

Student Movement: A Theoretical Study with Special Reference to Assam

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Abstract: Students form a huge and potential force for the development of a society. Besides ensuring education, the students could bring drastic changes in the society. For that purpose students are required to be organized and make them aware about their capabilities. They should provide equal opportunities to understand and take active participation in various socio-political and economic issues of a society. Therefore, students since long past, in fact all over the world, raised their voices from time to time against various problems that have been facing by the society. Many of them were also emerged as successful. In the context of Assam, the Assam Agitation of 1979-85 can be cited as one of the best example which proves the indomitable power of students.

Objective: The study intended to understand the process of student politics in post colonial Assam from a theoretical perspective. Several works on student movement, both pre and post colonial Assam had already been done. Among those, the works of R.C. Kalita, Meeta Deka, Shiela Bora are prominent in this regard. However, they seem quite insufficient. Keeping this view in mind, a humble attempt is being made to frame a theoretical concept of the student movement of Assam.

Methodology: In this work both primary and secondary sources are applied. Internal criticism is being applied to analyze the facts that are available to the research work and external criticism is used to authenticate the facts.

Students are an important part of the society. They cannot live in complete isolation from the community-life. The students play a crucial role in the socio-political and economic transformation of a society. Gramsci's conceptualization of Hegemony is also valid for the student's community. Students are diverse in nature and have often acted as the agents of social change revolutionaries against reactionaries. As students deal with ideas and intellectualize concepts in their academic works they are better able to understand abstract the ideological system.¹

There are varied ideas among the intellectuals on the question of student's politics. According to Meeta Deka the growth of student's movement is imperatively accelerated when they become conscious of

hegemonic influences of a bourgeoisie socio-economic background on proletariats.² Lewis Fewer wrote that a student's movement may be generated by emotional feelings often associated with inter-generation conflict, although with it may be also motivated by positive goals; the members of a student's movement, moreover have the conviction that as young intellectuals, they have a special historical mission to achieve that which the older generation failed to achieve.³ Marx termed the student's movement as a theatre where the battle of ideas was performed.

Romesh Ch. Kalita in his work '*Bharator Chatro Aandolonot Asomiya Chatror Bhumika*' (a study on the role of Assamese students in the struggle for freedom movement of India 1826-1947) tried to understand the student's movement of Assam and their role in the freedom struggle through a standard Marxist perspective. The role of working class, peasants, youth, middle class as well as the bourgeoisie have also been discussed from a standard class perspective and the political pre-dominance over the students community. He sought to narrate dialectical change of the society from colonialism to sovereignty and analyzed the role of students in the transition as they can't be isolated from the process of transition. He mentioned that the major task of the younger generation was to build up an effective democratic, egalitarian and secular society. After the Bolshevik Revolution, Lenin stated that a communist society must be built. Half of the work towards this end was already done. The old order was destroyed, just as it deserved, it has been turned into a heap of ruins. The ground has been cleared, and on this ground the younger communist generation must build a communist society.⁴ Kalita in his analysis on the student's movement came to a conclusion that the students are bound to be active in any kind of political participation. But the point is however to determine what kind of politics are being undertaken by the students. Whether they were following the ideas of the ruling class or were inclined towards anti-authoritarian democratic ideas was the question. One of the main aspects of Kalita's narrative was the stress for continuous interaction of the values of modernity, democratic set-up as well as the idea of hegemonic influence of the Gandhian mass movement. He emphasized that the new Assamese middle class had to perform together with the students. Otherwise the history of modern Assam would remain silent about some special aspect of the mass movement in Assam.

Meeta Deka in her work “Student Movement in Assam” threw light on the politics of the pre-independence era of Assam. On student politics, she argued that the historical roots of the students movement in India lay in the relationship with the political protest demonstration that transformed India from colonialism to a democracy.⁵ Regarding the role of students in the Indian National Movement she argued that during this period the student movement of Assam did not emerge as an independent movement but were part of Indian nationalism combined with a sense of regionalism. However in the post colonial period they emerged as independent movement fighting to remove the socio-economic problems of the state.⁶ She stated that system analysis was the most dominant methodological trend in social sciences; almost all branches of social sciences have come under its influence. While system studies in sociology, economics and political sciences have become rather common, such a use in history is rare. Therefore she attempted to study student organization and their movements as an open system; the basis of such a model being dynamic interaction of its components.⁷ The understanding of Apurba K. Baruah is different from that of Deka. He argued that explanation itself is dependent on ordering of and clarification of relation among facts about the events under study. Social scientists of repute have always been reminding us that reliable scientific knowledge have to be, by definition, theoretical. It is necessary to keep in mind that a theoretical framework is essential for adequate analysis of any social phenomenon because it is only by an identification of the significant variable and an analysis of their mutual relation that such phenomena could be understood. It is impossible even for empirical research to avoid theoretical process. Once research becomes aware of the mutual relations of the key variables of a social phenomenon plan for research can be developed. Without such a plan no meaningful research can be carried out except documentation. And it itself does not help us understand any social phenomenon. It merely enable researcher to locate useful material. Theory adds to the reliability of the results of both new and old research. It is therefore necessary to take the theories of students’ movements seriously to enable us to produce a body of lasting scientific analysis of students’ movement of the region.⁸ To understand the entire phenomenon of students politics or the movements we also have to deal with other aspects as well. We have to see that from the decade of 1970’s the phenomena of students’ movement become a dominant subject of study in social sciences.

In the context of Assam we have a complete work on the student movement in 1986 by R.C. Kalita. Afterward several scholars worked on student's movement. These studies led to the growth of certain concepts related to student's movement like the concept of "student's power". In the context of Assam, the six years long Assam Movement also influenced scholars to attempt research on student politics. We have also series of debates around 1979 among the scholars on the nature and development of the Assam Movement. These were published chronologically in Economic and Political Weekly. Noted scholars like A. Guha, H. Gohain, U. Mishra, G. Omvedt, and S. Bouah took part in the debate. In the meantime student's movement in France, Germany as well as in India compelled the scholars to look into the matter of student's movement.

Time and context are extremely important in understanding student's movement. As Carr pointed out- we can view the past, and achieve our understanding of the past only through the eyes of the present. The historian is of its own age, and is bound to it by the condition of human existence.⁹

For Assam the process of studying student's movement was initiated in the backdrop of gradual change of society. After R.C Kalita, others like Shiela Bora and Meeta Deka attempted to systematically study the student's movement of Assam. Student's movement cannot be isolated from political circumstances. Meeta Deka divided the student's movement into two basic parts i.e. norms-oriented and value-oriented student's movement. Deka insisted that political influence over the students existed in either type of student's movement. In her words- norms-oriented student's movement are generally concerned with a specific grievance or a goal and do not often have a broader ideological overtone. The norm-oriented student's movements take up campus issues and is likely to maintain itself after its goal has been attained although such movements often provide an impetus for further operation. On the other hand the values-oriented are concerned with broader ideological issues and when they are involved in concrete action these activities are usually linked directly to a broader concern.¹⁰

Conflict between institution's authority and students has occurred all over India in the past and the present. Such conflicts have generated mass students protest. For instance, in Javadpur University of West Bengal, on 28 August 2014, a second year student of history in Arts Faculty of the University was allegedly

harasser and ill-treated by a group of students. The boys manhandled her male companion and dragged both of them to a hostel room where her modesty was said to have been outraged. The authorities came to know of this immediately. But, unfortunately the administration did not initiate any enquiry. Subsequently, when the victim's father came to the university to meet the Vice-Chancellor (VC) about this outrageous incident, the VC insensitively asked him to come back after a couple of days. Obviously, this enraged the students and the faculty. The students union led by the SFI and other students took up the issue and lodged a formal complaint and asked for speedy and impartial enquiry. Hence the movement lasted till the VC's resignation in January 2015.

Values-oriented student's movement is closely linked up with the policies through which the education system is being directed. In these struggles the students fight against flawed education system, against fees hike, seat limitations, adequate numbers of teachers, quality of infrastructure etc. However, in the case of an absence of ideology a strike becomes an individual and isolated event and not a movement, which is what the case we have seen in Jadavpur University¹¹.

The student movement under the period of study was influenced by three basic concepts of student's politics i.e. the idea of student's power, idea of apolitical student movement and the idea of study and struggle. The student's power is a concept where the ideologue speaks for independent or political student's movement. It implies students leading a movement for social change, or of successful movement of the students unconnected with the organized working class movement. Generally the European New-Left, including the history of student's movement of France of 1968, is cited as an example. In France the movement became a serious challenge to the Gaulist regime.¹² The student's movement of Germany, America and Vietnam are also cited as examples. Instances may also be drawn from India where a number of student's movement like those of Gujarat and Bihar, which, while they certainly had democratic content and did play some part in raising the issue of democracy in society at large like the American movement, are seen to have failed in achieving their real targets beyond merely removing the established state government. It is truly ironic that the vey chimanbhai Patel whose government was dislodged by the mass movement in Gujarat is today in the Janata Party that the student brought to power. Similarly the Chatro Youva Sanghrash

Sammiti set-up by Jai Prakash Nayarayan is almost always at loggerheads with the Janata regime which they help established.

Student's movement believes that they can work for revolutionary transformation of the society. The trend would not like to confine student's movement within the educational campus or only to protest against the flawed educational system. Rather they believe in taking active participation and even leading participation towards social change. They consider their struggle as a political struggle. The events like the oil refinery movement in Assam, movement for medium of instruction, Assam movement the students involved in a massive manner. The All Assam Student Union (ASSU) the leading organization of Assam was the main student's body. However, after the six years long Assam Movement (1979-1985) the leaders of ASSU entered electoral politics through the formation of the Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) the regional political party of Assam.

The trend of apolitical student's was one of the dominant trends of the student's movement in Assam in its post-independence period. The beginning of such a trend can be traced back to the very beginning of India's independence in 1947. To quote Sheela Bora- the battle of freedom was won in August 15, 1947 when powers were ultimately transferred by the British government to the acknowledged representative of the people of India. Freedom saw hopes and aspiration of the students fulfilled and marked the end of their long and thrilling struggle. The students of the pre-independence period had left a rich legacy for their successors. Though political freedom has been achieved political involvement of students in Assam continues in order to remove social, economic and educational inadequacies.¹³ Under this particular context the idea of depoliticizing the students was rooted. While after the independence of India Jawaharlal Nehru who once shared the platform of students movement by inaugurating the first All India Conference of All India Student Federation (AISF) asked the students to return to their campuses and as a whole he denounced the role of students in Indian politics. In the context of Assam the congress leaders like Tarun Ram Phukan and his colleague invites all the students to involve them in their sacred duty to study. Proverbs like- *Prohuoi pohai rue pan, ei tiniue nisinte aan* (the students, teacher and the nut cultivator should mind only with their business) was quite common with the elders. But in the post-independence era as the question of

social inadequacy and social under development continued, the students again started to organize under the platform of the All Assam Students Association under their slogan of apolitical student's movement. The concept of apolitical students movement simply meant not to take part any political affiliation but the movement will continue to exist. The abstract ideology behind this trend in Assam was the sense of regionalism and Assamese Nationalism. The Assam Chatro Sanmiloni had declared that they were not political in the very initial phase of its development. AASU and *Asom Jatiyotabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad* (nationalist youth student's conference of Assam) (AJYCP) were the organization who did not want to be associated with any political ideology. After the inception of the AASU in 1967 they rigorously campaigned among the students not to take part in any political activities. In its constitution, the AASU mentioned that all the students of Assam were the general members of AASU and the AASU members should not be a member of any political party. Even in the present context such a trend among the student community of Assam is quite influential. However, whenever there was a matter of any social concern in Assam the AASU sought political solutions of the problems. R.C. Kalita wrote that students are never isolated from politics and cannot separate themselves from politics and there are only two types of politics i.e. politics of ruling class and that of the ruled.

The third most important part concept of student's politics was the 'study and struggle' concept. The student movement is an integral component of the wider democratic movement of the workers, peasants, and other progressive forces. It can neither achieve its immediate day-to-day demands nor realize its aims and objectives without a combined and united effort of all the progressive and democratic forces of our country. The Student's Federation of India will continuously educate its ranks and propagate among the broad student masses the importance of unity of all the democratic forces of the country in the struggle for a just and equitable social order. As such, it seeks the cooperation and the support of the democratic movement of workers, peasants, and the middle classes and extends its co-operation and support to all these movements and their aspirations. It raises its voice against all exploitation and oppression of workers, peasants, women, Dalits and tribals.¹⁴ The concept of study and struggle considered that the students movement should be associates with the class movement. Though they did not consider the students to be a part of any class but they claimed that the student's community was closely linked with the production

process and the means of production. The knowledge transmitted to them was the product of social contradiction or through the experiences from society. Hence, knowledge was a social product and the society consisted of class contradiction. To quote from the Communist Manifesto- the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle. Free man and slave, patrician and plebeians, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstruction of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.¹⁵ Therefore, the left-wing students are bound to view social movement through the class perspective. In its programmes the SFI wrote that that “Every demand for education, employment opportunities, and the right to work, and every slogan in defence of civil rights such as right to speech, assembly, and association, and every protest against any injustice or oppression are invariably connected with the policies of the state and thus assume a political character. In the face of this reality, it is hypocritical to subscribe to bankrupt slogans such as ‘students should abstain from politics’ and ‘education should be apolitical’. The student’s Federation of India is of the considered view that such deceptive slogans have the political motivation of perpetuating political ignorance among the student community to conceal from them the harsh implications of the anti-people policies of the ruling classes thus help the conservative, exploitative social order to stay.¹⁶ The idea of study and struggle effectively countered the idea of Student’s Power and Apolitical Student’s Movement. The idea of study and struggle does not consider students as the leader of social change. Rater it considers the students as the messengers of social revolution. The concept also appealed to the students regarding their task which was to study along with struggle. The idea also appealed to balance study and struggle. It considered that theory without practice is rootless and practice without theory was blind. Therefore, to have an effective student’s struggle there was a need to study through which we can have a society free from exploitation.

In the context of India this theory criticized the social-economic condition of India. They summed up the socio-economic development of post-independent India as Independence in 1947 brought high hopes that the progressive and democratic ideals of the freedom struggle would be realized. In the initial decades, significant achievements were registered in building up a democratic polity and breaking the colonial

stagnation of the economy. These, however, were halting and inadequate to meet the needs of our vast millions. This was because the process was fraught with contradictions- the central one being that the new regime adopted a capitalist path of development on the basis of a historic compromise with landlordism and imperialism. As a result, the stranglehold of feudal and semi-feudal relations remained largely intact. Consequently, neither economic growth nor democracy could have a stable base. In the sphere of education too, while there was some progress in the post-independence period, it was in the main limited to a privileged few, and the Constitutional directive for universal and compulsory primary education remained largely unfulfilled.¹⁷

End notes

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17. Ibid, clause-1.6 Pp-02
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