitude of the Assamese Middle Class reflected in the attitudes and activities of one of its important organisations, had not created too much tension in the region till the 1960s, because till then an advanced educated elite had not emerged amongst the various hill's and plain's tribes. But from the 1960s onwards, as an educated elite began to develop amongst the various ethnic communities, then this expansionist Assamese Nationalism became suspect and history was almost being repeated. Just as the nascent Assamese middle class in the late nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth century justifiably feared that it would lose its identity in the face of the onslaught of the more advanced Bengali Middle class,¹⁴ so also now the newly emerging elites of the North East Region had an understandable fear that their rising nationalism and their identity would be submerged in the expansion of Assamese nationalism. In this very critical situation the Assamese middle class, as the hegemonic middle class of this region¹⁵, has a very important role to play, and its important mouth pieces like the Asom Sahitya Sabha does have a responsibility in this respect. During the early years the attitude of nationalistic expansion as reiterated by the Sabha can more or less be explained. But when the smaller nationalities began to emerge, the Sabha could have diffused tensions by underplaying the big-brotherliness and hegemony of the Assamese Middle class and by highlighting the question of treatment of all small nationalities on an equal footing. As stressed in the beginning of this paper, if all the communities find that their aspirations

are being fulfilled within the existing system then the forces of disintegration would be stalled. In this context the constructive and progressive role of the Assamese Middle class would have been to take a such a theoretical position which would work out a system that would give all nationalities of this region equal scopes for progress. This could prevent Assam from falling apart. But such a progressive role cannot be expected from any Middle class and more particularly a hegemonic middle class like the Assamese Middle class which would struggle to the end to retain its hegemony this would create further dissensions in this region. There is however one aspect to development which might force the Assamese middle class to change its position. We have stated earlier and also shown in our other writings that the Assamese Middle class has very close and definite rural links, although these links have become weaker with the advance of the Middle class. But even then the Assamese Middle class still has the potentiality of mobilising and interacting with the peasantry when the need arises. The Assamese peasantry has quite a history of militancy¹⁶. If this peasantry, and the pressures come from below to take a more progressive stand, then the hegemonic Assamese Middle class might change its position and play a more constructive role in the integration of this North Eastern Region.

Notes & References

1. Trouble spots like Punjab, Darjeeling, Assam, Manipur, Tripura, Meghalaya, Gujarat, Merut and all those areas where regional forces have merged.
2. G.K.Roberts, **A dictionary of Political Analysis** (Aylesburg; Bucks: 1971) p. 161.
3. Monorama Sharma, "The Assamese Middle class: Its accordance to hegemony". (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis).

4. This point has been discussed in details in my work: **"The Assamese Middle Class Its Ascendence to Hegemony 1860-1910** (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis).
See also N. Poulantzas., *Classes in cantemporary Capitalise* (London 1978).
5. *Ibid* & A.K. Baruah, *Indian Nationalism and the Assamese National question*, *North-East Quarterly*, Vol I No.1
6. e.g. Antagonism between nascent Assamese M.C. and Advanced Bengali Middle class in late (19th Assam).
7. A.C. Hazarika (ed) : **Asom Sahitya Sabhar Bhasanawali**- Part I (Jorhat: 1955).
8. **Ibid. Loc.cit.**
9. See A.C. Hazarika (ed + compiled). **Asom Sahitya Sabhar Bhasanawali**, Part II. (Sibsagar: 1957) pp: 113-160, pp. 237-241.
10. For details of Assamese Middle class and rural interests see, Manorama Sharma, "The Assamese Middle Class : Its Assendence to Hegemony". **Op.cit.**
11. J.N.Goswami (ed & compiled) **Asom Sahitya Sabhar Bhasanawali** - part IV, (Jorhat: 1973) p. 231.
12. **Ibid.** p.232.
13. S. Hanse, "Bare Boronia Bhasha Sanskritir Milan bhumi Asom", **Asom Sahitya Sabha Patrika** (41st year : No.2: 1985).
14. For details on this point see, A.K.Baruah, "Indian nationalism and the Assamese National Question", **Op.cit.**, pp. 14-32.
15. For a discussion on Middle class and Hegemony see, Manorama Sharma, "The Assamese Middle Class: Its Ascendence to hegemony". **Op.cit.**
16. See, S.D. Goswami *Agrarian Politics and Peasant Militancy in Assam*, **North East Quarterly**, Vol I No. 1, pp.7-13.
Manorama Sharma, "Peasant unrest in Nineteenth Century Assam. Peasant US State" in A. Goswami (ed) **Land Reforms and peasant Movement** (New Delhi 1986) pp. 97-103.