

HISTORY OF PRESS IN ASSAM: AN ANALYSIS OF PRE AND POST AGITATION PERIOD

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Abstract

One of the most important events in the history of Assam was the agitation against the illegal migrants from Bangladesh then known as East Pakistan. Many people argue that the whole plot of the agitation was only an urban phenomenon as newspapers had quite limited reach in flaring up the issues in question. Language was at the center of the agitation. "Two key organizations that play a central role in the constitution of Assamese civil society are: the 'Assam Sahitya Sabha'* and the 'All Assam Students Union'. It was during this period of the agitation that the press took an active role in the agitation. Some of the left leaning publications also had to face the brunt of the agitators; while in general, the press supported the idea of the agitation. Press has been the cornerstone of the essence of Assamese identity. It helped formalizing the idea of a modern language system with proper grammar under the guidance of the Missionaries.

Keywords:

Agitation;
Press;
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Language.

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* Assam Sahitya Sabha is a literary body founded in 1917, that works for Assamese literature and culture. It plays an important role in the national life of the state and remains an important voice in matters of national relevance

1. Introduction

Assam has historically been a melting pot of civilizations. The coming of the British into the North East and consequently Assam in the early part of the nineteenth century, and their contribution towards the language and culture of the state was unparalleled.

One of the most important events in the history of Assam was the agitation against the illegal migrants from Bangladesh then known as East Pakistan. And the language issue was at the center of the agitation, popularly known as Assam agitation. The agitationist felt that the Assamese language could soon be wiped out as a result of the large scale migration of Bengali speaking refugees. Most of this fear was historical in nature, as educated Bengalis were preferred by the British to work for them in the tea gardens of Assam. It was Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, a freedom fighter from Assam, who first talked of an Assamese 'nation' and made language the unifying symbol of its modern national consciousness. He also saw it as a member of the family of nationalities that, today, form the Indian Union. (Guha, 1980: 1701)

2. Language and Nationalism

The language question was always imperative and played out in the consciousness of the middle class Assamese people. In fact, the micro-nationalism based on language was a distinct movement which arose in opposition to the cultural domination of the Bengali language. As Sanjib Baruah (1994: 654) points out "Assamese micro-nationalism began in the middle of the nineteenth century as an assertion of the autonomy and distinctiveness of Assamese language and culture against the British colonial view of Assam as a periphery of Bengal." The fear of the cultural domination in Assamese society persisted for a long period. The neglect at the hands of the British administration, treatment of the region as an extension of the Bengal province was historical flashpoints. "Assamese also tend to view Bengalis as 'cultural imperialists' who, if given the opportunity, would attempt to assimilate the Assamese, especially since the Bengali language is seen as more 'advanced,' its literary traditions stronger, and its cultural institutions dominating" (Weiner, 1983: 287).

The influence of press in a mass movement such as Assam Agitation was a record of sorts. A very important point to be noted is the idea of language and literacy. Literacy levels were quite low at that time thus what language the people of the state would use for education became a

sensitive issue. Many people argue that the whole plot of the agitation was only an urban phenomenon as newspapers had quite limited reach in flaring up the issues in question. Language was at the center of the agitation. “Two key organizations that play a central role in the constitution of Assamese civil society are: the ‘Assam Sahitya Sabha’[†] and the ‘All Assam Students Union’[‡]. That both organizations call themselves ‘non-political’ is significant in order to understand their location in civil society” (SanjibBaruah, 1994:665).

“It was in sessions of the literary organization the Assam Sahitya Sabha that the call for uniting under the banner of language was first sounded. Historically the question of language always remained pertinent for the state of Assam. That this issue was discussed in the forecourts of the annual events of the Sabha was proof enough of the role of the ‘Sabha’ as accumulator of public opinion against the hegemonic forces of Bengali domination. It is interesting to note here that the ‘Sabha’ grew in popularity as it took up the language issue strongly, and its annual sessions held across the state saw lakhs of people visiting it. It was in one such event “while presiding over the annual conference of the Assam Sahitya Sabha in 1927, TarunramPhukan (1877-1939) said: We, Assamese, are a distinct nationality amongst Indians. Though our language is Sanskrit-based, it is a distinct language. A rising nationality shows signs of life by way of extending domination over others. Alas! it is otherwise, we are incapable of self-defence today! We are not only dependent, but even a dependent neighbour is trying to swallow us, taking advantage of our helplessness. Brother Asamiya! recollect your past glory to have an understanding of the present situation” (Guha, 1980: 1703)”

The All Assam Students Union (AASU) was along with the Assam Sahitya Sabha the backbone of the agitation. It took up the cause of Assamese nationalism and represented the aspirations and vision of the young educated middle class Assamese intellectuals. The rise of the AASU could very well be ascribed to its nationalist call rather than political affiliations. Infact, after the agitation the AASU riding on popular support and success of the movement formed a political party which subsequently came to power. AASU was seen by the Assamese people as the

[†] Assam Sahitya Sabha is a literary body founded in 1917, that works for Assamese literature and culture. It plays an important role in the national life of the state and remains an important voice in matters of national relevance

[‡] All Assam Students Union is an important students’ organization that actively participates in matters relating to state interest. It played an active role during the Assam Agitation (1979-1985).

upholder of the Assamese language and culture, it organized rallies, took out processions, and made cultural icons out of singers whose song it used to use as rallying call for the agitation. In effect, the Assam Sahitya Sabha was the ideologue and AASU became the organizational backbone for the agitation.

3. Assam Agitation and the Role of Press

The phase from 1978 to 1985 was also marked by political turmoil for Assam. The Congress which had ruled Assam for major part post-independence lost the elections. 'Janata Dal' formed the government in Assam in 1978 along with the Communist Part of India. This government lasted for a total of 18 months led by GolapBorbora. The Janata Dal government was initially in favour of screening of the voters and eliminating non-citizens from voting, one of the major demands of the people leading the agitation. The agitationists demanded that the electoral roll preparation be completed before the parliamentary elections of 1980. But the fall of the Janata government in 1979 complicated matters. The new caretaker coalition government with J.N. Hazarika refused to screen voters arguing that many genuine citizens who had come during partition as refugees would be left out as a result, and they too deserved to be Indian citizens.

The Congress and the Communist Party of India were against the screening process of electoral rolls. This crisis was a flash point in the agitation which ultimately led to the boycott of the 1980 parliamentary elections, in which elections to 12 out of the 14 parliamentary constituencies could not be held. One of the important events was the anti-communist stance taken by the pro-agitation groups. They argued that the left in Assam were agents of the Bengalis, and even many Assamese intellectuals were viewed with suspicion during the time. The anti-left stance also resulted in widespread violence across the state, as they were accused of harbouring the Bengali Muslim tenants, who worked on the agricultural lands of landowners. SivaprasadBaruaone of the famous tea planter of his times started in the 1935 Assam's first daily newspaper, the *DainikBatori*, with NilomoniPhukan as its editor. It was in course of an article published in this news-daily in 1937 that Jnananath Bora, a law teacher, held of the threat of Assam's secession from India. This idea of secession again found voice during the agitation when the *All Assam GanaSangramParishad* (AAGSP)[§], an active organization during the agitation, raised the

[§]All Assam GanaSangramParishad was an amalgamation of several organization that were fighting for the same cause during Assam Agitation. For better leverage, the *Parishad* was formed to pressurize the central government to give in to their demands.

demand for secession. The non-committal nature of the government to screen the electoral rolls according to their wishes led AAGSP to raise the idea of exploitation of the region of its mineral riches.

From the period of the fall of the Janata government in 1979 till the time the parliamentary elections got over in 1980 and Indira Gandhi took over there was complete lawlessness in the state. The agitation was at its peak during the period, and the press in Assam played a pivotal role during this phase. “Detect, disenfranchise and deport or disperse all ‘foreigners’ these are the main slogans around which the agitation was built up and is still sustained by a united front of several local organizations, with the backing of the local press media” (Dasgupta and Guha, 1985: 843).

Post fall of the Janata government, the volatile situation in Assam continued unabated. “Not just the members of organizations such as AASU and All Assam GanaSangramParishad(AAGSP) who were active during the agitation even government machinery was found to be hand in glove with them. The police, the bureaucracy, the lower echelons of the judiciary and even the Guwahati Broadcasting Station of the AIR all were found colluding to boost the agitation” (Dasgupta and Guha, 1985: 843).

It was during this period that the press took an active role in the agitation. Some of the left leaning publications also had to face the brunt of the agitators; while in general, the press supported the idea of the agitation. “From June 1979 onwards, the press directed its hatred campaign almost exclusively against the so called ‘Bangladeshis’” (Guha, 1980: 1706).

It was in July 1978 that in a working committee meeting of the Assam Sahitya Sabha, a resolution was passed expressing concern over the fresh influx of immigrants across the border. The daily *DainikAsom* flashed the news the next day with a large space for the article. Press’ response was both open and subversive. “The message of violence was carried even in the state’s premier daily newspapers. On the election day of February 16, 1983 when the Brahmaputra Valley was burning, The Assam Tribune of Guwahati, for instance, carried a significant quotation under the caption ‘MESSAGE FOR TODAY’ on top of its editorial column. It was as

follows: ‘The very first essential for success is a perpetually constant and regular employment of violence-Adolf Hitler’. ‘Message for Today’ appeared in the same paper and in the same place, again, on the last day of the elections, i e, on February 21, in the form of yet another quotation. This time it was from Benito Mussolini: ‘There is a violence that liberates, and a violence that enslaves; there is violence that is moral and a violence that is immoral’ (Dasgupta and Guha, 1985: 844).

The attack on the left leaders also spilled into attacks on their institutions. *Kalakhar*, a progressive Assamese weekly came under attack. Its printing press in Guwahati was ransacked and broken up by force by a rally of protesting youths on August 17, 1980. The attacks on the left came under scrutiny “in an editorial article entitled ‘Nationalism: In Whose Interest?’” in its October 1978 issue, the *Sampratiksainyikii*, a progressive Assamese monthly, viewed the rising chauvinism as an indication that the conspiracy of the national and international vested interests against the growing leftist forces had started yielding its bitter fruits. The editor deplored the complacency and lack of political will on the part of the left to close their ranks and forestall any further worsening of the situation by an alternative programme of left and democratic unity to combat the danger and, at the same time, to voice the frustrations and injured feelings of the Assamese people (Guha, 1980:1706). The Assam Tribune, on November 8, 1979, published news with the caption: “Fear of Assamese about Outsiders Is Genuine and Real - Says JyotiBasu.”

The agitation therefore was a result of the direct control of the press by the capitalist class in Assam. And the press enabled itself to be the change that the middle class was looking for. Without the active participation of the press in Assam during the period of 1979-1985, the agitation would not have been successful, the rallying call were given by the press editors most of whom became active members of the protests. Many journalists were activist reporters who helped in opinion formation in favour of the agitation. The Assam Sahitya Sabha and organizations such as those remained only ideologues and tried to remain away from the political process. It was AASU that became politically involved, as seen later it transformed itself to a political party, in organizing the groundswell of support that the agitation needed and, which was dictated by the press instilled by its idea of cultural imperialism.

4. Post-Agitation Press

Overnight a young class of students, barely out of their teens, basically students had become extremely powerful in the new dispensation. Aided by a media, that was only too eager, to crown new heroes of a society that was bereft of them since the times of LachitBarphukan^{**}, the Ahom general. The press during the agitation was one of the crucial factors in whipping up public sentiment for the movement. Language which was the corner stone of the whole movement became a tool in the writings of the press.

The Assam Agitation and its aftermath saw the rise of print media with anew vigour. The resurgence was particularly characterized by effusion of Assamese nationalism and the new found confidence of having formulated a treaty with the Indian state that made the pressure groups particularly the AASU, the student's group at par in negotiating terms with the Indian state. This renewed confidence in the spirit of nationalism was nothing short of historical.

After the signing of the Accord between the AASU led by Prafulla Kumar Mahanta and then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, the state assembly was dissolved to be followed by fresh elections. The Assam Accord was historic, as the central government recognized the demands of the agitationists, like updating of the electoral rolls, setting up of central university, an IIT, and various other demands which would fulfill the economic potential of the state and give the resources at the hands of the people.

The national media went gaga over the achievements of the youth brigade. In 1985 after the elections were held AsomGanaParishad (AGP), a new regional dispensation which was led by the former leaders of the AASU won the elections and formed the new government. Prafulla Kumar Mahanta became the youngest chief minister in the history of independent India. The expectations from the new government were huge, and the people of Assam had high hopes.

The performance of the new government left many things to be desired and the press' honeymoon period with the movement leaders got over soon. The AGP came to power twice first

^{**}LachitBarphukan was an Ahom general who had fought against the Mughal Army and defeated them a number of times.

from 1985-1990 and again from 1996-2001 and both terms Prafulla Kumar Mahanta was the Chief Minister.

In an article in The Indian Express, Shekhar Gupta (2001) aptly summarizes the general feeling of media's disappointment with the new leaders,

“Northeast, particularly Assam, was then a unique story, perhaps the only one in independent history when the national media's sympathy – even admiration- was with the trouble-makers. ..In conversation, they were just “boys” the first time such a thing happened in our independent history. If you spoke Bengali, you were an infiltrator” and, therefore, in trouble. But what Mahanta, Phukan and others also proved subsequently was that ethnic hatred was negotiable as long as they had political power. They forgot the foreigners' issue, deported even fewer infiltrators than the Congress governments had done in the past and failed to bring in even the most basic concessions to their impoverished state from the Centre..... Mahanta has run the most ineffectual, unimaginative and worthless government in Assam in a long, long time and chances are that his own voters are now going to make him pay for it.”

Other such excerpts from the press in Assam portray the sense of pessimism and disappointment that had engulfed the state. The press which had so passionately supported the movement leaders was now asking for their removal.

“The Assamese people would realize their mistakes then when not even a single AGP minister would be able to go to the legislative assembly”- HomenBorgohain,*Sutradhar*, June 1990.

“This AGP ministry is sorrow to the entire Assamese community”- HomenBorgohain,*Sutradhar*, Oct 1990.

“Bhrigu KumarPhukan is the most corrupt minister in my ministry” was said by his own Chief Minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta and there appeared rift within the ministry which was reported widely- *DainikAgradoot*, 3rd April, 1991.

“Mahanta’s worthlessness, weakness and treacherousness created such grave law and order problems that President’s rule had to be imposed” Bhrigu Kumar Phukan, another minister made a public statement against the Chief Minister after the imposition of President’s rule in the state- *Natun Dainik*, 26th March 1991.

“People cast their valuable votes and brought the AGP party to power so as to implement the Assam Accord and detect and deport foreigners (illegal migrants) from Assam. But even after fighting for four years could not gather information of lakhs and lakhs of foreigners. Hence, during AGP’s tenure it was proved that presence of lakhs of foreigners in Assam is not true. That means the AASU-Ganasangram Parishad’s 6 years of agitation was based on false data”. – Hemen Das, *Sutradhar*, May 1990.

5. Conclusion

The Press in Assam thus, played an extremely crucial role in shaping the contemporary history of Assam. Right from the beginning when *Orunodoi* was published, Press has been the cornerstone of the essence of Assamese identity. It helped formalizing the idea of a modern language system with proper grammar under the guidance of the Missionaries. The standard Assamese language had an intrinsic connection with the dialect that the *Orunodoi* made popular as Anderson (1983: 45) says “the origins of print-languages and the differentiation of status between them were largely unselfconscious processes resulting from the explosive interaction between capitalism, technology and human linguistic diversity”, thus setting the idea in motion of the formation of a modern nation which the Press in Assam so diligently pursued throughout the Independence movement, the language movement and the Assam agitation. The morphology of the modern nation has language as its central argument and Assam also faced the issue of language until its very recent history.

What started as a print revolution in Assam brought along by the Baptist missionaries in a pre-print era where national boundaries were imagined as traveled distances and national consciousness was absent to the era of print-capitalism as we see in the agitation days, with the birth of an imagined nation, Assam in the twenty first century moved towards the post-print era.

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