

Voices from the Ground

Neo liberal statecraft and KMSS's resistance movements in Assam

Atri Baruah

Ph. D Research Scholar

Department of Political Science, Gauhati University

ABSTRACT:

Over the years, people's resistance movements in Assam have protested state policies and actions on the control, appropriation and ownerships of natural resources. Such movements are marked by an active ideological orientation from the time of colonial annexation of this northeastern region to that of the formation of the post-colonial independent Indian state and yet still continues. Resistance against power of the state occurred within a recognized public arena, which is well goes with what present days resistance movements are doing against the coercive role of the state in Assam. Voices are erupted from the grounds that have a direct connection with the neoliberal state policy of neo-extraction of resources by marginalizing local communities who are said to be the traditional right holders over it. Illustrative to this, the resistance movement spearheaded by a peasant-based organization called Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS) in Assam at the grass root level not only mobilizes the voices which are usually unheard, but build a strong counter force against the state power. In its decade long existence, the organization is offering its resistance politics by launching a serious of movements to resist anti-farmer and anti-people policies pursued by the government in the post-liberalization phase and has emerged as a powerful platform for representing voices of the economically-excluded, who fall behind the curtain of the neo-liberal economic paradigm.

Key words: resistance, neo-liberal statecraft, neo-extracitivism, natural resources, KMSS

Article Received: 10 August 2020, Revised: 25 October 2020, Accepted: 18 November 2020

Introduction

With the growing assertion of the people's movements for the fulfillment of the substantive rights, the encounter between the state and these movements has become a day to day affair. The Indian state, without totally abdicating its welfare measures, has gradually re-oriented its policy priorities towards the interest of the corporate and private capital which is evident in the development initiatives under the current neo-liberal regime. While the government for maintaining its own legitimacy continues to undertake lot of social intervention measures like Mahanta Gandhi National Rural Employment Generation Act (MGNREGA), National Health Mission (NHM), Mid Day Meal Scheme (MDMS), Indira Awas Yojana (IAY), PMGSY etc. However, the government has been accused of having a nexus with the corporate and the private capital which is also evident in policy initiatives under Public Private Partnership (PPP), Special Economic Zones (SEZs), FDIs etc. Indeed, a lot of policy amendments have been brought in after India had embarked upon the economic reforms in 1991 in almost all domains- environment, food, health, education, electricity, hydro power, to mention only a few. Resource transfer by the Government to the corporate forces has emerged as a new area of

contention. When natural resources are turned into commodities and local communities who are usually called as sustainable resource managers (Karlsson, 2011, p. 266) are slowly drifted from controlling and using nature resources from their livelihood needs, confrontation between state and aggrieved people become unavoidable. In a democratic set up, the nexus between the state and corporate forces, both in the policy and institutional levels, annihilate people's rights over the use of resources and often sideline their voices. State action of suppressing growing legitimate claims and curtailing traditional rights of communities over using of natural resources leads to a conflict-ridden situation between the state and agitating masses and hence resistance in the form of people's movements emerged as a new discourse of study. As such, vulnerable natural resources in a way or the other emerged as foremost area of social unrest and violent insurrections (Karlsson, 2011, p. 43).

In fact, there are many groups whose interests in and actions concerning a region's natural resources lead to conflict kind of situation and in such cases, there is involvement of many stakeholders *viz* local communities, governments both at the centre and state level and also even outside actors. The development paradigm introduced in India under the neo-liberal

reforms particularly after 1990's generated multi-layered discontents, that is visible in the form of numerous resistance movements. Movements by different groups, be it landless peasants, dalits, adivasis, women, displaced people etc. on around the issues of livelihood opportunities, dignity and inclusive development is now become a pertinent element for Indian democracy. The common agenda of most of such resistance movements is to restrict state power and strengthening people's power (Sagvai, 2007). Rajendra Singh provides a critique on the nature of social movements by putting in a comprehensive analysis as to why social conflicts exist in society that give rise to social movements. He feels social institutions of inequality and domination, if strongly imposed and maintained by social institutions and agencies, in turn produce a situation of resistance, rejection and revolt against those systems of domination (Singh, 2001). In T.K. Oommen's observation (2004), earlier it was the state that was the all-powerful component of society which was identified as the sole agent of mass mobilisation, had to mobilise its masses into collective actions.

In the last few decades, the state of Assam has been witnessing a numbers of people's resistance movements on various issues related to control over ownership and appropriation of resources under neo liberal development paradigm. This paper intends to investigate the nature, objectives and strategies of the ongoing resistance against the attempt of the state and private forces to take control of resources held in common by communities in Assam. Taking the *Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti's* (KMSS) movement as a reference point for empirical investigation, the paper investigates the role of KMSS as a force of people's resistance against the neo liberal statecraft. The paper wants to explore its ideological and organizational dimension, how the organization sustains itself, how it determines its objectives and the policy alternatives that it offers. It goes to the three core areas of large river dams, land entitlement rights and rights of forest dwellers where KMSS has initiated massive resistance movements. By organizing itself as a mass organization the paper argues that the *Samiti* has emerged as a powerful platform for representing voices of the economically-excluded, who fall behind the curtain of the neo-liberal economic paradigm.

India's model of Development under Neo-Liberal regime

The development model that the Indian state adopted in the light of its neo-liberal economic reforms in the country has virtually confined state structure into a framework of centralized unit with a minimal scope available to common people and even for government at the units to express their views on state-sponsored projects. Interpreting Indian's development experience, Atul Kohli made a strong argument for a social democratic model of development along with put some questions on the growing power of business houses and corporate sectors within the country (Kohli, 2009). Over the last few decades, the country, which earlier committed to the principles of socialism, has gradually transferred itself into what is now describe as pro-business economy. In fact, centralization of power not only diluted the federal system, but at the same time has been facing strong oppositions from different quarters of society including citizen bodies, organizations, students' and peasants' organizations etc.

The Indian state, as a giver of development is trying to impose a development agenda upon unwilling people where the state wants to play the role of a patron and citizens are treated as its clients. In the name of development, the state is gradually snatching means of livelihood from the tribal and marginalized populations of the North East region and rights over common pool resources have come under strain. Whatever may be the nature of the state, be it the colonial or post-colonial state, for the purpose of an overriding public interest, has posed a severe threat to dignity and livelihood security of its citizens. That the idea of right holder, duty holder and development itself has a human face is still largely missing in the context of India's developmental paradigm (Hussain, 2010). The state and the private forces are encroaching on common property resources and thereby land, forest, water bodies and other natural resources are converted into commercialized and privatized commodities.

It usually perceived corporate sectors and business houses are gradually taking control over natural resources of a state, facilitated by the creation of a corporate state having centralized power structure,

promoting state-corporate nexus, challenging the federal polity of the country and ultimately obliterating community rights over the use of natural resources. The dominant model of steered-development, and the corporate forces have started dismantling the local system of resource control, its ownership, governance as well as production. The state and private forces are encroaching on common property resources and thereby land, forest, water bodies and other natural resources are converted into commercialized and privatized commodities. India has experienced nearly about twenty years of neo liberal policies and even every major political party in the country opted for this policy in one way or the other (Kelley and D'Souza, 2010).

The violation of the rights of the farmers, fishing communities, tribal and indigenous people's access and control of their resources is resulted in depriving those people from their right to food, livelihood, social, economic and cultural security. The violation is either sometimes directly led by the state or sometimes by international financial institutions like International Monetary Fund, World Bank, Asian Development Bank etc. What does globalization and liberalization denote under neo liberal agenda is well illustrated by Anand Patwardhan's in his well acclaimed documentary film on the lives of fishermen titled '*Fishing in the Sea of Greed*'. The film narrates the story of traditional fishing communities around the world are under the great threat of mass displacement because of industrial fishing practices carried out by private capital with the aid from international agencies (Nayar, 2007). This emerging trend of state corporate nexus forces the local communities and different social constituencies to compete for access and control over resources, thus resulting in social conflicts and resistance movements.

The fight against private forces by masses for establishing their rights over resources can be related as the struggle against centralizing state structure and in most of the cases government at the units (Assam is not an exception to this) very rarely say or even does not utter a single word against the Centre's decisions on any state policy. In Assam KMSS is fighting against this liberal capitalist exploitation of state's resources that traditionally belong to the indigenous, tribal and local people of

Assam. Its opposition to big dams, privatization of water, river linkage projects, transfer of agricultural land for non-agricultural purpose is the part of the organization's ideological fight against the neo-liberal agenda of the big capitalist forces (Sharma, 2013). The liberalization programme was a purposive and an open attempt to bring transformation of country's economic institutions and their functioning. The structural adjustments measures included a wide range of reforms in trade policy, industrial policy, public sectors, capital market system (Byres, 1999). All those reforms and changes generated multilayer continents. It is argued that while state on one hand setting some parameters and institutional arrangements for inclusive development and livelihood security of its citizens, but in most of the cases state itself stands as an obliterate in the process of all-encompassing development including every economic strata of the societal structure.

KMSS: A voice of people's resistance movement in Assam

The KMSS emerged as a peasant organization in 2005 to act as a platform for representations of voices of the masses in Assam. By being a localised organization and by mobilising around local political issues, it has been trying to work as a facilitator of popular democracy. The essence of democracy reflects in its ability to collect citizens for the preservation of constitutional rights, such as, the right to equality of citizens, guaranteed by the state. It has also pressurized the state machinery on ensuring social security to its people and on providing an atmosphere for the full development of human capabilities. It has been argued by Mahanta that structured centrally around its people, the organization has raised a new discourse on democracy and justice through expansion of the horizons and practices of representational politics in the state of Assam (Mahanta, 2012, p.102-124).

The KMSS believes in socialist ideology. Pushing religion into philosophies of the medieval ages, and nationalism into philosophies of bourgeoisie and the middle class, the ideologues of KMSS have understood the philosophy of left-out peoples to be Marxism. However, the leader Akhil Gogoi does not accept Marxism as it comes; he has reconceptualised traditional Marxism, withdrawing from a revisionist

and anarchist application of Marxist ideas in India. The Marxism that KMSS believes in gives emphasis to nationalism. The organization's ideology is a creative mix, borrowing from Assamese traditions, folklores, popular cultures and ideas of progressivism (Gogoi, 2011). It has used this ideological grounding to oppose projects, such as, construction of dams without rehabilitations, privatization of water, river linking etc. It has brought the KMSS into opposition with big capitalist houses sponsoring the projects (Sharma, 2013).

The constitution of the organization declares the primary vision of the organization the bringing of social, political and economic equality and establishing of a society based on principles of inclusive development (Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti [KMSS], 2014). It has taken up political issues that affect the lives of peasants and the lower class such as land reform measures, evictions from state lands without rehabilitations and displacements of people for construction of dams and other state developmental projects. It has also taken up other issues such as preservation of the environment, corruptions in political and public life, and updating of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam in a peaceful manner. Through its mass movements and campaigns, the KMSS has desired, in resolving these problems, the state keeps the confidence of its people, favours the democratic spirit of public consultations and not reduce to becoming a non-functional political system (Gogoi, 2011, p.68-76).

The organization has adopted the path of active non-violence as strategy for its actions. It regards criticisms of the state and of itself as constructive tools for self-assessment (Gogoi, 2011, p. 68-76). The KMSS has condemned what it sees to be a new wave of commercialization of community resources in India (water, land, forests etc.), particularly since the 1990s with adoption of a new economic policy in the country. The leader, Akhil Gogoi has felt that KMSS as a mass organization has managed to bring a ray of hope among the masses of Assam by showing them the strength in non-violent popular participations. Resisting against the role of the state in commercialising resources that truly belong to the people, the KMSS has steered the idea of popular movements into a new direction (Gogoi, 2014b). It has

declared its main aim as a fight against the neo-liberal capitalist exploitation of community resources belonging to the people of Assam.

Gogoi has also observed upon the impacts made by the movements of the KMSS. Since the 1970s, the primary issues that affected the ordinary, lower class citizens had diluted from discourse of electoral politics in the state. It was, rather, controlled and regulated by the middle class, the opportunists and indirectly by capitalist houses. Since its birth, the KMSS has given organizational shape to the idea that true political change can only take place popularly. By bringing the demands and aspirations of the common masses onto exchanges of political discourse, it has been a factor for political changes (Gogoi, 2014a). Mobilizing people around the issues it adopts, the support for the organization often transforms into changes of support across electoral politics.

The emergence of KMSS has come about as identity-based movements in Assam have declined. This phenomenon, the political scientist Nani Gopal Mahanta explains, has taken place in time with a failure of the state legislature, elections and political parties – traditional forms of democratic institutions in India, to address the grievances of people (Mahanta, 2012, p.102-124). Collecting support from across different issues, the KMSS has been able to offer an alternative democratic forum for deliberations over public issues. Differences of identities do not seem to matter since objectives converge across separateness of political identities. In this way, by bringing together people of different ethnic groups and religious affiliations, the KMSS has envisioned a new and democratic unison of people in Assam where the lower class do not fall prey to ethnic conflicts and communal violence.

Areas of contention

KMSS as people's organization came into being in 2005 (though it has its genesis in Doyang-Tengani forest dwellers' movement) and in its decade long existence has been successful in maintaining the resistance politics by launching a series of movements to resist anti-farmer and anti-people policies pursued by the government in the post-liberalization phase. The significance of KMSS lies in the fact that it has transcended ethnic boundaries in its

organizational front as well as in its objectives and strategies. This has helped the organization to penetrate itself into new constituencies and thereby to expand its support base. The KMSS movements have brought in to light the tremendous loss of resources like land, forest, ecosystem (natural resources), losses of money and manpower etc. due to development projects and policies. Struggle over water, land and forest has acquired a new dimension after the emergence of the organization.

(i) Issue of Land Entitlement:

KMSS has taken up the issue of the question of land entitlement in Assam. The organization has given utmost importance to the issue of land reform and people's legitimate rights over resources. In India, often the peasant class is not the actual owner of land. Historically government has owned land. In most of the cases, peasants do not have *pattas* (settlement rights) to their names; government retains partial or full control over large areas of agricultural land. The issue of acquisition of land therefore has led to a massive movement for land reforms. Peasant movements are not new to Assam. The state has experienced strong peasant upsurges in the colonial and post-colonial period. However, issues related to peasantry have dominated the political discourse of the state only until the mid of 70's. Anti-foreigner movement pushed the importance of peasantry-issues in the state to the sideline. The contribution of KMSS to the new and upcoming political discourse is the creation of a new horizon in the area of land reforms and people's rights over natural resources in the state of Assam (Gohain, 2015). Emerging as an influential peasant organization, it has brought agrarian issues to the forefront of Assam's politics again (Sharma, 2013).

In resisting, KMSS uses the methods of submitting memorandums, demonstration, mass agitation and protest marches (*padayatra*) as the tools to organize their movement for land rights. On 11 January 2009, it submitted a memorandum to the Chief Minister, Assam, seeking a total land reform in the state that enables provision of land *pattas* to every landless peasant. Furthermore, on 29 June 2011, it submitted another memorandum to the Chief Minister, demanding that the government undertake a comprehensive survey of land in the state. It advocated repealing of the

Assam Land Revenue Regulation of 1886 and that the law be replaced by a new, democratic and progressive land act. Learning from an experience of ten years of different modes of protesting KMSS has drafted a new land bill and placed it before the public on 17 December 2015 as Draft Assam Land Bill, 2016 for replacing the current Assam Land and Revenue Regulation of 1886.

(ii) Rights of Forest Dwellers in Doyang-Tengani

The resistance movement offered by the KMSS for rights of forest dwellers is one of the prominent land rights movements of the organization. The organization is supporting the rights of Scheduled Tribes and other forest dwelling groups over their traditional land and forest resources legitimized under the Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act of 2006. The organization seeks due provision of food, livelihood and cultural security for the forest dwelling communities and for protection against eviction. The manner of its resistance to the state's policies for evictions from forest land can be traced back to the Doyang-Tengani movement in the state of Assam. Doyang and Tengani are parts of Doyang and Nambar Reserved Forests respectively, both located along the Assam-Nagaland border in the Golaghat district.

KMSS has successfully brought the issue of rights of forest dwellers' to the political centre-stage in Assam. Through claiming the rights of forest dwellers, it treads the path to achieving its objective of establishing people's control over resources and hence KMSS defines the Doyang-Tengani movement as a move towards achieving self-sustainability of the forest dwelling people (Mahanta, 2012).

(iii) Issue of Hydro Power (Lower Subansiri Hydro Electric Power Project)

KMSS has been protesting the construction of the Lower Subansiri Hydroelectric Power Project which is located in the Lower Subansiri district bordering the states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. To meet energy requirements of the country, the Union and State Governments of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh along with the National Hydro Power Corporation (NHPC) planned to generate 2,000 MW power from the project. The protests against the

Subansiri dam by various quarters of society viz-civil society organizations, environmentalist groups, students' organizations etc. began in early 2010, soon after the process of granting environmental clearance under India's environment, forest and wildlife laws has been initiated for it. At the beginning, KMSS began the protests on environmental aspects of the project but since then the contentious issues have expanded to cover other ecological dimensions –landslides, floods, ecological damage, loss of land and biodiversity in the project's locality, seismicity, carrying capacity and the socio-economic dimensions of rehabilitation, settlement of project-affected people, livelihood security, compensatory afforestation, and health hazards etc.

KMSS has emerged as one of the most significant forces of resistance in Assam is perceptible in the protests against the Power project. It has used a variety of protest methods such as submitting of memorandums, organizing mass protests, agitations, road blockades and demonstrations as tools to fight the anti-dam movement in the state. The movement against mega dams has found a new momentum after KMSS took up the issue as the organization's strong articulation provided a new dimension to the whole struggle against dam construction in the Northeast region in general and Assam in particular. The organisation has not only put the authorities in an uncomfortable position but also obstructed such constructions. It has submitted various memorandums to different authorities from time to time to show their contention and disagreements over building of dams in the region.

Conclusion

Michel Foucault (1978) famously claimed that where there is power there would be resistance. The neoliberal statecraft in Assam has been attempting to put into the hands of private and corporate forces the instrument of the free market. By doing this, the state has been withdrawing from the role of resolving complexities in the agrarian sector. This situation can be viewed through the prism of power and counter-power dialectics where power in the neoliberal regime situated both in the state and in the working of the free market has invited the counter-power of the peasant resistances in Assam. Like Foucault, James C. Scott

(1985) has also observed that there are clear connections between resistances to power and hidden and invisible power distributed through society and the state. The state can use hidden forms of power to keep certain issues and voices off the agenda, but relatively powerless groups such as peasant protestors in Assam has employed strategies of resistance to bring the issues concerning peasants back to the agenda (Scott, 1985).

Democracy in contemporary India is lacking its capacity in representing the interest of the people; emergence of people's movement such as lead by mass organizations like KMSS is a visible example of this. There is a co-relation between the neo liberal pattern of development followed by the Indian state and people's struggle for just and equitable claims over the use of natural resources. In most of state-sponsored development projects, there is every possible of curtailing people's claims over common pool resources (CPR) and projects with profit driven agenda indicate state policies shifting towards capitalism with diminution of apprehensions for the principles of equity, justice and democratic rights of the people. The State's inability to develop appropriate parameters to address citizen's concern over life and livelihood is a major weakness of the Indian state that results such confrontation between state and common masses.

The resistances offered by the organization to policies and actions of the state in Assam is worth mentioning. It represents the coming together of peasants and the working class, across religious and ethnic divides. It has been successful to the extent it has offered a single organizational platform for raising of agrarian issues and issues concerning the low-income groups, the working class people. It has been resisting opaque developmental policies and projects of ambitious nature that have weaned people away from their local and immediate interests of shelter and livelihoods.

References:

1. Byres, T. J. (1999). (Ed). The state, developing planning and liberalization in India. New York: Oxford University Press.

2. Gogoi, A. (2011). *Ganasangramardinlipi* [Diary of a peoples' movement]. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash.
3. _____ (2014a). *Parivortonor akhara*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash.
4. _____ (2014b). Xompadokioprati bedan: Axomoretipradhanprogotixiljatiyaxangathanru peprotistharsangram [Editorial note: Struggle for the establishment of a principal progressive public organization in Assam]. In *KrishakKormeerHatpathi* [The peasant-worker's handbook] (2nd ed.) (pp. 72-85). Guwahati: KMSS.
5. Foucault, M. (1978). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. New York: Vintage Books.
6. Gohain, H. (2015). Bhumi AdhigrahanaruKrishakarXamashxa" in *Mukti-the Mouthpiece of KMSS*, ed. Kamal Medhi, (Assam: KMSS, 2015).
7. Hussain, M. (2008). Interrogating development: State, displacement and popular resistance in North East India. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
8. Karlsson, B. (2011). *Unruly hills: The political ecology of India's Northeast*. New York: Berghahn Books.
9. Kelly, M. & D'Souze, D. (2010). (Eds). *The World Bank in India: Undermining sovereignty, destroying development*. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan.
10. Kohli, A. (2009). *Democracy and development in India- From socialism to pro-business*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
11. Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti. (2014). Constitution of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti. In *KrishakKormeerHatpathi* [The peasant-worker's handbook] (2nd ed.) (pp. 35-47). Guwahati: KMSS.
12. Mahanta, N. G. (2012). Conflict over land, governance and development: KMSS in Assam. In W. Hussain (Ed.), *Northeast India- Sustaining Peace and Changing Dimensions* (pp-102-124). Guwahati: Bhabani Books.
13. Nayar, B. R. (2007). *The themes in politics: Globalization and politics in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
14. Oommen, T.K. (2004). *Nations, civil society and social movements: Essays in political sociology*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
15. Sangvai, S. (2007). The new people's movements in India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42(50), 111-117.
16. Scott, J. C. (1985). *Weapons of the week: Everyday form of peasant resistance*. London: Yale University Press
17. Sharma, C. K. (2013). Krishak Mukti Sangram Samity and its struggle: The new peasant assertion in Assam. In A. Barua & S. Sengupta (Eds.), *Social Forces and Politics in North East India* (pp 130-176). New Delhi: DVS Publications.
18. Singh, R. (2001). *Social movement: Old and new-a post-modernist critique*. New Delhi: Sage Publication.

AUTHOR

ATRI BARUAH

(Corresponding Author)

RESEARCH SCHOLAR, DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE, GAUHATI UNIVERSITY

Postal Address: Atri Baruah, Department of Political Science, Gauhati University,

Gopinath Bordoloi Nagar, Jalukbari, Guwahati-781014, Assam, India

Email: atribaruah@gmail.com

Atri Baruah is Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR) Fellow and a PhD Research Scholar at the Department of Political Science, Gauhati University.