

# **Identity politics and Student Organisations in Assam: Understanding the Role of AASU in Anti-CAA Movement**

Md Zulfikar Rahman  
*Research Scholar, Assam University*

---

## **ABSTRACT:**

Citizenship is the essence through which individuals enjoy all democratic rights. It is a kind of licence to the countryman for fulfilling every sort of dreams. If any policy of government which try to alter the Constitutional provisions like the procedures for acquiring citizenship providing some contradictory logic, it always intensify controversy in political life of any particular state. Identity issue always plays a vital role in a multi-ethnic, diverse cultural and geographical area like Northeast India. A place of multicultural inhabitants since time immemorial the erstwhile Assam province started suffering in regard to the issues of language and culture because of various government policies. The hectic political arrangements by the British provided the sense of insecurity among the people in the region. Migration from nearby regions made the insecurity and resource scarcity as well as many socio-cultural problems triggered unaccounted problems in the region. In spite of all these existing issues, arm rebellion among various groups created severe crisis in the region up to the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century. Citizenship (Amendment) Bill 2016 received President's assent on 12<sup>th</sup> December 2019. People in large all over the country came out to the streets against the said Act. Civil society organizations including various students' bodies led the masses in various part of the state of Assam. All Assam Students' Union popularly known as AASU made the protest in the presence of large numbers of people in almost all the cities of Assam.

**KEYWORDS:** Citizenship, Students, Ethnicity, Multiculturalism, Migration etc.

---

Date of Submission: 01-06-2022

Date of Acceptance: 13-06-2022

---

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Students as a part of privileged social category can play influential role in almost all societies. The view of social scientists in this regard shows a progressive behaviour on the part of student as an organised body of potentially changeable orientations. (O. Radwan) By virtue of their higher education and training students are most likely to manage the elite positions in society. Students from higher education institutions in India occupies influential position in various spheres of life mostly contemporary politics. Identity politics is a generic term having diverse manifestations. Of all the manifestations, student protest politics in the form of student unrest, movements and activism are the most expressive and attract immediate attention. It is proposed to account the highlights of student political activism, the views of perceptive observers of the campus scene and making an overall assessment of its character and trends. Students have had a long-standing romance with nationalism and some of the earliest important student political participation was related to nationalism. To say this is not imply that in the rest of India and the world, theoretical frames always guide scholars in discussing student politics. In the backdrop of this tangled history of identity and politics of assertion and negotiation, the larger coverage of the anti-CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act.) stand in the country has failed to cover the muddled layers of Assam's lonely struggle. What has now become a matter of communal politics, of secularism and has often been reduced to merely an anti-Muslim Act, also concerns cries raised by the people of Assam, for their land, culture and identity. In order to understand this anti-CAA stance in Northeast, primarily in Assam and Tripura, it is necessary to look at the long history of struggle and oppression faced by the people of the region. Assam is a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual state, as diverse as India itself. The rich demographic composition of the state that includes multiple indigenous groups and identities make issues in the region more complex and layered. Very importantly, there is also a large number of Bengal-origin Hindus and Muslims with roots in East Bengal, now Bangladesh. The protests in the state have been interesting as people in huge numbers from these communities have also expressed solidarity. The people holding play cards and banners participated in the rally against the [CAA](#) organised by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU). All shops, banks, business establishments and private offices remained closed in the town throughout the day while attendance remained thin in government offices. AASU chief

adviser Samujjal Bhattacharya while speaking at the rally challenged Prime Minister Narendra Modi and union home minister Amit Shah to explain the Centre's decision to exempt the areas covered under Inner Line Permit (ILP) and Sixth Schedule in the Northeast from the contentious Citizenship (Amendment) Act. As per the AASU leadership, they stated that when CAA is bad for Sixth Scheduled districts then cannot be good for the other districts. The allegations of divide and rule policy to weaken the anti-CAA movement also labelled to the government.

## II. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Identity consciousness among the people of Northeast India could be found in the British period when Assamese students and youths led by Anandaram Dekhial Phukan submitted their charter of demands to A.J. Moffat Mills on his visit to Assam in A.D. 1853, to report on the administration of the province, giving their observations of the State. During that time people were hesitant to provide their children in the knowledge of European sciences and literature. In 1836, the year when Bengali was made the official language in the schools and courts of Assam replacing Assamese. This decision of the East India Company provoked a wave of protest from the educated Assamese students. Henceforth, a movement was initiated by the educated Assamese students to rejuvenate the language. Besides the fact that the submission of the memorandum was the first step towards Assamese student activity, it was also the first instance of the ventilation of public grievances through the submission of representations and memoranda. So far as this activity is concerned, it nevertheless is significant in the history of student movements in Assam in that it marked the beginning of student activism by the Assamese students studying at Calcutta. Assamese students studying in Calcutta formed the *Asamiya Bhasar Unnati Sadhini Sabha* (Society for Advancement of the Assamese Language) in 1888. The founder of the society became the harbingers of a new form of literary regeneration. Later, Assamese students' literary clubs (ASL Club) came to be founded in Calcutta and Gauhati. At Uzanbazar (Gauhati), an *Ekta Sabha* (Union Society) was formed by the students in 1905. The ASL club of Calcutta and Gauhati and the Ekta Sabha took the lead in forming the Assam Chatra Sanmilian. This "Assam Chatra Sanmilian" was the first national organization of Assam. From 1916, the year of inception of the Assam Chatra Sanmilian, to 1921, the thrust of the Sanmilian's activities was more on literary, social and economic development. Although the 1920s saw a definite desire on the part of the students of Assam to play a progressive role in the changing political situation in the country, till 1928 there was no change in the Assam Chatra Sanmilian's constitution prohibiting political discussions. The developments in the past decades had shown the crystallization of an organizational structure of the student community centered round the Asom Satra Sanmilian, which although did not participate in the nationalist programme formally as an organization yet time and again, when Congress leaders were hesitant to carry out certain programmes, appeal was made to the leaders of the Asom Chatra Sanmilian to take over the operations by men like Omeo Kumar Das and Hem Chandra Barua and resolution like the boycott of the Simon Commission was formally adopted at the Tezpur session of the Asom Chatra Sanmilian (1928), although it was beyond the purview of the constitution of the organization. In the wake of the Non-cooperation Movement and the Civil Disobedience Movement in particular, branches of the Asom Chatra Sanmilian were established in every school and every district in the Assam Valley. The beginning of Civil Disobedience once again provided the much awaited opportunity to the students for participation in the National Movement. Immediately, Mahendra Mohan Choudhury, Secretary of the Assam Chatra Sanmilian, called upon the student to remain united for effective participation in the forthcoming struggle and to lay particular emphasis on the use of *Swadeshi* and the boycott of foreign goods. A language is a basic identical element among all other for a civilized society and it was a time for the people of Assam to stand for their mother tongue to protect from dirty colonial blueprint. Here political consciousness along with cultural awareness provides Assamese students a strength for struggle. do the clerical work. The Bangla-speakers convinced the British administration that Assamese was a distorted form of Bangla and eventually got Bangla imposed as the official language of Assam. The Assamese language gained its rightful place only in 1873 thanks to the intervention of the Baptist missionaries, but the insecurity of the Assamese people over the dominance of the Bangla language lingered. The Assamese fear that if Bangla-speaking illegal immigrants are granted citizenship, these immigrants may outnumber the locals, as it has happened in Tripura where Bengali-Hindu immigrants from East Bengal now dominate political power, pushing the original tribal to margins. It is why protests against the bill, headed by the royal scion of Tripura, Pradyot Manikya Debbarma, who represents the tribal of the state, have been going on in Tripura. The linguistic data of the Census 2011 has also widened the already existing fault lines between the Assamese and Bengalis. According to it, the percentage of people speaking Assamese decreased from 58 per cent in 1991 to 48 per cent in 2011, while Bengali speakers in the state went up from 22 per cent to 30 per cent in the same period. When the British occupied Assam in 1826, they had Bangla-speakers coming in from West Bengal to

#### **SOURCES OF DATA AND METHODOLOGY:**

The required information are collected mainly from secondary sources such as books, journals, newspapers, Acts, statutes, Gazette Notification: Assembly Proceedings memorandums, pamphlets, organization proceedings and other archival records both official and non-official. The method of historical analysis is employed to find out the answer of the research questions. Besides, some selected personalities having knowledge belonging to AASU and other Student organizations working in Assam and Northeast were interviewed to collect relevant information.

### **III. DISCUSSION**

With the President giving his assent to the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill (CAB) on December 12, India for the first time has adopted an openly selective criterion for granting citizenship to migrants from three neighbouring Islamic countries of Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. Widespread protests erupted across Karnataka, as elsewhere in India. People stood up against a law, which they said besides “ring fencing” the Muslims, raised concerns about the impending National Register of Citizens (NRC) in India. Laws which seem to segregate one religious community from others often run the risk of feeding communal polarisation and this is just what has happened in regard to CAA. Discrimination on the grounds of religion is an act of defying Constitutional responsibility of a democratic government in 21<sup>st</sup> Century when the Article 14 strongly stand for the principle of equality. Classifying persons on grounds of religion for the purposes of citizenship also hits at the foundational values of the Republic.

The Northeast, where people, to protect their identity, culture and language, demanded that CAA must go. The anti CAA stir within no time spread across India, claiming several lives, injuring hundreds others, destroying public property and maiming the soul of India. The brutal police action in campuses of Jamia Millia Islamia, Jawaharlal Nehru University and Aligarh Muslim University last week left the world horrified. The basic criticism in the North-East is that the CAB, if implemented, will result in immigrants rushing to the region altering the demography and linguistic identity. In other parts of the country, the protest is mainly against the exclusion of Muslim — the protesters allege that CAB violates Article 14 of the Constitution (Right to Equality). With CAB turning into CAA, there is an apprehension that an NRC, similar to what was implemented in Assam, could be implemented in the entire country. This is adding to the protests. Supreme Court on Dec 18 declined to stay the CAA. It will hear dozens of pleas dealing with CAA on Jan 22. SC also issued notice to the Centre and sought its response by Jan-second week on a batch of pleas challenging the CAA. Khasi Student’s Union (KSU) and Jaintia Student’s Union (JSU) are among the active youth and student bodies working for the protection of cultural and ethnic identity of the Khasi and Jaintia community and their socio-cultural rights in the state of Meghalaya.

Ethnic population predominates in all the states of North-East India. Most of the ethnic groups have been agitating to preserve their identity and protect their rites. Once the largest state of the North-East India, Assam has been reduced nearly two third since 1947 by reorganization of the composite state. In recent past Bodo community, who inhabit in the north bank of the Brahmaputra River in Kokrajhar and Darang District of Assam launched a movement spearheaded by a student organization, the All Bodo Student’s Union (ABSU). From March 1987 to February 1993 the ABSU led the agitation for a separate homeland for the Bodos within the Indian Union that posed a major threat to the Asom Gana Parisad government of Assam (1986-1991). The AGP leaders, who launched a mass movement in the state to protect Assamese Identity in late 1970 and early 1980s, were beset with the similar movement by the Bodos for the protection of their ethno cultural identity. The Bodos belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language family and Indo-Mongoloid ethnic group. Bodos are the most numerous among the plain tribal of Assam. There are various student organizations are working The Khasi Students’ Union (KSU) established in 1978 is a brain-child of a group of students to safeguard the rights of the Khasi community through a common platform. An apolitical organization which strives towards a noble aspiration for the solidarity and unity of the Khasi people, the Khasi Students’ Union plays a pivotal role for the empowerment and betterment of the Khasis in every aspect. The students from the North Eastern Hill University (NEHU) and different colleges of Meghalaya with a common objective assembled at the Khasi National Durbar Hall, Mawkhar, Shillong, deliberated, and decided to form and name the organization as the ‘Khasi Students’ Union’. The Union was thus founded on the 20th March 1978, by a group of students who were patriotic and had a deep sense of responsibility and with a passion to unite the students belonging from u Khyntiam, u Pnar, u Bhoi, u War, Maram, Lyngngam and Diko sub-groups who formed the Khasi community. The motto of the Union was adopted as ‘Mait Shaphrang Khlur Ka Ri’ meaning ‘Strive Forward Children of the Soil’. The Union had since been led by selfless leaders who have sacrificed their lives and comfort for the service and cause of the Khasi people and the Hynniewtrep nation. Since its inception in 1978, the Khasi Students’ Union (KSU) had spread through the length and breadth of Khasi inhabited areas in Meghalaya, Assam and Mizoram. With its headquarters in Shillong, the hierarchy of the Khasi Students’ Union consists of the Central Executive Council

which is the apex body and numerous district units, circles and units across the length and breadth of 'Ka Bri U Hynniewtrep' and in other parts of the country.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

The people of Northeast have strongly opposed this bill. Though the bill covers refugees from three nations, the people in the Northeast fear that it will primarily benefit the illegal Bengali Hindu migrants from Bangladesh who have settled in "large numbers" across the region. It's an established fact that a large number of illegal immigrants, both Muslims and Hindus, entered the Northeast-primarily Assam-and this bill is being seen as an attempt to legalise these illegal Hindu immigrants. The bill was first introduced in Lok Sabha in 2016, but the first Modi government could not get the Bill passed in Rajya Sabha and it lapsed. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and BJP President and Union Home Minister Amit Shah, however, reiterated that the BJP was committed to passing the Bill. So, in effect, the bill excludes Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Mizoram, almost the whole of Meghalaya, and parts of Assam and Tripura, but keeps all of Manipur under its ambit. The government is likely to announce some remedial measures for Manipur as well. While these exemptions have calmed down other areas of Northeast, massive protests are going on in Assam, particularly in the Brahmaputra valley. In Assam, the Bodoland Territorial Area Districts, Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao have been exempted from the purview of the bill, and the Bengali-dominated Barak Valley has welcomed the bill. Though the BJP has tried to hard sell the Bill in Brahmaputra valley, projecting it as a strategy to protect the Hindu identity of Assam against the influx of Muslims from Bangladesh, it failed to take into account the fear among the Assamese of the cultural hegemony of the Hindu Bengalis.

#### **REFERENCES**

- [1]. Baruah, A. K., *Student Power in Northeast India: Understanding Student Movements* (Eds) (2002). Regency Publications, New Delhi, 110 008.
- [2]. Chaube, S. K., *Hill Politics in Northeast India* (2021). Orient BlackSwan, Hyderabad, 500 029.
- [3]. Nongkhlaw, S., *Politics of Pressure Groups: A Study of Student and Youth Organisation in Meghalaya* (2011). DVS Publishers, Panbazar, Guwahati, 781 001.
- [4]. Urmila, N., *The Student Movement in Manipur* (2007). Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi 110 002.
- [5]. Pisharothy, S. B., *Assam: The Accord, The Discord* (2019). Penguin random House India Pvt. Ltd, Gurgaon, Haryana, India, 122 002.
- [6]. Hazarika, S., *Strangers No More: New Narratives From India's Northeast* (2018). Aleph Book Company, Ansari Road, Daryaganj, New Delhi 110 002.
- [7]. Kumar, B. B., (Eds). *Problems of Ethnicity in the North-East India* (2007). Ashtha Bharti, New Delhi, 110 002.
- [8]. Oinam, B., & Sadokpam, D. A., *Northeast India: A Reader* (2018). Routledge India,
- [9]. Joykumar, N., *Revolutionary Movements in Manipur* ( 2005). Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi, 110 059.

Md Zulfikar Rahman. "Identity politics and Student Organisations in Assam: Understanding the Role of AASU in Anti-CAA Movement." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 27(06), 2022, pp. 31-34.