

Whether Youth Movements? Claims and Clashes of Identities

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Disquieting stories of unrest with the youth as the central actor has become a phenomenal description for India's North-East. However, issues of youth unrest cannot be a subject of study in isolation without looking at political processes of the Nation-State, issues of communitarian formations and their linkages with wider political institutions, issues of identity and political collaboration.¹ An alternative understanding of youth unrest in North-East India contrary to descriptions such as 'secessionists' or 'extremists', can be formed from the point of view of non-representation in terms of rights and ethnic, national and cultural identities.² While claims of Rights such as right to employment, education and livelihood, constitute civic and political rights, thereby signifying a broad democratic configuration of forces beyond cultural affiliations, non-representation in any aspect of such civic and political right requires an extra dimension of a politics of affiliation. One could clearly demarcate these differences between kinds of Rights and its associated claims in two distinct camps of contemporary youth movements. The left liberal ideologies speak the language of Universal Rights and uphold the claims of those who are denied of these Rights. Left liberal politics calls for struggle against hegemony and dominance that requires a broad based democratic mobilization. The other camp propagates the idea of group Rights against Universal Rights and champions the cause of ethnic and cultural formations in a context of contest between groups over

rights which are universal. This distinction between the camps enables us to place various youth organizations within a framework of political and ideological struggle. At the level of strategy the distinction manifests in claims of legitimacy on the basis of norms and claims of authenticity on the basis of cultural and historical episodes.

These two styles of youth mobilization in North-East India presents a fairly hybrid and plural context of legitimacy and power. Sometimes goals of legitimacy and power run over the claims of such movements, thereby reducing movements to an instrumental means. The code of these movements are often compromised in pragmatic means of attaining visibility and power. The Left liberal camp, sceptical of such ends do not foresee the desired end but mobilizes all its energy in means of contesting what they perceive as sources of dominance. Contrastingly, the political correctness of movements claiming ethnic and cultural Rights end up by attaining those means in their hands that was used to deny them those Rights.

For a specific study of these instrumentalities I would like to take a few cases of youth organizations belonging to ethnic formations as well as the left liberal entities. The most important and trend setting youth movement of the region has been the Assam movement led by AASU and AAGSP. The former has been in the forefront while the latter had been the think tank for the movement. The transition from AASU to AGP has been a transition from unrest to constitutional mainstreaming. Of course, the transition had its basis in the ideological content of the movement which turned out to be a contest over Indian citizenship backed up by formation of an 'Assamiya' identity.³ This contest resulted into an ambivalence of being an Indian as opposed to being a foreigner in the anti-foreigner's movement 1979-85. This ambivalence resulted into an interrogation of a construction of Indian identity and a celebration of an identity of the people of Assam as reflected in the early discourses of ULFA movement. So AASU's diminution into AGP did not put a halt to the burgeoning consciousness of 'Assamiya' youth to redefine itself with a greater amount of autonomy. One wouldn't be apocalyptic in saying that

such a renewed definition of youth identity in terms of *Swadhin Asoom* is not just a passing phase of history but a painful transition to liberation. What these processes of transition imply is simultaneously a reification of the youth movement as well as a regeneration of some of the unaddressed contours of resistance. One can further identify these movements of ambivalence to resistance and vice-versa in transformations that happened within the movement. AASU's marginalization during the first AGP Government could be understood as a kind of strategic collaboration between AASU and AGP, while AASU's critique of AGP during 1996-2001 on account of non-implementation of the Assam Accord and secret killings is a re-statement of its agenda of youth Rights now reflected in AASU's intervention for securing indigenous people of Assam. Further, one could see AASU's strategic distancing from AGP by way of championing the cause of 'Assamiya' as an indigenous formation.⁴

Within these transitional developments the Left liberal organizations of Assam have been interrogating the rationale of Assam movement. The SFI and DYFI, the student and youth wings of CPI(M) questioned the thesis of unabated infiltration by foreigners from across Bangladesh. They pointed out that the issues of protection of minorities of Assam against the chauvinistic outcries of the Assam movement is the most important task for bringing together toiling sections of various communities of Assam. Another prominent Left organization AIDSOS, the youth wing of SUCI pointed out the self-defeating logic of the Assam movement, as the movement got centred around the elite middle class Assamese speaking segment of the larger 'Asomiya' identity. It would alienate tribals, minorities and tea garden communities from the construction of the 'Asomiya' identity, it stated. Apart from critiquing the Assam movement, the Left organizations could not pursue an agenda of movements because the Assam movement limited the appeal of the Left. The Right and liberal organizations like the Yuva Janata and the Yuva Congress could not come out of their parent political compulsions. It is noteworthy to mention here that the Yuva Congress(S) opposed the Assam movement by upholding a principle of national unity as opposed to ethnic and communal divisions.

One could distinguish the punch lines of the two styles of interpretation of complex ethnic movement in the context of North-East India. While the Left liberals celebrated a unified concept of Nation without any space for difference of sub-national identities, the ethnic organizations pursued the idea of difference between Nation and Nationality. Further, Left Liberals intended to mobilize the middle class and the toiling masses on the basis of economic demands alone and couldn't answer questions about the threat to identity because of infiltration. The extent to which they tried to answer the questions of identity was novel but didn't find a taker. For example, SUCI's demand for permanent constitutional status to Assamese language irrespective of demographic change was the single most important suggestion presented to the then Prime Minister of India but it was not reflected in the Accord except a vague constitutional safeguard to cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people as written in Clause 6 of the Assam Accord. The absence of youth mobilization on the part of the left constituted the ground level weakness of the movement.

The fallout of the Assam Accord in terms of increased difference between various ethnic and tribal communities of Assam presented a scenario for reconfiguration of youth movements. All Assam Minority Students' Union (AAMSU) established in 1980 had put forth strong resistance to political victimization of the religious and linguistic minorities of Assam. AAMSU incorporated a number of economic demands while it championed the cause of a fair and equal treatment to minorities of Assam.⁵ As a compliment to this, United Reservation Movement Council of Assam (URMCA) formed in 1985 launched a Students' Youth Movement voicing demands for reservation of jobs and opportunities in every sphere of life. This reflected response of smaller ethnic and tribal groups of Assam primarily Adivasis, Mishings, Hmars, Ravas, Kacharis and others. It provided a broad based platform for mobilization for a common cause that prioritized a sense of deprivation vis-a-vis the dominant Assamese identity. Although the movement could not sustain itself but it opened up pathways for formation of bodies of various tribal groups such as AATSU (All Assam Tribal Students' Union) and later formations like All Rava Hajong Students' Union (ARHSU),

Motok Students' Union (MSU), All Assam Tiwa Student Union (AITWSU) and many other hitherto invisible groups asserted their self-identity. This trend of implosion of the idea of group rights resulted into an assertion of community rights through a politics of articulation and situational exigencies. One common thread that ran through all these assertions was the claim of homeland and territorial autonomy to be inscribed within the apparatus of the State through some form of Reservation or other.

The key theoretical issue that emerges out of the scenario of youth movements is whether assertion of a set of perceived Rights require an ontological grounding of group identity. The Left liberal position centres around a larger common identity that overcomes ethnic, tribal and communal boundaries. But social and political identities as collective actors ground themselves in immediate cultural contexts which the Left liberals consider as inappropriate because of inherent divisive potential of such a strategy. The correctness of the Left liberal position could be observed in the claims and counter claims made by identities pitted against one another and thereby providing a handle to the State in crushing the movement. Linking this situation to two styles of youth mobilization as mentioned above, one could diagnose a tension inbuilt into the very process of youth mobilization. Seemingly there is an inherent negation of the force of the movement in determining a closure for itself. Left liberals bear the burden of a counter-hegemonic anti-State discourse of endless struggle not zeroing on distinct achievements, while ethnic and tribal mobilizations end up in erecting impervious social and cultural boundaries that posit the burden of an internal autonomy. So the moot question is what should be the strategy of negotiating such closures.

Scenes from Unsettled Conflicts

The Bodo Territorial Council Act, 2003, generated a lot of dispute on the north bank of the Brahmaputra. The *Sammilita Janajatiya Sangram Sangstha* (SJSS), All Koch Rajbongshi Students' Union (AKRASU) and Assam Tea Tribes Students' Association (AATTSA) and other public bodies of non-Bodo communities aired their concern about being reduced to second class citizens in Bodo dominated areas. The question is, how does apolitical settlement

with one of the struggling groups allow space for others within its ambit. Similarly, the non-acceptance of Koch Rajbongshis and Bodos within 'Asomiya' identity is a question of doing justice to community aspirations which is possible only if space is allowed through negotiation and acceptance. Ethnically divided youth movements ironically demands such a space from its 'other' while the 'other' cannot respond because of its own ethno-cultural compulsions. Looked from another angle the problem of accommodation gets further complicated when claims of rights deny a similar place for others. The case of Adivasis now euphemistically called tea tribes has not been so far considered either as tribe or as a recognizable community. Further, the outbreak of ethnic clashes between the Karbis and the Kukis in Karbi Anglong district and Dimasa-Hmar clashes in North Cachar and Cachar districts centre around claims over land resulting into displacement of one community by the other. It is quite an ironical consequence of a youth movement when it only succeeds in displacing the other community without achieving much of its own and thereby losing on account of claims of Right as well as the solidarity with its immediate others. Is it that the discourse of specific identity creates positions of mutual displacement performing only a task of negation? Such a consequence demonstrates an exclusive understanding of social justice when the language of Rights cancel out each other's inherent autonomy. Theoretically speaking, the State plays around all such incommensurable claims of identity as a means of repression and it selectively provides a reified and marginal space by indulging into a preferential treatment to some of the groups at the cost of the other. Therefore, youth movements tend to generate a clash of tribalisms and undermines its own potential. This posits a problem of locating the community as 'community' in a multicultural context or in a context of contest loses its singular meaning in the confrontation between several discourses: Implicit, explicit, silent and absent. Students and Youth organizations based on ethnic and community affiliation try to define their membership in terms of territoriality and historicity.

Whither Youth?

Since a decade or so one witnesses a total ideological vacuum in youth movements in the sense that they are either tackled by

the constitutional agencies or suppressed by State machineries. There has not been a clear expression of strong ideological position either in appropriation to State hegemony or cultural others. Micro level youth politics also operate on a separation from the other without taking into account the rise of 'interstitial communities' which appropriates the idea of a single homogenised community. For example, the ULFA carried its anti-Indian State insurgency by way of identifying others in the institutions of State hegemony quite different to AASU's identification of foreigners. Insurgency carried out by ULFA practised a 'strategic essentialism' in a nationalist mode that constructed a domain of insiders who will remain ready to identify themselves with the cause of sovereign Assam. In contrast AASU identifies neo-Assamese immigrants as not a part of ethnic Assamese community and considers immigration as a threat to the existence of Assamese nationality. In this context one observes that the leading ruling party leaders in Assam including the Congress and the Janata parties did not lead the Assam movement. The leadership was provided by AASU, which also campaigned for the AGP in the general elections of 1985. But subsequently, the AASU was divided on the foreigner issue. The segment of AASU, which went to AGP was further divided on AGP's breach of commitment to the Assamese community.⁶ The alienation of non-Assamese speaking and tribal and other groups intensified and the general trend of middle class Assamese aspirations turned to militancy and violence. The youth in AASU and ULFA have been instruments of mass mobilisation and violence in the phases of 'transition to ethnic rage to statesmanly exercise' and then to 'sub-Assamese insurgency' because of the predominantly middle class nature of Assamese ethnic mobilisation. The issues raised by the AASU so far are at further crossroads with the emerging logic of reversals on the foreigner's issue. It may be mentioned here that initially the demand had been that infiltrators from Bangladesh after 1971 must be sent back. This demand was appropriated with the idea of assimilation. A third idea is emerging, that efforts must be made to develop Bangladesh so that infiltration can be resisted. The ULFA's concept of Assamese community was initially based on ideological premises of a comprehensive socio-economic and

structural development as the idea of Assam for them was more territorial than ethnolinguistic. However, the ULFA discourse had to die an ideological death because of ULFA's incapacity to address the connection between capitalism, interregional injustice and internal colonialism. Therefore the Indian State could easily involve monetary and other inducements to make ULFA activists surrender to legitimise another form of youth unrest through the activities of SULFA. This is a case of the State using the youth as an instrument of violence. Therefore violence and youth are used as synonymous terms both by the Indian State, the media and now also the middle class moral guardians of the community, who had earlier enjoyed the fruit of their movements. Apart from such instrumentality, the youth is depoliticized to the extent that no conscious collective can emerge out of them.

Therefore the crux problem for the youth movement in North-East India or in any other part of India is that political participation could not cross the boundaries of traditional liberal concerns of the individual citizen's engagement or alienation which is extremely essential for multiethnic or multicultural democracies like India.⁷ Otherwise, why should youthful energy and the will to 'do or die' end in such an imbroglio? Youth unrest has been looked from a positive aspect in the case of great social and political changes in history. Youth unrest has also been the phenomenon of the Indian freedom movement. Perhaps it is a contraction of larger issues in the form of a narrower 'we' which has given an issue oriented nature to youth movement in North-East India. Youth movement, in North-East India have been either ethnic, communitarian or political and the liberal organizations like the Left could not situate the immediate aspirations of the ethnopolitical life world of the masses into the broader framework of class or emancipatory theory. The case of Assam is a glaring example as discussed here.. It is ironical in the context of the present discussion that the youth, particularly students who have been dragged to violence and unrest in the interest of the dominant aspiration of communities are themselves targeted as objects of violence and unrest both by the State and the civil society and communities in question.

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