Emergence Of Ulfa And Socio-Political Situation Of Assam

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Abstract: The socio-political history of development of ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) needs to look at to have proper understanding of the situation in Assam. This study is an attempt to analyse the nature of conflict between the ULFA and the Indian state. In this context this paper tries to analyse the ULFA’S claim for Swadhin ASOM (Independent Assam) and its impact on the conflict situation of Assam. This paper also gives a historical understanding of the causes of marginalization of the Assamese and its implication for the growth of ULFA and further its impacts on the conflict situation of Assam.

Keywords: Ulfa, Swadhin ASOM, Conflict situation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Assam has a history of violent ethnic conflicts since Independence. The ethnic composition of the region and its socio-political implication has resulted in the formation of the state of Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram out of erstwhile state of Assam. The history of such balkanization was not smooth one as it resulted in the different level violence in the name of ethnic assertions. The sad part of the story is that there is no end to the process. Various tribal and non tribal groups are engaged in the movements for identity assertion in order to get various benefits ranging from more autonomy within the state to a sovereign country outside India. These movements are posing threat to the peace in Assam. Conflict between various ethnic groups or between ethnic groups and the state have resulted in unrest in the region. There are attempt to resolve these conflicts in order to bring normalcy in the region. In this context, the need to resolve the conflict between ULFA and the Indian state has been felt in order to save the common people from the violence perpetuated by both sides. Ever since its inception, ULFA has been fighting with the Indian state for the sovereignty of Assam. The struggle between the ULFA and the Indian state has been responsible for large scale violence in the region for last three decades. In this backdrop the paper will specifically focus on the nature and impact of conflict between ULFA and Indian State.

2. SOCIO POLITICAL CONTEXT OF EMERGENCE OF ULFA

The struggle between the ULFA and the Indian state is a source of serious threat to the peace in Assam. Ever since its inception, ULFA has been a source of continuous violence in Assam. ULFA has been fighting against the Indian state in order to fulfill their core demand of sovereign Assam. In the process, ULFA involve in various violent activities such as extortion, abduction, murder etc. The irony is that such violent activities by ULFA mainly affect the common people. Thousands of innocent people lose their life in the violence. The response of Indian government to these activities of ULFA needs to be interrogated because the state in the name of anti insurgency operation brings more violence rather than peace. In the name of anti insurgency operations, common people are murdered, tortured, molested; even women are raped in the hand of Indian army. Thus the conflict between the ULFA and Indian government is creating threat to the life of the common people and it becomes a major threat to the peace process of Assam. United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) is a revolutionary organization which was born on the 7th of April 1979 at Sibsagar (now Sivasagar) district of Assam, at the place of historic Rang ghar built by the ancient Ahom Kings.(Das, 1994). The basic aim of ULFA is to free Assam from the ‘colonial’ rule of the Indian state. ULFA argues that Assam was always been a free nation and its entry into India was based on fraud. They say that Assam has never been part of India and therefore their struggle is against the Indian state to regain their lost sovereignty. To understand the logic of their argument, it is important to look into the political history of Assam and the shift in the colonial period with the entry of the Britishers through the ‘treaty of Yandabo’. The study of the events of that particular period in Assam’s history which culminated to the treaty of Yandabo and the entry of the British into the region helps us to see the transition from independent nation to a colony. (Misra, 2000). Before the arrival of British, Assam was an independent kingdom, ruled by the Ahoms. Ahom kings established its authority over the whole Brahmaputra valley by the end of the 18th century. But due to some internal contradiction and misrule, the disintegration of Ahom rule started and it paved the way for Burmese occupation. (Srikanth, 2000). The Burmese occupation is seen as one of the darkest period in the history of Assam. The damage done by the Moamoria revolt to the social structure based on paiks and khels was aggravated by the Burmese occupation of the province which led to further depopulation and total collapse of agriculture and trade. (Misra, 2000). Ahom
king Purandar Singh requested the Britishers to conduct the internal affairs of the countries to restore Assam to its previous position. Initially, the British Government refused to interfere in the internal affairs of Assam. But when the possibility arose that Burmese might make their hold on Assam permanently and started acts of aggression in Chittagong, Cachar and Jayantia, then British non-interference policy quickly underwent a change. The Assamese people welcomed the British rule in the name of restoring peace in the region. Thus with the support of the Ahom rulers, the ‘treaty of Yandabo’ was signed on the 24th February 1826, mainly to defeat the Burmese. As per the treaty, Assam became a part of British India. Although, Assamese welcomed the British rule, they gradually become aware about the British policy of fraud.(Misra,2000). During the first decade of British rule in Assam, the common people much suffered due to the revenue collection system of the British. Scott was in favour to restore the traditional revenue system of Ahom monarchy which was based on the paik system. But after Scott’s death, British introduced a new land revenue system. The poor peasants suffered due to the British’s new revenue collection policy. It was not possible for the poor peasants to pay their taxes regularly. Because of these reasons, they were unable to adjust to the revenue collection system of the British. In this context, Misra observed: The burden of system of increased taxation and the disastrous impact of the monetization process on the peasantry would need some years more to find expression in revolt like the phulguri Dhawa in 1861 and the more organized peasant revolt of 1894 known as the Battle of Patharughat. (Misra,2000). Thus, the protest had already started against the colonial rulers in the name of peasant movement. The first organized popular movement came as peasant uprising at the Phulguri in Nowgong to protest against the ban of poppy cultivation. The people assembly or raij mels which were made up of dozens of Krishak and ryot or the peasants would need some years more to find expression in revolt like the phulguri Dhawa in 1861 and the more organized peasant revolt of 1894 known as the Battle of Patharughat. (Misra,2000). Thus, the protest had already started against the colonial rulers in the name of peasant movement. The first organized popular movement came as peasant uprising at the Phulguri in Nowgong to protest against the ban of poppy cultivation. The people assembly or raij mels which were made up mainly educated elites such as small landowners, muzzadars, traders etc. played a significant role in the peasant revolt. The raij mels were actively involved in the anti tax campaigns, launched in Kamrup and Darrang district against the illegal revenue system of the Britishers. The strong efforts of the raij mels compel the British to change their thought and they reduced the revenue rates to 37 percent increase over the old rates. The significance of the raij mels lies in uniting the people and creating a popular resistance against the British rule.(Borpujari,1977). The struggle against the British rule was also led by the newly emerging middle class who played a crucial role in the emergence of national consciousness. The marginalization of Assamese middle class started when British decided to incorporate the Bengali populated area-Goalpara, Cachar and Syllhet. During that time the British imposed the Bengali language as the official language in the place of the Assamese language. Perhaps the British introduced the Bengali language for their administrative convenience because the early colonization of the Bengal made a big group of the English educated youth available for the jobs. The Britishers brought many English known Bengalis to work as clerks, lawyers and other professional. The large scale Bengalis in the jobs and the declaration of Bengali as the official language gave the initial impetus to the feeling of relative deprivation by the Assamese people and formation of the Assamese nationality. British also encouraged the Bengali Muslim peasants to migrate from East Bengal to the Brahmaputra valley. It provided source of revenue for the British. They mostly settled in Goalpara, Kamrup, Nowgong, Darrang and Lakhimpur. Language and culture are the two issues tension between the Assamese and the Bengalis. Initially the Assamese elite readily accepted the Bengali language without any protest.(Phukan,1984). But, with the growth of Assamese sub-nationalism, the Assamese elite became increasingly conscious of the need of establishing Assamese language as official language. The Assamese middle class leaders attempted to carve out and to establish a separate and viable cultural identity of the Assamese people. They mobilized all the Assamese people to create consciousness about their cultural identity and demanded that Assamese should be made the official language of the region. In this backdrop, the Assamese students studying in Calcutta tried to organize them self and worked for the cause of Assamese nationalism. In this regard, the Assamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha was formed in August 1888 to make Assamese language one of the richest languages in the world. They started various creative activities for the development of the Assamese language. The best known work of the group was a standardized grammar Jonaki (A Journal) which led to a new era in Assamese literature. The contemporary Assamese people see their effort as an inspiration of glorious past.(Misra,2000). The formation of the Assamse nationality got further momentum with the Assamese language movement in 1960’s. Since the 1960’s Assamese nationalism patronized by the newly emerging educated middle class. Ambikagiri Roychoudhary was one of the first Assamese intellectual who had a distinct vision of great Assamese nationality. He was a strong proponent of linguistic nationalism. He called upon all the Assamese to sharpen their own national consciousness. He believed that if their national consciousness is not strong, they will lose all the national property, land, jobs, markets and even their language and culture. He had the fear that the immigration from the East Bengal and the increasing influence of Bengali language in Assam might lead to the loss Assamese identity.(Boruah,1991). He put emphasis on the need to protect the Assamese identity. He established the Asom Sangrakhini Sabha consists of dozens of Krishak and ryot or the peasants for the protection of the Assamese identity. “According to Roychoudhary, if India is a Mahajati; then Assamese is a Jati”.(Boruah,1991). Assam is a land of Assamese people where they live in equality and harmony. Therefore he requested all the
Assamese people to join the atmarakshini Bahini for the survival Assamese jati as Mahajati. Roychoudhary insisted that Assam’s position as a nation to be ensured only in a federation of equal nationalities that would be independent India. Although the idea of Roychoudhary to form a separate Assamese territory did not materialize, people realized the presence of threat to Assamese identity. The significance of the work of the Roychoudhary is that his works gave rise to a sense of patriotism in the minds of the Assamese people. (Misra,2000). It also helped in the process of the Assamese identity formation. The idea of Swadhin Asom was also shared by Jnananath Bora, a prominent Assamese intellectual. He argued that Assam is much larger than many other sovereign states of India, so why people accept our country as a province of India. He expressed his argument in an article published in the Assamese journal Awahon and in the newspaper, Dainik Batori. He advocated an independent status for Assam where people would live with full financial stability and economic progress. He blamed all the educated Assamese people for acting as the agent of Indian government. The argument put forwarded by the Jnananath Bora was similar to ULFA’s criticism of the middle class intellectuals of Assam. From the very beginning, the ULFA leaders blame the intellectual class as agent of central government and warned them to stop their action. ULFA has been arguing that the activities of the middle class Assamese intellectuals have turned the Assam into a province of India. The idea incorporated in his writing found expression during the Assam movement on the foreigners’ issue. It is seen that “fifty years later, Jnananath Bora’s views would find acceptance among the section of the Assamese who would resort to arms in order to liberate Assam from the “Indian Colonial Yoke.”(Misra,2000). The idea of sovereign Assam got impetus in the fight against the Cabinet Missions Plan to group Assam with Muslim majority province. The idea of a Swadhin Asom started emerging when the cabinet Mission of 1946 introduced the grouping plan, according to which Assam was placed in Group C with Muslim Majority province of undivided Bengal. The grouping created much dissatisfaction among the Assamese congress leaders and they felt that it would pose a serious threat to Assamese identity. The Assam Pradesh Congress protested vehemently against the grouping scheme under Gopinath Bordoloi. Both Nehru and Azad seemed quite sympathetic towards Assamese, but they did not raise the issue of Assam’s opposition to the grouping when they met the cabinet mission.(Bhuyan,1978). Instead of it, Nehru tried to persuade Bordoloi to accept the plan saying that “Assam must make some sacrifice for India’s Independence.”(Gogoi,2009). On the other hand, Gandhi acted as sympathizer towards the Assamese Congress. He encouraged the leader of the Congress from Assam to revolt against the central government. Gandhi told a delegation of Assam congress leaders, if Assam keep quite it is finished. No one can force Assam to do what it does not want to do. It must stand independently as an autonomous unit. It is autonomous to a large extent today. It must become fully independent and autonomous…. As soon as the time comes from for the constituent Assembly to go into the section you will say “Gentleman Assam retires’. For the independent of India it is the only condition. Each unit must decode and act for itself lead the way ……. if Assam takes care of itself the rest of India will be able to look after itself. What have you got to do with the constitution of the union Government? You should form your own constitution. That is enough. You have the basis of a constitution yourself.(Misra,2000). Thus Gandhi provided the moral support to all the Assamese to assert their identity and finally Assam was being saved from becoming a part of East Pakistan. These developments have major impact on the conceptualization of Assamese identity and struggle for the independent Assam.

In the later period, the feeling of relative deprivation by the people of Assam and Assam movement provided the background for the emergence of ULFA.

3. EMERGENCE OF ULFA AS MILITANT OUTFIT

In the initial stage, ULFA gained rapid popularity and became a serious threat to the Indian state. It is because, besides its long term goal of achieving independence of Assam, ULFA was actively engaged in various social agenda like conducting trials of people involved in drugs and prostitution rings. The ULFA also punished corrupt government officials for neglecting public responsibilities, such as government doctors who are engaged in private medical practice. They also took action against teachers who are employed in government schools but make money through private tuition at the cost of regular class. ULFAs also seeks to preserve Assamiya culture and social life in order to preserve Assamiya’s identity. “In April 1990, on the eve of the Assamese new year festival, Bohag Bihu, it issued a writ asking people not to engage in corruption of the spirit of the traditional festival by playing Hindi films songs and disco music”(Boruah,1994). Such action reflects ULFA’s conservative attitude towards the Assamese nationality. In the initial years, ULFA was successful to gain some emotional support from the common people. ULFA being our own boys who are struggling for region’s benefits helped ULFA to draw some initial support from the common people. Gradually, there has been a major shift in the path of the ULFA’s movement and nature of their ideology. In the name of liberation of Assam, they started killing many innocent people. The innocent people include the businessmen, teagarden managers and big contractors etc. They use all kind of violent methods including abduction, killing, extortion etc. Even many school teachers, petty businessmen and government employees were kidnapped and lakhs of rupees as ransom were demanded. In order to prove their existence and get public attention, they did not spare the destruction of public property and killed innocent
Nepalese, Biharies and Santhals who are involved in petty business or work as manual labour. The terrorist activities such as blasting the pipelines and bomb blast in the trains, bus and other public places became common phenomena. ULFA gradually started losing its support from the common people because of these inhuman and unjustifiable activities. (Srikanth, 2000). The loss of support of the common people by ULFA not only created the need of changing the tactics of their struggle, it also questioned the legitimacy of their struggle.

CONCLUSION

Thus from the above discussion, it is seen that ULFA came up as a revolutionary organization in order to fight against the Indian government. But it is a well-known fact that right from the beginning ULFA has been indulging in violence and terrorist activities in the name of liberation movement of Assam. The common people of Assam are suffering more due to these violent activities by ULFA. The Indian state response to the activities of ULFA through army has turn into source of committing a human rights violation in the name of anti-insurgency operation. Thus the struggle between the ULFA and the Indian state has creating a conflict situation and it has become a major threat to the peace process of Assam along with the life of the common Assamese people.

REFERENCES