



KRISHAK MUKTI SANGRAM SAMITI AND THE RESURGENCE OF PEASANT MOVEMENT IN ASSAM

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ABSTRACT:

In the history of India, peasants have always revolted in different phases of time against exploitation and oppression. Assam too witnessed peasant struggles during the latter half of 18th century against Ahom regime. In the 19th century, Assamese peasantry rose against British colonial rulers due to harsh taxation policies. However the colonial regime used to suppress those peasant uprisings with brutal use of force. The *raijmels* used to play the crucial role in the peasant struggle during colonial period. However in the post-independence period, political parties, particularly the leftist parties began to lead and patronize the peasant movement in India. The peasant movement in Assam too was heavily influenced by the leftist political parties. Meanwhile *raiya sabhas* played important role in the peasant struggle in Assam after independence. Many scholars argue about the role of middle class in those struggles but there are counter arguments for the same. It is mentionable that the peasant movement in Assam lost its militant character in the post-independence period. The strength of the peasants gradually waned in the last quarter of 20th century. Lack of strong leadership and efficient organization was one of the reasons behind such decline. Besides, the burning issues of the peasants remained unsolved due lack of interest from the government. However in 2005, a peasant based organization called Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS) emerged in Assam. The KMSS launched protest movement against eviction, corruption and demanded for the permanent land rights to the peasants. Soon it became the voice of vulnerable peasants and thereby led the resurgence of peasant movement in Assam in 21st century.

KEYWORDS:

PEASANT MOVEMENT, POLITICAL PARTIES, KMSS, LAND RIGHTS, RESURGENCE.

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INTRODUCTION

Indian peasants have always revolted against the oppression and exploitation by the rulers in different phases of history. Peasant uprisings can be traced since the last decades of Mughal era and continued throughout the colonial and post-independence period. Harsh taxation policies and many other economic reasons were mainly responsible for those revolts. The peasants were subjected to brutal treatment by the *zamindars*, landlords, revenue agents and other bureaucrats. They were always subjugated because of their poor socio-economic status. However their relentless efforts against such domination and exploitation often resulted in peasant uprisings in different phases of history.

As per the estimation by Kathleen Gough, at least seventy seven peasant revolts occurred during the period between last Mughal decades to initial British conquest.¹ The major peasant revolts during colonial rule were namely Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, the Moplah rebellion of 1836 and 1896, the Santhal and Munda revolts of the 1890s, Tebhaga movement in Bengal in 1946, the Telengana uprising in Andhra in 1946-48 and the Naxalbari uprising in 1967 in West Bengal.² Most of these uprisings were under the

communist guidance and CPI, CPI(M), CPI(M-L) and Maoist groups were the leading force.³

As an agricultural based economy, peasants are one of important stakeholder in the development of Assam. However, greater issues of the peasants have been always ignored by the authority in different phases of history. Their dissatisfaction often resulted in uprisings against subjugation and exploitation. The agricultural community rose against Ahom regime in the second half of 18th century for several decades which is famously known as Moamoria rebellions.⁴ Extreme socio-economic exploitation and repression of ordinary peasants was the major reason behind these uprisings.⁵ It is mentionable that the caste, creed, ethnicity factors were insufficient to explain the Moamoria rebellion as it was an open conflict between the classes of temporal and spiritual lords on the one hand and the peasantry and unconsolidated artisans on the other.⁶ During colonial period the Assamese peasantry fought valiantly against the British regime in the form of peasant uprisings namely *phulaguri dhewa* and *patharughator ran*. Those uprisings were violent in nature where *raijmel* (peoples' assembly) played a crucial role in

mobilizing the agrarian community. After independence, leftist political parties began to influence the peasant struggle in Assam. Parties like Communist Party of India (CPI), Communist Party of India- Marxist (CPI-M), Revolutionary Communist Party India (RCPI) etc. were at the forefront in Assam. However during the period 1979 to 1985, peasant issues were totally sidelined due to Assam Movement.

However peasant struggle in Assam was rejuvenated after a peasant based organization called KMSS was formed by peasant leader and RTI activist Akhil Gogoi in 2005. Due to pro-peasant activities, KMSS soon became the voice of the landless and marginal peasantry in the 21st century Assam. Under the strong leadership of Akhil Gogoi, KMSS initially focused on the land rights of peasants and the forest dwellers but later on it raised voice on diverse range of issues like corruption, irregularities in Public Distribution System (PDS) and anti-dam agitation.

OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this research paper is to discuss the resurgence of peasant movement in 21st century Assam. After independence, the peasant struggle in Assam lost its intensity and strength due to various reasons. The peasant movement in Assam became weak in the last quarter of 20th century due to lack of strong leadership and efficient peasant organization. However the birth of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS) in 2005 as a peasant organization brought dynamism to peasant movement in Assam. This paper thereby will make an attempt to discuss the rejuvenation of peasant movement in Assam under the leadership of KMSS.

METHODOLOGY

While preparing this research paper, historical cum analytical method has been followed. The study is purely based on secondary sources of data viz. books, journals, journal articles, internet sources, newspapers, media reports and so on (both print and online).

CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING

The Indian understanding of peasantry represents socially and economically vulnerable people belonging to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, landless agricultural labourers, sharecroppers and other marginalized backward classes.⁷ The conceptualization of peasant is a complex phenomena as various classes, groups and categories are involved in there. Moreover rural and urban diversification as well as occupational dimensions also cannot be ignored. Hence different scholars conceptualize peasant differently.⁸ The fact that the locality, caste and class compositions were varied in different peasant uprisings India. Hence many scholars refrained from generalization in their work as variations and different perceptions existed.⁹

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines peasant as a farmer who owns or rents a small piece of land and all the peasants in a region or country as peasantry.¹⁰ The Marxist tradition viewed peasants as the suppressed class

who are exploited by the producers of capitalist society.

The constitution of KMSS defines peasant movement as the struggle for securing land rights of the peasants.¹¹

Gough in her article Indian Peasant Uprising, classifies peasant revolts during British rule into five types- (i) restorative rebellions; (ii) religious movements; (iii) social banditry; (iv) terrorist vengeance and (v) mass insurrections for the redress of particular grievances.¹² Gough maintained that first and second types of peasant revolts are transformative in the sense that restructuring of society somewhat briefly achieved whereas restorative revolts were backward looking of the past. The third, fourth and fifth types are initially reformative as they aim at partial changes in the society. However both the third and fourth types sometimes becomes transformative.¹³

According to Debal K. SinghaRoy,¹⁴ the peasant movement can be perceived as organized effort by the poor peasants and the agricultural working class that basically includes small cultivators, tenants, sharecroppers, agricultural labourers. It aims at bringing about changes in the ownership, control as well as use of land and other socio-economic orders of the society. This conceptual understanding of peasant movement by SinghaRoy has more or less suitability to Indian context.

KMSS AND THE PEASANT MOVEMENT IN ASSAM

The background of *Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti* (KMSS) is associated with two areas namely Doyang and Tengani, located along the Assam-Nagaland border under Golaghat district of Upper Assam. Tengani is located in the Nambor reserved forest whereas Doyang is under the erstwhile Doyang reserve forest.¹⁵ Nambor was made reserve forest in 1878 under Bengal Forest Act and Doyang was made forest reserve under the similar act in 1886.¹⁶ Initially the British established forest villages in these areas and later on the Government of Assam continued such settlements of landless people in the post-independence period. It was a measure by the government against illegal encroachment of forest land by Naga people. Under the leadership of communist parties like CPI, CSP and other Marxist organizations, land grabbing activities continued in these areas. However from 1960's onwards, the government of Assam began eviction drives against the forest dwellers. On such a backdrop, leftist parties organized and led those agrarian people against such eviction drives and demanded permanent land *patta* (land documents) for the forest dwellers. Veteran socialist leader Soneswar Bora, once elected as MLA to Assam Assembly, was one of the popular leaders of these protest movements. However the National Forest (Conservation) Act 1980 came into being with new rules on forest conservation and occupancy rights to forest settlers which was a major blow to the people living in those areas. Leftist political parties, various Krishak Sabhas and organizations like Sadou Axom Khetiyak Sangstha were instrumental in organizing the agrarian people and leading the protest movement. However after 1990's onwards, peasant movement in those areas became weak and thus no significant

organizations were there to lead the people.

In such a scenario, an organisation called 'Brihattar Tengani Unnayan Sangram Samiti' (BTUSS) was formed in Tengani in 2002. Akhil Gogoi along with a few other leaders were at the forefront in giving rise to this organization. Subsequently, on 17 March 2004, 'Doyang Mukti Sangram Samiti' (DMSS) was formed in close association with BTUSS. These two organizations together launched strong protest movement against eviction drives and demanded permanent land rights to the forest dwellers as well as landless peasants. Meanwhile both BTUSS and DMSS went on a bicycle rally on the occasion of birth anniversary of legendary Assamese revolutionary icon Bishnu Prasad Rabha on 20 June 2005.¹⁷ Their main motive behind this rally was to create awareness among people about peasants' issues and gather mass support across the state. One month later, they reached at Tezpur and formed KMSS on 20th July, 2005 in front of hundreds of peasants and many socio-cultural organizations.¹⁸

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF KMSS

The constitution of KMSS mentioned its goal as the establishment of equal status, equal rights and equal development for all. It advocates for a society where the development of 'Total Man' is possible.¹⁹ KMSS maintains that the land and resource related issues are the primary issues of the peasants and thus their struggle is to give land rights to real peasants of Assam.²⁰

In order to bring socio-economic changes in the society, KMSS sought to draw support not only from the peasant community but also the hard working labourers as well as middle class people of the society. The constitution of KMSS mentioned a few principles to achieve its goals. A few of those are as follows-

- i. KMSS will work for the unity and solidarity of all the peasants irrespective of their socio-economic status and attempt to bring the likeminded peasant organizations under same umbrella.²¹
- ii. KMSS will work for a united struggle with all the labour organizations that opposes imperialist and capitalist ideology and believes in socialist ideals.²²
- iii. The organization advocates for cautious collaboration with various NGO's, tribal organizations and progressive leftist organizations for the welfare of the peasants.

Among the major demands and agendas of KMSS, the following can be understood-

- i. KMSS wants to launch a modern land reform movement for the welfare of landless poor peasants. They emphasize in struggle for land rights to the indigenous people living for a long time in the forest land, government land, land encroached by various companies etc. and so on.²³
- ii. They also aim at establishing real rights of Assamese people over the resources of Assam. The organization also urges for the decentralization of

power in the governance and thereby conferring real power to every villages.²⁴

iii. The KMSS completely opposes the philosophy of liberalization, privatization, and globalization and believes in relentless struggle against such expansions.²⁵

iv. The KMSS demands for irrigation facility in agricultural lands and special zone declaration for the drought prone areas.²⁶

v. They also oppose big dam construction and demands for small dam projects under state control.²⁷

PROTEST ACTIVITIES BY KMSS

It is mentionable that the then KMSS leader Akhil Gogoi created sensation in 2005 when he exposed PDS scam in Golaghat district. He was awarded with Shanmugam Monjunath Integrity Award in 2008 for his anti-corruption efforts. KMSS not only remained into peasants' issues but also raised voice into various other issues e.g. anti-big dam agitation, protest against CAA, eviction of forest dwellers as well as landless people and allotment of agricultural land to businessmen for non-agricultural use. Dignitaries like Anna Hazare, Kiran Bedi and Swami Agnivesh also actively participated and expressed their solidarity on different occasions to the protest rallies organized by KMSS.

KMSS joined the India Against Corruption (IAC) agitation under the leadership of Gandhian activist Anna Hazare but decided to broke with the campaign after some of the IAC members decided to form a political party. While leading anti-dam movement, KMSS protested against with 2000 MW Subansiri Lower Hydroelectric Power Project of the NHPC at Gerukamukh near Assam-Arunachal Pradesh border. Activist Medha Patkar also joined a huge anti-dam rally in Guwahati organized by KMSS in 2013.

It is mentionable that Akhil Gogoi was criticized for the self-immolation of a landless hill-dweller, Pranab Boro, during a protest by KMSS in front of Assam secretariat in 2014. Mr. Gogoi was arrested for instigating the mob after violent clash with police force during another protest by KMSS against eviction around Guwahati hills in 2017. KMSS opposed the capitalist system of and in order to facilitate direct access of rural peasantry with urban markets they opened a number of provisional retail outlets in different parts of Guwahati city.

In an effort to attract the young people to cultivation, KMSS's leadership declared that they will arrange a Bhui festival in 2017. KMSS again celebrated Na-Bhui festival at Kaziranga National Orchid and Biodiversity Park in Kaziranga in 2019. The organization protested against the three controversial farm laws (now repealed) by Govt. of India on Sept 25, 2020 amid spread of Corona virus worldwide.

KMSS actively participated in the anti- CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act 2019) protest along with other 70 organizations. They accused the then Sarbananda

Sonowal-led BJP Assam government of working against the interests of indigenous people. Mr. Gogoi was arrested by Assam police on Dec 2019 as a preventive measure and later on NIA booked him under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) on Assam governments' request.²⁸ Many other KMSS workers also detained by the police on the charges of destroying public property and involvement in violence which the organization considered as part of the ploy to weaken the anti-CAA movement.

CONCLUSION

It is evident that under the leadership of KMSS, a new form of peasant protest emerged in Assam. Many educated graduates in rural areas came out in support of their fellow villagers and thereby provided strong leadership to peasant movement in the state.²⁹ Participation of people from different sections of the society in the protest rallies organized by KMSS shows the mass base of the movement. The organization garnered support from the tea garden workers, women, educated young from the rural areas, intellectual class etc. across the state. Their tactics of gherao, road blockade, mass rallies etc. created tremendous pressure on the government since its emergence.

However there are concerns about deviation of KMSS from their objective to protect farmers' interest and work for the development of peasant community. It is because the organization gradually engaged themselves in almost all the rising issues and actively raised their voice regarding the same. The organization engaged itself in anti big dam agitation, protest against rampant corruption, anti-CAA protest and so on. Although Akhil Gogoi initially maintained that he will not join the politics, he formed a new regional political party called Gana Mukti Sangram, Asom at Moranhat in 2015. His party did not contest in the Assam Assembly election in 2016, however, Mr. Gogoi called the voters not to vote for BJP. Meanwhile on Oct 2, 2020 Akhil Gogoi floated another political party called Rajjor Dal and the Gana Mukti Sangram, Asom merged with this new party. Mr. Gogoi contested and won from Sibsagar constituency in the Assembly election 2021 and became the first person in the history of Assam to win an election from jail. Thus questions were raised against KMSS for deviating from their identity as peasant organization and becoming like other pressure groups. Many of it's leaders left the organization due to internal conflict and joined other political parties. Accusations are there against the leadership for diminishing the democratic norms inside the organization and using KMSS as a sister organization of Rajjor Dal for mere political gains.

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