Conclusions: Dialectics of Assam Movement

Any significant social movement is always deeply embedded in history and society from where it emerges. In our study of Assam movement, we have tried to situate its roots in Assam's specific society and history. We have attempted to go beyond the title of this study in order to comprehend the nature of social transformation that Assam has been experiencing since the beginning of colonial period so as to understand the Assam movement from a larger perspective.

Annexation of semi-tribal and semi-feudal society in Assam by the colonial rulers into British India in 1826 paved the way for a different historical transformation which had broken Assam's long isolation of pre-colonial period. The traditional social structure changed. The aristocracy particularly the ruling clan, the non-caste Ahoms weakened. However, a small fraction of upper caste groups managed to escape the onslaught on the pre-colonial aristocracy propelled by the machanics of colonial system. They produced the first group of the western educated Asamiya middle class by the end of 19th century. The success of upper castes and failure of non-caste groups like the Ahoms rested on the question of acquisition of land. The priestly class had acquired a large tract of land by the end of Ahom period,
which the colonial rulers allowed them to retain. However, unlike the upper castes, the pre-colonial Ahom aristocracy could not retain their ownership of large tracts of land. Hence, those who could produce some surplus from their land could afford liberal western education by sending their children away from home to Calcutta and Dhaka. The Asamiya middle class which was numerically very small had to face stiff competition from the Bengali middle class in the colonial Assam. In Assam's colonial administration, the Bengalis had nearly monopolized all jobs meant for the Indians. It had two pertinent reasons; first, by the time Assam was incorporated into British India, its neighbour Bengal, already had a large western educated middle class. When Assam was annexed, relatively advanced Bengalis came in together with the British rulers. Secondly, a thickly populated part of Bengal, i.e. Sylhet was amalgamated with the province of Assam. Therefore, being the subject of the same province, many educated Hindu Bengalis moved to Assam proper.

The British-owned sector of Assam's economy, particularly the tea-plantation had grown remarkably; but, it failed even in accommodating the emerging Asamiya middle class which had been facing competition from the Bengalis. It had
obviously led to an anti-Bengali feeling among the nascent Asamiya middle class which failed to understand the colonial limitations. The British rulers succeeded in envenoming the Asamiya-Bengali relations in colonial Assam.

We have noted that pre-colonial and even colonial Assam, of course excluding Sylhet, was a land abundant and thinly populated province. Therefore, its contribution to the colonial coffer was far below the expectation of its rulers. In order to augment the contribution to the colonial coffer, the rulers encouraged migration of various groups, so as to bring more and more land under habitation and cultivation to trap land revenue. Many people, in order to avoid duel oppression of colonialism and feudalism, migrated to Assam where feudal oppression was far below the level of East Bengal because of abundance of land and thin population. On the other hand, in the absence of local labour, the colonial rulers patronized the massive migration of black-tribals from Jharkhand region in order to meet the growing need of cheap labour for the British owned tea-estates. The poverty ridden and oppressed black-tribals migrated to Assam in search of better living. The colonial situation in Assam opened the floodgates of migration, and in the process it transformed
the social composition of Assam's population. As a part of its 'divide and rule' policy, the colonial state provoked and patronized the Asamiya and Non-Asamiya conflict in colonial Assam, though paradoxically, colonialism created the conditions of massive migration to Assam. Besides, it did not allow the Asamiya nationality to grow and hindered the process of assimilation in Assam. Similar to its middle class, the Asamiya nationality too had to experience distorted growth under the colonial constraints.

Following the independence and partition of the country, the Bengali inhabited Sylhet region became a part of East Pakistan. Sylhet's incorporation into Pakistan, the Asamiya became the largest group in the post-independent Assam. This also strengthened the Asamiya ruling class and it started exerting its hegemony over all other ethnic groups and minorities. In the process, it drew severe backlash and Assam became much smaller in size by 1972 compared to 1947. However, we must note that the Brahmaputra valley is the traditional homeland of the Asamiyas which they have been sharing with the autochthonous tribals of the plains. What we have emphasized in this study is that the Asamiya ruling class has been decisively shaping the politics of post-colonial Assam. It has been perpetuating its dominance in an economically backward, territorially shrinking and politically disturbed state.
Though India has developed a large public sector, yet, it is pursuing basically a capitalist path of development to overcome its socio-economic backwardness. As an inevitable result of this path of development, strong economic disparities have emerged among various regions in India. Assam has remained largely backward. However, Assam has gradually transformed over the years from a land abundant and thinly populated state to virtually a land scarred and thickly populated state. The high rate of population growth without significant corresponding economic development has compounded further the burden of backwardness. As a result, popular discontent was building up and reached its peak around the time of the beginning of the Assam movement. It seems that the Assam movement very successfully trapped the popular discontent to the advantage of the class of the people who led the movement.

We feel that behind the edifice of the movement stood the dominant class of Assam. Analysis of class dimension is very important to understand the nature of social movement. The masses participated in the movement out of their frustration, therefore, the leadership had to highlight some of the problems of Assam's economic backwardness and negligence of the centre. However, we must note that the movement did not aim at addressing itself seriously to the legitimate aspiration of the people
for overcoming Assam's economic backwardness. The massive blockade of oil for nearly one year was effected to pressu-
rize the government to send back the 'foreigners' who had come to Assam after 1951. The blockade was neither linked with abysmally low royalty paid to Assam by the central government, nor with better utilization of this precious resource for Assam's industrialization and economic develop-
ment. The leadership of the movement indoctrinated the Asamiya masses by emphasizing that the root cause of Assam's all problems lies in the continuous immigration from across the border. We do not deny the existence of such a problem, but that problem alone was not fundamental to Assam's backwardness.

Since 1971, the upper caste factions of the Asamiya ruling class declined in Assam's politics as they were marginalized with the emergence of non-caste leadership in the Congress party. Since then, the upper caste leaders were looking for an alternative organization with a new ideology to recapture their lost status in the power structure of the state. The emergence of the left political force as a potential alternative to the Congress-Janta formations in Assam alarmed them terribly. And, decline of the Congress at the grass-root level helped them to take up the leadership.
Their road to political power has not been straight, they had to come through a zig-zag way with ups and downs. In the process, they created a new ideology and tailored it to suit their class interests in Assam. Not only their ideology had to undergo transformation, they also significantly transformed organizational setup before embarking upon a massive social movement.

Like many other social movements, the Assam movement too used its own methods to pressurize the government to fulfill their demands. It used persuasive methods backed by massive protest actions, like strike, bandh, boycott, procession, rallies, satyagraha, blackouts, squatting etc. The movement very successfully resisted the governments plan to hold Lok-Saba election in the Brahmaputra valley in 1980, blocked the flow of crude oil and made mockery of 1983 election to the state legislature.

Though apparently, the movement was led by apolitical students' leaders, the Asamiya bourgeoisie stood solidly behind the movement. For instance, the Asamiya bourgeois press played a very decisive role in massive indoctrination, creating restlessness and fear among the Asamiya masses. The press which did not support the AASU movement of 1974, virtually became the mouthpiece of the AASU led Assam movement.
The leadership of the Assam movement was mainly confined to the Asamiya middle class. AASU, Asam Sahitya Sabha and two regional political parties together provided the organizational base for the movement. Geographically, the support-base of the movement was confined to the Asamiya homeland, i.e. the Brahmaputra valley. Socially, the Asamiya upper caste people were the most vocal supporters of the movement. The response of other social groups ranged from opposition to lukewarm support. However, it must be admitted that at the beginning, the movement had a wider support base. Behind the apparent leadership stood solidly, the weak and nagging Asamiya bourgeois composed of a few tea-planters, owners of Asamiya bourgeois press, Asamiya professionals, bureaucrats, middle class, contractors, owners of influential mobile theatres, transport operators and rural gentry. The rural gentry succeeded in bringing a section of Asamiya peasantry to the fold of the movement. Additionally, the movement received support from the educated, semi-educated and unemployed youths from rural areas. They provided aggressiveness to the movement in rural areas.

The Assam movement reached its peak in November 1979, and continued till the mid 1980. This was the period when the Asamiya masses had shown the power of the people; lakhs of people offered Satyagraha, resisted the elections to Lok-Sabha in 1980, blocked the flow of crude oil outside Assam, and came out in large numbers on the streets to make curfew inoperative which was imposed to curb their participation in oil-blockade. It was the massive participation of the people that made the Assam movement a very remarkable social movement that post independent India ever witnessed.
Assam was exposed to unprecedented violence. Both the leadership and the government failed to contain violence. Like many powerful social movements, the Assam movement also encountered a counter-movement. Besides, it had a very strong anti-left tendency both in ideology and practice. It also destabilized the parliamentary politics in Assam; leading to collapse of four governments within a period of four years. Ultimately the Assam movement gave birth to a right-wing regional political party 'Asam Gana Parishad (AGP)' which captured political power in Assam disproving its one of the major ideological assumptions that Asamiyas are facing a crisis of political identity in the wake of immigration of foreigners and inclusion of their names in the voter's list.

The career of the movement was also marked by a gradual change in goals. The leadership initially demanded 1951 as the cut-off, and later on they accepted for all practical purpose 1971 as cut-off year. The change in the cut-off year was the result of gradual erosion of its support base. However, the leadership of the movement maintained an inignorable support base among the dominant section of the Asamiyas and therefore it could bargain for certain concessions. Ultimately, an accord was signed between the Government of India and the leadership of the movement. The accord recorded the official understanding between
two contending parties. However, under the surface, the Asamiya ruling class came into a new working agreement with the Indian ruling class redefining their relations at the state level.

The emergence of A.G.P. as a ruling party in Assam with prominent leaders of the movement leading the state government, one can safely assume the institutionalization of Assam movement. The Assam movement has become a part of the establishment. Though the party came to taste the power soon after its birth and the leaders who operated the government machinery were young in age, but they had to accept the hard reality of operating within the same old institutions. Because of their severe class limitations, they failed to create new institutions or change tangibly the nature of the old institutions. The new party and its young leaderships proved too weak before the old institutions. They lugubriously allowed the old institutions to accommodate them solidly. And the goals of the Assam movement remained as distant as they were before the beginning of the movement.

In our study of Assam movement, we have tried to comprehend the question of Asamiya identity crisis vis-a-vis the Muslims, the Bengalis and the Nepalis besides the autochthon tribals, the black-tribals and other Indians living in Assam.
The Asamiyas in Assam, particularly in their traditional homeland Brahmaputra valley, are facing no threat to their socio-cultural, linguistic, demographic and political identity. Inspite of massive migration during the colonial and post-colonial period, the Asamiyas are not losing their identity, rather, such migration has propelled economic growth, better utilization of land and other resources. Significantly, most of the oppressed groups have identified themselves with the Asamiya nationality. This shows the capability of the Asamiya nationality to absorb and accept migrant groups into its fold. It should be noted that the demographic structure of 1951 census has been largely maintained in the census of 1971. Over the years the Asamiyas have been growing faster than any other group in Assam maintaining their numerical dominance. Thus we find the existence of serious gap between the ideology of Assam movement and the empirical reality. We have found that the Asamiya nationality is growing in strength over the years, and even massive migration during the colonial and post-colonial period has virtually failed to stop the growth of the Asamiya nationality. However, this is not our intention to say that as the Asamiyas are not facing a crisis situation therefore migration/immigration to Assam should be allowed to continue; the present Assam, as we have observed already, is neither land abundant nor thinly populated, over the years it has
radically. And, its continuous economic backwardness has compounded the problem further. Therefore, we would prefer to say that by energizing the ongoing assimilative and integrative processes in a democratic manner, and further halt to immigration would together heal the real or imaginary injury of the Asamiya nationality caused by the fear of losing their distinct identity in their traditional homeland.

In its long career of 6 years whenever the Assam movement generated certain bellicosous tendencies, many politicians characterized the Assam movement as secessionist movement. However, from our understanding, we do not feel so. As noted earlier, behind the Assam movement stood solidly the Asamiya ruling class which is a partner of the Indian ruling class. They would not like to sever their ruling coalition, though at times, they wanted redefinition and rearrangement of their relationship. In order to wrest certain concessions from the Indian ruling class, this nagging class might have used its secessionist card at times. Assam's integration with India was complete long back unlike Nagaland or Mizoram. An indigenous capitalist class capable of challenging the Indian big-bourgeoisie on equal terms is also absent. The Asamiya ruling class is neither capable of leading a
leading a secessionist movement nor they would like to become nihilistically ambitious. The Assam movement was definitely not a secessionist movement.

Needless to say that the Assam movement has become a reference group/movement for tribal movements that have emerged in the hills and plains of Assam. It seems the issue of group identity at various levels has become very important since the beginning of the Assam movement. In the process, some fundamental issues related to Assam's economic development has been relegated to non-issue or issue of no fundamental importance. It seems the Assam movement has affected the growth and emergence of a broad base democratic mass movement capable of uniting the people of Assam irrespective of nationality, religion, caste, language or ethnicity on legitimate economic issues and demands to overcome Assam's severe economic backwardness and popular discontent.