

Assam Movement and Communal Polarisation

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Abstract

The Assam movement (1979-1985) is considered as a successful secular and democratic movement led by a student organization. However, there have been allegations that Hindu fundamentalist groups influenced the movement, although such allegations were rejected by the movement leaders. Against this backdrop, the present paper tries to understand whether Assam movement was influenced by Hindu fundamentalist groups. And the paper argues that although communal forces did not have any influence over the movement when it began, both Hindu and Muslim communal forces tried to use this mass movement for spreading their organizational strength. In the process, the Assam movement was communally divided and it left a legacy of psychological division between the Hindus and Muslims of Assam.

Introduction

During last more than three decades after Assam Accord was signed in 1985, which brought about the end to the six years long Assam movement, the Assam movement has always remained an issue of sharp contestation in academics as well as politics of the state. One of such contestation regarding the Assam movement, during this period, has been about its secular character. The leaders and supporters of Assam movement have been demanding that the Assam movement in true sense was a democratic and secular movement. Opposed to this, there have been strong allegations that movement leaders were influenced by communal forces and as a consequence, the Assam movement was communally polarized.

Depicting the influence of communal forces on Assam movement, Isfaqur Rehman writes:

From the very beginning, Assam movement was against democratic and secular traditions, values and rules. Another angle of anti-foreigners movement was the influence and domination of communalism and casteism. At one point of time,

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BJP and RSS elements entered the movement and anti-Muslim feeling started to grow. Muslims were equated with the foreigners. As a result, people of Assam were divided into majority and minority. As a reaction to Hindu fundamentalism, Muslim fundamentalism also tried to influence the movement (Rehman 2016, 40-41).

This gives an impression that Assam movement leaders were influenced by Hindutva organizations like Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangha (RSS) and political parties like Bharatiya Janata party (BJP) and as a consequence Muslim communal forces stepped in the movement. However, the influence of the communal organizations, particularly of the Hindu fundamentalist organizations, on the Assam movement has always remained a big controversy since the days of the movement. Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, the president of AASU during the movement who became the chief minister of Assam after the movement, declined the influence of right wing Hindutva organizations on the movement. He argued that AASU appealed all organizations and political parties of India to support the Assam movement. In response, several political parties and non-political organizations supported the movement, several others remained silent, few political parties like Congress opposed it. Leaders like Atal Behari Vajpayee and Jaswant Singh etc. also supported the movement (Mahanta, 2007, p. 12). Even Hiteswar Saikia, the Congress chief minister during 1983-1985 who tried to control Assam movement with force, did not acknowledge of a big role of RSS in the Assam movement. In 1984, in an interview, he responded that although RSS tried to take the opportunity of the Assam movement, it failed (as cited in Saikia 1993, pp. 39-40).

However, after the Assam Accord was signed, AASU was first congratulated by the president of Delhi University Students' Union, Bijayendra, and the national president of Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), Dr. O.P.Kohli (Nivedan, swajan-cinta, 2007: 12). And most sharp criticism against the Assam Accord also came from Delhi and from a religious person. Maulana Asad Madani, national president of Jamiat and a Congress MP then, on October 9, 1985 in a letter to the prime minister of India alleged that Assam accord *encourages separatisms by treating Assam for Assamese and thus, it is unconstitutional and such agreement will encourage people in other parts of India to start such agitations to achieve their objectives reasonable or unreasonable* (Ahmed, 1999, p.173). These two incidents clearly show that the communal forces had interests in and influence on the Assam movements.

Against such contestation regarding the secular character of Assam movement, this paper tries to understand whether the Assam movement was influenced by communal forces. For that, it analyses different incidents during Assam movement which divided people into the Hindus and Muslims. And the paper comes to the conclusion that both Hindu and Muslim communal forces tried to exploit the biggest mass movement Assam experienced after independence in their own way, and as a result the movement brought about irreparable psychological gap between the indigenous Assamese and the Muslims¹.

Beginning of Assam Movement and Muslims

The by-election to Mangaldoi parliamentary constituency in 1979 emerged as the background of Assam movement. On the basis of the statement of then India's chief election officer S.L. Shakhder on October 24, 1978 about large scale inclusion of foreign nationals in the electoral rolls in northeastern states, All Assam Students Union (AASU) demanded for postponing the by-election in Mangoldoi till the names of illegal foreigners were deleted from the electoral rolls. In the meantime on June 8, 1979 the AASU sponsored a 12-hour general strike to demand the 'detection, disenfranchisement and deportation' of foreign nationals from Assam. In August, 1979 a few political and cultural organizations including the Assam Sahitya Sabha came together to form a coalition called Asom Gana Sangram Parishad (AGSP) to co-ordinate a statewide campaign to draw attention of Assam's problem of illegal migration. That was the beginning of the Assam movement (Baruah, 2001, pp 121-122). The organization behind the movement, AASU and AGSP, estimated the number of illegal foreigners in Assam to be as high as 4.5 to 5 million, or 31 to 34 per cent of the total population of the state in 1971 (Ibid. 118).

The Assam movement started in a period when the state was going through unprecedented political instability under Janata party coalition government in Assam after 1978 Assembly election. In the mean time, after the failed Janata experiment, Indira Gandhi led Congress (I) came back to power at the centre in January, 1980 with a thumping majority. AASU submitted a written memorandum to the Prime Minister on February 2, 1980 where it mentioned the demands of the Assam movement, which became the reference point of the entire movement and later of the Assam Accord. In the beginning of the memorandum, AASU mentioned: 'The problem which is agitating the minds of people of entire North East Region is the problem of foreigner from the neighbouring countries particularly Bangladesh and Nepal'. In its seven demands, the first was: 'Foreign national must be detected and deported from our country'. Among some Proposals included in the memorandum, the first was: 'The National Register of Citizens (NRC) of 1951 should be made up-to-date by taking into consideration the additions to the number of each family since the time of compilation of the Register'.

The demands and proposals mentioned above meant that the movement mainly targeted the illegal foreigners from Nepal and Bangladesh who immigrated to Assam after 1951. The leaders of the movement wanted NRC of 1951 as the basic document to determine the nationality in Assam and strictly demanded 1951 as cut-off year for detecting and deporting the foreign nationals from Assam. The demand for 1951 cut-off year frightened the Muslims, particularly the immigrants, of Assam. A large section of immigrant Muslims came to Assam since independence till the birth of Bangladesh.

When the movement started in 1979, the leadership of the movement identified all

'outsiders' (*Bohiragato*) as the enemy to the existence and identity of indigenous Assamese people. However, the movement shifted from the issue of 'outsiders' to 'foreigners' (*Bideshi*) within very short period and the memorandum submitted to the prime Minister in February 1980 mentioned only about foreigners. *Bohiragato* meant all the outsiders living in Assam, even from different states of India. In a liberal democracy like India, a democratic movement cannot sustain with such an undemocratic demand and Assam movement also had to shift its position from *Bohiragato* to *Bideshi* very soon. However, this shift created an impression among the immigrant Muslims that the movement leaders shifted its position only to target them.

Moreover, the movement leaders and supports began to label all the Bengali speaking Hindus and Muslims as 'Bangladeshis', i.e, illegal foreigners. In the course of the movement, the illegal Hindu immigration from Nepal and Bangladesh took a back seat and East Bengal origin Muslims became the target of the movement leaders and supporters.

Communalisation of Assam Movement

Both the Hindu and Muslim religious organizations tried to communalise the Assam movement. Even the state tried to communally influence the movement.

Influence of RSS and Jamiat

AASU formed a *seswasevak bahini* (volunteer force) in 1980 to mobilize the movement. And many believe that *seswasevak bahini* was formed as per the suggestion and instruction of the RSS. The supreme commander of the *seswasevak bahini*, Joynath Sarma who became minister under AGP government in 1985, was known to be very close to RSS (Manoj Nath, 2015, p.221). Many believe that the *seswasevak bahini* was involved with several communal clashes that occurred during the movement (Monoj Nath 2015 : 165). On February 21, 1982 RSS convened a *Purbanchaliya Hindu Sanmillan* in Guwahati where all Hindus were appealed to unite under Hindu religious flag, irrespective of caste and language, so that they could play a dominant and determining role in entire north east. Such appeal, in the midst of Assam movement, worked as a catalyst to unite Hindus against the Muslims (Borgohain 2001 : 15). ABVP strongly supported the cause of the Assam movement and it organized several seminars on the issue of the movement in different places like Delhi, Hyderabad and Bhubaneswar etc. Even some prominent leaders of Assam movement joined the seminar held in Hyderabad. On the day of *Rakhi Bandhan* in 1983, ABVP used lakhs of *Assam Rakhi* in the entire country and observed the occasion as 'Save Assam' day. A delegation of the organization carried a *Swahid Jyoti* (Martyr Light) from Rajghat and handed over it to the AASU leaders in Guwahati on 1st October, 1983. Next day, ABVP organized a mass *satyagraha* in Guwahati in support of the movement where almost 1000 members of the organization from all over the country participated (Bhattacharya, 2011: 204-205).

The Jamiat ul ulema e Hind (Jamiat), a Hindu religious organization, opposed the Assam movement from the very beginning. Assam movement made Jamiat very relevant among the Muslims of Assam against the idea that the movement was controlled by RSS. By the end of 1980, Jamiat began to advocate the cause of the minorities against the movement. It took the lead to unite all the minority organisations against the movement. It even aligned with the Citizens' Right Preservation Committee (CRPC), which was an organization of Hindu Bengalis, the linguistic minorities of Assam. It played an important role in creation of the All Assam Minority Students' Union (AAMSU) in 1980 as an opposition to the AASU and Assam movement (Ahmed, 1999: 149-151). During the movement, through regular publications, Jamiat tried to poisoning the minds of Muslim readers (Hussain, 1993: 132) against the Assam movement and the Hindus. Jamiat imported religious leaders from different parts of India, during the entire movement period, to campaign against the movement in the immigrant Muslims dominated areas in an objective to unite the Muslims against the movement. Jamiat even termed the leaders of the Assam movement as 'extremist' and 'secessionist'. In a resolution of the Jamiat, Assam unit 14th conference on 24th and 25th April, 1984, it said *due to abnormal situation arising out of the result of so called foreigners movement launched by the extremist secessionist force since the last 4/5 years constantly threatening the sense of security of the people belonging to all minority communities....* (as cited in Ahmed, 1999: 207).

It clearly proves that both Hindu and Muslim religious organizations tried to influence the Assam movement. Within one year the Assam movement began, AAMSU was born which marked the origin of Muslim counter to Assam movement. With the birth of AAMSU, the Assam movement started to get communally polarized. And the appointment of Anuwara Taimur as the Assam Chief Minister by Congress (I) high command in December 1980 also contributed significantly to this communal polarization

Birth of AAMSU

On March 29 and 30, 1980 a minority convention was held in Jaleswar, Goalpara district where mainly Muslim politicians and youths and a section of Hindu Bengali leaders participated. In this convention, AAMSU and All Assam Minority Yuva Parishad(AAMYYP) were formed to protect and safeguard the minority communities from the Assam movement (Ahmed, 1999: 150). Till the beginning of the Assam movement, AASU was strongly supported by the students from immigrant Muslim community and the organisation had strong presence in the educational institutions located at the areas inhabited by these Muslims. The immigrant Muslims from Brahmaputra valley stood behind AASU as a community in the medium of instruction movement launched by the organization in 1972. After the beginning of the Assam movement, particularly after the formation of AAMSU, immigrant Muslims as a community deserted AASU. The community began to consider it as a

threat and AAMSU emerged as the new platform of young leaders and students from the community. However, the indigenous Muslims of Assam opposed the formation of AAMSU. After the formation of AAMSU, in an appeal, Asomiya Muslim Public Relation Committee stated that the formation of AAMSU was unnecessary and it would bring about division between indigenous communities and Muslim community (Thakur, 2014: 26-27).

AAMSU came into existence as an antithesis to AASU under the patronage of the Congress. On 3rd March, 1980, in a talk with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi who visited Guwahati for discussions with the leaders of Assam movement, the leaders of AAMSU declared their readiness to accept 1971 as the cut-off year for determination of illegal foreigners in Assam (Hussain, 1993: 121). And within less than one year of the beginning of the Assam movement, AAMSU emerged as a counter force of AASU and a counter movement was launched by AAMSU against Assam movement on 26th May, 1980 by observing 'Demand Day' throughout the state. On the demand day, in Howley town of Barpeta district, AAMSU organized a big rally where four persons were killed in police firing (Ahmed, 1999: 153). Many allege that in Howley rally, AAMSU supporters shouted the slogan 'Jai Bangla' by taking Bangladesh national flag in their hands (Borpujari, 1999: 50).

The formation of AAMSU was the institutionalization of Muslim opposition to Assam movement. While AASU was demanding 1951 as the cut off year for identifying illegal foreign nationals in Assam against 1971 cut off year wanted by central government, AAMSU demanded that 25th March 1971 should be the 'base date' for detection of foreigners from Assam on the basis of Indo-Bangladesh Treaty of 1972. Indira Gandhi led central government was prompt to make AAMSU a part of negotiation on Assam movement as the organization has accepted the proposal of Mrs. Gandhi regarding the 'cut off' date. By making AAMSU a party in the table of negotiations, Congress led central government tried to show its concerns towards the causes of Muslims in Assam. However, the decision of the central government to make AAMSU a party of discussions vis-à-vis the Assam movement made the AASU anguished. AASU labeled AAMSU as the agents of illegal Bangladeshis living in Assam. There were reports of frequent clashes between the supported of AASU and AAMSU during the movement period. For instance, AASU called for 36 hours strike from 17th November 1980 demanding discussion on the situation of Assam in the winter session of parliament and during the strike a clash occurred between AASU and AAMSU in Dalgaon, Sonitpur. Assam government had to impose curfew in that area on 18th of November (Thakur, 2014: 35).

After AAMSU was patronized by the central government, the supporters of the Assam movement began to consider AAMSU as the organization of illegal Bangladeshis. On the other hand, AAMSU openly aligned with the Jamiat, a religious organization, to oppose Assam movement although it criticized AASU of being controlled by RSS. The organization mobilized and united the immigrant Muslim community against

AASU and Assam movement. In the whole process, the community, particularly living in Brahmaputra valley, started to believe that they were not recognized as Assamese; rather they were recognized as illegal Bangladeshis, by the leaders and supporters of the movement despite their attempt to integrate with Assamese language, culture and society.

Anuwara Taimur as Assam Chief Minister

After 1978 Assam Assembly election, Janata party alliance formed the first ever non-Congress government in Assam. But, from the very beginning, Janata government was instable because of internal conflicts and contradictions among the parties in government. The Congress (I) returned to power at the centre under Indira Gandhi in early 1980. After Mrs. Gandhi assumed office in Delhi, massive defection took place in the politics of Assam. Congress (I), which won only eight seats in 1978 election, increased the strength of its MLAs to 45 in December 1980 as a consequence of defections, although the party failed to reach the majority number in the Assam Assembly. At this point of time, under the patronage of Mrs. Gandhi, Congress (I) formed a government in Assam on 6th December 1980 with Mrs. Anuwara Taimur as the chief Minister, which lasted till 26th June, 1981. Anuwara Taimur's elevation as the chief minister of Assam, at this point of time, turned the Assam movement into communal playground.

AASU strongly opposed the formation of Anuwara Taimur led Assam government. It successfully observed total black-out in the state to register protest on the day Taimur government assumed office (Hussain, 1993, p.147). The vernacular press of Assam began to term the Taimur government as a 'minority government'. From the number equation, Janata governments led by Golap Borbora and Jogen Hazarika, before Taimur took over, were also minority governments. However, the Assamese print media labeled only Taimur government as 'minority government' (Hoque, 2007, p.301) only because Taimur was a Muslim. The Assamese press played a crucial role in the origin and evolution of Assam movement. The Assamese press openly supported the movement. Most often it spread emotions in favour of the movement and hatred towards who opposed the movement or differed with it.

Assamese press began to spread that immigrants would be encouraged and Muslim would get the benefit of the government jobs and services under Muslim chief minister Anuwara Taimur. As a reaction to the Muslim threat created by press, the influence of RSS and BJP on Assam movement suddenly increased (ibid, 301). Taimur government, on the other hand, appointed several Muslim officers in chief minister's office. Muslim officers were assigned responsibilities of important department in Assam secretariat which created dissatisfaction among the non-Muslim officers (Manoj Nath, 2015: 115). This government, for the first time, tried to discipline ethic Assamese government employees, especially senior officials, who were known sympathisers of the movement. For many, the actions of Taimur

government, on one hand, created a kind of legitimacy crisis in the state and on the other were aimed to de-Assamisation of state bureaucracy, which again reinforced the Assamese minoritisation at the hands of immigrants (Baruah, 2001: 128-129).

Anuwara Taimur's selection as the chief minister of Assam by the Congress High Command communally divided the society of Assam. Before Taimur, Muslim Congress stalwarts like Fakharuddin Ali Ahmed and Moinul Hoque Chowdhury were never considered for the post of chief minister of Assam by Congress High Command. On the other hand, Taimur was not a very prominent and mass based leader. Even she did not demand for chief ministership. Still, Congress made her the chief minister of Assam only to create a Muslim vote bank in favour of the party. Mrs. Gandhi realized that the Muslims of Assam were in crisis because of the Assam movement and if Congress could show its sympathy towards them at that point of time, the community would become a vote bank for the party. This Congress strategy gave dividend in 1983 Assam Assembly election when the immigrant Muslim community solidly stood behind the party against the movement. Assam Muslims are broadly divided into indigenous Muslims and immigrant Muslims and Anuwara Taimur represented both the groups. While Taimur was an indigenous Muslim, she represented Dargaon constituency, overwhelmingly immigrant Muslim dominated. This link of Taimur with both the groups of Muslims in Assam worked in favour of her when Congress planned to create a Muslim vote bank in Assam by appointing a Muslim chief minister in the situation created by Assam movement.

A section of indigenous Muslims alienated themselves from the Assam movement after Taimur became the chief minister. On the other hand, the movement leaders, because of Taimur episode, began to label Congress as the friend of illegal Muslim Bangladeshis. As a whole, the Taimur episode sharply divided the Assam movement in communal lines.

State's Attempt to Communalise the Movement

The government of India has always remained soft towards the Hindus remained in East Pakistan/Bangladesh, although India became secular after independence. The large scale and continuous illegal migration from East Pakistan to Assam since independence has always been ignored by the central government only to help the Hindus living in East Pakistan to migrate to India. No government at the centre, whether formed by Congress or non-Congress parties, has shown exception to this attitude. Even after almost seven decades of independence, in 2015, the Narendra Modi led BJP government has decided to give citizenship to Hindus and other religious minority groups of Bangladesh in India who have already migrated.

The Congress led central government also tried to communalise the issue of foreigners in Assam movement. The government urged the movement leadership to treat the 'displaced persons' from East Pakistan/Bangladesh specially. By the

‘displaced persons’, government wanted to safeguard the Hindus immigrated from East Pakistan/Bangladesh. However, the leadership of the Assam movement declined to distinguish the illegal foreigners on the basis of religion.

AASU’s stand in the whole issue was visible from its letter dated November 13, 1980 sent by its general secretary Bhriagu Kumar Phukan to the Home Minister of India. The letter clearly said,

Only yesterday the Prime Minister mentioned the Assam problem in the NIC meeting and said that any solution must not harm the minorities. Will you kindly explain to the people of Assam how detection of foreigners, on the basis of 1951 NRC only to avoid harassment to any genuine Indian, would harm the Indian minorities irrespective of religion? On the other hand, in the last Delhi meeting you suggested that the ‘displaced persons’ should be given special treatment, implying thereby that religion should be a factor in the detection process. We are all opposed to it. If the Central Government adopts such an attitude, the unity of the different section of Indians residing in Assam and belonging to different religious groups will be jeopardized. We can never allow such a situation to develop. The detention process, therefore, must be on the basis of the constitutional provisions and the 1951 NRC (Cited in Ahmed 1999: 201-202).

Communal Polarisation in Assam Movement

The influence of Hindutva organizations on Assam movement leaders, role of Muslim religious organizations to counter the movement, the origin of AAMSU and Anuwara Taimur’s chief ministership communally divided the Assam movement. The happenings of Assam movement since the mid 1981 were consequences of this communal division.

Election 1983

In the post independent period, 1983 was the most violent year in Assam. The Assam Assembly election held in February of that year and the Nellie massacre just after the election significantly influenced the future course of Assam movement and created everlasting distrust between the indigenous Assamese and immigrant Muslims.

The sixth Assam Legislative Assembly was dissolved pre-maturely on March 19, 1982. So according to the constitutional provisions Assam would have to go in for an election before March 18, 1983 in order to elect a new House (Hussain, 1993: 147). Mrs. Gandhi led central government was adamant to held Assembly elections in the state in due time. The government was sure that an election with a moderate to high turnout would weaken the claims of the movement about its representativeness and its power capability. On the other hand, the movement leaders were also adamant to oppose any election without removal of the names of illegal immigrants from the

electoral rolls, as they claimed that large number of illegal foreigners had already entered their names in electoral rolls. The organizers of the movement called for a boycott of the election, calling it Assam's 'last struggle for survival'. In this backdrop, the election of 1983 became the focus of a contest between the Assam movement and the Indian state (Baruah, 2001: 131).

The boycott call given by movement leaders was largely successful in the ethnic Assamese dominated constituencies. In some strong ethnic Assamese constituencies the polling was as low as 0.38 per cent, 0.40 per cent, and 0.68 per cent. In spite of such low voting percentage in ethnic Assamese dominated constituencies, the average voting in Assembly Elections, 1983 was 31.46 per cent. This became possible because of normal voting turnout in North Cachar (55.91 per cent) and Karbi Anglong (39.54 per cent) districts, both hill districts mostly unaffected by the Assam movement (ibid, 133) and normal voting turnout in Hindu and Muslim Bengali dominated constituencies in lower Assam and Barak valley.

In 17 constituencies (out of total 126) elections had to be cancelled because of total breakdown of law and administration. However, the immigrant communities participated in the election in large numbers. The Bengali Hindus and immigrant Muslims participated in the election to form an immigrant friendly government which could protect them from the Assam movement. Congress leaders including Prime Minister Indira Gandhi appealed the minorities in the election campaigning to vote for Congress and promised their protection. The immigrant Muslims and Hindus rallied behind the Congress in this election for their protection. Because of their support, Congress won 91 seats out of total 109 constituencies where elections were held. Total 33 Muslims elected to the Assembly in this election, which is the highest number of Muslim MLAs in Assam Legislative Assembly till now. Among 33 Muslims elected 26 won in Congress ticket.

The 1983 elections established the immigrant Muslims community as the main enemy of the movement leaders and supporters. The movement leaders appealed to boycott the election and the immigrant Hindus and Muslims participated in the election in large number against this call of boycott. And, thirty three Muslims were elected to the Assam Assembly in this election. So many Muslims could win in this election as most of the indigenous communities did not take part in the election. In 1972 Assam Assembly elections, 21 Muslims were elected to Assembly and that was the highest number of Muslim MLAs till then. In 1978 election, the number of Muslims elected to Assam Assembly increased to 28. This increase of number of Muslim MLAs in Assam Assembly became an argument at the hands of the movement leaders and supporters in favour of large scale illegal immigration of Bangladeshi Muslims to Assam. The election of 33 Muslims to Assam Assembly in 1983 election, which was largely boycotted by indigenous Assamese, made this argument even stronger that illegal Bangladeshi Muslims were becoming the threat to the political existence and identity of the indigenous Assamese.

During 1983 election campaigning, both the supporters and opponents of the election tried to communally polarise the election and the Assam movement. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi campaigned for consecutive three days from February 10 and she addressed election meetings only in immigrant Muslim and Hindu inhabited areas from Barak valley and lower Assam of Brahmaputra valley. Another two central ministers Abdul Ganikhan Chowdhury and Nihar Ranjan Laskar also campaigned in minority dominated areas. All these Congress leaders appealed the Bengali Hindus and immigrant Muslims to rally behind the Congress to oppose the Assam movement. There were reports that the central ministers, Chowdhury and Laskar made highly communal comments during their election campaigning in minority dominated areas (Manoj Nath, 2015: 134). On the other hand, BJP leaders like Atal Behari Vajpayee campaigned against the election. And Assamese press, during the election, blindly supported every move of the movement leaders and labeled every minority as illegal Bangladeshis who participated in the election.

Nellie Massacre

AASU not only boycotted the 1983 election, but also decided to stop the holding of election by using all the means available and at any cost. This stand of AASU made the 1983 election a battleground between the movement supporters and the central government. Government imposed different black laws like Assam Special Power (Press) Act which censored the media, imposed ESMA on state government employees to ensure their participation in the process of the election. Assam was flooded with paramilitary forces to hold the election and the government even imported polling personnel from Bihar to hold election as a large section of Assam government employees defied all dictates of the government and stood with the movement.

Assam movement became leaderless during the election. All the top leaders of the movement were arrested and kept in jail for holding the election. In this critical stage, the movement was led by second rank leadership. This is one of the causes that Assam movement made several mistakes during 1983 election. Assam experienced unprecedented breakdown of law and order and violence during 1983 Assembly election. AASU declared that 130 movement supporters were martyred in government violence during the election. On the other hand, government declared that 3026 persons lost their lives in election related violence. According to the Report of the Commission of Enquiry on Assam Disturbance, 1983, during 1st January and 30th April of 1983, in election related violence, the loss of lives in different districts were: Dibrugarh – 54, Sibsagar – 88, Lakhimpur- 350, Nagaon – 1811, Karbi Anglong – 16, Darrang – 493, Kamrup – 92 and Goalpara – 119 (ibid, 135). At different places, Assam movement supporters used force and involved in violence to stop the holding of the election. These election related violence eroded the non-violent character of Assam movement.

During the election, communal clashes occurred at different places. The election was held in three phases on 14th, 17th and 20th February, 1983. During the second phase of election, in communal clashes, 500 immigrant Muslims and same number of Hindu Bengalis were killed in Saolkhowa, south of Mangaldoi and in Khairabari, north of Mangaldoi. During 10th and 12th February, several villages were burnt in Gahpur of Sonitpur district where at least 150 people died and 2500 became homeless (Borpujari, 1999: 52). On February 18, 1983, a large-scale massacre took place in Nellie, near Jagiroad of Nagaon District, where around 1600 people died. In this incident, the local people, including the Assamese and tribes attacked the Muslim immigrants from East Bengal (Kimura 2003: 227).

The Nellie massacre severely affected Gandhian ideology of the movement and brought about significant changes to the direction of the Assam movement. The movement leaders declined any role from their part in Nellie massacre and pushed the blame to the Tiwa tribe who inhabited in nearby areas of Nellie. However, it was clear to everybody that the massacre was a revenge on the immigrant Muslims living in that area for their participation in the election. On April 10, 1983 newly elected chief minister Hiteswar Saikia alleged that the volunteer force of AASU led the Nellie massacre (Manoj Nath, 2015: 207). The leaders of volunteer force sent a secret written appeal to all its members by giving instructions for stopping the holding of election. In this appeal, the volunteers were urged to use all kinds of violence like burning the government offices, to cut trees for blocking communication, to disrupt electric supply, to physically torture those who support the election, to use bow and arrow etc. for stopping the election (Bora, 2007: 353-357)

The 1983 Assam Assembly election and the Nellie massacre while on one hand sharply divided the Assam movement on communal lines, on the other, visibly established the enemies for both the supporters and opponents of the movement. While the election made the immigrant Muslims 'enemy' for the movement supporters, Nellie massacre posited the movement supports as the 'enemy' for the immigrant Muslims. Even a section of indigenous Muslims, who supported the movement from its beginning, began to rethink about their position because of the growing anti-Muslim tone of the movement that became visible in Nellie.

Exclusion of Muslims' Interests

The 1983 Assembly elections and its related violence, especially one in Nellie, raised a question mark on the non violent and secular character of Assam movement. In this situation, Muslim leaders of AASU organized a special meeting among themselves on 11th and 12th April, 1983 in Guwahati which discussed about the communal violence occurred during the election. Among these leaders, vice president of AASU, president and organizational secretary of Kamrup district AASU, general secretary of Bokakhat AASU were also present. The meeting sent a letter to the central committee of AASU expressing their concerns in post Assam Assembly

election (1983) situation and demanded steps from the AASU leadership to contain the spread of communal violence.

The content of the letter showed how Muslims felt alienated from the Assam movement after the Nellie massacre. The letter openly alleged, referring some reports published in national media, that the supreme commander of AASU volunteer force, Mr. Joynath Sarma, had close association with RSS and he should be immediately expelled from AASU. The letter questioned AASU's role in declaring the attackers as martyrs during communal clashes and demanded a well formulated policy in declaration of martyrs. It appealed the central leadership to ask all units of to be vigil against any kind of activities of communal organizations like RSS, Viswa Hindu Parishad, Jamat-E-Islami, Jamiat etc. so that the movement can be saved from communal conspiracy of these organizations. The letter demanded that steps be taken to stop forthwith the practice of publishing any attack as attack by Bangladeshis or *Miyans* by regional media (Ahmed 1999 : 154-157).

However, the central leadership of AASU rejected the allegation that any leader of the organisation, including Joynath Sarma, had any association with RSS. Without giving any importance to the concerns of Muslims expressed in the letter, AASU leadership alleged that the meeting of the AASU's Muslim leaders was Congress sponsored. On this allegation, the central leadership of AASU suspended its vice-president and expelled all other leaders from AASU who organized the meeting. This intolerance showed by AASU central leadership towards the concerns of the Muslim leaders of the organization clearly proved how Assam movement ignored the interests and views of the Muslims. For many, the expulsion of the Muslim leaders by AASU central leadership was a clear indication of strong influence of Hindu communal organizations over the movement leaders (Hussain, 1999: 127).

The Muslim leaders of the Assam movement were mainly from the indigenous Muslim community. The expulsion of these leaders compelled the whole community of indigenous Muslims to introspect of their role in the movement, Already, Nellie massacre clearly showed that Muslims had become the main target of movement supporters. Gradually, a section of the community alienated itself from the movement.

Imposition of IM(DT) Act

The Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunal) [IM(DT)] Act was the state's response to the Assam movement. The IM(DT) Act, 1983 was to provide for the establishment of tribunals for the determination, in a fair manner, of the question whether a person is an illegal migrant to enable the central government to expel illegal migrants from India and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto. The Act set up tribunals in each district, which are to be presided over by retired district/additional district judges. Congress (I) ruled both at the centre and in Assam at the time of its formulation. The parliament passed the Act to address the issue

raised by the Assam movement, i.e., the identification and deportation of illegal foreigners from Assam. The central government led by Indira Gandhi formulated the Act in an objective to marginalise and weaken the movement by making the issue of illegal foreigners in Assam very complex. And Congress party, by formulating this act in parliament, tried to create vote banks among the immigrant communities in Assam who became the target of the movement.

The IM(DT) Act, besides making the process of identification and deportation of illegal foreigners from Assam very complex, also divided the society in communal lines. The IM(DT) was an immigration act and had no relation to majority or minority community. However, since the imposition of the Act on Assam, Congress had been openly arguing and campaigning in the state that the act was to safeguard the interests of the minorities. During Assam movement after the act was implemented, Congress argued that it was for safeguarding the interests of the minorities from the movement. After the signing of Assam Accord, Congress started to publish that the act was to safeguard the interests of the minorities from the clauses of the accord. The Act became a tool at the hands of Congress to show its solidarity towards the minorities. The argument and campaigning of the Congress in favour of IM(DT) Act clearly showed why Congress government at the centre formulated it and how the party used it for vote bank politics. The imposition of IM(DT) Act on Assam helped Congress in Assam electorally as the minorities, particularly the immigrant Muslims, began to consider the party as an ally against the political parties and organizations who supported the Assam movement. Against the Congress politics of vote bank via IM(DT) Act, most of political parties and non-political organizations of the state continuously demanded the repeal of the act since its implementation. During the period the Act was in force, the politics of Assam was sharply divided into pro and anti IM(DT) groups. And the anti IM(DT) group began to label the entire immigrant Muslim community of Assam as illegal Bangladeshis for the community's support to the IM(DT) Act. This has, again, alienated the legal and genuine immigrant Muslims from the society of Assam.

The Assam Accord

The Assam movement came to an end with the signing of the Assam accord on August 15, 1985. The Assam Accord fixed 24th March, 1971 as the cut-off date for identification and deportation of illegal foreigners from Assam against the demand of the Assam movement to fix 1951 as the cut-off year. Moreover, the IM(DT) Act, which was an obstacle to the process of identification of illegal foreigners in Assam and was considered as a safeguard by immigrant communities living in Assam, was not withdrawn by the government as a result of the signing of the accord although the movement leaders strongly demanded for its repeal. In both cases the demands of the minority organizations like AAMSU prevailed. Still, the Muslim organizations strongly opposed the Accord. In a convention of the Minority Coordination Committee attended by CRPC, AAMSU, Jamiat, Minority Yuva Parishad and Minority Forum

of Assam held on 28th and 29th September, 1985, just after the Assam Accord, at Guwahati strongly opposed the Accord and resolved that "*The Convention considers the Accord detrimental to the interests and safety of the minorities living in Assam. It has created a fear psychosis in the minds of the minorities*"(Cited in Ahmed 1999: 229-234).

Assam Accord again divided the indigenous Assamese and immigrant Muslims, this time politically. Assam movement leaders formed Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) after Assam Accord was signed. The CRPC formed United Minority Front (UMF) against AGP. Assam Jamiat actively supported CRPC in the formation of UMF. A large section of immigrant Muslims voted for UMF in 1985 Assam Assembly election against AGP. The UMF bagged 17 seats in this election, mainly from immigrant Muslim dominated constituencies. However, after the 1985 Assam Assembly elections, Assam Jamiat left to patronise UMF. Opposite to it, Jamiat tried to determine the electoral behaviour of immigrant Muslims in consecutive Assam Assembly elections since 1991. And in 2005, after Supreme Court of India repealed the IM(DT) Act, Jamiat formed Assam United Democratic Front (AUDF), which became All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) in 2009, to safeguard the rights of the minorities in post- IM(DT) situations. The Assam Jamiat has been patronising the AIUDF in all consecutive elections held in Assam since 2006. The active role played by Jamiat during Assam movement helped the organization to play an electoral role in politics of Assam after Assam movement and a political role via AIUDF since 2005.

Assam Accord was vehemently opposed by the minority organizations led by immigrant section of Muslims. However, within one decade of the Accord, the Muslim organizations started to support the Assam Accord. In 1994, Assam Jamiat resolved to support Assam Accord. In the whole process, Ganatantrik Adhikar Sangram Samiti (GASS) played a crucial role. After Congress came to power in Assam in 1991 under Hiteswar Saikia, Assam witnessed a situation where all the democratic processes were made hostage by army and paramilitary forces under direct patronage from the government, in the name of containing terrorism of United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), an outlawed organisation. Then GASS, a civil society organization, emerged to protect the democratic institutions and processes from becoming a pawn at the hands of armed forces. Maulana Abdul Hoque and Hafiz Rashid Chowdhury, both Assam Jamiat leaders, were among the organizers of the GASS. In that time, GASS leadership tried to bring a consensus among different communities and groups of Assam on the cut off date fixed by the Assam Accord. Till then, different recently immigrant communities in Assam were opposed to the cut off date fixed by the Assam Accord. As a result of this attempt of the GASS leadership, the immigrant Muslim community started to accept the Assam Accord and the cut off date fixed by it. Hoque and Chowdhury appealed the immigrant Muslim community to accept Assam Accord and actively campaigned for convincing them on cut off date fixed by the Accord (Gohain 2018, 1&8).

Conclusion

The Assam movement leaders successfully defeated the central government's attempt to communalise the issue of illegal foreigners during the movement. But they could not contain the influence of religious fundamentalist organizations from influencing the movement. The role of the Hindu fundamentalist organizations in the Assam movement was not direct, although they tried to influence the movement. But Muslim opposition to Assam movement came directly from the communal organization, the Jamiat. Jamiat led the process to form AAMSU, the Muslim counter to Assam movement. And after the emergence of AAMSU and Anuwara Taimur was made the chief minister of Assam, the Assam movement was heavily influenced by both Hindu and Muslim communalism. This polarized the society of Assam in communal lines and created unprecedented distrust between indigenous Assamese and immigrant Muslims.

This distrust has made the immigrant Muslims of Assam defensive and communal in attitude. The situation has been explained by Mosudul Hoque as-

The incidents and publicity during the Assam movement hurt the minorities of Assam who for centuries lived together with the majority and shared common culture. The orthodoxy among the Muslims of Assam, particularly of upper Assam, started from here. The first thing was that Muslims became introvert. More number of Muslims began to participate in Janaja. Use of mike for Ajan, attempt to show Muslim solidarity, emphasis on Muslim dress also started from then. The Maulavis from north India started to visit Assam frequently. With the increase of the visit of Hindutva leaders and journalists, Mulla-Moulanas visit to Assam also increased proportionately. Ordinary Muslims began to spend lots of time in reading Quran and religious discussions in Masjids. Communal elements began to root in Muslim mentality (Hoque 2007).

Notes

1. Muslims are the largest religious minority group of Assam consisting 34.22 per cent of total population of the state (2011 census). According to 2011 census reports, among total 27 districts in the state, nine districts are Muslim majority and three other districts have Muslim population more than 35 per cent. Another seven districts have Muslim population between 10 and 35 per cent.

Muslims of Assam are divided into two broad categories: indigenous and immigrant. The indigenous Muslims migrated to Assam since the 13th century till the took-over of Assam by British. On the other hand, the immigrant Muslims migrated to Assam under British colonialism and during 1951-1971 after independence. The immigrant Muslims of Assam are also known as *Miyani* Muslims. The Assam movement targeted mainly the immigrant section of Muslims.

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