Abstracts

Ambikagiri Roy Chowdhury and the Revolutionary Movement in the Brahmaputra Valley

A revolution (from the Latin revolutio, a turn around) is a fundamental change in power or organizational structure that takes place in a relatively short period of time. Its use to refer to political change dates from the scientific revolution occasioned by Copernicus’ famous ‘De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium’. Greek philosopher Aristotle mentioned two types of political revolution.
1. Complete change from one constitution to another
2. Modification of an existing constitution.

Scholarly debates about what does and does not constitute a revolution centre round several issues. Early studies of revolution primarily analyzed events in European History from a psychological perspective, but recent studies on it include events around the globe and incorporate perspectives from several social sciences, including sociology and political science. Several generations of scholarly thought on revolution have generated many competing theories and contributed much to the current understanding of this complex phenomenon.

Political usage of the word revolution first appeared in 1688 to denote William II taking over the English throne replacing James II, the process well known in history as the Glorious revolution.

Mostly the word, ‘revolution’ is employed to denote a change in socio-political institutions. One of the leading scholars in this field, Jeff Goodwin gives two definition of revolution. A broad one, where revolution is any and all instances in which a state or political regime is over thrown and thereby transformed by a popular movement in an irregular, extra constitutional and / or violent fashion and a narrow one in which revolutions entail not only mass or less rapid and fundamental social, economic and or cultural change during or soon after the struggle for state power.

A fundamental change in political organization, especially the over throw or renunciation of one government or ruler and the substitution of another by the governed, activity or movement designed to effect changes in the socio-economic
situations, a change in the way of thinking can also be termed as a revolution, a change of paradigm is also considered revolution.

The Latin American wars of independence were the various revolutions during the late 18th and 19th centuries and resulted in the creation of a number of independent states in Latin America. These revolutions followed the American and French revolutions which had effects on the Spanish, Portuguese and French colonies in the Americas.

In the light of the theories referred the anti-colonial struggle of India can also be termed as a revolution aimed at ending the British regime and effecting profound change in socio-political sphere. The resistance movement in the fascinating context of socio-economic and cultural conditions focusing on the slow emergence of nationalism and its local and regional dimensions that eventually affected the regime change.

The European imperialism of 19th century was of momentous consequences for the entire world which eventually led to domination and exploitation of Asia and Africa. Fundamental changes in politics, technology and ideology took place in this period with enormous consequences for world affairs. It thus becomes imperative to study the demise of imperialism and decolonization as colonialism was increasingly becoming incompatible with ever growing nationalism and an increasing aspiration of a populace guided into a path of resistance.

Colonial modernization and a complete transition of India, socio-political and cultural never experienced before, is an all encompassing theme of modern India. The emergence and growth of nationalism in India is a long multi dimensional process. Nationalism therefore became intermingled with local and regional politics sometimes not necessarily in harmony with nationalistic urges. The entire sub continent did not reflect a monolithic political culture. There were differences in the political orientation and behaviour towards the alien rules in different regions. The all encompassing nationalistic movement was interwoven with issues and aspirations reflecting typical regional variety.
We are living in an edgy time. The forces of globalization with its widening, deepening and speeding up of world wide interconnectedness has taken away from focus the process of our nationalist struggle and its dynamics which subsequently moulded the rise of the vibrant Indian nation that we see today. So it is an attempt to review the crucial phases in the history of a nation in the making. These episodes comprise record of past human activities in all spheres- not just political development but also social, economic and intellectual ones. Focused attention is now being given to the economic and social institutions that man and women created and that in turn, shaped the nation and their lives.

It is in this background that we shift our attention to nationalistic movement taking shape in a region situated in the North east of India that is Assam. A detailed, penetrating study of what happened in the public sphere of Assam is necessitated by the need to have a clear understanding of colonial modernization and orientation of the movement against colonial rulers.

Here in this context we offer an evolving account of a very interesting personality of Assam who organized life in response to the changing environment and persistent needs of a society. He is none other than Ambikagiri Roy Chowdhury, better known as Asom Kesari.

Although a substantial corpus of literature has grown over the years on Ambikagiri as a poet or litterateur or even as radical thinker, most of the works have explained this phenomenon either in terms of his personality or his ability to interpret and apply indigenous values for socio-political change or organizing people for an exclusivist movement for the ‘Assamese’ people. These studies provide useful insight into the dynamics of a crucial phase of our freedom struggle. But most of them ascribe a some what lesser significance to his socio-political milieu. What is needed is a conceptual and analytical frame work which could explain his ideas as a leader in the context of his interaction with other political leaders and the existing political values at institutional and ideational level. These studies on Ambikagiri are a bit simplistic and sometimes atomistic to provide a comprehension view of the impact of a personality like him on the still more complex, objective situation obtaining in Assam.
Naturally during his long public life he annoyed persons in firmly entrenched establishments who misrepresented his mission. He also incurred the suspicion of people who could not quite grasp his ideas and the thinking behind it.

It is necessary to view Ambikagiri as he was. Here an attempt has been made to highlight lesser known facts and his relentless efforts to mould the destiny of a society in transition. This attempt makes no claim to refute other interpretation to comprehend different aspects of his life. It aims to open new vistas and to provoke fresh thinking on his ideas by adding other dimension to the facts that have already been explored.

It is no easy task to make a realistic and historically objective assessment of a personality whose life and work made him the paradigm of a human being besides risking the temptation of transforming him into a myth alien to the reality that surrounded him during his life time.

It is an effort to delve more into the political activism of Ambikagiri Roy Chowdhury in the context of the Indian nationalist movement and his assertive regional focus related with it. Comparing and understanding him is an extremely complex exercise but important as it was or rather became a fact of the freedom movement.

Ambikagiri in many respects was a unique figure in the history of Assam, doubtless of a very different mould, transited from his Barpeta origin to become a revolutionary, an entrepreneur, music teacher, editor or even manager of a rice mill for a brief period before becoming a full time political activist. Here a painstaking effort by a man becomes perceptible to shake a frozen society apparently unconscious of the conflicting world of imperialism it lives in. It was entirely through his endeavour, he became a master practitioner of protest which he did not achieve by altering his nature or language of discourse. He was trying to transform a people who on account of prolonged foreign rule and other socio economic factors had acquainted a style of subservience by any means he could think of, be it as an entrepreneur, writer or as an organizer. He was rooted to the soil of Assam, he was of it, he lived the idiom, the dialogue and discourse of that soil, its sweats, its smells and its great
beauty and fragrance too and his life long project was to make it a vibrant society politically, economically and culturally.

In approaching the study of Ambikagiri it needs to be reminded first of all, that it is an attempt to deal with a great and good man who himself is more inspiring than any of his works literary or otherwise, from every respects hopeful, helpful and humane. At the same time it becomes difficult to make a balanced and unbiased historical assessment of his deeds in view of the complex ideological and political framework that he outlined to carry forward his mission i.e. to establish a strong, assertive as well as distinctive Assamese nationalism on a firm footing. Along with it varied people’s perspective of his activities should also be taken into account.

His public career covered an unusually long period compared to other notable contemporary figures like Tarun Ram Phukan, Nabin Ch. Bordoloi etc. Naturally during his long public life he challenged many vested interested and annoyed many persons. Being an ardent follower of Gandhi Roy Chowdhury believed in the principle of non violence. Gandhi challenged the most firmly rooted and Machiavellian Empire in the world as well as racial arrogance and introduced a novel method of fighting the domination of man by man which struck at the very root of all oppressive and exploitive governments, namely non co-operation and Satyagraha. Roy Chowdhury getting influenced by Gandhi and endorsing his methods become apparent after the latter’s first visit to Assam in 1921 where he had been introduced as a poet to Gandhi by Srijut Nabin Ch. Bordoloi, another prominent political figure of contemporary Assam.

This restless individual always engaged in a thought process, seeking an all pervasive development of the Assamese people was not to live for him but was to attain his goal in social context. The society in which he was born had long been emasculated politically economically and culturally which was at once the most sophisticated the best entrenched and culturally the most degrading.

So in that background the progression of Ambikagiri into a full time political activist fully convert to Gandhian idealism from an anarchist in his early youth is an interesting as well as absorbing saga of a man responding to a very complex situation
evolving in Assam in the background of the great nationalistic struggle. In this regard critique J. Sarma observed that, among the poets and litterateurs of Assam only one dared to face the tempest in the contemporary society till the out break of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} World War. He was Ambikagiri, social and political activist, poet, playwright and journalist.\(^1\) It would be relevant in this context to state that he was able to sustain that role much after the 2\textsuperscript{nd} World War.

Examining this personality emerges an extra ordinary figure Asom Kesari. People lovingly accorded him this sobriquet. It is known from his family members that this title was not accorded by any institution but one of his admirers, Dinabandhu Talukdar first used this title.\(^2\) Of course he roared like a lion. Any problem, any issue hurting Assamese interest Ambikagiri is the man of the people, Dr. Mahendra Borah laments that nobody paid any heed to Roy Chowdhury. He then wrote, “in the land of rhinos what is the role of a lion.”\(^3\) But in our study we have evidence that there were some people who did listen to Roy Chowdhury got influenced by him and followed him.

An astonishing array of opinions, materials are brazen out delving into his works and appear a highly spirited inspiring personality. To read all of his collected works and to understand him thoroughly is something of a task. On the other hand to read selection here and there, as is being done usually is to get a wrong idea of the man. Only glancing at the life of this marvelous Assamese man and consider his role would indeed result in a mistaken judgment about him.

For this study the investigator had to depend on records preserved in the state achieve, journals, leaflets, Phd. thesis, M.Phil dissertation, private collection, books etc.

\(^3\) Ibid.
Here a modest review of the source material is given below:

Starting with the collected works of Ambikagiri Roy Chowdhury published by the Publication Board of Assam and souvenir published on his birth century a detailed study of the journals *Cetana* and *Deka Asom* edited by him was carried out and his political views could easily be gleaned from the writings in those journals.


Apart from these an in-depth study of the journals edited by Ambikagiri was undertaken. Most interesting and revealing are the leaflets and the correspondence he maintained at personal and organizational level that provides with a less explored area needing focused attention.
Interviews with family members of Ambikagiri for instance Suchibrata Roy Chowdhury, Bhagagiri Roy Chowdhury, Jugabrata Dutta was another component of the research design.

On the basis of the secondary data that constituted the first step; primary areas of work have been selected and that was mostly in library. Some knowledgeable persons were contacted as a means of primary source of data collection. Interviews and informal chat also helped to gather necessary information related to the subject.

Ambiakagiri Roy Chowdhury has been an active force in the literary as well as socio-political and cultural sphere of Assam. A revolutionary per excellence, in his poetry an infrequent combination of a literary genius and a committed nationalist, advocate of an assertive Assamese nationalism within Pan Indianism is clearly evident.

This work has been planned to provide an introduction to Ambikagiri’s stature as a passionate revolutionary and as a believer in Indian federalism which needs to be refocused from a historical perspective and almost half a century (45 years) may be considered a reasonable time to rediscover a personality in the backdrop of major socio-political development unleashed by the forces operating in that period marked by the anti colonial struggle.

Taking into account the prevailing socio-political dynamism this narrative on Ambikagiri has been intended as a running thread that connects particular accounts spanning through his life and analysis. This study examines two contradictory aspect of Ambikagiri’s life, his role in the Indian national movement in the broad Indian framework working as a full time Congress worker and his gradual progression to be an advocate of regional nationalism or provincial nationalism. Drifting away from APCC has also been discussed thread bare in this study.

A good deal of information regarding the socio-political and cultural life of Ambikagiri Roy Chowdhury has come to light from his personal collection and the present study is based primarily on unpublished private collections, journals edited by
him, materials preserved in the Assam state Archive, D.H.A.S library, state central library Guwahati, accounts of contemporaries and interviews with family members.

On the basis of research accomplished so far and the study of collected materials the thesis has been framed in the following chapters division:

Chapter – I: Introduction
(i) An attempt to define revolution.
(ii) A brief survey of sources.
(iii) A quick glance on all the chapters and a general frame work of the study.

Chapter – II: Genesis of Revolutionary Ambikagiri.
(i) Turmoil of 1905 and its impact in Assam.
(ii) Initial participation in revolutionary activities.
(iii) Barpeta days.
(iv) Asom Bandhav and struggle for livelihood in Dibrugarh.

Chapter – III: A Swadeshi Entrepreneur and Congress worker.
(i) Establishment of Aruna Press and launching of Cetana.
(ii) Non co-operation movement; Ambikagiri’s involvement.
(iii) Days in Tezpur Jail.
(iv) Kamrup Mayabini Chemical works.

Chapter – IV: Ambikagiri and Indian National Congress
(i) Pandu Congress.
(ii) Civil disobedience and Ambikagiri.
(iii) Constructive Congress activity.
(iv) Congress’ council entry – ministry formation; Ambikagiri’s reaction.
(v) Final resistance movement – Grouping - Clarion call to save Assam.

Chapter – V: Dream of a resurgent Assamese society.
(i) Asom Sangrakshini Sabha
(ii) Asom Jatiya Maha Sabha.
(iii) Asom Siksha Prosar Samiti.
(iii) Atma Rakshi Bahini.

Chapter – VI: Nationalistic thought as reflected in Ambikagiri’s writings.
(i) Unique style of prose.
(ii) Nationalism in play.
(iii) Highly spirited poetry.
(iv) Lyricist of Nationalism.
(v) Political concept – federalism & panchayatiraj.

Chapter – VII: Post independence Ambikagiri.
(i) A restless protector of the interest of Assam.

Chapter – VIII: Conclusion.

In the first chapter an attempt has been made to define revolution. A brief discussion on colonialism and nationalist movement in Assam in the context of the larger Indian nationalist movement along with a glimpse of Ambikagiri’s personality has been done apart from a quick glance on all the chapters and a general framework of the study.

Second chapter is a narrative on his earliest involvement in some revolutionary acts like the formation of anarchist party, staging of patriotic play and finally an unsuccessful attempt to kill Governor Sir Bamfylde Fuller. This ended the first revolutionary euphoria that landed him as an intern at Barpeta. His Barpeta days are marked by an intense involvement in socio cultural and literary activities. His impressionable years as litterateur were spent in Barpeta. Roy Chowdhury initiated a cultural renaissance at Barpeta staging for the people of Barpeta the first Assamese play (Jayadrath badh) a highly successful endeavour. His involvement also extended to physical exercises for the youths of Barpeta. Another pioneering venture was the launching of Sankrdev Circus Party based on indigenous system. In these days he was under constant police scanner. Getting fade up with the anarchist tag he wrote a letter to Lord Hardinge the then Vice Roy expressing his interest to join the First World War. Eventually amnestied Roy Chowdhury landed at Dibrugarh with the manuscripts of ‘Tumi’ ‘Bina’ etc.

Roy Chowdhury busied himself as usual in the cultural landscape of Dibrugarh, published ‘Tumi’ ‘Bina’ and the essay called ‘Final goal of man and lasting peace’. ‘Tumi’ published from Dibrugarh won instant favour with public and also critically acclaimed and the recognition of Roy Chowdhury’s critiques are not wanting who stated that Tumi is the highest expression of his poetic genius (reflection of the author’s life and experience).
In search for a livelihood Roy Chowdhury had varied experience here working as a music teacher, railway clerk and journalist. Most significant involvement in Dibrugarh was his association with ‘Assam Bandhav’ (monthly journal published from Dibrugarh). This association presented him an irresistible and compelling idea of launching a monthly journal from Guwahati.

After a brief stint as assistant editor of Assam Bandhav Roy Chowdhury turned to journalism with the establishment of ‘Aruna Press’ and naturally the press was central to the process of politicization, the strengthening and widening of political consciousness and Cetana his dream project played that role successfully with a defined line of objective. In this chapter the narrative is based primarily on the involvement of Roy Chowdhury in provincial Congress activity, in the first phase of the non co-operation movement mostly in the organizational activities in lower part of Assam as well as a non co-operation editor fostering and sustaining a Congress political world.

His active involvement in this phase led to his arrest and rigorous imprisonment. His days in Tezpur jail is a poignant tale of suffering which he gracefully accepted, reflected in the ‘songs of the cell’ can be termed as a gospel of Congress volunteers. In this chapter another important aspect of Ambikagiri’s personality, as a Swadeshi entrepreneur has been discussed in the context of Kamrup Mayabini Chemical Works, a pioneering venture in Assam inspired by Bengal Chemicals, another Swadeshi enterprise. 4

Dominance and resistance must be seen as two integrally related aspects of the same structures and process of political power. In this chapter an attempt has been made in the light of the above statement only to focus better on the aspect of resistance. Here we examine Roy Chowdhury’s seminal role in the Pandu session of Indian National Congress and his immortal composition for the session.

The country as a whole was far more imbued with Congress ideology and Gandhian technique than it had been in 1920 5 when civil disobedience was launched

in 1930 as a coherent political movement. In this phase again we face Roy Chowdhury as a great organizer of volunteer, one of the office bearers of provincial Congress committee. This was also the period when Roy Chowdhury established Asom Sangrakshini Sabha (1926) articulating the notion of a district Assamese nationality. A slight drifting from Congress but never really detached ideologically from Congress Roy Chowdhury was intensely engaged in constructive Congress activity. Promoting Swadeshi he started a ‘By Swadeshi League’ in Guwahati.

Also examined with these aspects are the momentous years from 1935-47. The Act of 1935 and the consequent election for provincial legislatures and finally ministry formation is a crucial phase in the history of Indian independence. In this period Roy Chowdhury as the editor of weekly Deka Asom and general secretary of Asom Jatiya Maha Sabha played a central role as a facilitator of a national political campaign in the run up to the election (1937) and response highlighting dos and don’ts for the Congress ministry of Bordoloi and always acted as a voice of protest against any act or policy perceived by him as harmful to Assamese national interest.

The dramatic events leading to the Cabinet Mission plan and a rising Muslim League propaganda for a promised homeland for Muslims created an atmosphere of anxiety and tension and these were reflected in the pages of Deka Asom fostering a public opinion in those days of heightened political activity.

At the end of this chapter focused attention has been paid to a defining moment in the history the of Assam, grouping plan of Cabinet Mission and a vigorous anti-grouping campaign led by Roy Chowdhury, a lesser known, scantily focused episode.

Ambikagiri’s dreams of a resurgent Assamese society through different socio-political organization that he initiated and led are being highlighted in this chapter. The notion of an alternative scheme popular politics within the Indian nation organized independently of Congress itself is a matter of great political significance. In this chapter a general discussion is attempted through analyzing Asom Sangrakshini Sabha, Asom Jatiya Maha Sabha, Asom Siksha Prosar Samiti, Atmo
Rakshi Bahini and issues taken up by these organizations like immigration, census and grouping.

A renowned personality in the Assamese literary world Roy Chowdhury left indelible mark as a poet, lyricist and essayist. His literary activity also included play. In fact his literary career started with a patriotic play ‘Bandini Bharat’.

In this chapter, Roy Chowdhury as an active force in literature has been dealt with. He was the most stimulating poet of that age, voice of Assam who’s splendid and imperishable excellence of sincerity and strength are never missing in the writings. One of the most powerful and original minds of the age Roy Chowdhury impressed the dominant spirit of the time i.e. nationalist in all genres that he contributed. That Roy Chowdhury is one of the most original writers as well as one of the greatest masters of Assamese prose is undeniable. Impression of an intense loyalty to his ideals and sometimes a profound dissatisfaction that the deeds falls so far short of the vision he had for Assam mark every page. Keeping his object steadily before him, he drives straight on to the end, with a convincing power that has never been surpassed in our language. Spread and the diffusion of a nationalist culture being the objective, starting with ‘Bandini Bharat’, a conscious attempt had been made by Roy Chowdhury in his early youth that continued long after independence in his writing in different genres.

It should be clearly mentioned here that we are mostly concerned with only one aspect of his literary works that is the profound expression of nationalist political thoughts and in the end it turns out to be a general discussion of a wide ranging expression of varied literary forms that he used for an objectives well thought out and defined, motivating people for a resistance against dominance. His work represented its age in a far profounder way.

For almost half a century he was the voice of Assam, continuously engaged in propagating and projecting a distinctive Assamese nationalism within the larger political set up of India. Hopes and ambitions of particular period along with the suggestion of an astonishing vigour mark his political writings; we have safely avoided the section revealing spiritualism and mysticism.
Ambikagiri who belonged to a very complex historical period it is indeed necessary to situate him in the locale and examine his contribution. In this chapter a quick glance on different literary forms through which Roy Chowdhury propitiated his political idealism has been attempted. For a man capable of the considerable literary qualities of a text like *Tumi*, it must have been a major sacrifice to devote one’s writing talent almost entirely for political cause as part of a deeply felt social commitment.

Post independence, Roy Chowdhury was an embittered, disillusioned man, but still completely absorbed in his mission of a resurgent Assamese society. Here we confront a man as a restless protector of Assamese interest. Still leading Asom Jatiya Maha Sabha as General Secretary, Roy Chowdhury continued his relentless effort of promoting Assamese interest, voicing his concern on every issue like state reorganization, language, Naga problem etc.

His articulation of this period constitutes a significant discourse on a rising Assamese regional nationalism created by complex geo-political forces. A very significant role Roy Chowdhury played as president of the Margherita session of Asom Sahitya Sabha wherein a resolution was passed to the effect that Assamese language should be recognized as the official language of Assam.

The study has been summarized in the last chapter that narrates the findings and conclusions are drawn. To scan through his works and to understand him thoroughly is something of a task. It seems a curious contradiction at first glance that gradually gives way to an enormous range of the political and economic thought of a personality never in doubt about his objectives political or economic.

In this study so far it becomes quite clear that political Ambikagiri is a lesser known, largely forgotten personality. The organization he initiated and led, the journals he edited, contained a wide range of ideas formulated taking into account the then existing socio-political reality and mostly concerned with a secured future for Assam.
Most of his literary contribution excepting ‘Tumi’, ‘Bina’ and a few dramatic pieces, contained a strong political element poured out inspired by a wider concept of nationalism. Roy Chowdhury’s concept of nationality and nation speaks of a federal political structure for India that he pursued in his writings and correspondence with other political leaders. An ardent believer in greater political autonomy for the component states of India and a democratic decentralization of power much before the constitutional amendment (71st and 72nd) Roy Chowdhury formulated a detailed plan of Panchayat institution at the grass root level in a true democratic spirit.

Asom Sangrakshini Sabha, Asom Jatiya Maha Sabha, Asom Shiksha Prosar Samiti led by Roy Chowdhury did have a presence spreading all over the Brahmaputra valley reaching out to a wider section of people, contrary to the generally accepted view that these were mostly unsuccessful. Survey of land less Assamese people, spreading Assamese language among non-Assamese settlers in Assam are some of the works taken up by Roy Chowdhury bearing socio political significance.

Another interesting finding is Kamrup Mayabini Chemical works inspired by nationalistic idea of promoting indigenous industrial venture; Roy Chowdhury dared to start this entrepreneurial venture as a novice without the technical expertise just by sheer determination and reading a book on manufacture of ink. Range of products includes ink, shoe polish, hair oil, snow and the way he advertised the products in those days is really interesting. Although he could not sustain it very long he did a pioneering job starting Mayabini Chemical works, being more intensely involved in politics and not being able to make it a profitable enterprise.

Roy Chowdhury carried a vigorous anti grouping movement in Assam under the aegis of Asom Jatiya Maha Sabha creating a very strong anti-grouping public opinion in Assam. We are more or less familiar with the role Gopinath Bordoloi played in this regard, but what Roy Chowdhury did is still not properly highlighted.

At that time of an impending Muzahid invasion of Assam instigated by the Muslim League, that can be proved substantially Roy Chowdhury came forward with the idea of Asom Atma Rakshi Bahini for the defense of Assam and did get a positive
response from different parts of the Bramhaputra valley. For instance a student of class VII from Bajali High School requested his presence and help for organizing the Bahini. There are other responses that clearly vindicate the acceptability of the idea put forward by Roy Chowdhury with regard to Asom Atma Rakshi Bahini.

Relevance of Roy Chowdhury’s thinking and act, people are starting to realize now. Contemporary political reality of Assam and India as a whole proves beyond doubt that ‘provincial’ ‘Ambikagiri’ in fact envisaged a federal polity with a greater emphasis on regional distinctiveness, an identity that can flourish within the great Indian political entity.

So far these are the findings and I would like to solicit your suggestion regarding the study undertaken so far.

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