

Assam in the 1960s and the Birth of the All Assam Students' Union (AASU)

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ABSTRACT

The students' activism in Assam inherits the legacy of India's struggle against the British Colonialism. During the post-colonial Assam, the student community as a whole played a significant role behind the outbreak of the Refinery Movement in 1956, the Language Movement in the 1960s and even in the movement against the food crisis in the 1960s and its afterward. But, the birth of the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) in 1967 had brought some significant changes and the trend of independent students' movement in Assam was started. Eventually, AASU becomes one of the strongest leaders of social and democratic movements in post-colonial Assam. Instances of two major movements in this regard are the Movement for Medium of Instruction in 1973, the Assam Movement of 1979-85. The question of citizenship, the issue of illegal immigrants and the apprehension to the question of identity among the diverse ethnic groups of Assam are deeply rooted in these movements of post-colonial Assam. Besides, they have been also playing a major role in the electoral politics of the state.

Thus, understanding the nature and character of AASU in a way would help us to contextualize those highly contemplated issues of the state. But, before that, the atmosphere or the context under which the AASU was formed is found important to be investigated. Hence, this study is an attempt to understand the causes behind the formation of AASU in 1967 through the broad frame of time and context. Indeed, understanding a historical event through the frame of time and context is also a part of the study of the political economy. Therefore, the study intends to understand the political economy of Assam in the 1960s, under which the All Assam Students' Union was formed.

Keywords

Identity, Regionalism, Political Economy.

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Introduction

The birth of the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) in 1967 is one of the significant historical developments in the history of Post-Colonial Assam. The beginning of the independent students' movement in Assam can be imagined since the birth of the AASU. Besides, the birth of the AASU can also be symbolized as the cementing factor behind the growth of the nationalistic movement based on the identity i.e. the Assamese language, culture as well as an ethnic community. Moreover, in many ways, the AASU could also able to hegemonies state politics, especially after the Assam Movement. Besides, the AASU also became as the ground for battling the ideas among the students which subsequently gave political insights to their members and leaders. The platform of AASU was also subjected to the emergence of several significant political personalities of our time. Thus, the AASU always remains as one of the most significant political factors in the history of post-colonial Assam. Besides, the AASU in the post-colonial period of the state significantly played a crucial role behind the growth and development of some major socio-political and democratic movements i.e. Movement for the Medium of Instruction (1973), Assam Movement (1979-85). These movements in a way considerably changed the nature and character of the politics of the state. Therefore, understanding the AASU is highly concerned among the students of social science which on the other hand helps us to contextualize the highly contemplated issues of present Assam i.e. the question of citizenship, the issue of illegal immigrants and the apprehension to the question identity among the diverse ethnic groups of Assam. But, prior to that, the reason behind the formation of AASU in 1967 is

found important to be investigated. In other words, it is an attempt to understand the socio-political and economic factors which on the other hand compelled the students of Assam to form AASU in 1967. Hence, this study is an attempt to understand the causes behind the formation of AASU in 1967 through the broad frame of time and context. Indeed the study is a part of the study of the political economy behind the formation of AASU.

Dialogues behind the Formation of the AASU

It has been already stated that the scholars in most cases are concerned with the nature and character of the AASU, the role of AASU in the socio-political and economic sphere, and eventually in the movements which were led by them. Hitesh Deka (Deka: 2004) and Protim Sharma (Sharma: 2012) in this regard significantly contributed to understanding the AASU from a different perspective. However, they have also attempted to understand the causes behind the formation of AASU. Hitesh Deka in his analysis attempts to formulate the AASU's birth as a continuation of the ongoing students' movement in Assam. However, according to him, it was not spontaneous but a reaction against the center's discriminatory policies against the Assam. (Deka: 2004) He further states that the complex and unresolved issues of cultural pluralism, migration and inflated demography were instrumental behind the birth of the idea of identity crisis and eventually it was accumulated into the ideological discourses of regionalism and chauvinism. (Deka: 2004) Besides, scholars other than the Hitesh Deka also drew similar statements where the birth of AASU in 1967 is recognized as a form of consciousness centred on the issue of the Assamese language, the issue of

the Refinery Movement had put students' activism of Assam into a matured form and later on which stimulated the environment for the formation of AASU in 1967. These studies give us some insight to comprehend the nature, character as well as the history of the students' movements of Assam but at the same time it failed to answer some of the basic questions i.e. why did the AASU form in 1967?

Material Conditions of the state in the 1960s.

The roots of the above-mentioned question are deeply rooted in the socio-economic and political context of contemporary Assam. Thus, to comprehend the issues it is essentially needed to contextualize the whole event into the aspects of the economy and at the same time politics behind the economy of that time. Therefore this study first intended to analyze the material conditions of the state in the 1960s. It is observed that the decade 1960s Assam is marked as the growth of the tribal autonomy movements in Assam. Most of the hills tribal areas of the states were separated from Assam during this period. Besides, the plain tribes of the state also started searching for their separate political identity. Hence, the birth of the Plain Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) in 1967 (Gogoi: 2020) was also taken place during this period. Therefore, it can be said that the decade 1960s itself was an eventful decade that the state has witnessed a series of ups and downs in the political milieu. Besides, this decade also witnessed a series of economic crisis with some significant consequences. At the beginning of this decade, the state witnessed an acute food crisis which was reported as the crop production of 1960 was bellow than the state's average production. (RLRA: 1959-60) The agricultural production during this period was heavily devastated by the drought and subsequent floods. (RLRA: 1960-61) On the other hand, this resulted in deep anger and anguish among the native of the state and which was manifested into spontaneous movements. On the other hand, the prices of the foodstuff and other essential commodities particularly those imported from outside the state over the years were also increased considerably. (RLRA: 1959-60) According to the coordination committee of the progressive parties, groups, and individuals in Assam, the food problem has become more acute and hoarders and profiteers in complicity with and connivance of the Government machinery have wrought near-starvation to a lot of common people. The prices of all commodities essential to the livelihood soared sky-high. Much-promised and much-published agrarian reforms have not been implemented. The vast majority of tillers have not been provided with land. Intermediaries in land are still reigning supreme. Even the few land reform measures which have been passed but not fully implemented. (SPR: 1965) According to Hareswar Das, the then Revenue Minister of the state-15.6 percent of the total population of Assam in 1957 was completely landless and 52.6 percent of people owned more than 7.5 bighas of land. (ALAP: 4 July, 1957) Besides, the census report of 1961 revealed that 37 percent of the total cultivators of the state were living as sharecroppers. (Census: 1961) Dhanmani Kalita in his observation marked it as a period (1953-79) of growth of Peasantisation and Depeasantisation. (Kalita: 2018) The disparity within the

pattern of land ownership in Assam consequently headed towards a militant peasants' struggle.

In order to overcome these genuine economic problems, the Government in this decade attempted to endow with the settlement of the wasteland for the ordinary cultivation and at the same time increased the land revenue. (RLRA: 1960-61) But the newly initiated process neither helped to increase food production nor could restrict the trend of increasing the amount of land revenue arrear over the year. (RLRA: 1960-61) Conversely, the number of cases of attachment of movable properties as a part of the collection dues of land revenue was increased. (RLRA: 1959-60) The Communist Party of India (CPI) in this regard stated that there was suffering on the problem of the question of land alienation among the tribal people and likewise, the question of land also purchased a major challenge to the non-tribal peasants. At the same time, large numbers of unused land presumably worthwhile for agriculture viz. wasteland which were excluded from the wasteland grant, reserved low land but liberated from the forest resources, unused grazing lands were there with the government which can be distributed among the tribal and non-tribal landless peasants of the state. (Janamat: 1961)

The Politics of Resistance

The above-mentioned circumstances on the other hand were liable for the growth of democratic movements in Assam. In most cases, the left political parties and organizations of the state initiated these movements. It is seen that the left political parties and organizations inherit the legacy of fighting for the cause of the peasants and working-class people. Besides, there was a phase of a radical peasant protest under the leadership of the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCPI) in Assam. The formation of Krishak Banua Panchayat (Panchayat of the farmers and the workers) and their struggle under the leadership of Bishnu Prashad Rabha for a demand to raise the share of the sharecroppers and the agricultural labourers, the protest against the unwillingness to pay rent and also resistance protest against the eviction, (Das: 2015) even we are also having a phase of armed struggle in the late 1940s and the early 1950s which had a details agenda of the fight against the zamindar, large landholders with some demands like tin bhag (one third) and Nangal Jar Mati Tar (Land for the tillers) (Kalita: 2018) were the basic characteristics of the peasant struggle of the earlier decade. Henceforth, they also carried out the land issues and basically the issue of land settlement and land revenue in the 1960s. Nalbari Kishan Sabha (The Kishan Sabha is a class organization of the Communist Party of India) organized a Gana Samabesh (Public Rally) at Nalbari against the enhancement of Land Revenue and other taxes in 1961. The organization also submitted a memorandum to the Assistant Settlement Officer, Nalbari. (DSR: 1961) Likewise, an instance can also be drawn from the Borpeta Sub-Division of Borpeta. It was organized a protest for 21st July 1961. (DSR: 1961) Besides, the CPI and RCPI on 14th May 1965 organized a joint long march for a mass deputation before the Assembly at Shilong. The parties demanded the distribution of food and land to the peasants of the state. (CMAPM: 1978). There has been also an attempt in 1965 to form a common

platform of all progressive parties of the state to wage a joint struggle against some common issues. Among which they demanded the distribution of land to the landless peasants, the abolition of intermediaries in the land, stoppage of increase of land revenue, and implementation of land reforms act. (SPR: 1965)

The question of industrial backwardness in the state and the issue of unemployment were also one of the important aspects of the decade. The co-ordination committee of progressive parties of Assam also pointed out such basic questions of the political economy of Assam. It is stated as industrial development in Assam is lagging far behind. Workers' freedom to organize and their right to collectively bargain is under serious attack. Unemployment has been much more acute. Democratic rights have been curbed and curtailed. Civil liberties are jeopardized. The state of emergency is being continued, only to serve the purpose of the ruling party. (SPR: 1965) Along with the question of Industrial backwardness of the state the CPI as a part of its campaign in the Assembly Election of 1962 also carried out the point of communication and infrastructural backwardness of the state. (Janamat: 1961) Besides, the issue of unemployment was also considered as one of the main electoral agenda for the state General Assembly Election of 1967. (Talukdar: 2004).

At the same time, it was also witnessed in the growth of the movements of working-class people throughout the decade. It is already mentioned above that several trade unions of the state were organized into a common platform to wage a joint struggle against the issue of food crisis and price hike of the essential commodities. Simultaneously, they had been also fighting for their own sectarian demands as well. For instance, it could be mentioned here that, the Labour Union of Assam Oil Division (AOD), Digboi was fighting against the company for non-fulfillment of their old demands and the All Assam Aided High School Teachers' Association was fighting for cash allowances and fixation of their payment in 1961. As per the report the cash allowances were reduced from Rs. 13.50 to Rs. 9.00. (DSR: 1961) Along with this, the most vibrant and violent face of movements during the decade seems among the workers of the tea gardens of Assam. However, the movements were scattered and highly localized and had manifested into various forms. In spite of these, there was a correlation among all the movements and which was centered to the issues of wage and security of their jobs. It was often reported that the management of the tea garden in most cases refused to pay proper wages especially at the time of releasing the amount of arrear and the bonus to the worker of the garden during the decade. (DSR: 1961) This also resulted in clashes between the management and the workers. Consequently, the incident of discharging the tea garden workers from their job had also taken place during this decade. (DSR: 1961) Payment and the wage-related issue were also observed among the employees and workers of the Dhubri Match factory, Dhubri, (DSR: 1961) Oil India Limited, Duliajan (Janamat: 1961) in 1961 where thousands of workers came out for the protest against the respective authorities.

The State Government under such circumstances has confessed that the material condition of the people, both cultivators and middle class, in general, was not at all satisfactory. (RLRA: 1960-61) There was a large-scale food

crisis during this period of time. In 1959-60 it was reported the overall crop position was below normal. (RLRA: 1959-60) The causes behind the crop failure were reported as the influence of drought and flood. (RLRA: 1960-61) Subsequently, the problem had been accomplishing critical turn at mid of the decade and as a counterpart, it was witnessed a kind of spontaneous movement, which is also known as the food movement. On the other hand, the prices of the foodstuff and other essential commodities particularly those imported from outside the state over the years were also increased considerably. (RLRA: 1959-60) It was alleged by the co-ordination committee of the progressive parties, groups and individuals in Assam as- 'Food Problem has become more acute and hoarders and profiteers in complicity with and connivance of the Government machinery have wrought near-starvation to a lot of common people. The prices of all commodities essential to the livelihood soared sky-high. Much-promised and much-published agrarian reforms have not been implemented. The vast majority of tillers have not been provided with land. Intermediaries in land are still reigning supreme. Even the few land reform measures which have been passed but not fully implemented.' (SPR: 1965) Likewise, AASU after its formation in 1967 also had a similar kind of observation on the context of Assam. (Deka: 2004)

Contextualizing the Event

Thus, the context became volatile. There was a continuous movement against the issue of the Food Crisis and the unprecedented price hike of the essential commodities within the state. The acute crisis of food has been observed around 1966-67 which was immediately followed by the rigorous movement around the state. The Trade Union Co-ordination Committee (TUCC), Communist Party of India (CPI), Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M), Praja Socialist Party (PSP), Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI), 38 Trade Unions, 10 Youth Organisations, 6 students' Organisations, and the Kishan Sabha organized a joint convention on 27th May to 2nd June 1967. (Deka: 1996) At the same time, the students on the other side also initiated a joint struggle against the Governments' Food Policy. Numbers of agendas were put forwarded by them. All Assam Students' Union (Ad Hoc) and Assam Students' Federation (ASF) organized a joint meeting at Jorhat on 10th June 1967 which demanded to take over the entire food grain trade. (Deka: 1996) The students of Nagaon organized a twelve hours hartal on 16th June, All North Lakhimpur Students' Federation organized a meeting on 25th June 1967 against the issue of the food crisis and the rising price of the essential commodities. (Deka: 1996) Besides, it is also observed that the beginning of the year 1967 has witnessed as the period of the declaration of the Federal Plan. But it was not welcomed by the non-tribal people of the state. On the other hand, it was immediately reacted by forming an organization called 'Federal Assam Birudhi Karma Parishad' with an objective to fight against the Federal Plan and initiated a state-wide protest against it. (Deka: 1996) Similarly, the Post Graduate Students Union (PGSU) of Gauhati University, All Guwahati Inter College Students' Union, and the AASU (Ad-hoc) also opposed the plan and while according to Meeta Deka they stood to stand against

the creation of separate Hill state. The Students' of Cotton College through a resolution demanded the resignation of F.A. Ahmed, Union Deputy Minister, B.P. Chaliha, Chief Minister, and his colleagues if the proposal was not withdrawn. (Deka: 1996)

The prevailing crisis like the economic condition of the state and the quandary material condition of the people of Assam first provided the scope for the growth of an idea of oneness among the people of Assam. Secondly, the persistent movement of the students and the masses against the food crisis and again the movement against the proposed Federal Plan of the Central Government brought all the individuals and the organizations into some common platform. The Co-ordination Committee of all Progressive Parties and Individuals of Assam was formed in 1965, it was followed by the Trade Union Co-ordination Committee in 1967 and thus far the students who also had an active role in the movements for the people's cause started searching for a common platform. It was only the Assam unit of All India Students' Federation (AISF) among all India students' organizations who played a substantial role in the major movements of the decade. On the other hand, large numbers of local students' organizations based on the different geographical areas and the educational institutions were there viz. All Guwahati Students' Union as well as, All Guwahati Inter College Students Union, Nagaon District Students' Union, Students' Union of Gauhati University, Cotton College, Local Students' organizations of Tezpur, Dibrugarh, Jorhat who formed the ambit against the genuine issues of the decade. As a consequence, local students' organizations apart from the AISF disseminated the idea of the formation of an all Assam Students' organization. All Guwahati Inter College Students Union in this regard had taken the initiative for the cause. (Deka: 2004) Thus, as a part of the chronology of the continuous people's movement, the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) was formed on 8th August, 1967 at Tezpur. (Deka: 2004)

Besides, the period around the 1960s' also witnessed numbers of political movements viz. the Language Movement, the movement for the separate Hill State, Separation of Mizo District, separation of Cachar from Assam. Besides, there were also some other issues in the decade which used as an agenda for the electoral campaign in the state general Assembly Election of 1967 viz. the tussle between the hills and plains tribal people with the non-tribal people of Assam which was centered around the Central Government's proposed Federal Plan, the issue of communalism or the politics of communal polarisation and the border problem and the issue of immigrants from East Pakistan (Present Bangladesh). (Talukdar: 2004) At the same time, it was also found of formation of a new organization called 'Assam Youth Association' in 1965 having an objective to forge unity among the youth of Assam to work for all-round development of the state, to safeguard the state against foreign aggression, to wake the state free from the illegal immigrants from East Pakistan. (SPR: 1965) These developments also persuaded the students of the state to have separate and independent students organizations. Thus, it can be said that the politics prevailed around the 1960s in a way shaped the critical economic conditions and consequently the said critical economic condition was subjected to the birth of resistance

politics in the decade. Therefore, the point of the imagination of the nature of the organizations base on the regional identity was subjected to the consideration of the politics of the 1960s' Assam.

Conclusion

The discussion made above has pointed out that the critical economic condition which prevailed around the state demanded a united and joint platform of all political parties, organizations as well as individuals to wage a persistent movement against the problem of the food crisis, the price hike of the essential commodities and against the land issues. Thus, despite having political and ideological differences, the political parties and organizations of the state were united and launched a rigorous struggle throughout the decade. The birth of the AASU was a product of this context and especially at the peak hours of those movements. Besides, it can be also said that the AASU was a part of the chronology of the formation of various joint platforms of the political parties and organizations of Assam for the fight against the prevailing economic crisis in 1967. And lastly, it is to be said the platforms to wage the joint struggle against the prevailing economic crisis were shared by the Assam's units of various All India political parties and organizations, particularly the left, and again they were incorporated by the students of Assam in large. Therefore, the lack of the situation was none other than a broad and mass base students' organization of Assam. At the same time, it can be said that the birth of the new student organization was not patronized by any political party, indeed in absence of a regional political party in Assam, the newly born students' organization was bound to assume an independent and apolitical character.

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