

An Overview of the Growth of Nationalism in the Colonial Societies of Assam

Pori Borah

Assistant Professor

Department of Political Science

St. Xavier's College, Sonabheel, Tezpur

poriborah777@gmail.com

Abstract

Assam, the north eastern part of the British colony, has experienced the growth of nationalism due to the flames of Indian freedom movement. People started to agitate against the colonial rule because of the exploitative economic policies. The seeds of revolution were sown by the personalities like Maniram Dewan, Mohesh Chandra Baurah alias Peali Baruah, Bahadur Gaonburha, Sheikh Formud Ali, Rupahi Aideo, Lumboi Aideo, Dutiram Baruah and Madhu Mullick. The entry of the peasantry class into the revolutionary struggle has paved the way of political involvement of Assam into the larger field of freedom movement. Later on, the elements of culture and language influenced the nature of nationalism in the context of Assam. The nature of Assam agitation assumed a formal character with the formation of Assam Association and its merger with the Assam Provincial Congress Committee in the year 1921. With the inclusion of the political aspect the trend has got a new impetus in the direction of national liberation which is evidential in several incidents. Mass involvement in the process of liberation is a prominent feature of the nationalist agenda of this period.

Keywords: *Exploitative, revolutionary, agitation, inclusion.*

OBJECTIVES:

1. To study the prevailing conditions of women in the societies of Assam during colonial period.
2. To examine the process of nation-building in the societies of colonial Assam.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

1. What is the condition of women in the societies of Assam during colonial era?
2. How does the process of nation-building develop in the societies of colonial Assam?

INTRODUCTION:

For being a constituent unit of the larger territory of India that was under the colonial rule of British for a period of almost 200 years, Assam has also experienced the growth of nationalist sentiments in the native land as a result of the liberation movement staged against the British imperialist power. People of the native land fought hard to attain independence from the domination of a foreign rule or any kind of external control so that they could breathe in free air. Formation of an Assamese middle class during colonial era is influenced by the spread of western values through the medium of education. Mentioning the name of this class here is important as in the period of national struggle several members belonging to

this class of Assamese population had played a crucial role in awakening as well as organizing the rest of the population in the line of a mass movement. Initially the people of Assam welcomed the British annexure as it had relieved them from the Burmese atrocities. But with the gradual exposure of colonial exploitative rule especially through economic encroachment, along with the spread of nationalist ideology across the societies, people of Assam started to agitate against the policies and actions of the British rule in their native land. The revolutionary seeds were sown by the revolt of 1857 in which agitation against British rule in Assam was expressed by a group of people namely Maniram Dewan, Mohesh Chandra Baurah alias Peali Baruah, Bahadur Gaonburha, Sheikh Formud Ali, Rupahi Aideo, Lumboi Aideo, Dutiram Baruah and Madhu Mullick. After the revolt of 1857 that shook the economic stability of colonial power, they introduced new economic policies in several parts of the colonial country including Assam which further generated discontentment among the natives of the land and it gradually helped in the development of nationalist sentiments and activities in Colonial Assam. The outbreak of Phulaguri uprising in the year 1861 followed by the other uprisings during 1893-94 in places like Rangia, Pati-Darrang, Nalbari, Barama, Patharughat and others have marked the entry of peasantry class in Assam into the freedom struggle. Chandana Goswami in her book *Nationalism in Assam* writes, “The Peasant revolts imbibed into the minds of the people the ideas of nationalism, and proved to be the dress-rehearsal for the future movement for independence.” These peasantry agitations in Assam against exploitative economic policies of colonial rule had unleashed the path of its political engagement in the larger nationalist discourse of colonial India. In between these years of popular protests, some other developments were taking place in the social as well as administrative spheres of Assam which has added the elements of culture and language to the agenda of Assamese nationalism such as making of Bengali as the official language since 1837 to 1873, import of Adivasis, Bengali bureaucrats, clerks, doctors and others. To deal with such negative implications upon the issue of identity another movement on literary ground was parallelly launched by Anandaram Dhekial Phukan (1829-59), Hemchandra Baruah (1835-96), Gunabhiram Baruah (1837-94) and Anandaram Baruah (1850-91). This tradition of literary renaissance of Assam was later on carried forward by Chandrakumar Agarwala (1867-1938), Lakshminath Bezbaruah (1868-1938), Hemchandra Goswami (1872-1928), Kamalakanta Bhattacharyya (1854-1936), Satyanath Borah (1860-1925), Rajanikanta Bordoloi (1867-1939), Padmanath Gohain Baruah (1871-1946), Benudhar Rajkhowa (1872-1956), Ambikagiri Raichoudhury (1885-1967) and Sailadhar Rajkhowa (1890-1968). The political consciousness and collaboration of Assam with the rest parts for the cause of national emancipation began with the formation of Jorhat Sarbojanik Sabha in the year 1884 under the particular assistance of Jagannath Barooah. The other notable organizations of that contemporary era were the Tezpur Ryot, the Shillong Association, the Nagaon Ryot Sabha, the Upper Assam Association, the Sylhet Association and the Habiganj People’s Association. These associations maintained connections with Indian National Congress by sending their delegates to the sessions of Congress namely Devicharan Baruah, Gopinath Bordoloi, Kalikanta Barkakati, Satyanath Bora, Bipin Chandra Pal, Kamini Kumar Chanda, Radhanath Changkakati, Lakshmikanta Barkakati, Ghanashyam Baruah, Harendranarayan Singh Chowdhury, Haridas Roy, Manik Chandra Barooah, Meghnath Banerjee, Durganath Roy, Bholanath Baruah, Lakshminath Bezbaruah, Hariprasad Nath, Chandrakamal Bezbaruah, Bhabani Kanta, Sundarimohan Das and Ramani Mohan Das. Due to the close association of various enlightened minds of then Assam with INC and its activities, “Assam Association” was formed in the year 1903 and its several sessions were conducted in the places of Dibrugarh(1905), Dhubri(1907), Jorhat(1914), Sibsagar(1915), Guwahati(1916), Dibrugarh(1917), Goalpara(1918) and Tezpur(1920). Since its inception till its merger with the Assam Provincial Congress Committee in the year 1921, the association took up several issues and programmes, among them the issue of Opium consumption

was worth mentioning, through which it extended its support to the nationalist agenda for the liberation purpose. The nationalist zeal in then Assam addressed by this association not only influenced and encouraged a particular section of the society rather everyone who can related oneself with this very cause of liberation participated deliberately in the various activities organized by or under the banner of this association. Subsiding their initial difference on the principle of Non-cooperation which was uphold at the Culcutta Session of Indian National Congress (1920), Nabin Chandra Bordoloi and some others later on joined hands with Chand Sarma, Tarunram Phukon and Tapeswar Sarma to increase people's consciousness towards the principle with the help of Assam Association. As pointed out by Sagar Baruah in his book "Bharator Swadhinota Sangramat Assamor Abodan" (Assam's Contribution in India's Freedom Struggle) the session of Assam Association that took place at Tezpur in the year 1920 deserves a special mention in the direction of putting a step ahead of Assam towards adopting the principle of Non-Cooperation. With the formation of Assam Provincial Congress Committee and its various branches at the local levels across Assam a new era started in the region for the people who got a chance to encounter themselves with the policies of Indian National Congress for liberation. Arrival of Gandhi at Assam further encouraged the nationalist spirits of the people of the native land and they joined the movement with great enthusiasm by performing activities like picketing, no use of foreign goods, widespread use of khadi and other traditional ways of self-sustained economy, strikes by labour community and so on. Though the Non-cooperation movement of 1920s was ended in failure yet the people of Assam didn't lose their confidence in the principles of the movement as advocated by Mahatma Gandhi and INC and extended their support towards the anti-Simon Commission move of Congress. As noted by Sagar Baruah, Tarunram Phukon (1877-1939) in his presidential speech of the session of Assam Student Association (17-18 October, 1928) stated the formation of Simon Commission as humiliating and dishonouring for India. According to government sources, After the Lahor session of the Congress in the year 1929 which have decided to launch the Civil Disobedience movement on the demand of Swaraj or Complete Independence, dissatisfaction as well as difference of opinion arose among some of the members of Assam Provincial Congress Committee as a result of which people like Tarunram Phukon, Nabin Chandra Bordoloi, Rohini Kumar Choudhury and others debarred themselves from the activities of the Congress. The Assam Provincial Committee of Congress got a new impetus under the leadership of Bishnuram Medhi. Along with Medhi, the revolutionary spirits of the young generation of the native land namely Hemchandra Baruah, Amiyo Kumar Das, Siddhinath Sarma, Lakshidhar Bora, Kanak Chandra Sarma, Haladhar Bhuyan, Dodhiram Bhuyan and Ratneshwar Sarma who undertook several activities across Assam in support of the Civil Disobedience Movement. But unlike the nature of Civil Disobedience in other parts of undivided British India, the movement in Assam took a renewal shape of the earlier non-cooperation movement as discussed by Baruah depending on the statement of Mohamad Toibullah who urged Congress to continue their struggle largely against opium consumption, consumption of other alcohol, use of foreign goods etc. due to their inability to adopt the plan of Salt satyagrah. Amidst such circumstances, to debar the involvement of student force of Assam from the independence movement, in the face of their growing engagement in the nationalist activities throughout the early decades of twentieth century, the then Director of Public instruction, J.R. Cunningham, issued a circular known as The Cunningham Circular in the year 1930. But this seemed a mere failure and the student force expressed more enthusiasm towards the cause of freedom movement. According to government sources, till the year 1932, Police has arrested 1494 revolutionaries from Assam but as per the records of Congress almost 1700 people were arrested during the movement of 1932 which includes Chandraprabha Saikiani, Ghanachandra Goswami, Purnachandra Sarma, Hemchandra Baruah, Mahendra Mohan Choudhury, Kamalabala Kakati, Kanaklata Kakati, Laksheswari Bhuyan, Hem

Kakati(Bhuyan), Puinyo Kakati, Bina Das(Hazarika), Kalpana Hazarika, Malati Koch, Hemlata Dutta, Kanaklata Dutta and others. In the year 1934 Gandhiji, after launching a new reform movement for removing untouchability from the societies and to develop the conditions of the Harijan, went to Assam when he visited Dhuburi, Rangia, Tezpur, Barpeta, Guwahati, Nagaon, Jorhat, Golaghat, Sivsagar, Dibrugarh and Tinsukia which has helped in the restoration of nationalist sentiments among the people of Assam. The period of post-Government of India Act 1935 has witnessed the electoral struggle of the leaders actively involved in the liberation movement of that time like Tarunram Phukon, Rohini Kumar Choudhury and Fakaruddin Ali. This period can be regarded as the dawn phase of regionalism in Assam as the political leadership of Assam under Gopinath Bordoloi focused upon the genuine problems of the region and was in favour of taking decisions for securing the interests of the people of Assam. The nationalist sentiment got its height among the people of Assam along with the other regions in the final war of country's independence during 1940s. Among the various strategies of the movement the prominent ones were picketing, self-rule through the formation of Santi Sena, Mitru Bahini, conduction of processions, boycotting government institutes and employment, 'no-tax' mission, Satyagraha and others. Sagar Baruah quoted the writings of Harendranath Baruah where he mentioned the name of Gopinath Bordoloi as the first Satyagrahi of Assam. The fire staged by Satyagraha gradually spread across all the places of Assam such as Guwahati, Tezpur, Mangaldoi, Barpeta, Goalpara, Dhubri, Nagaon, Jorhat, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh, North-Lakhimpur and others. Through this mean of Satyagraha an attempt was made to maintain the flow of popular movement set up by the national liberation struggle. The flow of nationalist sentiments among the people of Assam continues and even took a sharp turn during the mass base movement of 1942. People of Assam openly protested against the colonial government as directed by the leadership of Congress especially Mahatma Gandhi who along with several others were arrested by the British government. In order to achieve the goal of independence people of Assam came out with a larger support base who have adopted various plans of action in line with the earlier movement for national liberation. Some of these newly added plans of action are like mass based processions, hosting of national flags at several places under government control especially at the police stations, formation of santi bahini, some early initiatives for self rule, observation of independence day and others along with the earlier ones namely Satyagraha, picketing, no use of foreign goods and no tax. Apart from these non-violent means, people with revolutionary minds have formed Mirtyu Bahini and Gupta Bahini to adopt extremist measures of bombing railway stations and displacement of railway tracts, of destructing telegraph and telephone facilities to create communication troubles to colonial forces. They have also imparted trainings to the people of the land so that they could save themselves from the atrocities of foreign military force. Many lives were lost in this struggle for independence namely Kushal Kuwar, Numoli Nath, Khohuli Nath, Kanaklata, Madan Barman, Rauta Das (Kachari), Kalai Kuch, Hemram Bora, Hemram Pator, Gunaviram Bordoloi, Tilak Deka, Bhugeswari Phukononi, Thogiram Sut, Boliram Sut, Lakshminath Hazarika, Manabar Nath, Moni Kachari, Ratan Kachari, Somnath Sutia and so on. The list of martyrs depicts an all inclusive picture of nationalism in Assam, apart from the arising tendency of linguistic nationalism, during that phase of colonial rule where people of the land fought against colonial rule without any reference to the class, caste, gender and religion based discrimination. But soon this picture gets gloomy due to the emergence of crucial elements of language, religion and gender. Just before India attained independence, some elements of sectarianism have entered into the land of Assam to scratch the unity of its people so that Assam's merger with Bengal initially and later on with Pakistan would be possible. Such an attack on the identity of the Assam province was overthrown by the nationalist leaders of the Assam Provincial Committee of Congress with their strong and precise stand against the Grouping System where Assam was included with the

Bengal. Thus, the nationalist agenda of Assam during the colonial period not only stood against the encroachment of the British Empire in the land but also stood firmly against any form of sectarian or separatist force that put a threat to the unique identity of the land.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATION:

From the above analysis, it is observed that the seeds of nationalist sentiment were developed in the colonial Assam primarily as an economic outrage against the exploitative policies of the colonial power. Active involvement of the peasantry class into the revolutionary wave has further helped in the growth of nationalism in the minds of the people of the native land. Gradually, the impression of language and culture were felt on the growth of nationalism in the context of Assam. Vibrant presence of personalities like Devicharan Baruah, Gopinath Bordoloi, Kalikanta Barkakati, Satyanath Bora, Bipin Chandra Pal, Kamini Kumar Chanda, Radhanath Changkakati, Lakshmikanta Barkakati, Ghanashyam Baruah, Harendranarayan Singh Chowdhury, Haridas Roy, Manik Chandra Barooah, Meghnath Banerjee, Durganath Roy, Bholanath Baruah, Lakshminath Bezbaruah, Hariprasad Nath, Chandrakamal Bezbaruah, Bhabani Kanta, Nabin Chandra Bordoloi, Chand Sarma, Tarunram Phukon, Tapeshwar Sarma and others have marked a great impact upon the people of Assam. Political engagement of the region with the larger discourse of nationalism took place after the formation of the Assam Association and its merger with the Assam Provincial Congress Committee in the year 1921. The student force of the region also played a vital role in the national freedom movement in spite of several restrictions imposed upon them by the ruling authority. Several joint ventures were adopted by the people of the region belonging to different categories who were bound together with the nationalist sentiments so that their prime goal of independence should be fulfilled. While discussing this issue of nationalism the contributions made by the great personalities like Gopinath Bordoloi, Tarunram Phukon, Lakshminath Bezbaruah, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Hemchandra Baruah, Gunabhiram Baruah, Anandaram Baruah, Chandrakumar Agarwala, Hemchandra Goswami, Kamalakanta Bhattacharyya, Satyanath Borah, Rajanikanta Bordoloi, Padmanath Gohain Baruah, Benudhar Rajkhowa, Ambikagiri Raichoudhury and others are worth mentioning. Therefore, one can say that the scenario that prevailed during the colonial era in Assam has helped to curb the spread of separatist agenda in the region apart from fighting against the colonial power.

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