



Political Status of the Scheduled Castes in Assam

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to highlighting the historical background of the Scheduled Castes people in Assam and their political consciousness or involvement in the state's politics of Assam. The study was based mainly on secondary data and a historical-cum-analytical method has been adopted to uphold the finding of the study.

KEYWORDS: Scheduled Caste, Political Mobilization, Participation

I. INTRODUCTION

Assam is a homeland inhabited by innumerable number of castes and communities having diversity in respects of language, tradition and culture and religion. They may however, be broadly divided into two categories viz. Tribal's and Non-Tribal's. They are found scatteredly settled both in the hills and the plains of Assam while the hilly areas of Assam are inhabited mostly by the Tribal communities, the plains by both the Tribal's and Non-Tribal. The Non-Tribal category of inhabitants may further be subdivided into a host of groups that include the High Caste Hindus, Other Backward Classes (OBC's), More Other Backward Classes (MOBC's), Scheduled Tribes (ST's) and Scheduled Castes (SC's). Thus Assam has been a cauldron of distinctive categories of population. They have different traditional customs and traditions of their own.

The Scheduled Castes is a politico-legal term. It was first coined by the Simon Commission (1927) and the Government of India act, 1935. When India became independent the term "Scheduled Castes" was incorporated in the constitution for the purpose of providing them certain Constitutional facilities and safeguards. Scheduled Castes is not just a caste in the Indian caste system but it is a term which implies the downtrodden sections of the society. This section of people have socially, educationally, culturally, economically and even politically been exploited since a long past by the dominant High Castes Hindus. In order to improve their pathetic condition and status in the society, the Government of India itself initiated a process of identification and listing them in Census of 1931.

The term Scheduled Castes has however, nowhere been defined in the Constitution. Article 341 of the constitution of India states that the President of India "may with respect to any State or Union Territory and where it is a state after consultation with

the Governor there of, by public notification, specify the Castes, Races, or Tribes or parts of, or groups within Castes, Races or Tribes which shall for the purpose of this Constitution be deemed to be Scheduled Caste in relation to that State or Union Territory as the case may be." It is further stated in article 366(24), that "Parliament may by Law include or exclude from the list of Scheduled Caste specified in a notification any Caste, Race or Tribes." Thus, Scheduled Caste may be defined as those groups of people included in the Government of India (Scheduled Castes) order, 1950.

II. OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the present study are formulated as follows

1. To highlight the historical background of the Scheduled Caste in Assam.
2. To understand the basis of political consciousness of the Scheduled Caste in the state of Assam.

III. METHODOLOGY

The present study is mainly based on explorative method with the application of secondary sources. In this research exercise, a historical-cum-analytical method has been adopted to uphold the findings of the study.

IV. ANALYSIS

Historical background of the Scheduled Castes in Assam: A historical Perspective

The historical background different caste and their original settlements are also different from one other in the state of Assam. Like any other parts of India, caste as functional division of society is also prevalent in the socio-economic life of the people of Assam. The existence of a large number of Tribes and their concentration outside the Hindu fold is perhaps the reason for its flexibility. Untouchability did not acquire rigidity because of propagation of liberal ideas by Sankardeva which generated a spirit of tolerance among various sections of people. The migration of brahmins who came to Assam carrying with them the seeds of casteism which was absent in earlier. The advent of Brahmins, in due course, had contributed a great deal in bringing about a change or reform in the existing Assamese culture and society. In other words, they were held responsible for the rise of caste restriction in Assam.

It is an all known fact that the Brahmins have been maintaining a feeling of social pre-eminence and intellectual superiority and thus insisted on the observance of caste discrimination. The patronage provided to them by the then ruling authority of kamrupa (the old name of Assam) tremendously helped in maintaining superiority in the society. Further, this facilitated the High Castes to prescribe as well as impose rules and regulations upon the so called impure castes and in turn such power invariably elevated their socio-economic position and pre-eminence. This process of religious prescription and imposition by the high Castes was allowed even during the Ahom rule (1228-1826) as well as the British period. Moreover, the high Castes were the first to respond English education which ultimately enabled them to emerge as the articulate sections that helped them to enjoy the material benefits and administrative patronage. However, in this context, it may not be left unmentioned that the various depressed castes along with the high castes also got slight opportunities during the British colonial

rule especially in the matter of education. This opportunity helped the upcoming boys and girls of the depressed castes to be conscious of their degraded socio-economic status and built up a movement in a bid to elevate their social status. Virtually speaking, these marginalized castes still suffer social disabilities in the rural areas. For instance, a section of the Brahmins still do not receive drinking water from their hand, and do not inter dine with them.

According to the caste hierarchy system, the Brahmins, Kayasthas and the Kalitas constituting the upper Castes were kept in the highest position. On the other hand, the low caste people namely Kaibattra, Brittil Bania, Namasudra, Hira, Mali and Sutradhar have inherited some sort of stigma since all the manual jobs have been carried out by the low caste people while the upper caste Hindus have been exempted from such sorts of functions. As such, the caste Hindu elite of Assam enjoyed higher social status and economic opportunities under the British rule that elevated to become the dominant community in Assam socially, culturally, economically and even politically as well. For this reason, they have subsequently emerged to be capable of occupying important positions in the Government as well as in the Commercial Undertakings in the state. On the other hand the low caste people popularly called the "Depressed classes" had to face keen competition in the industrial and commercial fronts with the Upper Caste Hindus. Therefore, they developed a sense of deprivation, discrimination, apprehension, alienation and after all gross social injustice.

This state of affairs persisted till 1930's. But the inception of political reforms in India paved the way for the depressed classes to get them organized for ventilating their grievances. The process of organizing themselves for social justice had ultimately led them to realize the need of political power as an effective tool for the overall upliftment of their communities. Their original grievances primarily included the demand for separate electorate which was raised by the All Assam Depressed Classes Association (AADCA) headed by late Sonadhar Das Senapati in 1932. The AADCA was of the strong view that the political representation would ultimately enabled them to overcome social and religious hindrances and would release them from a segregated life. This political demand was however dropped as soon as the depressed classes were renamed as Scheduled Castes by the Colonial Government Accompanied by certain economic and political packages as per the Poona Pact, 1932. Thus it is seen that there has been a switch over from socially depressed classes to politically formed Scheduled Castes. The nomenclature of Scheduled Castes along with other privileges provided them were retained even in the post independence period by way of incorporating various provisions in the Constitutions of India. By and large, the erstwhile depressed classes emerged as the Scheduled Castes under the Constitution of free India without any change in their socio-cultural and politico-economic life. Virtually speaking, their low-graded status has been accorded a perennial shape with a novel nomenclature what is called the Scheduled Castes in modern society.

Nevertheless, the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) order, 1950 (a) part (I) Assam has categorically specified the following sixteen Castes as Scheduled Castes in the State. They are Bansphor, Bhuimali or Mali, Malo, Jhalo-Malo, Kaibattra or Jalia, Lalbegi, Mahara, Mehtar or Bhangi, Muchi or Rishi, Namasudra, Patni and Sutradhar. Of these, all are indigenous to Assam except five namely Bansphor, Jhalo-Malo, Lalbegi, Mehtar or Bhangi and Muchi or Rishi.

According to the Census Report of India, 2001 the Scheduled Castes population in Assam constitutes 6.9 per-cent of the total population of the state. They are found scatteredly living almost all the districts of Assam. Their highest concentration is found in Nagaon District while Tinsukia District shows the lowest concentration of the Scheduled Castes people in Assam.

It may however, repeatedly be said that the Scheduled Castes population of Assam is a conglomeration of sixteen number of Sub-Castes connected with a variety of traditionally inherited professions. For instance, the Kaibattra, Namasudra, Patni and Jhalo-Malo communities are engaged in fishing profession living in both Brahmaputra and Barak valley. As such in order to facilitate their living on fishing profession the Kaibattra, Namasudra and Jhalo-Malo communities traditionally gave the river banks and springs (beels) preference to other spaces as the most suitable places. In the similar vein, the Banias and Hiras are found to be engaged in their traditionally inherited professions of goldsmithy and pottery in addition to cultivation. Similarly, the Suttradhars are connected with the small-scale carpentry profession that has immensely contributed towards their backwardness.

In the urban areas, the Harijan sector of Scheduled Caste namely Bansphor, Lalbegi, Mahara, Mehtar or Bhangi and Muchi or Rishi are Engaged in dissimilar services such as night soil clearance and carrying, sweeping, shoe making and repairing, washing cloths and the like. The stigma attached to some of these caste based professions particularly the night soil clearance and carrying of head-loads or otherwise are treated as most unclean jobs by the prestigious sections of the society and they are looked down by the society. Despite so, none of the professions as stated above, have enabled the Scheduled Caste communities to accelerate the pace of their economic development. Rather, such professions can be attributed to their backwardness and underdevelopment in the caste hierarchical system of our society.

Thus it appears to the Scheduled Castes elite that they remain backward socially, economically and politically even after the decades of independence together compared to other sections of the society. They as such increasingly developed a conviction that the Upper Castes elite of the State were mainly responsible for their utter backwardness. The emerging educated elite of Scheduled Castes communities therefore, rightly or wrongly began to feel that they were being deprived of their due share of administrative jobs and other privileges in the State. In fact, they felt that without organizing themselves on sound footing they cannot improve their poor socio-economic conditions. As a consequence, many more socio-cultural and apolitical organizations have made their appearance for the welfare of their community at large.

Interest Articulation and Political Status of the Scheduled Castes; An analysis

It has already been noted in earlier that with the spread of education there emerged a number of educated elite among the Scheduled Castes people. It made them conscious of their backwardness in all sphere of life such as education, social, economic and even political. They, therefore, felt the need of organizing the community in order to develop their socio-economic status in the society. As a result, the Scheduled Castes elite became increasingly organized and articulate in a bid to remove their backwardness, As such, the Scheduled Castes elite initiated the process of organizing their community which ultimately resulted in the formation of a number of socio-cultural organizations. Some

of them are All Assam Scheduled Caste Students' Union (AASCSU), Asom Anusuchit Jati Parishad (AAJP), All Assam Scheduled Caste Employees' Association (AASCEA), Anusuchit Jati Mahasabha, Assam (AJMA), Asom Anusuchit Jati Mahila Parishad (AAJMP) and so on. Ever since, their inception these organizations started exerting pressure upon the concerned authorities seeking fair solution of their manifold grievances. Some of them even went to the extent of launching agitation as a means of asserting as well as resolving their problems.

The movement for community development to erase and eradicate socio-economic and political inequalities existed among the various segments of Indian population has obviously made considerable impact on the politics of State even right from the days of colonial era. During the colonial rule such kinds of movements were however, initiated by the Caste-Hindu elite and interestingly the British seemed to be sympathetic towards such movements. It becomes evident when they started entertaining certain demands such as the reservation of seats for Indian in services and administration. Such privileges were allegedly reaped by the Upper Caste Hindus in the contemporary India. In course of time, the issue of reservation became a potential source of inspiration for other segments of population. For instance, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the chief architect of the Indian Constitution, also raised the demand for separate electorate and seat reservation for the depressed classes to whom he himself belonged to. Of course, his demand went unheeded and unattended mainly due to opposition by certain quarters of the Indian society. In this connection Mahatma Gandhi's name can't be left unmentioned who vehemently opposed the demand for separate electorate by way of observing fast unto death in 1932. Gandhi was in fact, not in favor of getting the united Indian society fragmented into many.

In the post-colonial era particularly when the Constitution was being framed a number of Articles such as 15, 16, 29, 44, 330, 332, 338 and 340 dealing with extraordinary provisions for the upliftment of the depressed and marginalized classes of people were included specially in the matter of education, socio-economic and political spheres. But unfortunately, these provisions have remained allegedly unimplemented in letter and spirit. As a repercussion, the down-trodden classes of people not only raised voices demanding the implementation of these constitutional provisions but also went to the extent of launching movements in various states of the country. Some of such states included Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and others. Despite so, a number of such provisions have still remained unenforced. Likewise, Assam is also not lagging behind towards this direction as she has also experienced a variety of movements in respect of community development for backward classes from time to time.

The Scheduled Caste movement in Assam has been a burning issue since independence. Of course, its legacy can be traced back to the day of pre independence. The Britishers had brought about a large number of people from outside the province in order to run the imperialist administration smoothly. But while recruiting the people in government services, the High Caste Hindus were given priority. Similarly, the High Caste Hindus also took the advantage of occupying the various economic avenues created by the imperialist rulers and subsequently became the dominant class in Assam both culturally and politically. On the other hand, the rest of the people belonging the backward Castes and Communities remained deprived the economic opportunities definitely became

depressed and downtrodden. But with the passage of time, these backward classes were capable of drawing the attention of the Government of India for extra-ordinary privileges by rechristening and re-categorizing their people. As a result, the Poona agreement, 1950 and the Constitutional orders 1950 (a) part (II) categorized 16 Caste groups as Scheduled Castes in Assam on the basis of their socio-economic and educational backwardness. Further more, the Government of Assam dominated by the Upper Caste Hindu leadership seemed to be unsympathetic and reluctant to implement the constitutional provisions and safeguards, as stated earlier, for the cause of Scheduled Caste's upliftment. Thus the Government continued to play the discriminatory role the resulted in perpetuating backwardness of the depressed Castes and communities. As such the emerging elite of the Scheduled Castes and communities. As such the emerging elite of the Scheduled Castes thought of their development in their own way. Development of such sentiment led them to get their peoples organised regardless of their profession which culminated in the formation of a number of socio-cultural organisations in the order to erase and eradicate squarely backwardness by means of building up social movements. Some of these organisations included Asom Anusuchit Jati Parishad (1981), All Assam Scheduled Castes Students' Union (1980), All Assam Scheduled Castes Employee Association (1983), Assam Anusushit Jati Yuva Parishad (2000), Asom Anusuchit Jati Mahasabha, Assam (2002), Asom Anusuchit Jati Mahila Parishad (2004), etc. while fighting for the cause of socio-economic upliftment of the Scheduled Castes people, their organizations generally employed the co-operative strategies such as the submission of memoranda to the Government of Assam as well as the Government of India, issue of leaflets and pamphlets, adoption of resolutions in the annual and biennial conferences of the organizations and their placement before the appropriate authorities and at best organizing demonstrations in the 'Last Gate' of Dispur. Unlike other ethnic communities, none of the Scheduled Caste people seemed to have undertaken a militant tactics so far. This has happened so perhaps due to fact that the Scheduled Castes is as noted elsewhere, conglomeration of a good number of the professional castes unlike that of an ethnic group. As such, the Scheduled Castes cannot be placed at par with other ethnic group since they lack a distinct language or culture of their own dissimilar from one another castes within the Scheduled Castes. They are organized primarily based on their traditionally inherited profession that, the Scheduled Castes elite believed, has relegated them into the position of socially derogatory, economically backward and politically deprived. In view of this, the Scheduled Castes can better be branded as a socio-economic community rather than ethnic one. The Scheduled Caste elite therefore perceived the need, of organizing them on the basis of socio-economic traits in order to exert pressure upon the concerned authority seeking fair redresses of their manifold grievances.

It may however, be reiterated that Scheduled Castes got themselves united on professional basis for which their organizations seem not as strong as the ethno-based organizations of the State. For this reason, they perhaps employed the method of co-operation and persuasion, not the contradiction and conflict while struggling against the dominant ruling elite as an effective measure of getting their grievances redressed. Of course, like any other ethnic groups the Scheduled Castes, during the course of their struggle for development, developed a perception that adequate share of political power is indispensable for proper ventilation of their grievances on the floor of the Legislative Assembly, So, while expressing a deep sense of laments Scheduled Casts elite raised a demand for increasing the number of reserved seats in the Stat's Legislative

Assembly as well as in the Union Parliament to ensure the proportionate representation of the Scheduled Castes. Thus they went on putting forward a plethora of demands such as the filling up backlog posts, issuing Scheduled Caste certificate to the genuine people, introducing new poverty alleviation schemes, introducing separate representation for Scheduled Caste people living in Autonomous Council Area, granting Pre-Metric and Post-Metric scholarship to the Scheduled Caste students, construction of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Bhawan in all Districts and sub-divisional Headquarters of Assam and many others. In fact, the Scheduled Castes require extraordinary managements for their development.

As soon as this demand was however fulfilled, the Scheduled Castes elite raised another demand for the induction of Scheduled Castes member into the State Cabinet. This demand has yet remained unfulfilled. Anyway, the thriving organizational capacity of Scheduled Castes has obviously made an impact on the contemporary electoral politics of Assam. Because either coming under the pressure of the Scheduled Caste organizations or as a part of their accommodative policy of stabilizing rule, to dominant party has been bound to give due weightage to a political force like the Scheduled Castes. By and large, the Scheduled Castes organizations seem to be so committed and determined to their professed missions, they are even prepared to bargain or if required to forge alliance with the dominant party, only to serve the genuine cause of their communities progress and prosperity.

As such, the constitutional recognition of certain groups as Scheduled Castes has provided the scope for organizing and uniting the communities on a sound footing. It has generated a sense of unity among these unprivileged sections of Assam. Moreover, it has created an impression in their mind that they are being deprived of what they call 'Legitimate share' of administrative jobs and other facilities in the state. For this reason, since the late eighties of the last century the Scheduled Caste people of Assam have been consolidating themselves under the banner of Scheduled Caste organizations capable of bargaining with the ruling elite for reservation of jobs and seat for admission in the educational institutions and so on. Indeed, the very concept of Scheduled Caste has become a potential political resource for political mobilization in the State. Therefore, it obviously draws the attention of highly ambitious political leaders and some of them have even exploited the advantages of the scheduled caste movement by different ways. In real sense of the term, the Scheduled Caste movement in general and the organizations of the Scheduled Caste in particular have been used as an instrument in political arena by a political leaders of the State with a view to fulfilling their political interests. There has been rightly or wrongly an allegation that the provision of reservation in the Indian Constitution has been extended from time to time by the parties in power for their political gains though initially the provision was introduced for ten years only.

However, since the very beginning all the organizations of the Scheduled Castes have been fighting for deriving maximum possible benefits from the government for the cause of what they called 'balanced development' with their counterparts, i.e. High Caste Hindu people of the State. It appears that the Scheduled Caste Associations and its wings have been able to fulfill their declared aims and objectives to some extent. For example, Scholarships and Book-bank Facilities to the Scheduled Castes students, construction Scheduled caste complex named as Ambedkar Bhawan, relaxation of age for Scheduled

Caste candidates in getting different benefits from the Governments, formation of Directorate for Welfare of Scheduled Caste etc. may be cited. Despite so, a large number of extremely backward people of Scheduled Castes still remained marginalized and impoverished who really need certain concessions in different sectors for their up-gradation.

V. Conclusion

From the above discourse, it is clear that unlike any other ethnic communities, the Scheduled Caste elite were successful in mobilizing their people on the basis of their socio-economic backwardness, not the lingo-cultural identities. Because, as noted earlier, the Scheduled Caste people of Assam comprising a good a number of professional caste are lacking a common language and culture. Therefore, they got themselves organized on the basis of economic profession for the basic cause of removing socio-economic backwardness. Secondly, like any other elite of ethnic group in a liberal democratic set up are supposed to give preference to collective interests. But very often they wanted to project their own interests as the interest of the community as a whole. This reveals that the Scheduled Caste elite were also not exception to this middle class character. Moreover, the Scheduled Caste elite are not free from intra-elite conflict so far as the game for power politics is concerned. This definitely leads to conclude that the politically ambitious Scheduled Caste elite are associated with the active politics of the State and for their personal gain they seem to lead the Scheduled Caste organizations as the political resource.

In conclusion, it may be recommended that whatever the policies the Governments of India and Assam have adopted so far for Scheduled Caste welfare needs a thorough revision and rectification. For this purpose, the Government should appoint a Commission for the same by considering the abject economic backwardness and social inequalities existing in society. Thus, the socio-economic imbalance and inequalities from our society can be eradicated in true sense of the term.

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