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Student Politics and Political Mobilization in Assam: Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Developments

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Abstract

Students are considered as the future leaders of society and therefore, student politics plays an important role in developing leadership qualities and political consciousness among them. Student organizations in colleges and universities provide a platform for students to express their views, raise issues of common interest and influence decisions concerning their academic and social life. However, student politics is not always confined to campus-related issues. It often extends to wider political and social matters, sometimes under the influence of larger political parties, which may lead to unhealthy competition and conflicts among student groups. Student politics in Assam has a long history dating back to the pre-independence period, when students actively participated in the freedom movement. After independence, student organizations continued to play an important role in the political and social developments of the state. The Assam Movement, led by the All-Assam Students' Union (AASU), remains one of the most significant examples of student-led political mobilization in the state. Besides AASU, several other student organizations representing different ethnic, linguistic and social communities have also emerged over the years, raising demands for greater autonomy, separate statehood, protection of identity and other regional interests. This paper attempts to examine the history, nature and major trends of student movements in Assam and analyses their influence on the political landscape of the state.

1. Introduction

Students play an important role in shaping society and the country by developing leadership qualities and becoming responsible citizens. Student politics provides them with an opportunity to understand and participate in various social, economic and political issues. In Assam, student movements have a long history dating back to the pre-independence period, when students actively participated in the freedom struggle. After independence, student organizations continued to influence the political and social life of the state through movements relating to linguistic, regional, ethnic and other issues. The Assam Movement led by AASU was a landmark in this regard.

2. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the proposed study are as follows:

- To study the history of the students movements in Assam
- To study the factors responsible for the growth of students movements in Assam
- To study the role of the AASU in the politics of Assam

- To study the factors influencing students movements in Assam

3. Methodology

The study is based on both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data have been collected from relevant government documents, reports, newspapers and other official records relating to student movements and political developments in Assam. The secondary data have been collected from books, research journals, newspapers, magazines, articles and other published materials. These sources have been examined to understand the nature of student movements, their major issues and their influence on the political developments of Assam. The collected information has been analysed to prepare the study.

4. Socio-Political Background of Student Movements in Assam

India is a vast country with great geographical, social and cultural diversity. The geographical conditions of different regions have influenced the economic, social and political life of the people. As a result, different regions have developed their own languages, customs, traditions and distinct identities. Although the freedom struggle helped in the emergence of India as a united political entity and developed a common political consciousness among the people, the regional and cultural identities continued to remain important. The North Eastern Region of India is one of the most diverse regions of the country. It is inhabited by different tribal, ethnic and linguistic communities having their own languages, customs and traditions. The migration and settlement of different groups of people, particularly during the colonial period, further increased the demographic and cultural diversity of the region. Consequently, issues relating to language, land, migration and identity gradually became important in its political development.

Assam also witnessed considerable demographic, social and political changes during the colonial period due to administrative policies, migration, expansion of agriculture and the growth of tea plantations. These developments influenced the relationship among different communities and raised concerns over language, cultural identity and traditional land rights. With the expansion of modern education, students gradually became conscious of these issues. Their activities were no longer confined to educational and student-related matters but extended to various social, economic and political issues affecting the state. Thus, student movements gradually emerged as an important part of the political development of Assam.

5. Changing Trends in Student Movements in Post-Independence Assam

In the post-independence period, student movements and the political trends that emerged in Assam created an atmosphere of social tension, mistrust and suspicion. These developments also contributed to the reorganization of the erstwhile British Assam and the creation of several new territorial and administrative units. Immediately after independence, there was no organized student movement in Assam. A sense of complacency prevailed among the people, which helped the Congress maintain its dominance in politics and administration. The student wings of different political parties that had emerged during the freedom struggle, particularly between 1916 and 1947, gradually became inactive. The Students' Congress, organized by the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) in early 1945, gradually became inactive and ceased to function by 1948. It took some time for new student organizations to emerge in the changed political situation. The Communist Party of India (CPI) helped the All-India Students' Federation (AISF) continue its activities, though it gradually lost its earlier strength. On the other hand, the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI) took the initiative to

organize its student front under the banner of 'Chatra Parishad' in the early 1960s. Its activities were mainly confined to the erstwhile Nowgong district, with some branches in Kamrup and parts of Sibsagar district. Under the guidance of Baneswar Saikia, Chatra Parishad gained influence among general students as well as Tiwa tribal students of Nowgong. Prominent members included Jnanadabhiram Saikia, Giridhar Pator (since deceased), Rajen Saikia, Biren Deka and Jatindra Kumar Bargohain. Along with AISF, Chatra Parishad provided a left-oriented alternative to the nationalist student organizations of that period.

Chatra Parishad played an important role in raising academic and economic demands. During 1970–71, it demanded the participation of student representatives in the Gauhati University Court. It also organized movements during 1970–74 for the extension of broad-gauge railway services from Goalpara to Dibrugarh via Badulipara, with the objective of promoting economic development in Assam. One of the important achievements of this movement was the passing of an Act by the Assam Legislative Assembly, allowing Gauhati University students to send two representatives to the University Court.

Another attempt to organize students on leftist lines was made in the middle of the 1960s under the banner of the Assam Provincial Students' Federation. An organizing committee was formed in 1966 with Samar Barman as its Secretary. Associated with CPI(M), the organization established branches at Sarbhog, Barpeta, Barpeta Road, Bongaigaon, Nowgong and Silchar. A convention was held at Nowgong in 1968, where its constitution was adopted. Later, it became affiliated with the Students' Federation of India (SFI), which was formed at an All India Students' Convention held in Trivandrum, Kerala, on 27-30 December, 1970. In the Nowgong Convention, Uddhab Barman was elected State Secretary and Amit Sarma as President. The first state-level conference of SFI in Assam was held at Guwahati on 24-26 December, 1973, with a substantial number of students enrolled as members. The formation of SFI marked a new phase in the development of left-oriented student movements in Assam. It organized progressive students in support of the historic All India Railway Workers' Strike of 1974 and the food movements in Assam during the same year. During the Emergency (1975-77), SFI and its activists opposed the emergency regime of Mrs. Indira Gandhi and participated in organizing resistance against it. Several leaders and activists, including Uddhab Barman, were arrested under MISA and DIR. Despite attacks and obstructions from nationalist student organizations and other groups that supported the Emergency, SFI continued to expand its influence in the post-Emergency period. During the Assam Movement (1979-85), it maintained considerable influence among students belonging to different communities and tribes. However, its position weakened following the formation of the United Minority Front (UMF) in 1985, shortly before the December elections. The CPI(M) and its student organization, SFI, suffered from political isolation and loss of cadres during the Assam Movement. Several of their activists faced attacks from nationalist elements during 1979-85.

Thus, the history of student movements in Assam reflects the changing political, social and ideological developments of the post-independence period. From the early activities of AISF and Chatra Parishad to the expansion of SFI, student organizations played an important role in raising academic, economic and political issues. Their growth and decline were closely connected with the wider political developments and changing social realities of Assam.

6. Role of Student Organizations in the Politics of Assam

As discussed earlier, students have played an active role in the socio-political developments of Assam. In this context, the present study examines the changing role of some of the important student organizat-

ions in the political developments of the state.

6.1 All-Assam Students' Union (AASU)

The All-Assam Students' Union (AASU) is one of the most prominent student organisations in the history of Assam. It was formally formed by the nationalist students of Assam on 8th August, 1967 at a state-level students' convention held at Tezpur, with Tilak Gagai as its founder president and Bharat Lohar as founder general secretary. Although AASU declared itself a non-political organisation and maintained distance from political parties, it gradually emerged as an important force in the political and social affairs of Assam. Its main demands were related to the interests of Assamese society, particularly the protection of the Assamese language, land and employment opportunities in government departments and establishments. Through its activities, AASU created public awareness and mobilised people in support of these demands. However, its demands relating to the Assamese language and identity also created differences among various tribal and ethnic communities of Assam, who had their own languages, cultures and identities. This became particularly evident during the Medium of Instruction Movement of 1972, when several tribal and ethnic groups demanded the continuation of English as the medium of instruction at the college and university levels. The most important contribution of AASU to Assam politics was its leadership in the Assam Movement (1979-1985). Along with the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP), AASU organised a mass movement demanding the detection of foreigners, deletion of their names from electoral rolls and their deportation from Assam. The movement received widespread support from different sections of Assamese society and became a turning point in the political history of the state. During this period, Assam experienced political instability, changes of government, suspension of the State Legislative Assembly and the imposition of President's Rule. The movement finally ended with the signing of the Assam Accord on 15 August ,1985. Subsequently, several AASU leaders entered electoral politics and formed the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), which came to power in the 1985 Assembly elections. In recent years, AASU has continued to function as an influential pressure group and a voice for indigenous rights in Assam. It has been demanding the implementation of Clause 6 of the Assam Accord and the recommendations of the Justice (Retd.) Biplab Kumar Sarma Committee regarding constitutional safeguards, reservation of legislative seats, protection of land rights and employment opportunities for the indigenous people. AASU also played an important role in organizing democratic protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), arguing that it violates the 1971 cut-off date of the Assam Accord and threatens the linguistic and cultural identity of Assam. It also challenged the Act in the Supreme Court of India. Besides these issues, AASU has raised its voice against large-dam projects in ecologically sensitive river basins and demanded effective flood control measures, complete sealing of the international border and error-free updation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC).

Thus, AASU continues to play an important role in student affairs, public movements and regional politics of Assam. However, questions are sometimes raised about the role and functioning of its leadership. Criticisms have emerged regarding the sincerity of some of its leaders towards the problems and interests of the student community, as well as allegations that personal political ambitions are sometimes given importance over wider public interests.

6.2 All Assam Minority Students' Union (AAMSU)

During the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, immigrant communities, both Hindus and Muslims, constituted an important support base of the Congress party in Assam. However, after the defeat of the Congress in the Assembly elections of 1978, the party was pushed out of power and faced a period of political

uncertainty. In the prevailing situation, minority communities, particularly those of immigrant origin, became increasingly vulnerable during the Assam Movement. They apprehended threats to their lives, property and citizenship rights and felt that the Left organizations were unable to provide them with adequate protection and support. Against this backdrop, minority students assembled at a convention held at Jaleswar in Goalpara district on 29-30 March, 1980 and formally established the All-Assam Minority Students' Union (AAMSU) with Abdul Hai Nagori as the founder president and Azghar Ali as the founder general secretary of the organization. With its three fundamental principles, namely, *"Unity, Struggle and Progress"* the AAMSU demanded 25th March, 1971 as the cut-off date for the identification and deportation of foreigners from Assam and sought the recognition of citizenship rights of all eligible immigrants who had entered the state before that date. The AAMSU launched a counter-movement against the AASU-AAGSP (All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad) led anti-foreigners agitation demanding 25th March, 1971 as the cutoff date for the identification of the foreigners as against the demand o the AASU-AAGSP which was demanding the year 1951 as the baseline for the deportation of the immigrants. It entered the field of organized political mobilization by observing a Demand Day on 26th May, 1980, when its members took out processions in minority-dominated areas of the state. Over the years, AAMSU has expanded its activities beyond student-related issues and emerged as an organization raising the socio-political, educational and constitutional concerns of Bengali-origin religious and other linguistic minorities in Assam. It has actively raised issues relating to the National Register of Citizens (NRC), the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), D-voters and the functioning of Foreigners Tribunals, emphasizing the protection of the citizenship rights of genuine Indian citizens. It has also highlighted the socio-economic problems of minority communities, particularly those residing in char areas, including recurring floods and river erosion, rehabilitation, women's education and the improvement of primary education.

However, like other students' organizations of the region, AAMSU has also faced criticism regarding the functioning and political orientation of its leadership. Questions are often raised about whether certain leaders give greater importance to their personal political ambitions than to the wider interests and welfare of the community. There are innumerable examples of the AAMSU leadership using the organization to strengthen their political clout for joining political parties to become MLA or MP for the religious minority dominated areas, though in the recent times most of such AAMSU leaders have been rejected by the people in the electoral politics. The examples of Azizul Haque and Rezaul Karim Choudhury can be cited in this context.

6.3 All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU)

The All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) was formed in 1967 at Kokrajhar with Baneswar Basumatary as the founding president and Kanakeswar Narzary as the founder general secretary. The organization was founded as a non-political student organization primarily focused on preserving the Bodo cultural identity, promoting the Bodo language and literature, and advocating for the socioeconomic and educational welfare of indigenous tribal students in Assam. It spent the first two decades of its existence operating largely in the background rather than as the mass socio- political force which it became later. It was during the late 1980s that ABSU emerged as a powerful organization representing the aspirations and demands of the Bodo community. Along with other Bodo socio-cultural and socio-political organizations, it raised the demand for a separate Bodoland state within Assam. The proposed Bodoland was to cover the northern part of Assam, extending from Sadiya in the East to the Sankosh River in the West, with Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh in the North and the Brahmaputra River in the South. It also

demanded recognition and extension of Scheduled Tribe status to Bodos living in different parts of Assam and neighboring states. Under the leadership of Upendra Nath Brahma, popularly known as '*Bodofa*', ABSU played a significant role in mobilizing the Bodo people with the motto "*Unity, Survival and Prosperity*". He was elected president of the central ABSU in 1986 at its 18th Annual Conference held at Rowta. In 1987, ABSU launched a vigorous movement under the slogan *'Divide Assam Fifty-Fifty'*, demanding a separate Bodoland state. The movement spread across Bodo-inhabited areas and brought the issues of Bodo identity, political rights, language, education and socio-economic development into the forefront of the political discourse of Assam. However, the movement also witnessed violence, tensions and differences within Bodo society resulting in the assassination of a number of important Bodo scholars and socio-political leaders . Along with the democratic struggle led by ABSU, militant organizations emerged with demands for greater autonomy and even sovereignty, making the political situation more complicated.

After prolonged agitation and negotiations, the first Bodo Accord was signed on 20th February, 1993, between the Governments of India, Government of Assam and ABSU-Bodo People's Action Committee (BPAC). It provided for the establishment of the Bodo Autonomous Council (BAC). However, problems relating to territorial jurisdiction, administrative powers and implementation prevented the Council from meeting the expectations of the Bodo people. Following the death of Upendra Nath Brahma in 1990, the movement also faced further challenges. Differences among Bodo leaders and organizations over the formation, functioning and control of the BAC affected the unity of the movement. In January, 2020, ABSU, different factions of the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), the United Bodo People's Organization (UBPO), and the Governments of India and Assam signed another Bodo Peace Accord. It paved the way for the formation of the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) with enhanced political and administrative arrangements under the Sixth Schedule. It also included provisions for Bodo language and education, socio-economic development, rehabilitation of former militants and protection of Bodo identity. Thus, ABSU played an important role in bringing the Bodo movement towards a political settlement through democratic negotiations.

In recent years, ABSU has continued to raise issues relating to the educational, linguistic, cultural and political interests of the Bodo community. It has demanded time-bound implementation of the 2020 Accord, particularly the inclusion of additional Bodo-inhabited villages in the BTR, extension of BTR powers and development of Bodo areas outside the region. It has also raised issues concerning provincialization of Bodo-medium schools and colleges, appointment of teachers, textbooks and educational facilities. At its 57th Annual Conference in March 2025, ABSU reaffirmed its commitment to the implementation of the Accord and the educational and socio-economic development of the community. It has also continued its efforts to promote Bodo language, literature and culture. Thus, ABSU continues to play an important role in raising the political, educational and linguistic concerns of the Bodo community in Assam.

6.4 Karbi Students' Association (KSA)

The Karbi Students Association (KSA) is one of the important students' organizations active particularly in the twin districts of Karbi Anglong, Assam. It was formed on 21st July, 1959 at Dilaji, Karbi Anglong. Pratap Chandra Tokbi was the founder president of the organization and Gandhiram Timung was its founder general secretary. The motto of the KSA is "*Khei Ingtur Lonang*" (Help Rise the Karbis). The main objective behind its formation was to look into the problems and grievances of the Karbi students in particular and the student community of Karbi Anglong in general. With the passage of time, the KSA

emerged as an important organisation in the socio-political life of Karbi Anglong. It played a significant role in protecting the language, culture and identity of the Karbi people. The organization raised its voice against the language policy of the Assam Government and actively participated in the hill state movement. During the period from 1962 to 1968, the KSA organized regular demonstrations and processions demanding a separate hill state for the hill people of Assam. It also encouraged the preservation of Karbi culture encouraging the students to inculcate the traditional behavior in their dresses and social activities. Besides, the KSA various educational and developmental issues concerning the region. It demanded reservation for tribal students in medical, engineering and other technical institutions. During the autonomous state movement under the banner of the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC), the KSA became one of the most important force of the of the movement extending the strongest support to the ASD in involving the masses in to the movement . It encouraged active participation of students and helped to strengthen the movement at the grassroots level. The organization was also one of the important signatories to the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed on 1st April, 1995 between the representatives of the autonomy movement in Karbi Anglong and the state and central governments. The said MoU paved the way for the upgradation of the then Karbi Anglong District Council (KADC) into the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) with more powers and responsibilities. Moreover, the KSA also raised issues relating to higher education and contributed to the development of educational institutions in Karbi Anglong, including the Assam University Diphu Campus, science and postgraduate courses at Diphu Government College and other professional institutions.

However, over the years, the KSA has faced several splits, resulting in the formation of different factions led by different student leaders having political affiliations with various political parties. Such divisions have weakened the organization and affected its ability to represent the genuine interests of the student community. It is alleged that certain leaders have encouraged the formation of separate factions mainly to establish their own leadership and fulfil their personal political ambitions. Such activities of opportunist leaders have greatly affected the unity of the organization and the larger interests of the Karbi community. Therefore, despite its significant contribution to the educational, cultural and political development of Karbi Anglong, the KSA needs to regain its unity and independent character so that it can work sincerely for the genuine aspirations and interests of the student community.

7. Post-Assam Accord Period Student Movements in Assam

The signing of the tripartite Assam Accord on 15th August, 1985 marked the end of the six-year-long Assam Movement and opened a new chapter in the political history of Assam. One of its immediate consequences was the entry of AASU-AAGSP leaders into electoral politics. The Assembly election held in December, 1985 brought these leaders to power and transformed them into important political figures in Assam.

In the wake of the Assam Movement and the Assam Accord, AASU became a role model for different tribal and ethnic communities of Assam. Gradually, almost every major community started organising its own students' organisation to protect its language, culture, identity and political interests. Some of the important organisations which emerged in this process were the All Assam Nepali Students' Union (AANSU), All Assam Deuri Students' Association (AADSA), All Assam Koch-Rajbangshi Students' Union, All Assam Koch-Rajbangshi Yuva-Satra Parishad, All Assam Chutia Students' Union, Tai-Ahom Yuba-Satra Parishad, All Assam Sonowal-Kachari Students' Union, All Assam Hajong Students' Union,

All Assam Sarania-Kachari Students' Union, All Assam Garo Students' Union and All Assam Moran Students' Union. The Tribal Students' Federation also emerged as a common platform for coordinating the political activities of different tribal students' organisations. Besides these, other Left, nationalist and regional students' organisations like the Indian Students' Association, National Students' Union of India (NSUI), Assam Yatiatabadi Juba-Satra Parishad and Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) are very much active in Assam.

Most of these tribal and ethnic organisations gradually started demanding separate autonomous territorial units to protect and develop their respective languages, cultures and traditional ways of life. The creation of Meghalaya, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh inspired other tribal communities of Assam to raise similar demands. The formation of the All-Party Hill Leaders' Conference (APHLC) in July, 1960 marked an important beginning of the demand for autonomous states in the region. The Assam Official Language Bill of 1960 and the Medium Movement of 1972 further increased political activities and apprehensions among the tribal communities. In this process, the Rabha community raised the demand for a Rabha-Hasong Autonomous State, and the Rabha-Hasong Demand Committee was formed in June 1989 to lead the movement. Similarly, the Tiwa community launched an agitation for a Lalung Autonomous District under the leadership of the Lalung Autonomous District Demand Committee, with the active involvement of the All Tiwa Students' Union and All Assam Tiwa Yuba-Satra Sanmilan. These movements also received support from different political parties and organisations. Along with the demands for autonomy, several tribal and ethnic organisations also raised the demand for the inclusion of their respective communities in the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe lists.

8. Conclusion

Thus, the post-Assam Accord period witnessed the emergence of numerous tribal and ethnic students' organisations in Assam. These organisations played an important role in raising the political, cultural and constitutional demands of different communities. However, the mushroom growth of such organisations and their competing demands also contributed to ethnic divisions, political instability, economic disturbances and the growth of bandh culture. In this way, the students' movements of post-independent Assam gradually developed from general student-related issues into wider ethnic identity, autonomy and political movements.

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