

**ETHNIC
MOVEMENTS
IN
POLY-CULTURAL
ASSAM**

Edited by

P.S. DATTA

With the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, Assam came under the British rule. Despite a series of geographical & administrative reorganisations the self-determination aspirations of the ethnic groups remained unfulfilled. These unresolved ethnic aspirations in Assam are mainly constitutional and predominantly extra-constitutional, depending on their respective nature of assertions.

This book concentrates basically on the aspirations of different ethnic groups of Assam whose assertions have, by and large, been within the constitutional framework. There are four articles dealing with the Ahoms, Karbi-Dimasas, Koch-Rajbongshis and the Religious and Linguistic Minorities of Assam. The authors, who are widely known for their keen interest in matters pertaining to north east, have painstakingly collected all relevant documents prepared by various ethnic organisations and at the end of the text of each article the most representative documents have been reproduced for the benefit of the researchers. The articles and documents, taken together, provide a deep insight into the dynamics of the politico-cultural multiplex, i.e., Assam and explode many carefully nurtured myths about the demography, political sharing, social accommodation and related matters.

For the Indian reader in general, since long, ethnic movements in north east meant either the Naga-Mizo type insurgencies or the ethnic assertion of the Assamese. That various other ethnic groups of Assam have been agitating for long is not known to most readers outside north east. And even within north east these movements are yet to catch the imagination of professional researchers.

The present volume is unique in the sense that for the first time an attempt is made to document and analyse the movements of lesser known ethnic groups of Assam. The work is important as without solution to the issues raised by these movements a permanent solution to the ethnic tangle in Assam is sure to remain a far cry.

ISBN 0-7069-5299-5

Rs 250

DR. P.S. DATTA had his schooling in Narendrapur RK Mission Vidyalaya followed by collegiate and university education in Dibrugarh. He obtained his M.A. in Sociology (1973) and was awarded a UGC Junior Research Fellowship to work on *Social Mobility and Political Behaviour in Upper Assam* for which Dibrugarh University awarded him Ph. D. (1980). He was also awarded a UGC Post Doctoral Fellowship (1981) to work on *Muslim Political Behaviour in Assam*.

He taught in Regional Engineering College, Silchar, St. Edmund's College, Shillong and North Eastern Hill University. In 1987 he joined ICSSR North Eastern Regional Centre at Shillong as its first full time Deputy Director. Currently he is on *lien* from ICSSR and working as a Reader in Centre for Himalayan Studies at North Bengal University.

He has contributed articles in a number of volumes on north eastern society and polity and edited *Electoral Politics in North East India* (1986). His book *Mobility and Political Behaviour in the Plains of North East* is shortly to be released. His forthcoming publications include *Ideology of Change in Hills - The Case of Meghalaya*, *Electoral Dynamics in Arunachal Pradesh* and *Ethnic Assertions in Assam: The Muttak-Mopans*.

Dr. Datta frequently writes for the regional press in Assamese and Bengali as well.

F 235
582

Ethnic Movements in Poly-Cultural Assam



Edited by
P.S. DATTA



HAR-ANAND PUBLICATIONS

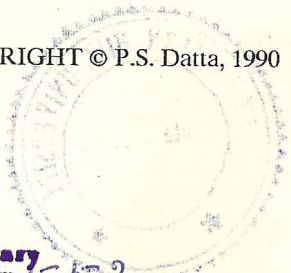
in association with

VIKAS PUBLISHING HOUSE PVT LTD

Phil

VIKAS PUBLISHING HOUSE PVT LTD
576 Masjid Road, Jangpura, New Delhi - 110014

COPYRIGHT © P.S. Datta, 1990



Library
Acc. no. 1755.52
Acc. by
Date 29/8/91
Class by
Sub Heading by
Category
Transcribed by

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without the prior written permission of the publishers.

NE
323.154162
DAT; 2

Printed at Sanjeev Offset Printers, Delhi.

For

*Professor Bani Prasanna Misra
who sacrificed much to advance
our understanding of the societies
of India's North East*

Preface

Idea for a volume containing documentation of aspirations of different ethnic groups in poly-ethnic Assam has been granulating in my mind ever since I began my work on *Muslim Political Behaviour in Assam* with a Post-doctoral Fellowship from the UGC in 1981. The Accord of 1985 and the immediate reactions that followed further strengthened the idea. However, the formal initiative took some more time and only in the latter part of 1986 after Assam had completed its first couple of months under the AGP stewardship I decided to start contacting the probable contributors.

But before that a major decision was to be taken as to the coverage and scope of the proposed volume. I was fortunate enough to have the benefit of discussion on various informal occasions on the basic sources of maladies of Assam and the Assamese society with some of the most alert and vibrating minds around us – Professor Annada Charan Bhagabati, Professor Prasenjit Choudhury, Dr. A.K. Baruah, Dr. Sib Nath Barman, Dr. Sujit Choudhury, Dr. B.B. Dutta, Shri Mehdi Alam Bora and others. The writings of Professor Amalendu Guha, Professor Hiren Gohain and Dr. Dhruvajyoti Bora were also of tremendous help. Besides, my exposure to the students of North Eastern Hill University, who belong to different ethnic groups of north east, too helped consolidation of my perspective. I was also lucky to have frequent opportunities for discussion with leaders of various ethnic movements of Assam today. Among them Dr. Harendra Narayan Dutta, Dr. Jayanta Rongpi and Shri Holiram Terang deserve special mention.

As a result of above it was ultimately thought proper to have a first round coverage of those movements only in which

extra-constitutional means of assertion appeared to have been absent or effectively neutralised and hence the final choice fell on the UARP Phase of Ahom Movement, Koch-Rajbongshi Movement for Scheduled Status, Karbi-Dimasa Autonomy Movement and the Minority Movement. The present selection in no way claims comprehensiveness. We had to begin somewhere. And this is just the beginning. Our plan is to cover other movements in subsequent attempts.

Write-ups on contemporary movements of Assam, scholarly or journalistic, are generally found to be heavily depending on news paper clippings in absence of access to original documents and material. Hence we decided to collect as much original material as possible so that our next generation researchers and social activists do not find it difficult to understand the time we were destined to belong to. After each article in the Annexure we have listed the major documents followed by reproduction of the most important document(s) on each movement covered by us. However, we have not attempted at editing the document(s) except very minor type of spelling discrepancies. The idea has been to bring them to focus with their original strength or folly.

However, collection of original documents took a much longer period than anticipated as we are yet to develop a tradition of preserving the documents on ongoing events properly. Nevertheless the individual contributors have tried their best to locate and then procure the relevant material in original. Some documents were made available to us by Dr. B.B. Dutta, General Secretary, North East Congress Coordination Committee (I), Dr. Harendra Narayan Dutta, President, All Assam Koch-Rajbongshi-Kshatriya Sanmilani, Dr. Jayanta Rongpi, Chief Executive Member, Karbi Anglong Autonomous District Council, and the Eastern Press Service.

I do not know how to repay my debt that I owe to all the above scholars and activists. In a sense this volume is the product of our joint venture to understand our own society.

P.S. DATTA

Contributors

T. LAHON teaches Political Science at Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh.

P.S. DATTA is currently a member of the research staff in Centre for Himalayan Studies, University of North Bengal, Raja Rammohunpur.

RABIJIT CHOUDHURY is a freelance journalist and he runs Eastern Press Service, Guwahati.

Contents

I	Introduction <i>P.S. Datta</i>	15
II.	Ujani Asom Rajya Parishad: A Phase in Ahom Aspiration <i>T. Lahon</i>	21
III	Karbi-Dimasa <u>Autonomy Movement</u> <i>P.S. Datta</i>	108
IV	Koch-Rajbongshi Movement for Scheduled Status <i>P.S. Datta</i>	160
V	Minority Movements: Emergence of United Minorities Front <i>Rabijit Choudhury</i>	182

175552



Chapter I

Introduction

P.S. DATTA

Identity-consciousness or identity-assertion among different ethnic groups in Assam is nothing new. Many such cases may even be traced much before the days of Indian Statutory Commission (Simon Commission) in 1930. It is a fact that the hillmen always reported higher degree of consciousness than their counterparts in the plains but that does not mean that the plainsmen of Mongoloid origin lacked identity-consciousness. In the modern sense of the term, with emergence of a 'middle class' through expansion of modern education and entry to jobs under colonial administration, seeds of identity-consciousness were sown. It is in the 'modern' sense because a distinct identity and self-perception about that distinct identity were not new atleast to the hillmen. This holds good to a large extent for the plainsmen of Mongoloid origin as well. For the hillmen it was more manifest as neither the Ahom rulers nor the Britishers disturbed the basis of their traditional economic-political-cultural arrangements. This was not exactly so for the plainsmen though they too had own traditional arrangements sufficient enough to provide material push towards an identity or identity-consciousness. Hence even if there was no expansion of 'modern' education or no emergence of a 'modern middle class' atleast the hillmen would have continued to have their identity-consciousness and tried to maintain their traditions and customs. But this emerging 'middle class' could provide them a definite direction by articulating their aspirations in tune with the changed rational-legal framework. An

advanced section of this 'middle class' also definitely drew inspiration from the long drawn freedom struggle. Equipped with modern education and a sense of history this 'middle class' was destined to occupy the position of leadership in their otherwise tradition-bound and more or less stagnant societies.

Though colonial administration was never expected to provide a people-oriented education system yet with the introduction of modern education the number of literate and educated people started increasing not only in the core Assamese society but also (may be at a lesser rate) in the non-Assamese indigenous societies of Assam. Number of government employees also kept on increasing over the years. With spread of Christianity, expansion of education and increased scope for jobs in government establishment the tradition-bound smaller societies, later on named 'tribes', became pregnant of an untraditional segment – the 'middle class'. And this very class of people played a pioneering role in unfolding, consolidating and then spreading an identity-consciousness among the members of their own societies. It was they who brought newer dreams to their people. It was they who very often tried to rise above the traps of insularity so inherent in tradition-bound smaller societies. However, many among this first batch of pathfinders, in their early stage of consolidation, identified themselves with the larger Assamese society. Some of them even distanced themselves from their respective ethnic-roots. But with the increase in their volume (in the Assamese as well as their own societies) members of this 'middle class' stood exposed to a hitherto unknown competition as employment opportunity or avenues for advancement in various economic spheres were not expanding at an identical pace. As a result they now found the road to further prosperity full of hurdles which was not so in the earlier phase. On the other hand, social discriminations, superiority complex of the caste-Hindu Assamese society and the caste-based social equations gradually started pushing them away from the larger Assamese society. Gradually the unresolved economic apprehensions started getting a political direction. The

atmosphere of neglect and indifference expedited the resilient process further. The hurt sentiments of the 'middle class' realised that without political power no malady could be remedied and bargaining for political power-sharing started. But no effective mechanism was evolved which could satisfy the legitimate aspirations of this 'tribal middle class'. Instead a deliberate attempt at projecting them as mere show-pieces in different political organisations and forums without giving them any real power further damaged the situation. They were never taken into confidence and the governing caste-Hindu Assamese elite in fact never seriously thought of sharing power with them. This stubborn situation was potential enough to provide motivation for them to start thinking in terms of their own political boundary. Their leadership was already established in all spheres of their respective societies. Hence it was not very difficult a task for them to arouse the latent identity-consciousness among their own people and direct it towards self-determination aspiration.

Due to specific historical and administrative traditions the self-determination aspiration in the hills has been from the very beginning political in nature. The Nagas, the Mizos, the Khasi-Jaintia-Garos, the Karbi-Dimasas - all of them began their assertions with a more or less definite political idiom. On the other hand, plainsmen belonging to a number of smaller ethnic groups of mongoloid origin, who later on came to be known as 'plains tribals', had to begin their assertions mainly with apparent non-political focus - safeguarding cultural identity, preservation of language, choice of a script, instruction through mother tongue, continuation of English as medium of instruction in higher education etc. And after completing a varying period on probation, each of them graduated to the next higher stage and all the above demands culminated in political demand - a separate political identity. On this question, however, all the groups of mongoloid origin in the plains could not proceed at an identical speed. There were variations in the degree of assertion among them. Some demanded scheduled tribe status, some demanded federal

18
Diplomacy
policy - only 1 out of 100
are elected
day
17

cannot be maintained in 100%
demand

structure while some other demanded autonomous state. But whatever might have been the level of aspiration or degree of assertion, the 'middle class' and the student-youth force were able to mobilise the people of their respective societies and what began as a sense of deprivation among few now spread as a sense of deprivation of the whole society. The major preconditions of a movement—collective mobilisation and orientation towards change — thus fulfilled, the important question of 'sustenance' was ironically left to be taken care of by the rigidity of the core Assamese society and also the Indian polity. The identity-consciousness among these smaller groups was the result of not only their pride in their tradition but it also acted as a defence mechanism against the designs of legitimising a system of deprivation which they thought was victimising them to a point of no return. However, identity-consciousness alone was not sufficient to protect them from the alleged onslaught of a political-economy of which they were compelled to be partners. Necessarily there arose the need for identity-assertion as well to provide them some elbow room within the existing system. Thus consciousness of a few became consciousness of the larger society and identity-assertion developed into a demand for self-determination.

There has been another stream of aspiration too in Assam — the aspiration of the religious and linguistic minorities. Basically they do not have any self-determination aspiration. They cannot probably have it either. Their demand has been extension of natural human rights enjoyed or supposed to be enjoyed by Indian citizens anywhere in the country. This demand includes — right to education in mother tongue, end to discrimination in employment, end to forceful eviction and harassment in the name of foreigner etc.

Some amongst us feel that the rickety pace of development during the last few decades since Independence has failed to open up avenues for further assimilation in poly-ethnic Assam. They think if a continuous process of all embracing development was available in Assam, avenues for the much needed assimilation would not have been closed. On the other hand if

a modernised agriculture could have been introduced in Assam replacing the backward feudal remnants then too probably a renewed process of assimilation would have begun. But this argument suffers from a serious lacunae. Our experience since Independence is that in the name of development a process of dependent development has been initiated. Our system has miserably failed to usher in a justice oriented growth and as a result in the name of development, paradoxically, the volume of poverty increased rather than decreased. More and more people and groups of people were marginalised with every passing year and with every passing plan period. Under the circumstances then probably 'development' does not hold the clue to solve the ethnic tangle in Assam. We of course do not advocate rejection of development. Development has to continue but atleast development styles and instrumentalities have to be changed. Pending a final decision on the future of existing political-economy, we can safely say that there is no natural possibility of the acquired political direction of ethnic assertion in Assam dying out. Rather this will be sharpened by each passing day.

Identity-consciousness and identity-assertion that have emerged in the 'tribal' societies of Assam and the human rights aspiration of the religious and linguistic minorities do not depend on any one's liking or disliking. It seems it was historically destined to emerge. No one today can wish these assertions away. To search for a foreign hand behind them too will be an exercise in futility.

It is quite possible the maladies of Assam today are all rooted in certain wrong perspectives and premises of the core Assamese society itself. We are yet to have a definition of Assamese which is stable over time and place and people. With the changing circumstances the definition too changes. On some people an Assamese identity is imposed while some others are allured to accept an Assamese identity. At another point of time the allured neo-Assamese are identified as non-Assamese and hence non-Indian.

Recently another trend has been observed in Assam. A

significant section has been naming the 'tribals of Assam' as 'Assamese tribals'. It is indeed very difficult to establish the sociological justification for this terminology. In Assam today there are two main categories of 'tribals' – hills and plains. Each of these 'tribes' has its own name, language, culture and tradition. To call them 'Assamese tribals' is probably nothing but a clandestine attempt at imposing an Assamese identity on them. On the other hand, the illfated millions who once had to disown their ethnic-roots in search for 'security' and accept Assamese identity in the past are now being pushed away from their adopted society. In fact the real or imaginary fears of the core Assamese society and its ambitions have been alleged to be victimising the other ethnic groups of Assam since long.

Independent of a political solution there is today a serious need for initiating an incisive attempt at ferreting out the elements of self contradiction in the core Assamese society. It is indeed an unavoidable responsibility for all the right thinking members of our society to find answer to the question as to why the friends and neighbours for centuries are raising accusing fingers and asking social and political separation and why even the most genuine aspiration of the Assamese society makes them apprehensive.

It is no doubt a painful task. But no one else can travel the road for us. It is our society and we alone will have to carry the cross. With the earnest hope that an honest soul searching will be initiated by each one of us rising above our immediate ethnic-identities, I invite the fellow members of our societies to take a close look into the following pages and accept the challenge.