

Students' Politics in Assam

Monuj Phukan

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Kolkata

The book describes the genesis of the students' movement in Assam beginning with the formation of small societies in the mid 19th century now represented by organizations of students of different tribal communities with all Assam Students Union uniting them all. The study specifically deals with the spread of the *All Tai Ahom Students Union* (ATASU), the organization of the students of Tai Ahom Community. It analyses the transformation of ATASU from a non-political body of Tai Ahom students to a highly politicized organization actively concerned with all political issues affecting Assam as a whole for uplifting not only the Tai community but for the entire Assamese society.

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A Study of All Tai Ahom Students' Union

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Introduction

Student community has been one of the supreme powers that have put the entire world in great wonder. They have been raising their voice in each department of the life of mankind throughout the world. As such they have persistently been articulating the educational, social, economic and political problems faced by the society. And in order to get their problems resolved the students have also indicated various courses of action through diverse students movements. In this connection it is worth mentioning that while articulating problems of different nature, they have become successful in mobilising the mass of people as a whole. This would be clear if we throw some light on the role of students community in the movements that have taken place in different countries. In May 1968 the student movement witnessed a grand success in their agitation when it was able to bring out ten million workers on strike in France. Thus, the possibility of revolution even in an advanced capitalist country like France could be anticipated.¹

The history of students movement shows that strong voice has always been raised by the students against all the major anti-national activities and abuse of power by the government in different parts of the globe. Thus, they had great influence on all the major movements launched in Europe. In the revolutions of Germany and Austria in 1848 the activities of students tremendously encouraged the “Professors’ Parliament” which almost succeeded in toppling several monarchs.² In America also the students have been playing

significant role on the major issues. For illustration, a number of student bodies had an important role in the movement for the abolition of slavery system which ultimately led to the Civil War.³ Likewise Vietnam is also a classic example of students' agitation over the issue of war.

In Great Britain, when there was a national crisis, students plunged into the movement wholeheartedly to vindicate their honour to the community. When their country was under threat from every side, their only slogan was "*Freedom is in danger*". Students were found whose lives were spent mostly in trenches and in the battle fields to defend their country. Thus, not only during war period but also in great popular movements in peace time the students community got itself actively entangled for the emancipation of their society as well as nation.⁴

In Czarist Russia the students had played a leading role in launching various effective movements which were revolutionary in character. In the earstwhile USSR the students got spontaneously mingled with the peasants and workers for their salvation. It should be recalled that in the year 1935, ten thousand girls were given pilot training while another ten thousand students were provided special training in horse riding and other field works.⁵ In Scotland the student movement can be traced back to 1943. A conference of the Scottish students had been held in January 1943 which was attended by 250 student representatives from eighteen different universities and colleges. In fact, the students community was greatly successful in introducing many far-reaching changes affecting the fulfilment of their academic missions.⁶

In China the students force was one of the fundamental forces in the movement which overthrew the Manchu regime and supported the establishment of the Republic in 1911. Later on when China was threatened by external aggression, the students community firmly stood against the Japanese with more radical and militant activities in 1930s. In the similar way many students supported the communists and were involved in the historical struggles which had

brought Mao-Tse-Tung to power.⁷ Likewise, the students had spontaneously become involved and spearheaded the anti-colonial struggle in most of the Afro-Asian nations. They were considered the major potential force in the struggle. In Indonesia, the students played a momentous role in the growth of nationalist movement. Many of them studying abroad during the early years of the twentieth century provided leadership of the Indonesian nationalist movement.

In several African nations the tiny students community had been capable of producing a number of nationalist and radical leaders who later on became instrumental in achieving independence for their countries.⁸

In India also the students have been playing a commendable role during the major crises ever since the days of pre-independence. In 1905 there were many student strikes conducted all over India in order to liberate the country from foreign bondage. There are instances that many students who rightly or wrongly joined the revolutionary societies and committed acts of violence in the hope that it might be able to convert their dream into reality, and for this purpose some of them had to pay the supreme sacrifice.⁹ Indeed the students in India constituted one of the leading groups in the anti-colonial movement. Abstaining from schools and colleges to join the Non-Cooperation Movement led by M.K. Gandhi in 1920 is a glaring example of how the students contributed to the National Movement. Thus, the students continuously went on participating in other phases of National Movement also like Civil Disobedience Movement, Quit India Movement etc. In this context mention may be made that during this period, on being organised, the students formed a number of their organisations such as All India College Students' Conference (1920), All Bengal Students' Association (1929), The Hindu Students' Federation (1930), Bombay Presidency Students' Federation (1936), All India Muslim Students' Federation (1937)¹⁰ and so on. Thus like other organisations the students community also started participating in the freedom movement under the banner of their respective organisations in an uninterrupted way.

Like any other part of the country the students of Assam were also not left untouched by the freedom struggle. There is a long history of students' active participation in politics of National Movement since nineteenth century. The beginning of students' involvement into freedom movement in Assam can be traced back to the formation of the Assamese Literary Society as early as 1867. It was founded in Calcutta by a group of Assamese students led by Anandaram Boruah, Madhab Chandra Bordoloi, Julnur Ali Ahmed and others. But this organisation of the Assamese students became defunct shortly¹¹ and was replaced by the Assamese Students' Literary Club (Asomiya Chatrar Sahitya) or ASLC in short, in order to promote Assamese language and culture. It may be mentioned that by nomenclature it was a club of the Assamese students studying in Calcutta but in real sense of terms it was a socio-political platform of the Assamese students rather than a literary one.¹² Because while discussing the then plight of the Assamese society, side by side the students developed a sense of national consciousness. It became categorical when they decided to float a student organisation of their own named Asom Chatra Sanmilian in 1916. In fact, being influenced by the ASLC as well as the Behari Chatra Sanmilian, the 'Asom Chatra Sanmilian' subsequently made its appearance and later on jumped into the different phases of Freedom Movement under its own banner. It may be clear when the '*Asom Chatra Sanmilian*' adopted a formal resolution in order to join the Non-Cooperation Movement in 1920. Since then the *Sanmilian* continued to take an active part in the movements launched by the 'Indian National Congress' and thus it gained momentum as an active students' organisation of the state.¹³

However, in the post independence period the students' movements characteristically underwent a sea change which got manifested in the diversion of their attention from national issues to the regional ones. It happened perhaps because of the lack of any common national issues which generally kept them together.¹⁴ As a result, the students' organisation of Assam also began giving its

priority towards regional issues which became evident when a series of movements were launched by the '*Asom Chatra Sanmilian*' (subsequently renamed as All Assam Students' Union in 1967) pertaining to the economic issues as well as the issues related to the protection of the linguistic and cultural identity of the Assamese nation. Some of them were Oil Refinery Movement (1957), Food Agitation (1966), Second Oil Refinery Movement (1969) and 21-Points Movement (1974). Likewise, there were three other historic movements conducted under the leadership of the '*All Assam Students' Union*' (hereinafter AASU) on the issues of the protection of linguistic and cultural identity of Assam. They were Official Language Movement (1960), Medium Movement (1972) and Foreign National Movement (1979-1985). In all these movements the students of Assam had been capable of mobilising the majority of Assamese masses in support of their endemic demands.¹⁵ It is however, interesting to recall that the AASU even became successful in toppling the then Hiteswar Saikia's government during the Foreign National Movement (1979-85). Since then the students organisation under the banner of the AASU acquired an unprecedented significance in the politics of the state.

It is very relevant to mention here that the Assamese society is a heterogeneous one in character with different castes and communities having their linguistic, traditional, religious and socio-cultural distinctiveness. In due course these divergent groups have contributed their respective share in the formation of the greater Assam and Assamese society. But at the same time they did not want to get themselves completely submerged with the greater Assamese society. Rather, emergence of an educated elite among these groups enabled them to increasingly perceive the need of maintaining their distinct socio-cultural identity. At the same time they also firmly believed that without the backing of students force of their respective communities their movement for maintaining separate identity would prove to be a futile exercise. So, they inspired their students to be articulate and organised in a systematic and

formal way. Similarly the students also began to realise that they should be organised and assertive in a bid to serve their community interests of different kinds. As a result, a number of student organisations on the caste and community lines came into being in the state. Some of them are the Assam Tea Tribes Students' Association (1947), All Assam Tai Students' Association (1964), All Bodo Students' Association (1967), Rabha Students' Union (1967), Sonowal Kachari Students' Union (1968), All Assam Nepali Students' Union (1976) and so on. Moreover the role of AASU was allegedly responsible to a greater degree for the emergence of a galaxy of students organisations on caste and community considerations. Because the educated elite as well as the students' leadership of such organisations believed that the AASU deliberately failed to represent the hopes and aspirations of their communities for which they remained lagging behind so far compared to other advanced sections of state's population.¹⁶

In this connection it may be noted that along with their academic problems these students' unions are seen to have become increasingly concerned about the non-academic issues like socio-economic and political problems faced by the communities they belonged to. It became clear when the Bodo Students' Union, Karbi Students' Union and Mising Students' Union raised demand seeking the formation of a separate state of their own as a measure of fulfilling their multifaceted aspirations, while the Rabha Students' Union and the Tiwa Students' Union have demanded the creation of autonomous district regions. In fact, the students' leadership was of the view that their all round development would not be possible unless they raise non-academic issues under the banner of students' organisations of their own respective communities. From the above it should be clear that the students' organisations are either rightly or wrongly getting involved into non-academic issues despite the fact that they were supposed to look after the academic issues only to serve the interest of respective students' communities. Strictly speaking, the students gradually developed a perception that since

they are part and parcel of their community and it is their bounden duty to play a leading role for the all round upliftment of their respective communities. And therefore, the student leadership started raising voices on issues of all kinds including political ones. So, looking from such perspective it is an interesting question to be examined to what extent the student organisations have been able to maintain their non-political character vis-a-vis how far they have been successful as a students' organisation to serve the interest of their respective students' communities. In order to examine this question the present work aims at examining the role of All Tai Ahom Students' Union towards all round development of the Students as well as Tai-Ahom Community as a whole.

For a better understanding of the causes of the birth and dynamic role of the ATASU it is desirable to briefly highlight the historical background of the Tai Ahom community of Assam. As is well known Tai Ahoms ruled Assam for six long centuries (1228-1826). Their rule virtually came to an end with the annexation of Assam by the British company administration in 1826 under the treaty of Yandaboo. A section of them however made an abortive attempt to restore Tai Ahom regime. Indeed, this historical treaty brought about a pathetic turn to the ruling Tai Ahom community when they were gradually but deliberately relegated to the position of a backward community. Because they not only lost their past glory and royal status but also they were deprived of their due share in the company administration and eventually became backward socially, educationally, economically and even politically.¹⁷

As time passed on, instead of restoring Tai Ahom regime the enlightened section of Tai Ahom felt the need of maintaining their distinct ethnic identity as a measure of all round development. So they started organising their community which resulted in the formation of All Assam Ahom Association in 1893. The association stood for the preservation of distinct identity of the Tai Ahoms. Even after independence, their overall backward conditions remained unchanged. Of late, in addition to the educated section of Tai Ahom

community the Tai Ahom students also perceived that their community would be lagging behind unless they become articulate and organised to accelerate the pace of their development. At the same time the emergence of a good number of student organisations on the caste and community lines, particularly in the sixties of the last century also became a great source of inspiration for the Tai Ahom students of the state to be organised in this direction. As a result All Tai Ahom Students' Union (hereafter ATASU) came into being on 14th July 1988 with Promod Boruah and Arun Gogoi as President and General Secretary respectively. The basic objectives of the ATASU were to fulfil the academic problems of the Tai Ahom students along with a variety of other problems such as the educational, lingo-cultural and socio-economic and even political ones faced by their community.

In this context it may be recalled that prior to the ATASU there were two other student organisations of the Tai Ahom students named All Assam Tai Ahom Students' Federation (1944) and All Assam Tai Students' Association (1964). Both these organisations were primarily concerned with the academic and cultural problems of the Tai Ahom, unfortunately they disappeared from the scene allegedly for lack of efficiency and far-sighted leadership. Moreover, they failed to build up a broad popular base among their students community. Nevertheless, ever since the inception, the ATASU has been putting forward a host of demands before the government of the Centre as well as the state for the cause of all round development of their students community as a whole. Some of these demands are:

1. to take necessary steps for academic development of Tai Ahom students by providing scholarships, separate hostel facilities and book banks,
2. to reserve 30 per cent of seats for the Tai Ahom students in technical, professional and higher educational institutions;
3. to recognise Tai language and make it an elective subject in the educational institutions and make necessary arrangements for higher studies and research;

4. to preserve Tai manuscripts in the museum and development of Tai culture; and
5. to census the Tai Ahom population separately and to give reservation in government jobs according to population percentage and so on.

Thus, it is evident that ATASU became not only concerned with Tai Ahom students but also with Tai Ahom community as a whole. Further, it is interesting to note that in due course, rightly or wrongly, the ATASU leadership developed a sentiment that without having a share of political power in the state their development would not be possible. In fact, they wanted to have an adequate share of political power for removing their grievances. As a result, the ATASU began demanding reservation of seats for Ahom candidates in the state legislature as well as in the parliament.

In this way the ATASU began to champion the interests of not only Tai Ahom students but also the entire Ahom community. And while doing so the ATASU either consciously or unconsciously got involved in the politics of the state in the sense that they have raised political issues also as a means of safeguarding their interest. Over and above this, the ATASU used to pressurise the ruling political authority seeking fair solution of their problems and thus became successful in exercising considerable influence in the contemporary politics of the state. Therefore, like any other strong student organisation the growing role of the ATASU has also drawn the attention of the social scientists for a scholarly investigation. This work is, therefore, an attempt to examine under what circumstances the All Tai Ahom Students' Union began to get involved in politics of the state despite being a non-political organisation and how far they have been successful in their declared mission.

However, there has been no systematic work on the ATASU and its growing role in Assam. Of course, work on the ATASU has been done here and there in a superficial manner. In this connection, the works of Niru Hazarika, *Profile of Youth Organisations in North-East India* (Vol. I, 1998) and Kanak Sen Deka, *Noton Poroshe Juktir*

Adharat Samaj Garhok (in Assamese) may be referred. These works basically dealt with the declared objectives and constitutional demands of the organisation. No systematic and serious research work has been done on its changing role yet. Consequently the growing role of ATASU has remained unexplored so far. The present research exercise is therefore, an attempt to fill this gap.

This study is based on both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources are memoranda, proceedings, booklets, leaflets and pamphlets. Books, articles, research papers and periodicals were also consulted as secondary sources of materials.

This study is primarily divided into three chapters excluding introduction and conclusion. The first chapter deals with genesis and development of the ATASU. The second chapter discusses the objectives and organisational structure of the ATASU while the third chapter examines the movements launched by ATASU on different issues at different periods of its history.

A historical cum-analytical method is used in the study.

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