

GOPINATH BARDOLOI AND THE TRIBAL LEAGUE OF ASSAM AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract:

The Tribal politics in pre and post colonial Assam is always a subject of much concern. The emergence of 'Tribal league' in Assam in the third decade of 20th century was a significant event for the political history of modern Assam. It paved the way for the beginning of a new phase in the political history of Assam. The hegemonic nature of Assamese elite and the feeling of negligence provoked the innocent tribal to think of their own socio-economic and political development. These tribal people were often termed as backward and marginalized. Therefore with the formation of Tribal League, they envisioned the unity of different plains tribals of Assam and try to get their own respectable space. Moreover, this period also witnessed the relationship between the first Chief Minister of Assam 'Gopinath Bardoloi' and the Tribal League. It was because of the soft corner of Gopinath Bardoloi towards the tribal people of Assam, which provide them the new system of tribal belt and block. Moreover the inclusion of Tribal League in the general politics of Assam was possible only because of the support of Gopinath Bardoloi. Therefore the present paper will try to highlight the factors of the rise of the Tribal league and the relationship between Gopinath Bardoloi and Tribal league of Assam.

Key words: Tribal, colonial, marginalized, tribal belt and block.

Introduction:

The emergence of 'Tribal league' in Assam in the third decade of 20th century was a significant event for the history of modern Assam. It paved the way for the unification of a small number of educated and conscious tribal elite who formed the tribal middle class in the early decades of the 20th century. Of course it was the hegemony of those tribal leaders who had the desire to re-establish and reaffirmed the tribal identity in the periphery of greater Assamese identity. The tribal league envisioned the unity of different plains tribals of Assam, who were considered as marginalized people. The growth of separate tendency and tribal identity movement among the tribes of Assam had been initiated by the league. Perhaps it was one of the most prominent and powerful organizations of the tribals of Assam. Indeed through this united platform they were practicing

several socio-political activities during the colonial period by actively participated in the Assam politics and retain its dominance and hegemony over the common people and the government till 1953. Moreover with the growth and development of bourgeois politics¹ in Assam in the pre and post colonial period and also the participation of Tribal league as an representative organization of the Plains tribals of Assam and their desire to get separate electorate is a subject of must study. On the other hand Gopinath Bardoloi the then chief minister of independent Assam was one of the strong supporters of the tribals and always a well wisher. He was such a person who believed in equal share and development. He believed in growing together of the tribal and non-tribal Assamese.

Theoretical perspective: During the 19th and 20th century with the growth of nationalism in India, its im-

pact has also been seen among the tribals of Assam in the form of regionalism and sub-nationalism². Growth of sub nationalism in the 20th century was one of the specific phenomena of that century. Importantly in the beginning of 20th century the gulf between the tribals and non-tribals of Assam was widened. This century is also marked with the growing tribal movement or ethnic nationalism. The creation of excluded and partially excluded areas³ then tribal belt and block with the aim of preserve and conserve the tribal identity with distinct culture led to the growth of ethnonationalism⁴ among the tribals of Assam. It is first a community feeling then to greater level of national feeling. It is first expressed as parochialism then tribalism and finally ethnonationalism. According to the instrumentalist, in ethnonationalism ethnicity and identity are situational and conditional. And the central role played by the elites of the community. When Gopinath Bardoloi became the chief minister of Assam he was much concern about the history of Assam with its original son of the soil, the tribals. He had to tackle the ethnonationalistic attitude of the tribals and at the same time for the greater interest of the state had to adopt policy of amalgamation with the tribals of Assam.

Under this theoretical background the present paper aims to discuss the factors of the emergence of Tribal League in Assam with their active participation in the Assam's politics. It will also highlight the relationship between Gopinath Bardoloi and tribal league.

Methodology: Both primary and secondary sources are used in writing this paper.

Review of literature: P.S Datta discusses about the Autonomy movement in Assam⁵ including the plains tribals. V. Venkata Rao focuses on the Tribal Politics in North –East –India (1874-1974)⁶. Another significant work of Dr Devabrata Sharma⁷ discusses about the tribal socio-political organizations and their contribution in the tribal identity movement in Assam as well as the formation of Assamese nationality. Another remarkable work was done by Nirode Barooah⁸ where he dealt with the relationship of Bardoloi and Tribal Assamese of the Brahmaputra valley. In the several

writings of Prafulla Mahanta⁹ the tribal consciousness and their quest for identity also highlighted. Similarly in the writings of Indibar Deuri¹⁰, he also tries to focuses on the tribal issues of Assam and their identity movement. In spite of all these work the emergence of Tribal League in Assam and the relationship between Gopinath Bardoloi and Tribals of Assam is always a subject of much concern. And there are so many things to be disclosed.

Factors of the gulf between tribal and non-tribals in Assam:

The factors of gulf between tribals and non-tribals in Assam can be divided into two different categories. One is related with the discriminative behavior and attitude of the non-tribals towards the tribals. It is evident from some historical narrative that the caste hierarchy in Assam itself a factor of deterioration of the tribal and non-tribal relationship. The dominating nature of the non-tribal or caste Hindus of Assam creates a social and mental distance between them. In this context the initiative taken by Satras of Majuli to convert the tribals into the vaishnavite sect of Hinduism could not able to eradicate the social inequality and lower-upper caste outlook. Therefore those tribal organizations formed in the early 20th century aimed to introduce socio-economic reforms and development of their respective communities. The feeling of discrimination provoke the tribals to think about to gain some political power and restore their privileges. But the social psyche of a section of caste Hindu stood as a hindrance. One of the renowned tribal 'leaders Bhimbar Deuri was himself a witness and victim of the prevalent caste discrimination in Assam. It was very heart touching that the tribal students could not dine with the caste Hindu students in the first mess at the prestigious Cotton College.¹¹ This is very common scenario in different schools of Assam during the early 20th century. Therefore the tribal students decided to fight against this racial segregation. Initially a social movement for equal social status and elimination of racism started. This is how the tribal consciousness grows in Assam. Gradually it increased the feeling of self determination and nationalism and loyalty to one's own tribe. And it was Bhimbar

Deuri, who conceived the dream of an organization comprised of all tribal and non-tribal people of Assam. With the aim of to get rid of all kind of inequality and discrimination the tribals of Assam felt the necessity for a united platform. And secondly it was the entry of external forces such as globalization, modernization and penetration of non-tribals into the tribal areas. The idea of preserve and conserve the tribal land, culture and identity by stopping more sanskritization process among the tribals of Assam is entirely a colonial construct. The colonial government preferred and encouraged the tribals for maintenance of distinct tribal entities. Latter on this exclusion from the mainstream non-tribal society led the plains tribals of Assam to think of their separate political identity. Thus the perceived feeling of deprivation and negligence among the tribals of Assam encourage them to think for their own the identity. Another tragic example of Caste Hindus suspicion and jealousy upon the tribals on Assam was noticed in their criticism regarding using Bengali language in a journal name 'Bibar' published from Goalpara in 1924.¹² The non-tribal Assamese suspected the tribals as anti-Assamese. In response to this Rupnath Brahma replied that they desired nothing but the unity and progress of their people who were to be found in many places of Bengal as well.¹³

Prior to this, to fulfill their wishes and aspiration from the second decade of 20th century the tribals of Assam started to mobilize their people under the fold of common association and organization. The first of this kind was the Dangari Kachari Jubak Sanmilloni in 1921 latter on known as All Assam Kachâri Sanmilloni from 1927. And it was the first social organization which raised its voice for the evacuation of foreign nationals in Assam. Apart from this common organization most of the tribals of Assam have their own community organization, viz Bodo Maha Sanmilloni in 1915¹⁴ Bodo Satra Santha in 1915,¹⁵ Miri Jatir Hithadhini Sabha in 1924, Assam Rabha Sanmiilon in 1925, Lalung Satra Sanmillon in 1920 etc and all of these organization moved together to work together for the benefit and development of the Plains tribals of Assam. And thus

the All Assam Plains Tribal League was formed in 1933. Moreover the tribal people felt that their wishes and aspirations would never be fulfilled until and unless they secured political power. Charan Narzary one of the prominent tribal leaders of Assam is of the view that the educated and energetic tribal youths, who were driven by their indomitable urge for assertion, felt that in absence of a common political platform their demands would not be fulfilled.¹⁶ Therefore the advanced section of tribals decided to separate themselves from the non-tribals Hindus. In 1929, Jadav Chandra Khaklari, the then General Secretary of All Assam Kachari Sanmillon with Gurudev Kalichara Brahma, Baburam Brahma, Karendra Narayan Mandal Brahma, Subedar Belbungram Kachari with advocate Mohd. Giasuddin Ahmed submitted a memorandum to the Simmon Commission in Assam demanding separate representation for their people.¹⁷ And after this visit they urgently needed a common political organization for all the tribals of Assam. Hence, the members of the All Assam Kachari Sanmilloni made a study to see if a united political forum could be formed.

Under the efficient leadership of Bhimbar Deuri and Jadav Chandra Khaklari, a general meeting of the All Assam Kachari Sanmilloni was held at Raha on 17th April, 1933. In fact that was the last meeting of the All Assam Kachari Sanmilloni. As per certain resolutions of the meeting the All Assam Kachari Sanmilloni was dissolved and the first political organization of the tribals of Assam, known as the All Assam Plains Tribal League was born and repeated the demand for separate electorate. Jadav Chandra Khaklari and Heramba Nath Bora (Sonowâl) were elected its President and Secretary respectively. The birth of the All Assam Plains Tribal League was a landmark in the socio-political history of Assam. From that time onwards, tribal politics in Assam assumed a form and orientation. The Tribal League repeatedly appealed to all the tribals to present themselves as tribals and to stop the tide of sanskritization¹⁸. Further, the grievances were increasing among the tribals of Assam as their demands of getting representation in the provincial legislature including others were not ful-

filled. Thus, the tribal people of Assam strongly fought for their rights.¹⁹

The aims and objectives of the All Assam Plains Tribal league are as follows:

- 1) Educational development of the tribals of Assam.
- 2) Economic development of the tribals of Assam
- 3) Equal social status and position with other high caste people.
- 4) Safeguard of the interest of all the tribals of Assam.
- 5) To protect the separate ethnic identities of the tribals of Assam.

In a session of working committee of Tribal League held at Dharamtul of Nagaon, in the year 1939, on 19th and 20th November, presided over by Jadav Chandra Khaklari and the secretary was Heramba Nath Bara, adopted some important resolutions. These are as follows:²⁰

- 1) Demand of separate census for the plain tribes of Assam.
- 2) From the upcoming census of 1941, all the tribals of Assam should introduce their original identity as Kachâri or other tribe by leaving the identity of general caste, which they earlier adopted to hide their real identity. And therefore the census of the plain tribes of Assam including Kachâri had to be started from that year.²¹
- 3) The Tribal League was much concerned about the contemporary political developments of Assam. It was thought that for their socio-economic and cultural development they should come into close contact with the political parties of Assam.

Tribal League and Gopinath Bardoloi 1933-1947:

In the meanwhile the Indian Constitutional Reforms accepted the proposals of the Simon Commission for the classification of the territorial expansions into excluded and partially excluded areas²². It was also said that the expenditure on the excluded areas should be non-electoral. This was fully utilized by the Assam Congress which responded to the All Assam Plains Tribal League and supported their demands on the creation of tribal belts and blocks as had been recommended by the Simon Commission. They were convinced that

to translate their demands into a reality, all tribal people should stand united and hence merge with the Congress. The Tribal League therefore in its meeting at Dharamtul, in 1939 under the presidency of Jadav Chandra Khaklari resolved that the Tribal League was in alliance with the Congress party of Assam.²³ This is how the Tribal League and Gopinath Bardoloi came into close contact. Both of them are thinking of the progress of their own people together.

Gopinath Bardoloi had a soft corner for the tribals of Assam for which he won their support. With the issue of tribal belts and blocks, Bardoloi won over the tribal league in forming his Congress Coalition Ministry in 1938. An Accord was signed between the Assam Provincial Congress party and the Tribal League, on 10th September, 1939 at Shillong. The accord recognized the All Assam Plains Tribal league as a separate political unit and they were interested in participating in the election as an independent party.²⁴ And the Assam Congress party will keep separate seats for the tribals in the joint electorate. The Tribal League has to give support only to that party which would be supportive to their demand. The tribal belts and blocks were expected to provide constitutional safeguards to the tribals in their respective areas. The leaders of the Tribal League were convinced by the activities of the Bardoloi Government and therefore 'they not only accepted the principle of joint electorate with reservation of seats offered by Bardoloi but also merged them with the Congress. The Coalition failed because all the Congress leaders were sent to jail on the eve of quit India movement.

And therefore the Tribal league had to join their hand with the Saddulla government. When the Congress Coalition ministry was dissolved and Mahammad Saddulla was ready to form a government and the Tribal League again signed another accord with Saddulla. The leaders of the Tribal League were interested only to secure safeguard of the tribals of Assam and not concerned with who formed the government. It was very clearly confessed by Bhimbar Deuri that the prime motive of the Tribal League was to take care of the

interest of the tribals of Assam. They were concerned about the all round development and progress of the tribal communities of Assam.²⁵ In this context it is worth mentioning here that Bhimbar Deuri asked Gopinath Bardoloi if he should also resign from the ministry or join with the Saddulla government. Bardoloi asked him to enjoy his liberty. Then on the assurance received from Saddulla regarding safeguard of the tribal belts and blocks, Bhimbar Deuri joined the Saddulla ministry. And one of the conditions of that Accord was that Saddulla would take necessary steps to give safeguard to the tribal belts and blocks. But Saddualh ministry had to resign before the implementation of tribal belt and blocks in 1946 due to upcoming general election. During his tenure Saddualh tried to welcome more immigrants on the plan of “grow more food²⁶” scheme. In the general assembly elections of 1946, some tribal leaders won the election on a Congress ticket and some others fought the election separately on the Tribal League ticket. Rabichandra Kachâri, Bhimbar Deuri, Karkchandra Doley, and Kharsing Terang entered the Assam Legislative Assembly as a Tribal League member. The implementation of tribal belts and blocks in Assam were in 1947 by Gopinath Bardoloi was one the greatest achievement of tribals as well as the then government of Assam led by Gopinath Bardoloi. It was implemented in Assam under the chapter 10 of the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Law, 1886 by the British government. The Congress wanted a complete merger of the Tribal League with them while some of the Tribal League leaders were offering strong opposition. Differences arose widening day by day among the members of the Tribal League on the question of the merger with the Congress party. Giving more fuel into this conflict among the members of Tribal League, Harendra Nath Baroua, the then joint secretary of Assam Provincial Congress Committee, prepared a report against the activities of tribal league minister Rupnath Brahma, Rabi Chandra Kachari and Kark Chandra Doley. These three leaders condemned and criticized by the APCC for non-fulfillment of tribal people’s wishes and aspiration. Therefore APCC appealed to the tribal

people to cast their votes in favour of the Congress candidate in the next election. Indirectly they tried to motivate the tribal people into their side. But when they failed to do this they criticized the tribal leaders.²⁷ The situation was further utilized by a section of Assamese chauvinist by circulating false propaganda categorizing all the tribal people as anti Assamese. But this section of people intentionally ignored the fact that in the legislative assembly Bhimbar Deuri raised his voice against the Saddullah government’s steps to invite the immigrants into Assam in the name of ‘grow more food’ scheme.²⁸ He asked in the Assembly session of 1940, February, that how the government of Assam is bound in any way to provide lands to the landless people of the other provinces. Assam is not a charitable institution where all poor and landless peoples of other provinces should be treated and given lands. Finally, in 1946 after winning the general election Bhimbar Deuri from the Tribal League accepted the invitation of Bardoloi to join the government. Although Bhimbar Deuri and Gopinath Bardoloi were above their self-interests, this step of Bhimbar Deuri in Assam politics eventually led to the breakdown of the Tribal League in 1953. On the contrary, Gopinath Bardoloi tried his level best to do welfare of the tribals of the Assam. For instances he took measures to construct many roads, bridges, schools and dispensaries in the tribale areas of Kamrup district.²⁹ Moreover during his tenure he took initiatives for the development of all tribal and non-tribal people of Assam. With this aim he introduced five year plan for rural development on 2nd October 1947. And finally in 1948, 11th March introduced the Assam Rural Panchayat Bill³⁰. Gopinath Bardoloi keeping in mind the Gandhian ideology said that he dreamt of such a country where the poorest shall feel that it is their country, with an active voice and which would be classless. Gopinath Bardoloi’s contribution to the upliftment of tribal and non-tribals of Assam was appreciated by Medini Choudhury, one of the Bodo intellectual. He is of the view that Gopinath Bardoloi was a man of extraordinary wisdom and foresight appeared in the political leadership of Assam. If Bardoloi had lived for

another ten years the history and geography of Assam would have changed completely.³¹ Another social activist Nibaran Bora highlighted Bardoloi's tribal policy by saying that in order to save Assam, Bardoloi with great dedication decided to go together with Assam's original inhabitants, the tribal.³²

Conclusion: In conclusion we may say that the tribals of Assam were greatly dissatisfied with the behavior and attitude of non-tribal people of Assam during the early decades of 20th century. They were provoked to do something for their safeguard of tribal identity. It is also noticed that without political representation the wishes and aspirations of tribals of Assam would never be fulfilled. With the aim of gaining some political privileges and equal social status and economic upliftment, the tribals of Assam decided to form the Tribal League by merged with all other Plains tribal organizations in Assam. At the same time in the politics of Assam we have Gopinath Bardoloi a great enthusiast leader, who contributed a lot in framing the bonding between tribals and non-tribals of Assam. He was the architect of tribal belt and blocks in Assam and also introducer of Assam Rural Panchayat Bill. The period between 1933 to 1953 was a crucial time for tribal movement in Assam whom we also consider as ethnonationalism. One of the far reaching impacts of this new trend of ethnonationalism is seen in the form of autonomy movement among the various tribal communities of Assam. Today most of the plains tribal communities have their own autonomous councils. If we do not have leaders like Gopinath Bardoloi then the scenario of Assam today might be different.

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- ¹⁸ Sanskritization indicates a process of cultural mobility that in taking place in the traditional social system. Moreover by this process a low Hindu caste, or Tribal or other group changes its customs, rituals, ideology and way of life in the direction of high and frequently twice born caste. Vide: M.N Srinivas, Social Change in Modern India, Orient Longman limited, New Delhi, and Reprint 2001.
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- ²³ Durgadhar Khaklari, opcit, pp-5-9
- ²⁴ P.S Dutta, opcit, pp-142-143
- ²⁵ Details may be found in Jogendra Nath Hazarika (ed): Nayak, Souvenir, (In Assamese), Bhimbar Deuri memorial issue, 1948
- ²⁶ Saddulla encouraged migrants from Mymensing district as a campaign of war time need to grow more food. Therefore he opened the forests and grazing grounds for the settlement of the immigrants.
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