

Ambikagiri Ray Chaudhury and Assamese Nationalism : An Analysis of His Ideas As Reflected In Ahuti

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Political events in Assam, particularly in the recent past, have generated a fierce controversy about the character of Assamese nationalism. While a section of intellectuals described it as a chauvinistic middle class phenomenon, others have seen in it a manifestation of the hopes and aspirations of a relatively backward nationality placed in a colonial hinterland. There was at least one serious attempt at explaining it as a peasant nationalism. Participants in this debate over the character of Assamese nationalism have marshalled considerable amount of data and powerful arguments in support of their respective positions. But no serious attempt has as yet been made at analysing the ideas of the founders of Assamese nationalism. Ideas of Ambikagiri Ray Chaudhury seem to have influenced the Assamese nationalists considerably. His songs and poems have inspired a whole generation of Assamese men and women. Through his innumerable articles, poems and other creative writings he brought a revolutionary fervour to Assamese nationalist writings. As an active participant in India's struggle for freedom Ray Chaudhury worked relentlessly for Congress during the freedom struggle but at the same time he kept on urging the Assamese people to protect their own identity. He feared that as a result of uninterrupted immigration particularly from East Bengal and the increasing influence of Bengali language in Assam the Assamese would eventually lose their identity. He believed that this small nationality could save itself from extinction only if it consciously developed nationalist ideas and became aware of the impending danger. He was so concerned at the indifference of his countrymen about the threat to national identity that in 1926 he established the *Asom Sangrakhiri Shabha*, to protect the interest of Assam and the Assamese, which later became the *Asom Jatiya Mahasabha*. This aggressive posture of Ray Chaudhury on the issue of Assamese national identity led a dominant section

of Bengali intelligentsia of Calcutta to call Ambikagiri a *Bengal Kheda Neta*.¹ It is rather doubtful whether this was an objective assessment of Ray Chaudhury's politics. Hiren Gohain maintains that it was a distortion of truth. He cites the instance of Ray Chaudhury protecting many Bengalis during the Assamese Bengali riots in Gauhati.² But the anti-propaganda about the 'Bengal Kheda' chauvinist politics of Ambikagiri was so powerful that a section intelligentsia even in Assam was swayed by it. It is surprising to note that even a historian like Amalendu Guha's calibre has become a victim of this propaganda. He seems to have uncritically accepted this interpretation of Ray Chaudhury's politics. In *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, Guha repeatedly calls Ambikagiri a chauvinist, often for wrong, and does not even mention the humanist ideas so apparent in his writings. While commenting on the politics of Muslim League in Assam, Guha calls him a chauvinist because he advocated an Indian Federation of Linguistic nationalities and emphasized the principle of dual citizenship. Guha writes,

*"The league politics provided an opportunity to the chauvinistic influence of Ambikagiri Ray Chaudhury to thrive, particularly when the Congress leaders were in jails since 1942. In his concept of a future Indian federation of linguistic nationalities, he laid emphasis on the principle of a dual citizenship. He even presented an outline of a constitution for an ideal Indian confederation."*³

The principles of linguistic federation and dual citizenship should have been interpreted as progressive because they ensure a more egalitarian arrangement so far as linguistic nationalities are concerned.

There is no doubt that Ray Chaudhury's politics of Assamese nationalism had a rather aggressive tone. But it is highly debatable whether such politics could be summarily dismissed as chauvinistic. Owing to lack of time and space we shall not go into this aspect of the issue. Here we intend to confine ourselves to a discussion of Ambikagiri's ideas on Assamese nationalism as reflected in his writings in *Ahuti*. *Ahuti* probably is the most important collection of Ray Chaudhury's articles on Assamese nationalism. In forty articles included in this collection Ray Chaudhury expresses his ideas on the concept of nationalism, national interest, the relation of Assamese nationalism with Indian nationalism and appeals to the immigrants to assimilate with the Assamese culture. A close look at these ideas should enable us to understand Ray Chaudhury's

concept of Asamese nationalism and also his attitude to the non-Assamese Indians. Such an understanding should go a long way towards arriving at a correct understanding of Ray Chaudhury's so called chauvinism.

Nationality and national identity occupy a central position in Ambikagiri's thought. In fact, he identifies national consciousness as the essence of human beings. While trying to define human essence he says "The essence of human beings is the process of becoming a complete man by developing the finer instincts of human mind, through national mind and national ideal."⁴ The nation is then central to the very being of human existence because without a national mind and a national ideal a man cannot hope to be a complete human being. Ray Chaudhury believes that national consciousness is the centripetal force which assimilates the conflicting individual interests of the members of a community.⁵ Thus national consciousness is viewed as a means to attain a situation of peace and harmony in society. Ray Chaudhury seems to believe that left to himself man would pursue his own interest and since the interest of individual human beings are conflicting pursuit of this interest would lead to conflicts and tensions but man is capable of overcoming this problem because he can vitalise national interest. He argues, "compared to the interest of the country personal interest is lowly - compared to pride of the country individual prestige is narrow, compared to the welfare of the country personal welfare is insignificant."⁶ It is therefore logical for him to believe that by adhering to the ideals of nationality the individual members of a society can lead a harmonious life. He declares, "Man with knowledge and conscience is an excellent product of the Kingdom of God. That is why the great path toward fulfilment by protecting nationality is open to him, it is closed to other animals."⁷ That the band of nationality transforms the self seeking individual to a noble human being is argued repeatedly by Ray Chaudhury. He maintains that everyone of us is subordinate to the usage, customs, social norms and religious faith emerging from our own environment, "But such subordination instead of bringing us down, creates an intense desire in our heart to arouse our national consciousness and to develop our human essence and to spread the fragrance of human welfare in the human society."⁸

Ray Chaudhury thus views national consciousness as a part of our human essence. In an article entitled 'Man and his Rights', he maintains that a man is a man only because he establishes himself through knowledge, prestige, tradition, customs etc. The

phase he uses to describe this urge in man is '*Atma Prathistha*'. The phrase need not mean selfish urge to establish oneself. It should be read to mean development of one's personality because this is called a 'great idea' and is not expected to be present in Animals. He maintains that man is inspired to take up all sorts of activities, all through his life by the urge to *Atma Prathistha*. A man who fails to attain this *Atma Prathistha* becomes a slave of others. He accepts it as natural to be dictated by others because "He has lost the capacity of his conscience to think of his own good and to act on his own for the lack of self consciousness, self confidence, and inner strength."⁹ He then extends this argument from the level of the individual to that of the nationalities and argues that the people who do not have this *Atmaprathistha* are worse than animals because the latter enjoy freedom while the former are not free. But he says that in a sense they are better than animals because if they wish they can break the shackles and attain *Atma Prathistha*.¹⁰ If absence of *Atma prathistha* is synonymous with lack of freedom then *Atma Prathistha* need not mean self-gratification, nor should it mean establishing one self through domination of others. It should mean the establishment of the right to exist freely without being by others. This implication is clear in Ray Chaudhury because immediately after the above passage he goes on to praise India's attempt at freeing herself from foreign rule. For him the right of a nationality to exist in an atmosphere of freedom was of such great importance that he took it to be a part of human essence. This position becomes further clear from his ideas on aggression and domination. For Ambikagiri the act of aggression and domination is a slur on humanity both for the aggressor and the aggressed.¹¹ But he points out that in the history of mankind almost all countries have suffered from such ignominy.¹²

A clear understanding of his concept of freedom of nationalities is possible only if we understand his concept of nationality. Ambikagiri uses the word *Jati* to refer to a community of people who have a distinct identity and who is aware of this identity. While trying to define such a nationality he says, "... the people who live under a particular natural environment with common sympathies and emotions created by common trends of thinking, ideas, language and modes of expression, social customs, behaviour, food habits and dress are called a *Jati*."¹³

From the above quotation it is clear that Ambikagiri defined nationality in a cultural context. In the modern world the terms nations and nationality have been defined from various perspectives.

against exploitation of our homes and hearths, roads, markets, language and culture.”¹⁷

This non-chauvinistic approach is clear in his idea on India's struggle for freedom. He asserted that only if the Assamese join the freedom struggle on equal terms it would be able to strengthen India's struggle for freedom.¹⁸ He welcomed immigrants to Assam from the rest of India when they came as Indians and not as a part of their provincial cultural identity. He expected the provincial cultural identities to retain their own identity in their respective homelands. However, while thinking of smaller nationalities within Assam he did not virtualise any possibility of conflict because these were indigenous. According to him there was no possibility of conflict between the interests of these communities with the greater united interest of the Assamese.¹⁹ But the history of the post independence Assam disproved Ray Chaudhury. With emergence of educational elites and middle classes in these communities conflict with the Assamese middle class arose and it led to the reorganisation of the State of Assam. Ray Chaudhury's failure to anticipate this was in fact, the result of his inability to analyse historical processes in terms of socio-economic forces.

It should be clear from our discussion above that Ambikagiri viewed Assamese nationalism as a linguistic nationalism which while remaining a part of India should jealously guard its own identity. He believed that if the Assamese did not sharpen their own national consciousness they would be oppressed by others. But his nationalism was not a mere cultural concept. He perceived it also as a means to protect the economic interests of the people in their own homeland. That is why he repeatedly called upon the Assamese to realise that if their national consciousness was not strong they would lose all their national property – their land, jobs, markets and roads and even their language and culture.

Notes & References

1. S. N. Sharma, “Ambikagiri Ray Chaudhurir Pratibha”, in Sarma (ed.) *Ambikagiri Ray Chaudhury Racanavali* (Gauhati, 1986), p. 11.
2. Hiren Gohain, “Desh Prem Amrikagiri aru Desh Premar Swarup” in Gohain, *Sahitya Satya* (Gauhati, 1970), pp.283-84.
3. Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, (Delhi 1977), p. 316.

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3. Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, (Delhi 1977), p. 316.

4. S. N. Saram (ed.) *Ambikagiri Racanawali*, (Gauhati), p. 560.
5. *Ibid.*, *Loc. cit.*
6. *Ibid.*, p. 567.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 566.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 568.
9. *Ibid.*, *Ip.* 587.
10. *Ibid.*, *Loc. cit.*
11. *Ibid.*, p. 668.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 587.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 588.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 577.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 579-80.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 582.
17. *Ibid.*, *Loc. cit.*
18. *Ibid.*, 584.
19. *Ibid.*, . 581.