

REVISITING THE ASSAM MOVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Assam remained in the grip of an organized mass agitation, namely the Assam Movement, for a long duration of six years which finally came to an end with the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985. The movement primarily revolved around the issue of illegal immigrants of foreign nationals, their detection and deportation. The article analyses the significance of the Assam movement in the socio-political development of Assam. The issue, organization and even goals of the movement underwent transformations as inherent part of the growth and decline of the movement. The article while focusing on the class character of the movement critically examines its effectiveness and makes an assessment of its implications. It is argued that instead of addressing the larger problems faced by the toiling masses of the society the movement and its implications created cleavages in the society of Assam. The study argues that the movement was largely responsible for problematizing the day-to-day life of the minority communities unleashing a series of attacks on them besides creating a fear psychosis. The article emphasizes that the movement severely affected the very foundation of the entire society in Assam and set into motion the ethnic partitioning of the society.

Keywords: Assam movement, Asamiya identity, cut-off year, AASU, political leadership, illegal immigration, deportation, integration

Introduction

The Assam movement is considered to be the watershed event in the political history of Assam. It is also regarded as the one of the longest socio-political movements lasting for a period of six long years. Hence it is very important to understand in the beginning what the Assam movement is all about and how this movement unfolded and proceeded. Assam movement started in 1979 and continued for six long years finally coming to an end with the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985. The movement primarily revolved around the issue of illegal immigrants of foreign nationals, their detection and deportation. The leadership of the movement felt that in the wake

of continuous immigration of foreign nationals, the distinct socio-cultural, economic and political identity of the Asamiya nationality was facing an identity crisis. Hence, the movement was designed to protect the distinct Asamiya identity.

Monirul Hussain in his analysis of Assam movement maintains that Assam movement refers to the movement that demanded to stop (1) the illegal immigration of foreign nationals to Assam from the neighboring countries- Nepal and Bangladesh, and (2) their participation in the electoral process in Assam/India, and (3) deportation of all foreigners living illegally in Assam so as to (4) enable the people of Assam to protect their distinct identity, in their traditional homeland from the threat of foreign nationals.¹ The leadership to the movement was provided by All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP).

The Assam movement brought about and introduced many significant changes in the society and polity of Assam. Therefore, Assam movement has tremendous significance in the socio-political development of Assam. The movement appears to have sowed the seeds of various subsequent political developments in Assam. Officially the movement was dominantly led by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU). However, there stood the weak and small Asamiya bourgeois press, the Asamiya professionals, the bureaucrats, the middle class, contractors the owners of influential mobile theatres, and the rural gentry.² The movement had its own periodic peaks and lows. If the initial phase of the movement is characterized by massive political mobilization, the later phase of the movement gradually started losing its momentum, and if the former phase was more or less peaceful and democratic in its appearance, the later phase exposed the violent nature of the movement which at the same time took an undemocratic turn. During the movement the air of Assam was filled with slogans like detect, disfranchise and deport or disperse all foreigners. The hot-bed of this so-called anti-foreigner agitation, popularly known as Assam movement was the Brahmaputra valley.

The context and the beginning of the movement

The context for the movement to emerge was provided when the Chief Election Commissioner of India, S.L. Shakhdar, expressed his concern over the large scale inclusions of foreign nationals in the electoral rolls, and more particularly in the north-east region. Shakhdar in the conference of the Chief Electoral officers of the states held at Ooty from October 24 to 24, 1978, observed:

“I would like to refer to the alarming situation in some states specially in North Eastern Region wherefrom disturbing reports are coming regarding large scale inclusion of

¹Monirul Hussain, “The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity” 1993, p.7

²Ibid. p.126

foreign nationals in the Electoral Rolls. In one case, the population in 1971 recorded an increase as high as 34.98% over the 1961 figures and this increase was attributed to the influx of a very large number of persons from the neighboring countries. The influx has become a regular feature. I think it may not be a wrong assessment to make, on the basis of the increase of 34.98 % between the two censuses, the increase that is likely to be recorded in the 1991 census would be more than 100% over the 1961 census. In other words, a stage would be reached when the state may have to reckon with the foreign nationals who may probably constitute a sizable percentage, if not the majority of the population of the state.”³

Such remarks provided the needed impetus to the movement and accordingly the leadership of the movement accepted Shakhddhar’s remarks in letter and spirit. The leadership of the movement also utilized this opportunity to transform the issue of bohiragoto- which could not draw support from the masses- to a ‘more concrete and rational’ issue of videshi- the foreigner in Assam.

However, in the true sense, the movement emerged only with the Mangaldoi bye-election. It is generally considered as the historical juncture which marked the beginning of the Assam movement. With the death of Hiralal Patwari, the Janata M.P. on 28 march 1979, the Mangaldoi parliamentary seat had fallen vacant and accordingly the preparation for holding bye-election to the Lok Sabha were being made. For the bye-election, the voter’s list was updated for this constituency. Out of 600,000 names on voter’s list, objections were raised against 70,000 names as foreigners, though a large number of these complaints are claimed to be fabricated ones. Hussain argues that most of them had already received or exercised their constitutional rights whose authenticity of citizenship was now being challenged, and he goes on to comment that the services of the state police was utilized to inflate the number of alleged foreign nationals in Assam.⁴ Nonetheless, the government of Assam was then asked by the Chief Election Commissioner to take the required steps to rectify the voter’s list. The tribunal set up by the Chief Minister Golap Borbora in this regard declared 45,000 as foreigners. This subsequently spread like a shock wave among the people of Assam. Importantly, it provided the basic ground for the movement. In a sense, it also outlined a constitutional framework on which the movement could stand and progress. A legal aspect was, thus, provided which the supporters of the movement articulated, used and utilized in course of the movement. The lack of socio-economic development and progress of Assam in the post independent era was also then, by a section, linked to the settlement of millions of foreigners on their land.

³ Shakhddhar quoted in Assam Jagriti 1980: 2-3, also cited by Monirul Hussain in “The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity”, 1993, p.102

⁴ Monirul Hussain, “The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity”, 1993, p.104

The All Assam Students' Union took the matter seriously and discussed over it in its annual conference held from 7th to 10th March 1979, and also prepared and charted out the course of action in this regard. AASU made its stand clear and asserted strongly that the names of all foreign nationals should be deleted from the electoral rolls and that until then the Mangaldoi bye-election should be postponed. It also demanded deportation of foreign nationals from Assam. AASU, in this regard, then gave a call for 12 hour Assam 'bandh' on 8th July, 1979, highlighting their demands. The 'bandh' is generally claimed to be total and peaceful. But what is more important is that this bandh remarkably marked the beginning of an active phase of protest actions and mass mobilizations. In the words of Manirul Hussain, "the event, therefore, turned out to be only the first of a protracted series of protest actions." Subsequently, an unprecedented mass popular upsurge followed. sit-ins, picketing, strike and symbolic disobedience of the law were all now forming a part of the popular upsurge. No doubt during this phase the movement remained largely peaceful and non-violent. Also the methods used were largely democratic though the very content of the movement cannot be claimed to be democratic.

Manifestation of violent and non-democratic characteristic of the movement

In order to point out if a movement holds to be democratic its contents need to be assessed. The Assam movement from the very beginning demanded that all those people who entered Assam after 1951 are to be considered as illegal immigrants and that they should be deported. In other words, the movement aimed at declaring those people stateless and wanted to remove them from Assam, after being born or resided in the state for about 30 years, virtually as naturalized citizens. For Amalendu Guha they are mostly toiling peasants, artisans and workers who were given shelter and relief, and in many cases wastelands by the government. In such a backdrop, after having lived in the state for almost three decades and simultaneously having undergone the process of assimilation to an extent by such weaker sections of the society, when a movement targets to render them stateless and remove them, naturally the nature of the movement is questioned to the extent that one cannot call it a democratic movement in the first place.

The movement that was largely peaceful and non-violent in its initial phase underwent many changes in the subsequent phase. The situation did not remain the same over the time and the movement started exposing a different nature and characteristic when gradually it turned out to be anti-democratic and non-secular reflecting the fascist tendencies. Hence, naturally the question arises as why the movement could not continue with its peaceful and non-violent characteristic over the time. What inspired the later phase of the movement to turn out to be violent exposing its undemocratic character? Such questions need serious attention and analysis as it is the later phase of the movement that problematized the day-to-day life of the minority communities unleashing a series of attacks on them besides creating a fear psychosis. In order to understand and explain such questions one must take into consideration multiple factors that

contributed or in other words inspired such a shift, accordingly affecting and changing the nature and characteristic of the movement. Youths of the movement did not have any clue regarding the procedure for detection and expulsion of foreigners, and the extremists among the regional groups got used to the coercive fascist practices. The former confusion and later practices combined together contributed significantly in the rise of incidents of violence and intimidation as the movement proceeded. Also the movement had its periodic peaks and lows. Over the time as the movement started losing the momentum, the supporters of the movement were not reluctant to use any means and accordingly they even resorted to violence to sustain and carry forward the movement at any cost. The initial phase of the movement was more or less peaceful as it began with a mood of optimism about a negotiated settlement. However, this optimism did not last long and the first phase came to an end with a considerable pessimism about the prospects of a likely solution. At the same time the Asamiya bourgeois press continued to provide warlike socialization. Hence such socialization combined with the prospects of a negotiated settlement losing its grounds influenced many youths to resort to violence to build up pressure. With the gradual erosion of the support base over the time, the leadership of the movement needed new mechanisms to keep the momentum alive and the easy available weapon at their disposal was to resort to violence. Also after a point the religious and linguistic minority communities that were at the receiving end of the movement decided not to remain as merely passive receivers of various forms of onslaught and hence tried to build around counter-agitation as a means of defense. The leadership of the Assam movement was apprehensive about such developments and intensified the process to crush any form of challenge or counter-agitation to the movement. The leadership of the movement then failed to contain the anti-democratic, non-secular and violent tendencies generated by the movement itself particularly against the Hindu Bengalis, Na-Asamiya Muslims and in some cases Nepalis living in the Brahmaputra valley.⁵

The ongoing process of validation of the 1979 electoral rolls for the 1983 poll, received mighty resistance (as the talks were broken off). According to Sanjib Baruah, "holding an election amid the prevailing ethnic and political polarization was no ordinary law-and order-problem." It implies that there was sharp ethnic and political polarization over the issue of holding the election and there was no unanimity as the supporters of the movement were not able to convince all the ethnic communities. Also the stand of the political parties varied over the issue. However with the Centre's adamant approach to go on polls despite the opposition from the supporters of the movement, the holding of the election became the focus of a contest between the Assam movement and the Centre. The campaign to boycott the poll got its momentum as it was well organized. Accordingly the campaign became widespread. Keeping in mind the strong

⁵Monirul Hussain, State, Identity and Internal Displacement in the North-East, EPW, p. 4520

determination of a section of agitated and angry people, the pro-poll parties were unable to launch regular campaigns. The entire atmosphere turned out to be tense and furious. As a result some prospective candidates either could not submit or had to withdraw their nomination papers. Unfortunately, now poll related violence and killings became common phenomena. All these clearly show that the 1983 elections were held on a war footing. The elections also witnessed the flood of blood in many areas. The desperate attempts on the part of the agitators to boycott the poll included attacking polling booths, destroying bridges or cutting up roads with a view to prevent voters from exercising their franchise. Some 150 agitators died of police firing while they were making their desperate attempts in relation to the poll boycott campaign. And in many cases, such attacks even faced retaliatory counter-attacks. Here both attacks and counter-attacks evidently carried a political connotation, political question and motive. However, they did not remain merely political in the long run, but ended up largely as communal massacres, and in some particular case even genocide.⁶ According to the then Chief Minister of Assam- Hiteswar Saikia “more than 4,000 lost their lives over the 1983 Assembly elections.”⁷ However, this is only an official estimate, and the non official estimates far exceed these figures.

Undoubtedly, the year 1983 witnessed the most severe form of violence. However, the year is also crucial for the tussle between the determined centre to hold state elections and an equally determined and resolute leadership demanding the all out boycott of the elections on the other hand. Over the issue of participation in the election, apart from the political parties various social and ethnic groups were also divided. There were large scale protests with the leadership of the movement appealing to all sections of the society to join the fray and oppose the call of elections. This conflict and clash between the two determined forces was then channelized by the leadership of the movement to arouse the patriotic sentiments by terming it as Assam’s ‘last struggle for survival’. What such labeling (or slogan) did was to arouse the highest form of Asamiya sub-nationalism challenging the imposition of the centre. In the process, all those who were not supporting the cause of poll boycott were considered to be against the very interest of the distinct Asamiya culture and identity, and they were, therefore, simply not loyal to the greater cause of Assam. All the opponents were then treated as enemies. For the leadership of the movement now resisting the holding of election became the immediate challenge also because an election with a moderate to high turnout would have weakened the claims of the movement about its representativeness and its power capability. As a result, severe form of violence emerged when the two different forces, the pro-poll and the supporters of the movement demanding the all out poll boycott, and their interest came into conflict. The leadership of the movement and the elite class behind it was clear that if at this juncture elections were allowed to

⁶ The genocide of Nelie is the example in this regard.

⁷ The Statesman, September 14, 1984

be held peacefully and the opportunity was compromised, it would altogether lose the ‘battle of bargaining’, depriving it from the very concessions that otherwise it would be able to generate. However, it also shows that apart from the internal causes to the spread of violence, the external factor also contributed to it, and this external factor can be seen in terms of the Centre’s adamant to go on with the elections despite large-scale protests against it generated by the movement and its supporters. What is important at this point is, unlike the initial phase, the leadership did not make any serious attempt to prevent the spread of violent clashes and communal massacres. As long as the spread of violence was contributing to the cause of the movement and the hidden class interest, the cost of it was not calculated by the leadership and the elite class behind it. Therefore, it also went on to encourage violent clashes and communal massacres. In the words of Manirul Hussain, “a ruling class would not like to abjure violence if it helps their class interests, and they would not hesitate to provoke killing and protect the killers they provoked so systematically”.⁸

This way with the progress of the movement its highly intolerant nature was also exposed as it tried to forcibly curb any form of opposition to the movement. The movement in that sense reflected ‘either with us or against us’ approach. All those who either opposed or criticized the movement on various grounds, for example the means and methods, were targeted and victimized by the supporters of the movement. In its pursuit of the highest form of Asamiya sub-nationalism, it failed to consider even the progressive criticisms in the democratic spirit. Hence, the movement took an undemocratic turn as it failed to appreciate and nurture the culture of dissent. There were complaints regarding the suffocating intellectual atmosphere that provided little room for dissent. However, such complaints were responded with various forms of attacks by the supporters of the movement, and the reports of terrorist attacks on opponents of the movement bear testimony to it.

The movement and the minorities

Undoubtedly, the Assam movement could mobilize popular participation of the masses. However, in between the mobilization of popular participation and its gradual erosion of the support base and the subsequent intensification of large scale violence and communal massacres, the case and cause of the minority communities remained vulnerable. Hence, it is important to raise this question as how the question of distinct national identity of the majority community problematized the life and functioning of the minority communities in Assam. When the anti-foreigner agitation rose to its peak in 1979 and early 1980, it also introduced an atmosphere of suspicion and apprehensions. Every fourth man in Assam was now a suspect, and remained so in

⁸ Monirul Hussain, “The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity”, 1993, p.116

the eyes of the indigenes. The anxiety and fear psychosis among the minority communities got aggravated with the prevailing confusion over the issue of exact number of foreigners that were to be detected and deported from Assam. To quote Hiren Gohain, “often the figures given in public meetings and the press were as high as five million or seven million, naturally making every non-Assamese feel that he would be on the list of such aliens, however just and strong his claim might be.”⁹ With such proceedings even pre 1951 old settlers of Bengali origins, both Hindus and Muslims were subjected to various forms of harassment. They as well as the settlers of Nepali origin were subjected to frenzied foreigner hunts from time to time. The fear of loss of national identity on the part of majority community thus led in its turn to the fear of loss of citizenship, hearth and home on the part of the minority communities of Bengal and Nepal origin.¹⁰

Amlendu Guha claims that the initial phase of the agitation developed ‘by and large peacefully’ with blessings of the press, organized intimidations and jingoist wall-writings. However, “the ceaseless protest meetings fed with myths and false statistics since 1978 finally culminated into a mass hysteria after September 1979 and accordingly this hysteria led to large scale anti-Bengali programs in the subsequent period.”¹¹ Up to the end of 1979, there were only a few cases of suspected foreigners or their alleged abettors being killed. However, the scenario did not remain the same for long, and soon it started unfolding a different story altogether. The supporters of the movement also tried to coerce minorities to join their rank, and any form of counter agitation was not tolerated. The first week of the new year 1980 brought along the dark side of it with the large scale massacres of settled linguistic and religious minorities, particularly in North Kamrup. As a result of this large scale violence a large number of people belonging to the religious and minority communities were displaced. Gohain asserts that “mobs roamed from village to village, indulging in arson and massacring pitilessly helpless people, unmoved by wails of terrified women and children.” It was one of the first major civilian violence against the civilians. It is argued that more or less it took place in the form of systematically organized rioting against selected Na-Asamiya Muslims and Hindu-Bengalis, and that the killers of North Kamrup also went unpunished. It was followed by yet another phase of massacres of minorities. This time it took place in Nagaon district as a response to the counter agitation initiated by the minorities. Hiren Gohain claims that the members of the minority communities were also forced to sign pledges and letters to the editor expressing total support to the cause of expelling foreigners.¹² This way we can easily say that the question of distinct national identity of the majority

⁹Hiren Gohain, Cudgel of Chauvinism, EPW, p. 419

¹⁰Kaya Dasgupta and Amlendu Guha, 1983 Assembly Poll in Assam: An analysis of its background and implications, EPW, p. 843

¹¹Amlendu Guha, Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist: Assam’s Anti-Foreigner Upsurge; 1979-80, EPW, p.1706

¹²Gohain, Hiren. Cudgel of Chauvinism, EPW, p. 419

community in its course of development created an atmosphere of fear psychosis for the minority communities and that they largely remained helpless and vulnerable.

Class dynamics of the movement

In order to understand Assam movement in its totality an analysis of its class dynamics becomes very important. Hence any it becomes imperative to ask “Is there any class dimension to the movement?” “How has the class dimension shaped and guided the course of the movement?”

In this regard if we analyze the changing power equation within the Congress from 1971, it helps us to see how the movement was also driven by the hidden class interest of the powerful Asamiya middle class and the small bourgeoisie and how in the subsequent phases they used and utilized the scope of the Assam movement to serve their own aspirations and class interest. Monirul Hussain in his work shows that interestingly from 1971 the members of the backward classes gradually rose to the positions of leadership in coalition with the scheduled castes and tribes, Muslims, Bengalis, and the black tribals of Assam’s tea-plantation. The encouragement from the Congress party itself made it possible for these groups to rise to the positions of leadership both at the party and government level, resulting in considerable decline in the position of high castes leadership within Congress. Such change of power equation helped the Congress to deepen its roots and support base. On the other hand, through such action the Congress alienated and antagonized the powerful Asamiya middle class. Such action also had larger implications as it went on to annoy the weak and small Asamiya bourgeoisie and their mouthpiece, the powerful Asamiya press, having the same caste and class background¹³

Therefore, the socio-political upheaval before the start of the movement needs to be understood in this light as well. If the issue of economic backwardness, employment opportunities etc. were being raised, at the same time there was also this hidden class interest of the powerful Asamiya middle class and importantly the small Asamiya bourgeoisie was also apprehensive about such developments at the level of power equation. For them maintaining the status quo is important and for the purpose they can use all the resources at their disposal in order to avoid any form of challenge or competition to their hegemonic role. The analysis of the support base of the movement also reveals that the powerful Asamiya middle class, the small Asamiya bourgeoisie and the powerful Asamiya press strongly backed the movement. In the words of Amalendu Guha, “the agitation was started by the Asamiya capitalists and gentry through the communication media they control, and the students and other sections of the petty bourgeoisie including sections of peasants were gradually drawn into it.” In Hussain’s analysis, the weak and small Asamiya bourgeoisie press, the Asamiya professionals, the bureaucrats, the middle class,

¹³For details see Monirul Hussain, *The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity*, 1993, p.97

contractors, the owners of influential mobile theatres, and the rural gentry strongly stood behind the movement. Udayon Misra further argues that the challenges from the Indian big bourgeoisie over the time had considerably pushed the Assamese bourgeoisie in the defensive position. However, the motive of the Assamese bourgeoisie remains identical to that of Indian big bourgeoisie, but the former wants its share protected, and therefore, unhindered process of exploitation to continue. The Asamiya upper classes were not strong and resourceful enough to push out big capital from their position of domination in industries and trade. The failed anti-bohiragoto movement targeting primarily the Marwari community also explains this limitation. In such a backdrop, the Asamiya upper classes, in the words of Guha, “aspire to monopolize what residual is left over, that is, small industries and petty trade as well as professions and services in their state.” Seen from this perspective as Guha claims, their survival depends on three conditions,

- i. Elimination of Bengali and other competitors.
- ii. Opportunities of intensification of labour exploitation, unhindered by trade unions.
- iii. Unhindered control over the state administration for the creation of bureaucratic capital of which the Asamiya upper classes could be made beneficiaries.¹⁴

It is natural on the part of the Asamiya bourgeoisie to become apprehensive when their hegemony gets challenged or is questioned. Hence we can argue that with the changing power equation in the political sphere, and the ever growing challenges from the Indian big bourgeoisie, the Asamiya middle class and the small Asamiya bourgeoisie needed to consolidate and strengthen their position. Accordingly the Assam movement was then used and utilized by this section to serve their hidden class interest by strongly backing and subsequently providing direction to the movement so as to secure the conditions required for their unhindered hegemony to continue. Simultaneously the split of strong trade unions from within was encouraged on chauvinist lines. To quote Gohain, “Nibaran Bora, a leader of the movement, virtually its mentor, had appealed publically to patriots to wreck trade unions as these are allegedly dominated by Bengalis.”¹⁵ No doubt, the breaking up of trade unions is quite handy for the capitalists as the absence of trade unions creates the opportunities of intensification of labour exploitation.

Whereas Hiren Gohain claims that Assam movement is nothing but the cudgel of chauvinism, for Amalendu Guha, with the help of Assam movement, in order to aggrandize its own class interest, the Asamiya middle class took up the case of identity to the level of chauvinism. For

¹⁴Amalendu Guha, Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist: Assam’s Anti-Foreigner Upsurge; 1979-80, p. 1706

¹⁵ Hiren Gohain, Tangled Theories, EPW, p.733

Guha the Asamiya middle class is constituted of small capitalists and other sections of the petty bourgeoisie including professionals and service holders: and many of them are also simultaneously small landlords. Guha further argues that the cudgel of chauvinism often serves great purpose for the capitalists and landlords. As the capitalists and landlords realized the competition from other sections they used this cudgel of chauvinism to serve their purpose and class interest. Hence it was used effectively in order to cut the size of Bengali and other non-Asamiya competitors, along with their workers and tenant farmers by dividing them.¹⁶ To quote Guha, “ethnicity was not a given factor to which politics responded; rather, ethnicity awareness was encouraged and exploited by the upper classes for political ends”¹⁷. The Asamiya press that is largely owned by the high caste Asamiya bourgeoisie also helped deepening the Asamiya fear and sharpening the hatred. The Asamiya middle class was apprehensive about being swamped culturally by Bengali immigrants, and accordingly some chauvinist elements utilized this insecurity to spread communal hatred between Assamese and Bengalis. Hence, the movement also developed the tendency to term all Bengalis as “Bangladeshis”, which in the process went on to create a fear psychosis among ‘immigrant’ communities- particularly Hindu Bengalis and Muslims of Bengali descent.¹⁸

Again in this context, if we look at the complex issue of less civil violence directed against the Nepali community in comparison to the Bengali Hindus and Na-Asamiya Muslims it helps us to unfold the class dynamics behind it, and how largely the interest of the powerful Asamiya middle class and the small Asamiya bourgeoisie shaped the course of the movement by providing it the kind of direction that served their hidden aspirations. According to Sanjib Baruah, by and large, except during the Assam movement, anti-Nepali feelings in Assam have been rare. Though abrasions were created between the Nepali and the Asamiya in course of Assam movement, however, there was less vociferous campaign against the Nepali demanding their deportation/expulsion from Assam. More interestingly there was comparatively less civil violence directed against this community. However, this cannot be considered as merely a coincident, as some scholars have rightly argued that this, somehow, reflects the middle class dimension of the problem. The Asamiya middle class is more apprehensive about the group/community that stands as its apparent competitor, and the Nepalis, given their confinement to the subordinate role, certainly do not challenge the middle class monopoly of the dominant section of the Asamiyas.¹⁹ Neither the Nepali community was successfully influencing the power equation at the political level nor were they rising significantly as an integral part of the

¹⁶For details see Amlendu Guha, *Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist: Assam’s Anti-Foreigner Upsurge; 1979-80*, p. 1706

¹⁷Ibid pp. 1705-06

¹⁸See Sanjib Baruah, “India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality”, 1999. Pp.126-127

¹⁹ For details see Monirul Hussain, “The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity” 1993, p.261

bureaucratic capital. More or less they remained submissive to the Asamiya ruling elite without resisting the domination. They were, for various reasons, therefore, not in a position to threaten the Asamiya middle class. And accordingly this explains why there was less vociferous campaign against this community, and more importantly comparatively less civil violence directed against it. This simultaneously provides the ground to claim that the hidden class interest of the powerful Asamiya middle class and the small Asamiya bourgeoisie largely shaped the course and direction of the movement.

The issue of cut-off year and the foreigner question

The question as who are the foreigners remained at the heart of the Assam movement, and despite it, there was no clarity over the issue in the beginning, and later also the figures varied according to one's way and method of estimate. In fact in 1978 and early 1979, the terms 'videshi' (foreigner) and 'bohiragota' (outsider) were used interchangeably. However, later one of the prominent constituents of the Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AGSP), the Assam Sahitya Sabha clarified the prevailing confusion over the use and meaning of the term foreigner. The Sabha articulated the term foreigner to refer to post 1951 immigrants from foreign countries with questionable citizenship status. This view was then accordingly accepted by the other constituents of the AGSP and the supporters of the movement. The leadership of the movement therefore, first emphasized that the year 1951 should be made the cut-off year for detection and deportation of foreign nationals from Assam. In this regard, they claimed that the National Register of Citizens (NRC) could be considered as the basic document to determine the nationality in Assam. As long as the movement could draw overwhelming and massive support from the masses, with its broader support base, the leadership of the movement remained firm with their position that 1951 be made the cut-off year. However, with the changing equation at the level of the support base, the leadership was forced to rethink on its rigid stand. By the end of 1980, the leadership of the movement and the Government of India agreed on two points that

- I. 1951-61 entrants should not be deported, and
- II. All the post 1971 entrants should be deported²⁰

So the major confusion and disagreement prevailed over the entrants of 1961-71. As Hussain points out, in one instance the leadership even refused to accept the appeal made by the Governor of Assam that 1967 be considered as the cut-off year for the detection of foreign nationals from Assam. All the political parties, on the other hand, wanted and supported that 1971 should be made the cut-off year, which of course the leadership of the movement did not

²⁰ Ibid. p.123

agree. However with the centre's delaying tactics and the gradual erosion of the support base of the movement, after many rounds of negotiations between the Centre and the leadership, the year 1966 was accepted as the cut-off year. With the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985, it was agreed that the foreigners who had entered Assam between January 1966 and March 1971 would be disenfranchised for ten years, and those who came after March 1971 would be deported.

This way the claim over the cut-off year kept on changing and getting re-articulated with the course of the movement. In the process, the persistence of the leadership on the cut-off year issue contributed to the prolonged confrontation between the centre and the supporters of the movement, besides resulting in large scale violence and communal massacres. Whereas all the political parties were in agreement in making 1971 as the cut-off year from the beginning, the leadership of the movement showed its strong opposition to it, and continued with its somewhat rigid approach over the issue. Therefore, in this context, Guha questions if the real and major concern of the movement was the fear of being swamped and losing distinct Asamiya culture and identity, for he believes, if that was the major concern, 1971 should have been accepted as the cut-off year. That is because according to him, no basic inter-community imbalance was created during the period 1951-71 which could have probably threatened the Asamiya culture in its religious and linguistic aspects.²¹ Question then naturally arises as why the leadership was persisting over the cut-off year issue. What explains this persistence? If we critically look at the middle class dilemma over this persistence it helps us to see how the middle class aspirations were articulated via the myth of the threat to distinct Asamiya culture and identity. The Asamiya ruling class that stood firmly behind the movement and aspired to wrest some concessions for itself vis-a-vis the Indian ruling class by capitalizing on the prevailing persistence over the issue. With the growing confrontation the Indian ruling class needed to devise some mechanism to resolve the crisis and accordingly it had to explore the prospects of providing some concessions to the Asamiya ruling class to buy peace in Assam. Hence, even though in accepting 1971 as the cut-off year, the distinct Asamiya culture and identity would not have got compromised, as claimed by Guha, but certainly the scope of wresting more concessions for itself, the aspirations of the Asamiya ruling class would have got jeopardized. With the Asamiya ruling class interest being entrenched, it became more and more complicated, and we can, therefore, say that largely the ruling class interest guided and directed the course of the movement, including the persistence over the cut-off year issue, using the perceived threat of distinct Asamiya culture and identity being swamped, as the tool to serve their own aspirations and class interest.

Implications of the movement

²¹ For details see Amalendu Guha, "Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist: Assam's Anti-Foreigner Upsurge; 1979-80", p. 1710

Assam movement had shown tremendous power to mobilize the Asamiya masses and build up pressure through various means, and it was not possible for the Indian ruling class to buy peace in Assam without giving certain concessions to the Asamiya ruling class- that stood firmly behind the movement. And, as Monirul Hussain argues, it was done not only through the official accord (the Assam Accord, 1985) but the non-official accord, the real understanding between the Indian ruling class and the Asamiya ruling class. The leadership of the movement was then co-opted in the power structure of the state. However with such negotiations and developments whether peace has come back to Assam becomes a pertinent question, to understand and answer which one must trace the socio-political developments that took place in the state in the aftermath of the Assam movement. It is also important because the movement not only had the immediate impact or implications but also carried far reaching socio political implications. During the Assam movement the Assamese sub-national formation was negatively influenced. The movement severely affected the very foundation of the entire society and set into motion the ethnic partitioning of the society. In other words, the movement and its consequences created cleavages in the society of Assam.

The relations among the indigenous peoples –the ethnic Assamese and the tribal groups, particularly the Bodos worsened substantially during the Assam movement. In the course of time, the autochthon tribals that have been living in Assam’s hills and plains since time immemorial challenged the hegemony of the high caste Asamiya ruling class. They in the course of time became very restive and built up massive movements, like the Bodo movement for example, using the Assam movement as their reference movement. The Bodo movement also then carried forward the lesson given by the movement that is, mixing popular mobilization with violence against ‘others’. Therefore, one can say that the partitioning of the society that was started by the dominant national group in Assam through the Assam movement was then carried forward by its successors, the smaller ethnic groups. If the Bodo movement is an outgrowth of the Assam movement, the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) also emerged as the radical off-shoot of the sub-nationalist aspiration of the Assam movement. The ULFA made its inroads significantly during the year 1983 and consolidated its position in the following years. ULFA considered the 1983 elections illegal and despite all round opposition by the supporters of the movement that the elections were held in the state made it claim that there was no so-called moderate road available to the people of Assam. In the words of Baruah, “the perceived failure of the Assam movement to resolve Assam’s immigration crisis led to a radicalization of Assamese sub-nationalism, giving it a separatist turn.”²² During the Assam movement, for the first time Assam experienced a new kind of violence- ‘bomb blasts’, and such violence was either aimed at selected individuals or at times a particular group. Hussain argues that such

²² Sanjib Baruah, “India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality”, 1999, p. 117

violence was very alien to Assam's pre-movement society and history. Nonetheless, this new form of violence was then subsequently carried forward more particularly by the ULFA in their mode of functioning, along with the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) that emerged in the course of Bodo movement. ULFA also introduced into Assam's politics the ideology of armed revolution and the agenda of secessionism.

Tilottama Misra holds that a positive outcome of the agitation on foreigners issue is the growing awareness among the Assamese people of being subjected to gross economic exploitation on a scale worse than in the pre-independence days. She further claims that the movement has been able to make the common people aware of the big business stranglehold being the cause of economic underdevelopment.²³ No doubt, Assam's socio-economic backwardness has a definite connection to the big business rule and exploitation. However, this is not a peculiar case of Assam alone as the same form of exploitation and socio-economic backwardness can be found in other states as well like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. However, in regard to the hegemony of the vanguard of nationalism there lies some difference. In the words of Hiren Gohain, "the vanguards of Assamese nationalism were never as secure in their hegemony as their counterparts in other regions in India."²⁴ But importantly, if the anti-foreigner agitation was so positive with growing realization of the nature of exploitation, in those circumstances the interests of the toiling masses would have become identical, that is, to defeat big business policies by their united struggle. Unfortunately to Misra's claim of growing awareness generated by the movement, it failed to reflect such tendencies and materialize them. Rather, in the opinion of Amalendu Guha, instead of uniting the toiling masses of various castes, creeds and languages in an anti-feudal, anti-monopolist struggle the movement rather divided them. The movement aroused the destructive anger. However, this anger was not directed against bourgeois and landlord properties but against the thatched huts and the liberty of a section of the poor people and the dissidents.²⁵

Hiren Gohain claims that the dream of national resurgence in a capitalist set-up that the Assamese ruling elite so passionately adheres to inspires it to use the cudgel of chauvinism from time to time to beat into submission non-Assamese groups who might resist the domination. Hence Gohain sees Assam movement as the cudgel of chauvinism, inspired and backed by the Asamiya elite class that in the process terrified the non-Assamese working class simultaneously inspiring the Assamese peasantry with dreams of refurbished national glory.

²³ Tilottama Misra, "Assam: A Colonial Hinterland" EPW, p. 1357

²⁴ Hiren Gohain, "Assam: A Burning Question", 1985, p.34

²⁵ Amalendu Guha, Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist: Assam's Anti-Foreigner Upsurge; 1979-80, EPW, p. 1719

Conclusion

The six years long anti-foreigner agitation or popularly known as Assam movement finally came to an end with the signing of the Assam accord in 1985 after a series of negotiations between the leaders of the movement and the centre. The issue, organization and even goals of the movement underwent transformations as inherent part of the growth and decline of Assam movement. The issue was formulated and presented systematically and in a way that could catch the imagination of the masses. Some scholars claim that the leadership transformed the ideology and organization in such a way that it gained the backing of the ruling class. The Asamiya ruling class interest mainly guided and directed the course of the movement. In such a situation naturally the anti-feudal demands of the peasantry could not get articulated in the course of the movement. The movement severely affected the normal day-to-day functioning in the state and heavily disrupted the economy of the state. There was also the breakdown of governance.

Though the continuous immigration from across the border is a serious issue of concern, but then it should not be seen as the root of Assam's all problems. The movement on the other hand, misled the masses by considering it and posing it as the only major concern for Assam's prevailing socio-economic crisis and failed to articulate other important aspects. Certain changes in the existing structures were needed to influence the prevailing socio-economic backwardness, and to improve the plight of the working class. Accordingly, in order to bring about radical changes in this direction mere detection and deportation of foreigners was certainly not sufficient. However, the Assam movement failed to articulate such larger concerns into its fold. Also, the important sub-themes like Delhi's neglect and exploitation, economic backwardness etc. were, to a great extent, put into the shade during the Assam movement which then primarily emphasized on one-point programme of detection and deportation of the so-called illegal immigrants. In the words of Hussain, "the movement did not aim at addressing itself seriously to the legitimate aspirations of the people for overcoming Assam's economic backwardness."²⁶

The Assam movement did not reflect the tendency to own the humanist-liberal and intellectual elements in the national heritage of Asamiya culture. Instead, one of the prominent features of the movement is to revive its clerical, conservative aspects. Rather than encouraging a policy of integration and putting a check on future immigration, the movement and its supporters, from the very beginning, emphasized on disfranchisement and deportation. The nationality question and its solution proceeded along the brutal fascistic lines favoured by the bourgeoisie. Monirul Hussain holds that the Assam movement also reflected the weakness, bias and limitations of the dominant majority of the Asamiya middle class, businessman, contractors, and small capitalists belonging to the high caste Asamiya Hindus, in a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious

²⁶Monirul Hussain, "The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity", 1993. p. 280

society. Many prominent scholars including Hiren Gohain and Amalendu Guha, from the very beginning, emphasized that the solution of immigration issue lies mostly in integration and not forcible eviction, though at the same time they advocate for a check on future immigration by illegal means. Therefore, sealing-off of the Bangladesh border in order to check future immigration is also important. However, the Assam movement, the nature and direction of which was largely shaped by the ruling class, never focused on the process of integration. In the words of Hiren Gohain, “the Assamese ruling elite lack both economic resources and cultural strength to integrate non-Assamese groups into Assamese society.” This also helps us to understand why expulsion or deportation was so strongly propagated against encouraging a policy of integration combined with a check on future illegal immigration.

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