CHAPTER - V

THE AGITATION AND THE LEFT: AN ANALYSIS OF RESPONSE
OF THE CPI, THE CPI(M) AND THE CPI(M-L) GROUPS
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Ever since the beginning of the Assam agitation on the foreign nationals issue, political parties at the national level have hardly displayed any depth of analysis, for reasons of their own or for their sheer inability to do so. Even the parties from which one would have expected some attempt to study the problems at greater depth because of their commitment to social change, have failed to do so. In this respect the CPI and the CPI(M) seem to have always suffered from some kind of an inertia amounting to paralysis when it comes to assessing the tricky problems raised by nationalities in India. And in the present crisis of Assam they seem to have been guided more by opportunism than anything else. In spite of all this, one finds, a few independent groups - some of Marxist-Leninist tendency - which have shown themselves to be free from the traditional categories of a euro-centrist Marxism and as a result more capable of coming to better grips with the particularities of the Indian situation. Among all the leftists some groups of Marxist Leninist tendency (M-L) seem to have been most alert on the question of Assam. The CPI(M) on the other hand pointed out that the Assam movement is directed against them. They maintained that the movement is controlled by the ruling classes to hinder the progress of the leftist party in Assam.
According to CPI(M), the Assam agitation was directed "against the religious and linguistic minorities and it posed serious threat to the unity and integrity of the country. They pointed out that the agitation was artificially raised. The agitation has been described as one of violence against minorities." \(^1\)

The political resolution adopted by CPI(M) in 1982 at Vijaywada stated that its first task is to fight all divisive and secessionist forces which undermine national unity. The resolution also stated that "secessionist influence in the north eastern region including Assam is due to the backward condition of the region and denial of rapid industrial development. The secessionists have succeeded in diverting the discontent arising from mounting economic misery into disruptive channels. They have also used the fear of foreign influx to strengthen the secessionist appeal." \(^2\) However, the CPI(M) completely failed to give any evidence of secessionism in Assam. They allege that adivasi areas are proving ideal ground for some foreign Christian missions to spread the message of separation from the country and again alleges that the imperialist propagandists are attempting to dismember the

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2. The political resolution adopted by CPI(M) in 1982 (Vijaywada), pp. 52-53. Published from the office of the CPI(M) Gauhati.
country through such propaganda. However, these assertions are not backed with concrete evidence.

During the Janata Party rule both in the Centre and in the State, the CPI(M) in one of their resolution declared that "influx of people from across the border must be stopped. They demanded that border must be completely sealed. It is the duty of both the central and the state government to tackle such problems immediately." 3

In 1978, the agitation over the foreigners issue moved into direct action. Within weeks slogans were raised and the movement organised for the boycott of the Lok Sabha election until the electoral rolls were revised eliminating the names of all foreigners. The Election Commissioner decided that the names of those who were on the rolls at the time of the 1977 election should not be deleted. The result was that election to twelve out of fourteen Lok Sabha constituencies could not be held. For the first time a state refused to participate in the central parliamentary polls. According to CPI(M) the unity and integrity of the country was disrupted by this action. It must be noted here that some candidates themselves refused to file their nominations when it was clear to them, that inclusion of foreigners name in the

electoral rolls is against the unity and integrity of the country. But it must be stated that, people also forced them not to submit nominations.  

The CPI(M) in the middle of June 1980 put forward a seven point proposal for a solution of the problem in Assam.

"(1) The secessionist agitation should be withdrawn and following it, all repressive administrative measure should be withdrawn; 

(2) Steps should be taken to instill confidence in the minorities by revamping the local administration; 

(3) The centre should announce firm measures to stop all further immigration across the border; 

(4) Discussions should be started with 1971 as cut of year; 

(5) An impartial machinery having confidence of the minorities should be set up to detect foreigners; 

(6) A joint campaign by all democratic parties to explain to the peoples of Assam the vital issues at stake and win them over to protect national unity; and 

(7) An agreed programme for the economic development of Assam to overcome problems of unemployment, landlessness and poverty."

4. The Dailies published from Assam like The Assam Tribune, The Sentinel, The Dainik Atom were full of eye witness accounts of popular pressure on prospective candidates. 

5. "Most parties do not subscribe to CPI(M)'s view", Assam Tribune, November 2, 1982.
Implicit in this is that Assam agitation was a threat to national integration. But an analysis of the events and the nature of the movement as shown in the Chapter IV proves that the CPI(M) position was untenable.

The All Assam Students Union and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad from time to time criticised the ruling and the leftist parties for their narrow political interests. They pointed out that the solution was elusive "only because of the governments unwillingness to recognise the Hindus who had infiltrated into Assam in the 1961-71 period as foreigners." 6

The above statement of AASU and AAGSP disproves CPI(M) allegation that the movement is against minorities. If it had been only against minorities, as the CPI(M) claimed, the leaders of the movement would have never asked for the deportation of Hindu infiltrators.

The CPI(M) along with several left and democratic parties stood firmly against the anti-foreigners movement in Assam. It saw in the 'anti-foreigner' campaign a movement directed against the linguistic, ethnic and religious minorities in Assam. The so called 'foreigners' according to them are either Indian citizens from other states or the refugees

who have come to Assam from the territories of former Pakistan now Bangladesh. "The CPI(M) along with its left and democratic allies also sees in the anti-foreigner movement a force of destabilisation in whose creation and working American imperialism plays an important role."\(^7\) The CPI(M) criticised ruling party for their policy on the foreign nationals issue and held them responsible for the deteriorating situation in Assam. Their view was that the anti-foreigner movement was directed against them, the ruling party according to them was trying to hinder the progress of the leftist party in Assam. But such assertion refused to acknowledge the fact that the massive support which the movement had received was the result of a thorough colonial exploitation of Assam and the increasing pressure on land resulting from the unprecedented migration from outside the region. It must be pointed out that there is hardly any evidence to support the CPI(M)'s view that movement is directed by the ruling party to hinder the leftist success and it appears that only as a result of CPI(M)'s unreasonable position in the early phase of the movement it turned against them. However anti-communist and chauvinistic forces in Assam did take advantage of the situation to launch an attack on the CPI(M) and other left parties.

Regarding refugees from East Bengal, the CPI(M) stated that "there was a large influx of Bengali Hindu refugees into all the states of north eastern region. Communal disturbances in 1951 and 1964 caused further refugee influx. A movement of fugitives across the border mostly Bengali Muslims, coincided with the East Bengal struggle for liberation from Pakistan in 1970-71. Most of them returned after the formation of Bangladesh." This position cannot however be unquestionably maintained in the face of the data generated by various census reports. The 1971 Census had suggested that there were about 2,23 lakhs persons whose Indian citizenship was open to question.

Table - IX: Number of Inter-State Migrants and Immigrants into Assam: 1951-71.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Inter-State Migrants</th>
<th>Immigrants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>113,617</td>
<td>222,925</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>369,260</td>
<td>640,750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>236,759</td>
<td>440,276</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of India, 1971.

We are aware of the fact that "the place of birth information in the census reports for Assam is not reliable, particularly in the case of migrants from the then East Pakistan who constitute the most important stream of immigrants in the post independence period, as many Muslim
immigrants did not return their birth place correctly for fear of deportation."⁹ This led clearly to an underestimation of the number of immigrants. Assam, hosted during 1951-71, as many as 15.85 lakhs of foreign nationals, with or without valid documents. The then Congress Government of the State had appointed tribunals in the districts of Kamrup, Goalpara, Darrang and Nowgong where a large number of immigrants from East Pakistan had settled. Documents, citizenship certificates, oral evidence of affidavits of a locally well known Indian citizens, place of birth, the duration of stay in India - any of these was accepted by the tribunals as identifying a person for being termed as non-Indian citizen. According to the figures published by the Congress Government of Assam from year to year in the Assam Gazette on the basis of the decision of these tribunals, a total of little over three lakhs persons had been deported between 1962-1972. The State Government had wound up these tribunals on the ground that the work of detecting such illegal immigrants and deporting them had been completed. The Congress treated the minority as vote banks. So they refused to take any action which affect their interest.

The CPI(M) stated that all along they have been advocating a democratic solution to the problem of 'foreigners'

in Assam fully protecting the rights of all those non-Assamese speaking people who are either Indian citizens already or are entitled to Indian citizenship. They have all along been calling on all the democratic forces in Assam, among the Assamese speaking population and in the religions and linguistic minorities to come together to isolate and defeat the secessionist elements leading the agitation.

"The CPI(M) has always been telling the people of Assam that while they have to struggle for solution, to whatever genuine problems they have, they should not be misled into a wrong tract as wanted by the secessionists. The CPI(M) has also been sharply criticising the Government of Assam for its mishandling of the situation relying only on the bureaucracy a following line of drift.\textsuperscript{10} They also repudiates the propaganda of the leaders of the Assam agitation that the General Secretary of the CPI(M), E.M.S. Namboodripad during his election campaign in Assam has directed his speeches against the local Assamese speaking population to appease foreigners. According to them some leaders of the opposition parties particularly Bharatiya Janata Party who boycotted the elections are backing the secessionist agitation."\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{10} The Election Manifesto of CPI(M), 1985, p.3.
\textsuperscript{11} "An overall view on Assam", CPI(M) Perspective, State and Society, Vol. 21, No.1, Jan-March, 1981.
Regarding the participation of the CPI(M) in the 1983 election, the Party stated that "they wanted the defeat of the ruling Congress I and the game of the separatist forces in Assam and mobilising the healthy forces living in the present State of Assam for the unity and integrity of the Indian Union, and against all the secessionist forces in Assam." They continued to hold that the agitation was anti-national and secessionist and refused to go into the causes of resentment.

In view of the above, the position taken by the CPI(M) in the issue of immigration of foreign nationals and the movement launched by the AASU and AAGSP over this issue appear to be unjustifiable. This unjustifiable stand coupled with the irresponsible statements issued by the CPI(M) leadership in West Bengal invited the wrath of the Assamese masses. The situation worsened mainly because the CPI(M) tried to organise resistance to the movement in minority pockets and tried to incite sections of tribals in Assam.

The CPI on the other hand suggested their own solution to the problem of foreign nationals.

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13. The West Bengal Chief Minister, Jyoti Basu himself remarked in an published daily that the participation of Assamese women and children in the agitation is nothing but a well organised picnics.
(1) The foreigners who entered Assam after 25th March, 1971 should be detected and deported from Assam.

(2) The Indian and Bangladesh border should be completely sealed off.

(3) Those foreigners who entered Assam during 1961-71 should be distributed in all other states of India.

(4) CPI also demanded that identity cards should be provided to all Indian citizens.  

Right from 1979, the CPI demanded an early solution to the foreigners problem in Assam. "According to CPI, in the name of detection of foreigners the State Government no doubt adopted some measures which went against the wishes of the Bengali Hindu and Muslim. The party alleged that throughout the agitation there had been harrassment of the minorities, many murders, forcible occupation of shops and landed property, insults and humiliation." We know that the CPI did not consider the problem of immigration serious, but the question is why should they suggest solution?

The CPI, no doubt criticised the Assam agitation, but they completely failed to give any evidence of what they maintained.


15. Ibid., p. 5.
The CPI in one of their meetings in Gauhati suggested that those who come after 1971 should be divided into four categories:

"(1) Those foreigners who were detected and deported earlier but came back again, should be deported.

(2) Those who were settled in Government lands with the help of Government loans should be regularised and be given citizenship.

(3) Those who were detected, but not deported by Government should be deported.

(4) But those who settled on their own, should be detected with the help of law. The Government should no doubt deport them, but it should see the humanitarian question here." 16 This position was not compatible with the dominant view within the movement.

According to AASU and AAGSP the basis for "detection of foreigners should be the National Register of Citizenship (NRC) of 1951 and the 1952 electoral rolls and in accordance with the Constitution and the laws governing citizenship, Passport and the Foreigners Act. Regarding deletion of foreigners names from the electoral rolls, AASU and AAGSP stated that names of those found to have entered Assam illegally must be struck from the electoral rolls before any

16. Ibid., p. 53.
election is held in Assam. They also stated that foreigners whose names were detected in course of screening should be deported from the country. Those whom the Government is unwilling to deport on humane consideration should be settled all over the country. AASU and AAGSP refused to accept 1971 as the base year." 17

When Congress (I) Government was installed in Assam, on 6th December 1980, there was non-cooperation by the people for 24 hours. The new Government headache was the anti-foreigner agitation. Their main aim was to crush the agitation. The government tried all strong arm tactics against the people of Assam. It was under these circumstances that motion of no confidence was moved. During the debate all the left parties joined the non-communist opposition in criticising the government. In a communication to the Governor, the CPI(M) alleged that during the Congress (I) rule, the democratic rights of the people were trampled upon and the right of political parties to carry on the normal lawful work became virtually non-existent. Political workers were attacked, assulted and murdered but the state government failed to protect the life and security of its citizens. 18

Despite all this criticism the 23 members leftist group in the Assembly abstained from voting on the no-confidence motion and thus helped the Government to survive. "These parties were sure that the opposition would not be able to form an alternative government. This apprehension was reflected in the statement of the CPI(M)'s Nurul Huda that Mrs. Gandhi would not allow the opposition to form a government. The leftist parties probably were afraid of going to the polls and therefore allow the Congress (I) to continue its rule." 19

The leftist have argued that the no-confidence motion was moved by an alliance of bourgeois parties and since they wanted to side neither with these elements nor with the Congress (I) the only course open to them was to abstain from voting. They stated that their abstention does not prove that they support Congress (I). But whatever be their attitude, their action surely created strong resentment among the Assamese people.

The National Council of the CPI at its meeting at Hyderabad on November 24 to 2 December 1982 passed a resolution on it, which was published in the 'New Age' under the caption 'Hold elections in Assam'. This resolution inter alia stated that the National Council of the CPI is of the firm

view that the undemocratic President Rule in Assam should not be further extended and election to the State Assembly and remaining seats of the Lok Sabha should be held within the scheduled time so that a responsible government can be formed in the State. It further stated:

"An elected government alone can create conditions for normalisation of the situation and help to find a final solution of the issue of foreign nationals." 20

It did not stop there. It accused the Central Government and the leaders of the agitation for prolonging the talks on the issue for their own narrow political interest. They criticised the central government for their tactics which would hamper the progress of the leftist group in Assam.

It must be stated here that the position taken by the leftist parties created an opinion among many Assamese that the left was anti-Assamese. This sentiment was dominant in the pre-movement circle.

If we analyse the views of CPI(M) it is clear that they charge the movement as secessionist but they could not give any proof. The 'Peoples Democracy' asserts that the issue of foreign nationals has been magnified beyond proportions to suit secessionist interests. In an apparent attempt

at misrepresenting the Assam agitation to Indians outside Assam, it stated that "hopeless Hindu peasants and poor people .... Muslim peasants, immigrants settled in Assam, who have earned citizenship rights ... (and) people from Bihar, Orissa, and other states who are settled in Assam" and makes out that "others consider them as foreigners and want to drive them out of the state or defranchise them,"

This was certainly not true, because the movement was launched to detect and deport foreigners and not Indian citizens who settled in Assam. However, the CPI(M) could never refute the AASU claim that the Indians settled in Assam are fully aware of the fact that the Assam agitation is not aimed at nor against them. Otherwise they would not have decided collectively to abstain from voting. Instead they would have turned out massively to vote. The 'Peoples democracy' in an editorial picks out the Nellie massacre. They stated that in Nellie only the Bengali Muslims were massacred. The CPI(M)'s bias is evident from the fact that the Peoples democracy editorial said not even a single word of the ghastly massacres in Goalpara, Darrang and Kamrup districts where the local people were the targets. All sections of people, immigrant Muslims, immigrant Hindus, Assamese Muslims and Hindus, Bengalees and Tribals suffered ghastly wounds during that period. But it is not without significance that the non-Assamese Indians were by and large, the only section of Assam population that did not suffer from large scale
attacks. This in fact disproves the CPI(M)'s contention that the agitation is directed against all non-Assamese, including Indians from other States of India. As Baruah summarises that "If it had been directed against the non-Indians, trade centre like Guwhati and Tinsukia would have been disrupted where most of the trade are controlled by Bengalees and Marwaris." 21

The difference between the CPI and CPI(M) in their reactions to the Assam tragedy at that stage was too evident to be slurred over. It came out in their speeches in Parliament. CPI's Indrajit Gupta made it clear that while the CPI was against an amendment to the Constitution, other ways were open to the Government of India for extending President's Rule in Assam in proclamation of emergency and certification by the election commission that the elections could not be held. He referred to the support offered by the Janata Party, the BJP and the Lok Dal to the government's proposal for amending: "With the support of all these parties you would have got the two-third majority. It is for you to explain to the house and the country why you did not accept their offer." He also asked "why could they not revise the electoral rolls earlier." 22

22. Quoted in 'Most Parties do not subscribe to CPI(M) View', Assam Tribune, November 2, 1982.
What is however most notable about Indrajit Gupta’s speech in the Lok Sabha is that not even once did he say directly that the agitation was inspired, financed, guided and controlled by the foreign powers. On the other hand, he suggested that the "deep feeling of resentment among the youths of that region (North Eastern Region as a whole) due to the neglect by the far away central government of their aspirations and development - economic, cultural, linguistic was the basic cause of the turmoil and agitation there."\(^{23}\) Thus the CPI was trying to sympathetically understand the problem of the people of Assam.

Both the left parties have expressed completely opposite views, when the former Chief Minister Mr. Hiteswar Saikia expressed his decision to detect and deport the post '71 infiltrants. The CPI state committee has welcomed Mr. Saikia's decision. They strongly criticised the decision of the citizens right preservation committee and All Assam minority students Union to stop the detection process. The official organ of the party *Janamat* in its July 4th issue condemned both these organisations for spreading communal tension in Assam. The Assam State Council of the CPI in its May 9-12 session demanded that an early negotiation between the Central Government and the student leaders is of utmost

necessity for solving the foreigners tangle in Assam. They also pointed out that the State Government should start detecting the post '71 infiltrants. The resolution also called for the sealing of the Assam Bangladesh border and also urged the State Government to take necessary steps for safeguarding the identity of the Assamese people, and protecting the rights of the linguistic minorities in Assam.24

The CPI(M) State Committee on the other hand opposed the State Government's move to start detection. There is no doubt that the CPI(M) supported the detection and deportation of post'71 infiltrants. But they pointed out that the government should first rehabilitate the affected people who had suffered during the agitation. The CPI(M) concern for the affected people is to be appreciated, but their stand on the question of detection has given rise to many doubts. It is a fact that CPI(M) all along been strongly opposed AASU led movement, it proved that they were not sincere about the cut-off year which they had accepted in principle.

The CPI's demand for safeguarding the cultural and linguistic identity of the Assamese must be appreciated. But it is the CPI again which in a joint appeal, along with CPI(M), R.S.P. and forward bloc, declared the agitation as

a CIA inspired conspiracy. As Misra points out, "According to them AASU and AAGSP tried to misled the people by saying that the identity of the Assamese people was in danger. The foreign nationals issue according to them is nothing, but it is a clever device to drive the non-Assamese. Thus it was charged against the CPI that they were working on two sides on the Assam issue, one directed at the Assamese and other at the minorities." 25

The CPI(M) stand on the question of detection is quite similar to that of AAMSU and citizens right preservation committee. Both these organisations were opposed to the very idea of detection. The CRPC declared that anyone who stayed in India for more than 180 days was eligible for citizenship. "The CRPC was established after the language riots of 1960, and it is mostly dominated by Bengali Hindus, whose organisation is limited in the urban areas of Cachar and Brahmaputra Valley." 26 The AAMSU on the other hand, is a recent creation.

The AAMSU, CRPC and the CPI(M) tried to project the movement as anti-Bengali. But the mainstream of the movement seemed to have made a distinction between the Indian and non-Indian Bengali.

26. Ibid., p. 1350.
Other left parties like SUCI, RCPI and RSP are not very strong in Assam and "they stated that 1971 should be the basis for detection. The SUCI's influence is solely limited to a small Bengali speaking area in the Goalpara district." 27

The non-parliamentary left comprising of the different CPI (M.L.) fractions, is sharply divided in its assessment of the Assam problem with the Bhaskar Nandy Group being totally opposed to the movement and the Vinod Misra fraction expressing its qualified support to it. These are the two major CPI (M.L.) groups functioning in the state and "organisationally both are pretty weak, yet it goes to their credit that they have been expressing their opposition to the repressive measures being adopted by the government." 28

The CPI (M.L.) Vinod Misra fraction has generally taken the stand that the Assamese crisis has its roots in the nationality question that has occupied the central place in all the disturbances in Assam. Apart from non-controversial issues like linguistic and cultural rights, the nationality question has two important aspects: national liberation and self-determination. 29 National liberation concerns a colonised

27. Ibid., Loc.cit.
28. Ibid., Loc.cit.
nationality and with minor qualification, such a nationality has the historic duty to liberate itself, for no internal resolution is possible without national liberation. National self determination on the other hand concerns any nationality that co-exists with other nationalities in a multi-national state, and involves a decision by that nationality to become independent. Abstractly "the right to self determination always exists, but unlike the right of national liberation, it cannot be regarded as always applicable, for example, on the morrow of victorious socialist or democratic revolution, when genuinely anti-imperialist forces are in power but not when classes whose opposition to imperialism is doubtful are in power." 30

In the light of this, the CPI (M.L.) stated that, while looking at Assam, Nagaland or Mizoram, it is necessary to decide whether it is colonised nationality or merely a nationality that consists with other nationalities in the multi-national state, India. It is a fact that Assam is a producer of raw material and agricultural products like Tea, timber and oil, it is industrially underdeveloped, and such public sector units are dominated by others. Uneven development of the Indian economy generated by the capitalist path.

30. Ibid., Loc.cit.
of development has converted Assam into a colonial hinterland.\textsuperscript{31}

It is a fact that in Assam there exists an unbelievable amount of popular anger and hatred against the left parties, while their leaders and intellectuals who sympathise with them have attributed this to the evil designs of external and internal reactionary forces, but some progressive people\textsuperscript{32} maintain that these parties have displayed worst form of political opportunism and thereby invited the hatred of a vast majority of the Assamese masses.

It is true that, at present the left parties are not very strong in Assam politics. But it does not mean that, they would remain in the same position in future also. It is true that the left's silence and sometimes its strong support of the repressive measures on the eve of February polls have alienated them from the people of Assam. The CPI has slowly changed its stand on the foreigners issue. "Pramode Gogoi, the CPI state committee secretary recently stated that the identity crisis in Assam is a serious problem. He urged upon government to solve the problem as early as possible."\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{31} For an exposition of this theme see Tilottama Misra "Assam: A Colonial Hinterland" Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. XV, No.32, August 9, 1980, pp.1357-64.

\textsuperscript{32} For an exposition of this theme see A.K. Baruah's article on 'Left and Assam' Frontier, June 20, 1981.

\textsuperscript{33} See, Asamar Bidashi Nagarikar Samasya aru Bharatar Communist Party Baktabya (Assamese) (CPI's Office, Guwahati), pp. 13-17.
It is true that anti-left and reactionary forces are taking advantage of the prevailing situation in Assam and organising attacks on left cadres. Mere condemnation of such attacks would not help the left parties to win back the people's confidence instead they must play a constructive role which would help them to win the confidence of the people. The movement in Assam can never be understood without analysing the socio-economic realities of Assam. The opportunist section of the left in Assam by refusing to do it, has done irreparable damage to the left movement in Assam. But it must be admitted that a large number of Marxist and Leninist groups did try to understand the real cause of the movement.