

Student Movements in Assam : The Roots of its Continuity and Sustenance

Meeta Deka

There has been a lack of in-depth analysis and historical perspective of student organisations, student movements and student participation in socio-economic problems, so far as the student movements of Assam are concerned. The reason for this could be that the role of students until late, has never been emphasised by historians, or perhaps that student movements then, did not emerge as movements by themselves but rather emerged against the backdrop of the Indian National Movement. Students of Assam participated sometimes in conformity with the national programme, for example, the *Swadeshi* Movement and the Non-Cooperation Movement, and sometimes out of it, for instance, the Civil-Disobedience Movement which was essentially a student movement taking the shape of an anti-Cunningham Circular agitation.

There are certain factors which initiate student movements and agitations, namely, there must be a sufficient number of students to resort to a particular movement ; *secondly*, there must be issues stimulating such movements ; and *finally*, there must be leadership or organisation to shape and channelise such movements towards a socially recognised goal. Such being the factors required for the growth of student movements, the question of student organisations in the pre-colonial period did not arise, there being no educational institutions in the modern sense of the term.¹ In the colonial period, when modern educational institutions started towards the end of the nineteenth century,² students' unions were gradually formed to promote extra-curricular activities as well as to express their grievances, and through these unions, the students of Assam had the first experience in organisation and leadership.

A study of the student movements in Assam of the pre-independence period provides a background and inspiration to student movements in the post-independence period. The problems with which the students were concerned, then and even now, are not the achievement of high ideals or raising the standard of living, or an attempt at modernizing Assam but with much more grave problems which demands urgent practical solution. The problem of "infiltration of foreign nationals" in the context of Assam has, of late, flooded books, journals and other publications, where some

treat it as a mere "phrase", interpreting and reshaping it according to one's own wishes. However, it is this particular problem, unique to Assam only, which has given a new dimension to the student movements of Assam since the early twentieth century till the present day.

The crysatllisation of regional consciousness began, no doubt, through their contact with the students of Bengal, recognising themselves as a separate regional-linguistic community of the national mainstream, just as the Bengalees were. This contact with Bengal was inevitable as the growth of educational institutions in Assam was slow, and students from Assam had to go to Calcutta for their higher studies. With the establishment of the Cotton College in 1901, several other colleges were founded in due course of time,⁸ and as a result the student community of Assam began to grow, but not in the degree of its Bengal counterpart. As a result, the educated Assamese were insufficient to man the government jobs of the region, luring Bengalee recruits from the neighbouring state.⁴

Large scale immigration into Assam began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, effecting great changes in the 1901 Census. In fact in 1901, Assam's population constituted 1.38% of India's and increased to 2.22 % and 2.67% in 1951 and 1971 respectively, the increase being the result of immigration rather than a natural rate of increase (excess of births over deaths). Goswami and Gogoi have clearly shown a maximum inflow rate of migrants took place during 1911-21, dropping considerably in the subsequent couple of decades i.e. 1921-41, but increasing greatly in the next three decades i.e. 1941-71.⁵ This inflow of migrants apart from the tea-garden labourers who have assimilated into the Assamese society⁶, have created acute socio-economic problems for Assam. This increased the apprehension of the growing Assamese middle class, which magnified the participation of students in the socio-economic problems of the region. In fact student organisations were influenced to a great extent by the demands and aspirations of this middle class.⁷

Although the year 1947 saw India free herself from the shackles of colonialism, in Assam, the regional problems continued to be the concern of the students of Assam, problems which were basically the legacy of the colonial regime. Thus student movements and agitations in the post-Independence period entered a new phase on the major and popular issues of Assam, like industrialisation, food crisis, introduction of state language and medium of instruction in the universities, to ensure the linguistic and regional

identity of the Assamese people. Through these agitations, the All Assam Students' Union emerged as a mass organisation of the student community of the Assam Valley, and of late, carried out the six-year old movement to solve the Foreign Nationals' Issue.

The student Movements in Assam in the post-Independence period may be seen as a continuation of the tradition developed during the national movement. One obvious reason for this is that the declaration on Independence did not basically change the socio-economic structure ; rather the regional problems to which the students reacted, dragged on. Another factor responsible for this continuity, is the fact that student movements in Assam are not only intense but, widespread as well, their organisational network extending to villages as well. It was particularly after the anti-Cunningham Circular agitation that student volunteers like Bijoy Chandra Bhagawati engaged in propaganda and picketing in the villages of Tezpur, while Rabin Kakoti engaged in villages of Sib-sagarh. Narayan Goswami in Bajali, Baliram Das and Deben Chowdhury in Palasbari and Rampur areas of Kamrup. Tirthanath Sarmah in Korore, Sepoti and Rangiya in the North bank and K.K. Goswami in Nalbari.⁸ This further explains that the student movements of Assam, not only of the colonial period but even of the recent times, were largely rural-based and therefore were able to gather considerable support for their movements for a long time, which has not been the case elsewhere in the country.

Notes & References

1. For details see V. Venkata Rao, "A Century of Higher Education in Northeast India", *The NEHU Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 1985, p. 17-18.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 22.
4. A. Goswami and J. Gogoi, "Migration and Demographic Transformation in Assam in 1901-1971", edited by B. L. Abbi, *Northeast Region : Problems and Prospects of Development*, (Chandigarh, 1984), p. 61.; also see. P. C. Goswami, "Foreign Migration into Assam". edited by B. L. Abbi, op. cit., p. 35.
5. *Ibid* P. 37
6. P. C. Goswami, op. cit., p. 37.
7. Apurba Baruah, "Indian Nationalism and the Assamese National Question", in *North-East Quarterly*, Vol. 1 August, 1982. p.32.
8. S. Borah, "The Cunningham Circular as a Catalyst in the Civil-Disobedience movement (1930)", Progs. NEIHA, Second Session, Dibrugarh, 1981