

The Jorhat Sorbojanik Sobha :
Its Role in Socio-Political Awakening of Assam

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The Post-revolt period in Assam was marked by a rapid growth of socio-political organisations of which the Jorhat *Sorbojanik Sobha*¹ was perhaps the most important. Founded at Jorhat in 1884² at the initiative of Raibahadur Jagannath Barooah (1851-1907) the *Sobha* was established "...for the purpose of representing the wishes and aspirations of the people to the Government, explaining to the people the objects and policy of the Government, and generally ameliorating the condition of the people."³ It was a truly representative body having the support of all classes of people of Jorhat.⁴ The founder-president of the *Sobha* was Raja Narayan Singha, and Jagannath Barooah was its Secretary. After the death of the former, the later became its President and Devicharan Barooah (1864-1916), a lawyer cum planter, its Secretary.

From the very beginning the Jorhat *Sorbojanik Sobha* was engaged in a great deal of constructive works. Its activities extended to all sorts of public welfare programmes. The extension of railway line to Jorhat and the improvement in the means of communication were also due to its influence.⁵ However, being composed of the loyal and educated gentry of Upper Assam, the *Sobha*, like most of the socio-political organisations of the time, did not believe in direct confrontation with the authorities, but pinned its faith in constitutional agitation. It was alive to all burning problems of the day and never failed to espouse the cause of the Assamese people, incurring thereby the wrath of the official circles from time to time. Blessed with a wide agrarian base, it made common cause with the ryots whose conditions were fast worsening due to the increasing demand of the Government.⁶ It is a pity that in an agricultural province like Assam where the bulk of the population depended on land for subsistence, assessments were mostly 'arbitrary and unjust', and did not appear to have been fixed with reference to their actual capabilities.⁷ So when in early 1886 the Assam Land and Revenue Regulations were introduced, replacing

thereby the Settlement Rules of 1870, a storm of protest was raised throughout Assam.⁸ In a mammoth public meeting held at Jorhat on 2 June 1886, the *Sobha* strongly criticised the Government policy of passing the Regulation in the form of an ordinance rather than placing the same for a thorough discussion in the Legislative Council.⁹ Again in 1892, when as a result of the sudden enhancement of land revenue the Assamese rural society was terribly rocked, the *Sobha* boldly took up the cause of the peasants and mobilised public opinion in their Favour. Between October 1892 and February 1893 the *Sorbojanik Sobha* held a series of meetings to 'protest against the policy of the Government for an excessive increase of revenue.'¹⁰ The resolutions adopted in these meetings reflected its deep concern on the declining socio-economic condition of the people and indirectly forced the Government to reduce land revenue from an average of 53 per cent as originally decided to 32.7 per cent.¹¹ During this period when agrarian disturbances erupted in some places of upper Assam some of the members of the *Sobha* actively supported the agitating ryots. Jagannath Barooah, its President, even went to the extent of hiring, at his own expense, lawyers from Calcutta for the release of the arrested leaders.¹²

Though actively associated with the peasant movements of the late nineteenth century Assam the Jorhat *Sorbojanik Sobha* did not remain silent to the various administrative lapses. It expressed grave concern and anxiety at the policy of frequent transfer of the experienced officers from Assam to other provinces and thus depriving the province of the services of competent officers. The case of Assam being slightly different, it was imperative that officers having greater knowledge and experience of the province should be retained for a longer period. Frequent transfer of officers to and from this province, in the opinion of the *Sobha*, "should as far as possible be prevented in the interest of the Administration; the experienced officers should have sufficient inducements offered to them by ameliorating their prospects to remain in the province and any additional outlay that may be required for the purpose would be more than well spent."¹³ On principle the *Sobha* was perhaps not opposed to a policy of inter-state transfer of officers; but it found no justification why experience acquired in this province should always be utilised for the benefit of others. It therefore felt that for the sake of administrative efficiency and convenience every effort should be made to attract capable officers to this remote province and expressed the view that this goal could be partially achieved by equalising the pay of the Deputy and Assistant

Commissioners with that of the District Joint and Assistant Magistrates of Bengal. "It is hardly necessary to add", the *Sobha* represented, "that as this is a comparatively new and growing province, her interests should be placed in the hands of experienced officers who are required to deal with much delicate matters with a strong planting community, . . . and who require all reasonable protection; while the people of Assam, passing through a state of transition. . . ., require all the care and sympathy of a paternal Government."¹⁴

Regarding the employment of the sons of the soil the Jorhat *Sorbojanik Sobha* expressed its profound dissatisfaction for ignoring the claims of the local youths. While there had been a remarkable progress of higher education in Assam⁵ since 1874, the avenues of employment continued to be closed for the Assamese. For example, out of the thirty-two graduates of Assam in 1892, the services of twenty-five were not utilised, whereas in the Surma Valley none out of fifty could find a berth in the cadre of the Extra Assistant Commissioner. In Bengal the Sub-Judicial and Executive services were the prerogatives of none but the local university graduates, whereas in Bihar and Orissa preference had always been given to the qualified local candidates for filling provincial vacancies.¹⁶ If that be the case the *Sobha* found no reasonable answer as to why a different procedure should be applied in this province for selecting candidates for similar posts. "It is hardly necessary to say", the *Sobha* observed, "that the natives of this province, not unlike the inhabitants of other countries of the world, have a natural ambition to serve their own country and sovereign; and in this honourable desire they are entitled to receive encouragement so far as it is consistent with efficiency."¹⁷ By supporting the cause of the sons of the soil the *Sobha* did not advocate that the executive posts should, as a rule, be always reserved for the Assamese. Rather it wanted that about one-fourth of the posts should be filled up with non-residents of the province, and there should also be a few Europeans to give "tone and steadiness to the service." What the *Sobha* actually insisted was that the natives of Assam should receive "the same measure of consideration as is shown to the people of different portions of the Government of Bengal", and for this suggested that as far as possible the "main body of the service" should be filled up locally and in case of candidates having equal merit and qualification the natives of the soil should be preferred.¹⁸

The educational policy of the Government was also criticised

by the Jorhat *Sorbojanik Sobha*. In its memorial of 14 December 1892 it expressed its resentment at the lukewarm attitude of the local authorities towards higher education as evidenced from the abolition of the second-grade college at Gauhati as an 'unsuccessful institution' and the subsequent reduction in the number of scholarships to only fourteen for a population of nearly two and half millions. It further deprecated the decision of the Chief Commissioner of Assam that no scheduled posts should henceforth be reserved for Assam on the ground that state of education in the province did not warrant such reservation "within a measurable distance of time."¹⁹ The *Sobha*, therefore, not only urged upon the Government to take positive steps to encourage higher education but also to keep the doors open for the local youths to enter such public departments as post and telegraph, forest, police and education.²⁰ Already the people of Assam had to fight a grim battle to re-establish the Assamese language in its rightful place ; and it is needless to say that public opinion mobilised by the *Sobha* in support of higher and technical education soon found expression in a demand for the establishment of Assam's first college.

The Jorhat *Sorbojanik Sobha* also took interest in the socio-economic problems of the time. Opium was an issue to which its attention was drawn. Opium had been in the nineteenth century Assam a commodity of daily consumption for a large section of the people. With a view to reduce its inordinate use the Government in 1860 banned its cultivation and manufacture throughout the province and the system of issuing the same from Government treasury under license was introduced. However, notwithstanding the official policy of 'maximum of revenue with minimum of consumption', consumption did not decrease²¹ as the habitual opium addicts, taking advantage of the low price of the drug (Rs. 14 in 1860) and increasing facilities of purchase,²² continued to indulge in this vice. In 1893, a Royal Commission, with Lord Brassey, a Member of British Parliament as Chairman, visited India to inquire into matters relating to the opium evil. The Jorhat *Sorbojanik Sobha* deputed its President Jagannath Barooah to Calcutta to submit its views before the Commission. A memorial, prepared and approved by about three hundred members of the *Sobha* on 11 November, 1893, was also submitted to the Commission. It is interesting that though fully aware of the harm caused by the excessive consumption of opium the *Sobha* did not support the idea of a sudden stoppage of opium supply. In its view such a step would be disastrous as the bulk of the people who had been

addicted to this drug for a very long time would be forced to take other narcotic drugs and spirits which were more harmful to the people. The memorialists argued

*That if the sale of opium be stoped in Assam, those who now indulge in opium are certain to take to some other stimulant, and they would in natural course take to spirits. The consumption of spirits, it is hardly necessary to remark, would be hundred fold more injurious than opium. Drinking is liable to excess, and the misery and distress that would be caused by excessive drinking in a hot climate would be simply appalling.*²³

Moreover, in the light of the past experience any hasty decision to prohibit opium was most unwelcome. In fact the memory of the Nowgong outbreak (1861) was too fresh in their minds. Under the circumstances the *Sobha* believed that the best course would be to abolish opium by gradual doses, and this could be effected by gradually raising the price of the drug to such an extent which would be beyond the means of the common man. At the same time it gave emphasis on arousing mass consciousness against this vile drug.²⁴ It is true that the views expressed by the *Sobha* did not have much influence in the working of the Royal Commission on Opium, but still, by adopting a very realistic approach to the opium problem, it did succeed in arousing public opinion throughout the valley and helping thereby the emergence of a number of *Kani Nibarani Sobhas* (associations for the eradication of the opium habit) in Assam in the early 20th century.²⁵

With the foundation of the Indian National Congress in 1885 the Jorhat *Sorbojanik Sobha* was also attracted to the national struggle. Many of its members took part in the Congress sessions. Attending the second session of the Congress at Calcutta in 1886, Devicharan Barooah, its Secretary for seventeen years since 1890, spoke in favour of immediate introduction of representative government.²⁶ However, its role in the freedom struggle being one of moderation, was often criticised by the radical section of the Congressmen. Being composed of loyal, educated, urban elite of upper Assam, the *Sobha*, understandably, could not assume an anti-Government stanch. For the same reason perhaps it neither opposed the Partition scheme of Lord Curzon, nor took part in the *Swadeshi* and Boycott movements.²⁷ Nevertheless, the Jorhat *Sorbojanik Sobha* did succeed in fostering national consciousness and patriotism and brought Assam closer to the national mainstream.

From the above discussion it is clear that the Jorhat *Sorbo-*

janik Sobha, during its short span of life,²⁸ by constantly involving itself in various socio-economic and political problems of the region, did a great deal of spade-work in preparing the ground for a united opposition against governmental injustice. To the people of the different cross sections of the society the *Sobha* provided a common platform for exchanging views on subjects of common interest. The experience thus acquired stood the ryots in good stead and facilitated their active participation in the various ryot *Sobhas* which appeared in the last part of the 19th century. The *Sobha* also gave the nascent Assamese middle class the necessary political training and hence it may be regarded as the precursor of the first broad-based provincial political organisation, the Assam Association. Supporting the above view, Benudhar Sarma, a well-known critic of Assam wrote, "Prior to the establishment of the Assam Association this (*Sorbojanik Sobha*) was the only association which was capable of expressing the public opinion irrespective of caste, creed and community."²⁹

Notes & References

1. It is not known whether the *Sorbojanik Sobha* of Jorhat owed its name to the *Sarbajanik Sobha* founded in Poona in 1870 by Justice Mahadeo Govind Ranade. Secondly, no uniformity is found among the historians regarding the name of this *Sobha*. It has been variously spelled as *Sorbojanik*, *Sarbajanik* or *Sarvajanik*. To me the *Sorbojanik* appears to be the more appropriate word than the other two.
2. There has also been some controversy regarding the year of the establishment of the *Sobha*. Nakul Chandra Bhuyan, in his book *Radhakanta Sandikoi Dangariya* (in Assamese) mentioned 1875 as the year of the birth of the *Sobha* and the same is accepted by Prafulla Datta Goswami in his book *Manikchandra Barua Aru Teur Yug* (in Assamese).
3. Evidence of Jagannath Barooah, 28 December 1893, *Royal Commission on Opium, Minute of Evidence*, Vol. ii. Calcutta, 1894, p. 297.
4. *Ibid*,
5. Jatindranath Goswami, *Jagannath Barooah* (in Assamese), Jorhat, 1976, p. 39.
6. The total land revenue demand of Assam increased from Rs. 1 million to over 4 million between 1865-66 and 1897-98. Amalendu Guha, 'Assamese Agrarian Society in the Late Nineteenth Century', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. xvii, No. 1 (January-March 1980), p. 51.

7. A. Dhekial Phukan, 'Observation on the Administration of the Province of Assam', A. J. M. Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, Calcutta, 1854, Appendix, J. p. xxxviii.
8. For details see K. N. Saikia, *The Assam Land and Revenue Regulation*, 1886, Gauhati, 1965.
9. Jatindranath Goswami, *op. cit.*, p. 38.
10. Evidence of Jagannath Barooah, 28 December 1893, *Royal Commission on Opium, Minutes of Evidence*, vol. ii, p. 299.
11. Assam Secretariat Records (hereafter ASR), Home A, September, 1894 (Proceedings on the Rangia, Lachima and Patharughat Riots), No. 326, Answer to Rash Behary Ghose's Questions in the Imperial Legislative Council, 29 March 1894.
12. Jatindranath Goswami, *op. cit.*, p. 40.
13. ASR, Home A, July, 1894, No. 186.
14. *Ibid.*
15. In 1874 there were only two graduates in the Assam valley; in 1892 the number increased to 32. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.* 17. *Ibid.* 18. *Ibid.* 19. *Ibid.* 20. *Ibid.*
21. In 1875-76 the quantity of opium consumed in Assam proper was 1, 689 *maunds*; in 1919-20 it was 1, 640 *maunds*. Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj, Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826-1947*, New Delhi, 1977, p. 340.
22. For details see Shrutidev Goswami, 'The Opium Evil in Nineteenth Century Assam', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. xix, Nos. 3 & 4, 1982, pp. 365-76.
23. 'Memorial of the Jorhat *Sorbojanik Sobhal*, *Royal Commission on Opium, Minute of Evidence*, vol. ii, Calcutta, 1894, p. 462
24. *Ibid.*, p. 298, see evidence of Jagannath Barooah.
25. Padmanath Gohain Barua, *Mor Suaroni* (in Assamese), Gauhati, 1948, pp. 47-50.
26. Cited in H. K. Barpujari (ed), *Political History of Assam, 1826-1819*, vol. i, Gauhati, 1977, p. 166.
27. On behalf of the Jorhat *Sorbojanik Sobha*, Jagannath Barooah, its President, in a note dated 10 February, 1904, agreed to accept Bengal partition provided Assamese rights and interests were duly protected and jobs reserved for the locals.
28. The internal divisions in the *Sobha*, particularly after the death of Jagannath Barooah in 1907 practically marred its reputation. Though officially alive till about 1921 it had done very little work since then.
29. Benudhar Sarma, *Arghyabali* (in Assamese), Gauhati (second edition), 1967, p. 112.