

The TAI AHOM Movement in Northeast India: A Study of All Assam TAI AHOM Student Union

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Abstract: The Ahoms, one of the foremost ethnic communities in the North East India are a branch of the Tai or Shan people. The Tai Ahoms entered the Brahmaputra valley from the east in the early part of the thirteenth century and their arrival heralded a new age for the people of the region. The ethnic group Tai Ahoms of Assam has been asserting their ethnic identity more than a century old today. The Ahoms who once ruled over Assam seek to maintain their distinct identity within the larger Assamese society. The Tai Ahoms of Assam faced a lot of problem after independence in different aspects. Moreover, though once Tai Ahoms ancestors were ruling race but today they have been squarely backward. They have been recognized as one of the Other Backward Classes (OBC) category. As a measure to solve their multifold and multifaceted demands, the ethnic group Tai Ahoms has been struggling through their organizations. In present time, All Tai Ahom Student Union (ATASU) has been very much concerned about the various problems of Tai Ahoms community. While struggling for the overall development of the Tai Ahom community, rightly or wrongly the All Tai Ahom Student Union has been raising political issues and thus got involved in the politics of the state despite being a non-political organization. Thus, the present study will examine the role of Tai Ahom Organisations especially All Tai Ahom Student Union to organizing identity assertion movement in Assam.

Keywords: *Distinct Identity, Ethnic group, Political issues, Identity assertion movement.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The north-eastern region of India is a mosaic of cultural diversity based on ethnicity. The region is inhabited by number of ethnic communities which possess its distinct culture, language, dialectic, etc. It is the hotspot of number of ethnic movements, extremist, secessionism, etc. Strategically the region shares international boundaries with china, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal and the illegal migration from these neighboring states leads to the demographic imbalances in the hill states of northeast India. In Northeast India, different ethnic groups which represent both Tribal and non Tribal communities have been struggling long either for special constitutional safeguard or for the creation of separate political entities on the basis of their lingo-cultural identities. With passage of time, the number of disgruntled groups asserting for such demands has gone up. Assam, being a major part of Northeast India has been experienced a number of such movements of such nature over several decades. In many respects, Assam is a miniature India with different national, ethnic, religious, linguistic and tribal groups living together in the region. It was never a monolingual or single nationality region at any point of time. The population of Assam is a broad intermixture of Mongolian, Indo-Burmese, Indo-Iranian and Aryan races. Many tribal, racial, ethnic and caste groups have composed the greater Assamese society and there began a process of socio-cultural fusion among them. The ethnic communities of Assam, who used to view themselves as integral part of Assamese society, are now following a familiar pattern of cultural revivalism manifested itself in the demands for political autonomy, protection of linguistic and cultural identity and preferential treatment in employment. The reasons behind such ethnic uprising lie in the differentiated socio-economic and political status between the caste Hindus and non-caste people of Assam. The caste Hindu became politically powerful, economically dominant and socially advanced in comparison to other ethnic groups of Assam. As a result, the other ethnic groups of Assam society remained economically, socially, culturally and politically much more backward than the Assamese caste Hindus. The identity assertion of the different ethnic groups has emerged as a strong force in Assam through which different ethnic groups try to fulfill their aspirations, demands, rights and to protect ancestral soil or ethnic homeland, safeguard and maintain their distinct ethnic identity as well as want to create a political space for all round development for themselves

within the existing polity. In Assam the Bodos, Karbis and Dimasas wanted separate states through over ground movements as well as insurgency. Karbis have been granted an autonomous state council and Dimasas have been granted autonomy under District Councils while Bodos were recently given Autonomous Council. The other tribes like the Rabhas, Hasong, Tiwa, Mising, Sonowal Kachari, Thangal Kachari and Deuris have been granted autonomous district councils to satisfy their autonomy aspirations. There are demands from other ethnic groups like the Konch, Ahom, Moran, Mattok, Chutia and the various ex-tea plantation labour populations for the grant of Scheduled Tribes status as well. The Tai Ahom is one of such ethnic groups of Assam who has been asserting their ethnic identity throughout colonial periods to today onwards. The Tai Ahoms have own culture, tradition, religion, language etc; thus forming a distinct community in Assam. Infact, they don't want to merge their culture completely with the dominant Assamese caste Hindu culture and for this purpose, they want to preserve their customs, tradition, religion and language etc. As a means of maintaining distinct identity, they demanded the constitutional safeguards of their distinct ethnic identity. The Ahom elites, with the growing consciousness and organizational strength began to urge upon the government to fulfill their demands in a bid to establish their community in to a rightful place in the contemporary socio-economic scenario of state.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To study the role of All Assam Tai Ahom Student Union in organizing the identity assertion movement in Assam.

III. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The study is based on secondary sources. Books, journals, newspapers, reports, memorandums are used for collecting the secondary data. The present Study is covered the Tai Ahoms of Assam and their demand and the role of All Tai Ahom Student Union in organizing the identity assertions movement in Assam.

The study is carried on by following descriptive and analytical method. The analytical approach helps to analyzing the various aspects of the study. At the same time, descriptive method is also adopted to have a clear and a thorough vision in this study.

Analysis: The Youth organization always plays an important role in any form of agitation against the government to develop a society. Role of students after independence of India continued to be active. The student community gained lot of experience in course of their struggle in freedom movement of the country. The ethnic groups of northeast India has been formed student organization to keep their identity and for socio-political developments. The students of Assam had participated actively in all the major movements that had been originated in Assam since independence. History revealed that most of the movements of Assam had started by students themselves. In pre 1947, it were the political leaders who led the struggle for independence backed by the students, the post-1947 Assam saw the students lighting it all alone in ensuring and securing for its people what they deserved-socially, politically and economically. It was in this backdrop that the All Assam Students Union (AASU) was born in 1967, a logical conclusion of the glorious tradition of students movements throughout the world in general and Assam in particular. Moreover the role of All Assam Student Union (AASU) was allegedly responsible to a greater degree for the emergence of a galaxy of student's organizations on caste and community considerations. The Assam movement had launched under the banner of AASU to expel the foreigners from Assam. The objective of the AASU was for the development of all the people of Assam. The growing inequalities between the ethnic communities and the hegemony of the dominant Assamese middle class have created a sense of relative deprivation among the ethnic tribes. The degree of relative deprivation has reached its zenith with the attempt to impose the Assamese language on the tribes which they feared would endangered their status and identity. So, the tribal and non tribal leaders tried to keep themselves away from the AASU and formed their own student's organization. Some of them are the Assam Tea Tribes Students Association (1947), All Bodo Students Union (1967), Rabha Students Union (1967), Sonowal Kachari Students Union (1968), All Assam Nepali Students Union (1976) , All Assam Mishing Student Union (1978), All Assam Tai Students Union (1988),All Tiwa Student Union (1989), All Deori Student Union 1989, All Assam Sutiya Students Union (2005) which have been very active in mobilizing their respective communities politically and socially. All Tai Ahom student union is one of the student or youth organization of Tai Ahom community of Assam who has been very much concerned about the various problems of Tai Ahoms community. While struggling for the overall development of the Tai Ahom community, rightly or wrongly the All Tai Ahom Student Union has been raising political issues and thus got involved in the politics of the state despite being a non-political organisation.

The Ahoms, one of the foremost ethnic communities in the North East India are a branch of the Tai or Shan people. The Tai Ahoms entered the Brahmaputra valley from the east in the early part of the thirteenth century and their arrival heralded a new age for the people of the region. . The Ahoms are the first Tai bunch who came to Assam under the leadership of Sukapha in 1228 A.D. and subjugating the local tribes, founded a

kingdom in 1253 A.D. as Charaideo as their first capital. By 17th century, this small kingdom covered almost the entire Brahmaputra valley excluding Goalpara. By defeating the mighty Mughals in the battle of Saraighat fought near Guwahati in 1671; they consolidated their power as the most powerful state in the entire northeast. The Ahom Kingdom laid the foundations of an Assamese nationality. This kingdom lasted six centuries and could successfully withstand the onslaught of different forces including those of Mughal imperialism. It was the identity of interest regarding driving out the Mughal invaders that largely contributed to the formation of a civil society, a state with a common overlord. It was under these circumstances that a state called Asam or Assam, with a common overlord in the person of the Ahom king and a civil society to be identified as Assamese grew up. From the very beginning of their reign, Ahoms followed a policy of assimilation and peaceful co-existence with the Morans, Mottocks, Barahis, Kachari, Chutiya and other indigenous communities of Assam. The people of the different communities were made part of a greater societal framework. It was the liberal outlook of the Ahoms and their policy of assimilation that formed the bedrock of their political hegemony. It was in this way that the Ahom kings from the time of Sukapha wanted to unify the various tribes and communities of Assam to form an Assamese nation. They were very advanced in culture and literature and for the first times in Assam the Ahoms started writing history. The 1912 census of India enumerated approximately 197,000 people identifying as Ahom in Brahmaputra valley of Assam. At present with population of over 40 lacs, Ahoms are mostly living in upper Assam districts Sivasagar, charaideo, Jorhat, Golaghat, Dibrugarh, Tinisukia, Lakhimpur and Dhemaji . Tai Ahoms are also found in Lohit District of Arunachal Pradesh.

The Tai Ahoms of Assam faced a lot of problem after independence in different aspects. Moreover, though once Tai Ahoms ancestors were ruling race but today they have been squarely backward .They have been recognized as one of the Other Backward Classes (OBC) category. The socio economic status is not suitable at all majorities of the Ahoms. With the growth of their numerical strength, and democratization of political system and universalisation of education, there emerged educated elite among the Tai Ahoms who realized their backwardness and underdeveloped. As a measure to solve their multifold and multifaceted demands, the ethnic group Tai Ahoms have been struggling through their organisations. In present time, All Tai Ahom Student Union (ATASU) founded in 1988 with Promod Boruah and Arun Gogoi as president and General Secretary respectively, has been very much concerned about the various problems of Tai Ahoms community. Now, president of ATASU is Litul Buragohain and general secretary Moyur Borgohain. Number of Ahom elites like prof. J. N. Phukon, Prof. Hrien Gohain, Dr. Puspa Gogoi, Hem Buragohain, Kiran Kumar Gogoi, Horen phukon, Prodip Gogoi contributed a great deal in the emergence of All Tai Ahom Students Union. The primary objectives of the All Tai Ahom Student Union (ATASU) are as follow:

- a) To encourage the students belonging to the Tai Ahom community to respect the traditions of Tai Ahoms.
- b) To take necessary steps for the upliftment of socio-economic, educational and cultural plight of the Tai Ahoms.
- c) To bring together the Tai Ahom students of North-Eastern Region with the Tai Mongoloid people on the basis of homogeneous culture.
- d) To sow the seeds of unity, integrity and harmony among the different communities of Assam.
- e) To inculcate a sense of consciousness of exploitation of people belonging to Other Backward Classes and weaker section of society by the advanced section of society and thereby to liberate the same by a united democratic struggle.
- f) To create a conducive atmosphere for the study and research of Tai language and culture.
- g) To preserve all the historical monuments, sculptures and traditions of the Tai Ahoms.

While struggling for the overall development of the Tai Ahom community, rightly or wrongly the All Tai Ahom Student Union has been raising political issues and thus got involved in the politics of the state despite being a non-political organization. From the very beginning the ATASU had raised a host of demands before the government of the state as well as the centre which were both non-political and political in nature. Some of such demands were to reserve seats for the Tai Ahom Students in higher educational institutions, to recognize Tai language and make it as an elective subject in educational institution, to include the Tai Ahoms in the list of Scheduled Tribes, to census Tai Ahom population separately and to give reservation in the government jobs according to the proportion of the total numerical strength, to reserve those seats of Assam Legislative Assembly where 25 percent or more voters belonged to the Tai Ahom community, to create Legislative Council in Assam on the basis of equal representation of different communities, to create an autonomous region comprising the districts of upper Assam and so on. Now, ATASU is spearheading the demand of the Ahom people for being granted the Scheduled Tribe status to the Tai Ahom people. In the year 2007, ATASU has been demanding that the renaming of Assam to Asom be cancelled on the grounds of historical claims that echo the pride of the Ahoms as a potent ethnic group. All these inspire some people of the group to tend to search for an alternative to the label of Assamese. But by and large, the Ahoms are not deviating from what is known as Assam and Assamese culture even though they have a sense of injured pride.

The ATASU has been adopting various strategies and tactics to put forward their demands. Over the year the ATASU has been using various strategies and tactics to put pressure on the government. Strikes are the forms of protest launched by the ATASU to various demands. Strikes are organized due to various reasons for the uplift of the Tai Ahom community as a whole. ATASU has been submitted by Ahom organizations to the concerned government authorities, and other documents on various demands of the Tai-Ahoms of Assam. ATASU submitted memorandum to the government of the day expressing the aspirations of the community and incorporating its various socio-political demands. Demanding the ST status in Assam for the Tai Ahom community the ATASU submitted a memorandum together to the chief Minister of Assam and the prime Minister of Assam and the prime Minister of India through the Deputy commissioners of each district demanding the inclusion of the Tai Ahoms, Moran, Motok, Konch Rajbonsi and Tea Tribes in the list of ST. Accordingly, on 23th July 2000 delegates representing organizations of the Tai Ahom, Moran, Motok, Konch Rajbonsi and Tea Tribes unitedly submitted a memorandum to the prime Minister, Home Minister and the Minister of tribal Welfare demanding inclusion of these communities in the list of ST. ATASU also submitted memorandum to the Prime Minister for inclusion of Tai Ahom in the list of Scheduled Tribes of India. Besides these, ATASU submitted memorandums from time to time to ventilate their grievances.

Protest marches and rallies and Dharnas are other forms of pressure tactics used by ATASU. The Dharnas are held at specific places such as in front of the building of concerned authorities, some famous places so that the wider public opinion can be created to pressurize the authorities to accept their demands. Under the leadership of ATASU the All Tai Ahom Organizations Co-ordination Committee, Assam, staged a dharna at New Delhi on 28 August 1997 to draw the attention of the central government. Dharnas are peaceful protest tactics used by the ATASU in many cases they pressurize the government to accept their immediate demands. The ATASU also mostly uses the bandhs, public meeting, seminar and conference etc. Lastly on 3rd July and 27th December of 2017, ATASU had called 24 hour Assam bandh in support of the organization's demand. In support of the demand to recognize the Tai Ahom community as Scheduled Tribe (ATASU) Sivasagar district committee staged a sitin near the DC office on 16th December 2017. Led by Ashowni Chetia, advisor of ATASU and Tultul Gogoi and Horen dihingia, joint secretaries of the district committee, hundreds of Tai Ahom students gathered to protest against the Union and state governments. Speaking in the protest, Ashowni Chetia alleged that before the Lok Sabha election, BJP leaders had promised to raise the issue in the parliament. Moreover, state BJP leaders had also promised to the Tai Ahom Community to help them getting ST status. But no positive move has been taken in this regard by the so-called public representatives, he rued. He also announced that ATASU had called for a 24-hour Assam bandh on December 27, 2107 in support of the organizations demand.

Response of the government

However, after a protracted agitation the Ahoms along with Six other ethnic groups-the Matak, Moran, Koch-Rajbangshi, Chutiya, Gorkha, Adivasi, who demanded Autonomous Council status under the framework of the Indian Constitution, were only given Development Council status. For this purpose an amount of Rs.12 corers was provided in the state plan budget of 2008-09. The primary objective was to provide maximum participation of the people belonging to the backward communities for their social, economic, educational, ethnic and cultural advancement. The Development council was intended to provide the people with the opportunity to make their own development plans and execute them. The Tai Ahom Development Council was constituted in 2010 along with 13 other such development councils for different communities in Assam by the Government of Assam (vide govt. notification No. TAD/BC/491/07/120 dared.11/10/2010.). But it needs mention here that the Tai Ahom Development Council did not reflect the hopes and aspirations of the Tai Ahoms populace of Assam. The student union had made it clear that the demand for Scheduled Tribes status and Autonomous council even after the formation of the Tai Ahom Development Council. They wanted constitutional safeguards to basic rights, and ensuring their welfare and development. The methods adopted by ATASU are many and all contributing to the chief cause of creating a definite space for the Tai Ahoms. The community's demand is not the formation of a development council, but the Tai Ahom Development Council (2010) was formed by the government. Though it is said as a landmark for the identity movement of the community but it serves only an elite group where the necessities of the common people seems to be deprived. Therefore, it can be said that they lives amidst backward in the grounds of economy, political and social aspects.

IV. CONCLUSION

ATASU being a community based organization appeared into be concerned about the academic advancement as well as all round development of the Tai Ahom community as a whole. For the sake of Tai Ahom students wellbeing they put forth a host of demands like reservation of seats in educational institutions and government services as well as the demands for the incorporation of the Tai Ahoms into sixth schedule of Indian Constitution etc. Simultaneously they paid equal attention to the preservation and development of the

historical monuments of Tai Ahoms rulers and places of historical importance. Many people ridicule the demand of ST status by Ahoms due to their glorious past while some support this demand as this may help implementation of constitutional safeguard against illegal Bangladesh migrants. Recently ATASU protests against the Hindu Citizenship Act 2016, The ATASU leadership are very much concerned about the development of Assam and people as a whole. As per the constitution, the ATASU was declared to be and out of a political organization but subsequently its growing role not confined to academic, socio-economic, cultural but taking up political character as well signifies that it has already lost its non-political character. Indeed, its activities categorically demonstrated the consciously or unconsciously they have got involved into the politics of the state to derive maximum possible benefits for the cause of overall development of their community which, they believe was a part of their accountability towards the society they belonged to. Despite so, most of their demands have still remained unfulfilled but their efforts in this direction are still on.

Tai Ahoms student Union in Assam have thus contributed much towards socio-economic change in the state and have drawn the attention of the government in policy making on educational, political, economic and social issues that might otherwise have been ignored or neglected.

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