

Looking Back to the Context of Political History of Assam

Rajen Saikia (ed.), (2024), Political History of Assam (1947-1971) Vol. I; Publication Board of Assam, Guwahati; 590 pages

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The first volume of Political History of Assam edited by eminent historian Rajen Saikia has been an elaborate exercise of analysing the contexts of political developments in Assam at a crucial phase of history of a contesting region confronting with post-colonial complications. With the coverage of a critical timeline from 1947-1971, the book is expected to be the most elucidating compilation on Assam and the Northeast as a repository of political events and social developments that took place during this crucial period of history.

Since the dawn of independence, the north-eastern part of the country remained politically contested and socially volatile. Several political developments coming alongside of independence such as partition and its aftermath, rise of ethnic movements and assertions, rise of insurgency, question of infiltration and refugees etc. among many others left the region as a ground of contestation in the new architecture of the nation-state.

Therefore, a political history of the time is a hugely challenging task underscoring the significance of specific time and context of historical developments and events. The book has been divided into eight (8) chapters including a lucid introduction of Assam including the political developments right from the Varman Dynasty of fourth century to the end of colonial rule in the 1940s. The introductory chapter also vehemently dealt with the journey of economic development in the state of Assam.

The second chapter *Approaches to Nation Building* analyses the journey of Assam that started in independent India after escaping the 'grouping scheme' and many other political hurdles and how the leadership of Gopinath Bordoloi was instrumental in the process of building new Assam. He was also instrumental in establishing several institutions including the Gauhati University, Assam Engineering College,

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the Ayurvedic College and many other foundational initiatives during his short but profound tenure of leadership in the state. Considering his contribution and vision for the state, Mr. Bordoloi was, therefore, eulogised as the ‘blend of Gandhian nationalism and Nehrubian Modernity’ (p.62). The author also attributed Mr. Bordoloi as a ‘man of clear perspective, courage and governance’ keeping in mind his pioneering works for development of Assam and ‘vision for a better future of the region’ (p.73).

Moreover, the legacy of Gandhian ideology had also significant imprint in the society and polity of Assam in the process of nation building in early years. The author has described how the Bhoodan movement reached the state and the idea of ‘Sarvodaya’ was brought into practice for welfare of people in the region. The author also outlined the history and the journey of the largest political organisation – Indian National Congress in Assam during the given period of time. The Congress leadership in Assam has often been challenged by internal dissent, with different factions aligning themselves with various leaders or ideologies. The concomitant development of counter political organisations and movements was also an important part of post-independent political history in Assam. The author noted the rise of the Forward Block in the state which tried to play a constructive role in the society and politics of the state by advocating for ‘communal harmony and unity in the country’.

The third chapter *Challenges and Responses* deals with critical challenges that the state had to confront in the initial decades after independence. The question of infiltration and refugees which shaped the future course of politics in the state to a great extent has been focussed in the first two sections of the chapter. The following sections describe the rise of different ideological movements including Socialist, Communist and Hindu Nationalist in the state.

Influx of immigrants from East Bengal and subsequently from East Pakistan had been an established fact in the pages of history. Immigration had an alarming effect on the demography of Assam and its impact on the indigenous people of the state has also been immense. Several policies of the colonial and post-colonial governments and the aftermath of partition had resulted not only in changing the demography and but also the socio-cultural and political milieu of the state. The author referred to the political and administrative debates and discourses and also quoted several fact and figures to suggest how Assam was affected by the illegal immigrants and refugees. The role of the central government was always ambiguous as there was no proper move to stop infiltration of people from East Pakistan. The Author quoted many alarming reports and statements suggesting vulnerability of Assam in the wake of continuous and unrestricted influx of people. Pitambardev Goswami, as quoted by the author, wrote a letter to Pandit Nehru in 1962 stating “...due to (defective) policy and inefficiency of Assam Congress and leaders of the Government, basking under the sunshine of your favour, Assam is demonstrably slipping into the bosom of Pakistan by a gradual process” (p.112).

The account of Socialist movements in India and how it grew within the Indian National Congress during the course of freedom struggle has been well depicted by the author. The historical developments such as formation of the Congress Socialist Party to Socialist Party and Praja Socialist Party, the journey of socialist movement in the country and particularly in Assam was a significant development in the post-colonial history of Assam. Though the socialist movements grew in the state, it could not make stronghold due to internal splits and dissidences. The socialist parties ‘dissolved themselves in the Janata Party in 1977’ (p.179).

The author has distinguished the socialists from the communists on several grounds. Although, both the socialist and communist have common premise of socialism, yet there are differences in their ‘ideas and methods’ (p.161). In the early years of independence, political organisations with communist ideology such as Communist Party of India (CPI) and Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI), formerly known as Communist League geared up their activities in Assam posing a ‘challenge to the state administration’ (p.184). There are several political outfits within the domain of communist ideology such as Assam Provincial Student Federation, Kishan Sabha, Krishak Banua Panchayat, Biplabi Chatra Front, Nari Mukti Sangha, Gana Bahini, Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti etc that have had different activities spreading the ideas of communism in the society. Among others, these organisations also spearheaded the process of mobilisation of peasants and workers for their rights. Elaborating on the communist political parties starting with RCPI and CPI to CPI (M) and CPI (ML), the author described incidences and contexts of rise and fall of communist ideology in the state.

Like the socialist and communist, the Hindu nationalist also found strong ground to enter the political arena of Assam. The rise of Muslim League was triggering for a call to unite Hindus and protect the interests of Hindus (p.226). Although, there were many Hindu Nationalist organisations such as Akhil Bhartiya Hindu Mahasabha, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Bharatiya Jana Sangh and Swatantra Party developed relations with Assam from the early years of their inception (p.225), the rise of Hindu nationalist sentiments grew in Assam when the state unit of Muslim League adopted the Pakistan Resolution at Habiganj in January, 1941 (p.232). Quoting Savarkar author states that ‘the Hindus outside Assam were not sufficiently aware of the Muslim design to turn Assam into a Muslim majority province (p.233). The author has put the journey of Hindu nationalism in Assam and portrayed a picture that the rise of Hindu nationalism in the state was a response to the rise of radical Muslim political outfits in the state. The chapter also describes the entry of RSS and Jana Sangh in Assam and their slow and well charted course of action to make their imprints to influence the society and politics of the state.

The fourth chapter *Loose end of National Integration* underscores the fallacy of nation-building especially in the Northeast. The author argues that challenges coming from the rise of insurgency movements in the region especially of the Nagas and Mizos

reflect erroneous design of national integration. So far as the integration of Naga Hills was concerned, the author drew a trajectory of historical relations of Nagas with the colonial administration and also with the leadership of independent India. Their demand for independence, levels of negotiation, interaction with the Indian state and contestation thereon etc are well documented in the volume. However, it may be worth-mentioning that the peace negotiation is still under progress between some of the Naga rebel groups and Government of India.

The movement of Mizo National Front had been one of the significant episodes in the history of Assam and the region. The author has described how the Mizo leadership learnt their lessons from the insurgency movement of Nagas and took appropriate measures to end violence in search of peace and prosperity after successful negotiation with the Government of India. The author has tried to put detailed accounts of the history of Mizo identity formation and their political assertion at different phases of colonial and post-colonial setups in the volume.

The fifth chapter *Burden of International Border* focuses two of the significant episodes in the modern history –the Chinese Aggression of 1962 and the Indo-Pakistan War of 1965. The impacts of these two crises were immense on Assam. The Northeast is a significant frontier region of India with its unique geo-strategic location surrounded by five foreign countries including China (Tibet) and Bangladesh (East Pakistan). The aggression that happened at the international border deeply added to the ‘psychological distresses’ of people of Assam (p.337). The author has provided an eloquent documentation on these two events that left the region as a critical borderland of the country.

The sixth chapter *Assam-NEFA Relations* has been a noteworthy contribution of the volume where the author has penned the process of state formation in the region. Today’s Arunachal Pradesh was known as North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), an administrative design of the colonial government that continued for more than two decades after independence. The author has brought to light the history and political trajectory of NEFA and its attainment of statehood as Arunachal Pradesh.

A significant theme of political history of Assam *Linguistic, Local and Ethnic Assertions* has been divided in seventh and eighth chapters of the volume. As the theme suggests, these two chapters are dedicated towards understanding multiple historical developments that took place in the state including the rise of different socio-ethnic and political movements and assertions, and the responses from the state to different movements and its interventions for development in the region.

The author has raised the issue of language movement and its genesis in the state which occurred after the independence. The ‘movement to declare Assamese as the official language of Assam was gaining popularity throughout the state (p.358). Though the movement led to eruption of violence in different places of the state, the

author maintains that the linguistic assertion in the state was a parallel development that took place in several other states of the country. Such assertion was leading toward the constitution of State Reorganisation Commission (SRC) in India. The author has also recorded significant developments in the volume with regard to the language movement and also interaction of SRC with the leaders of Assam and different nationalist organisations of the state.

In the third part of the seventh chapter *Dynamics of Development*, author has pointed out assertion of people of Assam with regard to economic development of the state. Assam is a state with rich minerals and natural resources which were explored and exploited by the Union Government but due attention was not given for development of the region. Therefore, there was movement for establishing a refinery in the state marking the quest of people for 'realising economic potential of Assam'. The author has referred to the initiatives of the state government and leadership of different political and social organisations for realising developmental interventions including the oil refineries, power projects, communication infrastructure, fertiliser plants etc in the state.

There had been several assertions for separate state and union territories in Assam prior to the reorganisation of Northeast in 1971. The author has devoted one part of seventh chapter and three parts of eighth chapter to provide analysis of four different assertions of that period. The hill state movement basically under the leadership of All Party Hill Leaders' Conference leading to the creation of the state of Meghalaya was a significant development in Assam. Similarly, there were three other movements –first one was under the leadership of Plain Tribal Council of Assam for creation of a union territory called *Udayachal*; second, the movement in Cachar for creation of a union territory called *Purbachal*; and the third, demand for a separate state comprising upper Assam districts under the leadership of Ujani Asam Rajya Parishad. The author has documented in detail the genesis and trajectory of these movements in the volume. Although all these movements could not be realised in terms of creation of separate state or union territory, they left everlasting effect on the politics of ethnicity and identity in the state.

In trying to put together the trajectory of political history of Assam, the author has highlighted the rise of nativist movements in Assam. The 'increasing unemployment and a sense of economic deprivation' (p.476), which was already there in the minds of Assamese youths, might have prompted such nativist movements in the state, to elucidate his point further, the author referred to the rise of *Lachit Sena* and its activities. Further, the anti-establishment sentiment created the ground for a regional political party to emerge in the state called Peoples Democratic Party.

The efficacy of reorganisation of Northeast and creating new states and union territories in the region has been discussed and analysed in the final section of the last chapter of the volume. The author was of the view that 'despite several decades of achieving

statehood, the states in the North East have continued to remain on the margins of financial development...'(p.488). Most of these states still depend solely on central assistance for their survival. Therefore, the North Eastern Council (NEC) was devised to safeguard internal security, advance the economic development of the region and work towards achieving common targets for the greater benefit of the member states and union territories (p.484). Since inception, the NEC has been contributing in numerous ways to bridge developmental gaps in the region.

The present volume on Political History of Assam (1947-1971) has been an eloquent testament of processes and contestation of state formation in the region called Northeast India. The author has tried to document the history of a period which was politically sensitive, economically fragile and socially volatile. The volume lays bare how the political developments and events of this particular phase of history crafted the political and economic future of the region. The rich sources of data and references remain as one of the greatest strength of the volume and shall continue to be an essential document for the posterity trying to understand the political history of Assam.