**Assamese Nationalism of Nineties Decade and the Writings of Parag Kumar Das: in Search of the Connection**

- Panchanan Hazarika, MA, MPhil.
  Research Scholar, Dibrugarh University, Assam, India.
  Email- panchanan24@gmail.com

**Abstract:**

The political landscape that got altered after Assam Movement (1979-1985) introduced certain new phases or levels to the social structure of Assam. Failure of regional party government, ascending armed struggle of ULFA, tribal agitations etc. converted the nineties decade to an unstable and turbulent period. In the name of ULFA domination, state sponsored military terror was violently violating the human rights in Assam in the nineties decade. On the other hand, this decade was also gradually becoming an era of resistance by united Assamese community against the dominating system of Indian governance. Although the Assamese nationalism scenario of nineties decade was hugely impacted by the ULFA’s secessionist movement, this decade also saw the rise of some fresh nationalist and political questions which were based on that very struggle of ULFA.

Parag Kumar Das (1961-1996) was an activist writer from that vibrant era of nineties. As the editor of ‘Budhbar’ and ‘Aagan’ and as a rationalist writer-journalist, he used to be an uncompromising voice of that period. Raising certain basic questions and political demands for the welfare of the community’s future, as well as by practicing the art of economic self-sufficiency, he offered a progressive front to the trend of Assamese nationalism of nineties decade. Secondly, in making the common people vocal and united against the human rights violation and state sponsored terrorism, he played a very significant role. That stand and viewpoint of him can be accessed and evaluated from different writings of him during the period 1989-1996, especially in those writings that were compiled in books such as ‘RastradohirDinlipi’, ‘SwadhinotarProstab’ and ‘NisiddhoKolomaruAnyanyo’. Through that evaluation, the relationship between the journey of Assamese nationalism from the aggressive and separatist nature of eighties decade to its progressive character of nineties and the role played by the writings of Parag Kumar Das in that can be properly discovered.

**Introduction:**

Nationalism is a certain type of political theory, through which the entire rights of a community and the safeguard of their cultural-political-economical aspirations can be discussed. A community generally gets constructed by a stable set of population formed through a historical procedure, whose main basis is a common culture expressed through a common language, habitat, economical life and mental composition. A nationality generally forms as the next stage of a tribal and grouped society. With the beginning of the process of community formation, the system of common production and consumption of earlier grouped lives gets substituted with accelerated development of social classes having personal property...
and ownership. In regards to the formation of nationalism, Romila Thapar states that, “The concept of nationalism arises from the ground of historical evolution. The concept of nationalism is hard to find in the pre-modern society. Hence we don’t go back several centuries to find the origin of nationalism. On a certain stage of societal evolution, when the need of nationalism is felt, then only we starts to search for it.” (Dutta, 10). Nationalism is a significant contribution of intellectual-political thinking of modern age. The development of nationalist thinking mainly originates from the hostile environment of Europe’s industrial revolution. In the Seventeenth-Eighteenth Century Europe, factors like development of Capitalism, beginning of Colonialism and middle class’s intentions to participate in the governance resulted in such an environment where formation of an all accessible unity and secular identity was possible. In case of Indian nationalism and even in the context of Assamese nationalism, those same characteristics are observed at the initial phase.

In the Colonial Period, the formation of Assamese nationalism mainly took place through following two ways: (a) Development of linguistic self-esteem by the highly educated Assamese middle class, (b) Opposition to imperialism driven by peasant revolts. Although, during the colonial era, the nature of Assamese nationalism was also of two different kinds. Congruence with the Indian nationalism formulated by Indian freedom movement and development of regional nationalism through concepts like ‘Assam is for Assamese’, both were taking place simultaneously at the same period. From Anandaram Dhekial Phukan (1802-1832) to Lakshminath Bezbaruah (1864-1938), patriotism was getting converted to nationalism among those founders of Assamese linguistic nationalism; who wanted to spread nationalistic conscience in the community through progress and development of language & culture of the motherland. In the Colonial period, even after being a part of the greater Indian freedom movement, Ambikagiri Raichoudhury (1885-1967) represented a powerful brand of Assamese nationalism. Back then, Raichoudhury felt that the aspirations of Assamese people are completely different from that of the rest of India, which he expressed in ‘Deka Asom’ (1930) through his clear stand on small community’s self-control and secessionism. Gyananath Bora was also another significant personality who was able to suppress the intense emotion of Indian nationalism and was successful in logically raising the context of independence of Assam.

Dissatisfaction from Indian independence and deception from local leaders in post-colonial period had already made people understood that – the transfer of power doesn’t imply the change of the system. Moreover, the absence of uniform development and uniform preference towards the small set of populations or small communities of various parts of the country also agitated them in the post-colonial period. On the other hand, it was proved during the period from 1947’s anti-grouping movement to 1962’s Indo-China War that the political leaders of the mainstream India were indifferent towards the hopes, aspirations and emotions of North-East India. The movement that took place in 1960, where Assamese language was demanded to be given the status of ‘State Language’, was one of the significant phenomenon towards the establishment of Assamese linguistic nationalism. In the next years, Refinery Movement of 1967, Medium Movement of 1972 and the six yearlong illegal immigrant expulsion movement during the years 1979-1985, popularly known as ‘Assam Movement’; offeredan elaborate representation to the history of Assamese nationalist movement. Moreover, the emergence of other nationalist organisation and regional political
parties offered a newer degree to the history of Assamese nationalism. The armed struggle of ULFA which was initiated in 1979 with the aim of ‘establishment of scientific socialism in independence Assam’ steered a section of Assamese nationalism towards secessionism and identified the Indian State as the primary obstacle in the development of Assamese nationality.

In the nineties decade of twentieth century, Assam Movement and armed struggle of ULFA were the most impactful factors of socio-political scenario of Assam. Failure of regional party’s government formed through the Assam Movement, the ever-increasing armed struggle of ULFA, tribal agitation etc resulted instability in the nineties decade. Although the concept of Assamese nationalism in the nineties decade was highly influenced by the ULFA struggle; several new nationalist and political questions were put forwarded in that decade based on that struggle. Through the write-ups of Parag Kumar Das in the nineties decade where he demanded some basic political rights and practices of political autonomy, the significance of the decade in Assam’s political history and the nationalist questions arose during that decade can be elaborately evaluated.

**Objective of the Study:**

Through his essays, Parag Kumar Das, one of the vibrant writer cum journalist of the heated period of nineties decade, wanted to showcase the progressive and democratic status of Assamese nationalism. During that period, Parag Kumar Das played a significant role in making people aware and united against the state-sponsored terrorism and crippled human rights. Hence, the objectives of this study are:

a) Through this study, the relation between Assamese nationalism of nineties decade and the writings of Parag Kumar Das, their reciprocal influences; and even in the middle of unstable politics of nineties decade, Assamese nationalism’s effort to embrace a progressive status declining its previous aggressive and separatist identity and the influence of Parag Kumar Das’s writings on it etc. will be discussed.

b) This study will primarily try to offer an assessment about Assamese nationalism of nineties decade.

c) Lastly, this study will try to provide an explanation regarding the nationalistic ideology of Parag Kumar Das.

**Scope of the Study:**

Assamese nationalism, which was born in the Nineteenth Century against the British colonial politics, crossed many stages afterwards and reached a certain level in the nineties decade. The major circumstance of this stage was composed by numbers of political questions that were remain unanswered by the Assam Movement but again made relevant by the armed struggle of ULFA. The demand of self-control that was harnessed in the thinking of personas like Gyananath Bora, AmbikagiriRaichoudhury, MahendraNathDekaphukanetc was made more relevant by tremendous efforts of Parag Kumar Das and his journalist colleagues.

Therefore, the politics of nineties decade and specifically the writings of Parag Kumar Das during 1989-96 are included in the range of this study. Besides ‘RastradohirDinlipi’ and ‘SwadhinotarPrastab’, few relevant editorials from ‘Budhibar’ and ‘Aagan’ are also chosen as a part of the discussion.
Research Methodology:

In this research paper, exploratory and analytical methods are deployed.

The nationalistic questions raised on the basis of the writings of Parag Kumar Das will be experimented.

Also, analysis will be presented about the relation of nationalistic thinking and movement with Parag Kumar Das.

Analysis of the Subject:

The major significance of the nineties decade in the political landscape of Assam was that – the ULFA struggle and the parallel fight of human rights and also the questions that were intellectually presented in front of the hyper-centralised system of Indian nation made this decade vibrant and unstable through lots of conflict. On the occasion of ‘United Liberation Front of Army’s’ tenth anniversary of foundation on 7th April’1989, it presented itself as a revolutionary mass organisation and detailed analysis of its aims and objective were also put forwarded through a special leaflet published and distributed by the then Media Secretary Uddipta Hazarika. The main ideology that was advocated by them was – “Scientific Socialism based on nationalism” (Deka, 89). Respecting the universal aspiration of self-control by every community, ULFA too was demanding the complete self-control for Assam without any foreign intervention. They have the following explanation for their version of nationalism, “Our nationalism is based on self-preservation, not on aggression. Our nationalism is not based on any particular language. Assam’s universal culture and oneness resulted from historical harmony of different tribes is the main basis of our nationalism” (Deka, 89). It’s noteworthy that in that particular leaflet, ULFA also kept the demand that every tribe would enjoy its ‘cultural autonomy’. They also mentioned that they were not of the belief that any movement based on limited reforms like foreigner expulsion or autonomy would cause any cultural development of the state. Thus compared to the brand of nationalism that was originated from Assam Movement, which gradually took a hyper-communal form and thereby created conflicts and distrust amongst the indigenous communities, one that was popularised by ULFA in the nineties decade was completely of different dimensions.

While analysing the relation of writer-editor Parag Kumar Das with the ULFA brand of nationalism, there are certain points which have to be remembered. Without any proper evaluation of Parag Kumar Das’s political ideology, many critics used to think about him as a blind supporter of ULFA. But thorough analysis of his writings only asserts the fact that, although he was an open supporter of the ‘Independent Assam’ demand of ULFA, he also strongly criticises the violent or destructive pathway chosen by ULFA. But the major role played by Parag Kumar Das in the political scenario of nineties decade was that – he offered ULFA an intellectual platform to discuss political demands like self-control etc. Parallel to the distribution of leaflets on the occasion of ULFA’s tenth foundation day celebration, Parag Kumar Das published his inaugural edition of ‘Budhbar’ paper, showcasing his political and social responsibility. Failure of regional government to fulfil the expectations of people’s basic demands and the extortion carried out by rulers from New Delhi made him think of a socio-political alternative. He was keen in establishing an intimate and trustworthy platform
for conversation through his ‘BudhbarorMejmel’. He also possessed a generous and sensitive viewpoint towards the concept of tribal nationalism. He chose the topic of ‘Finding solutions of the tribal issues of Assam’ for the inaugural edition of ‘Budhbar’. In the second ‘Mejmel’ of ‘Budhbar’, the topic of discussion was ‘Problems of Assamese Tea Tribe Community’. In eighties decade, he wrote a series of articles in ‘Prantik’ highlighting the aspirations and disappointments of people from Bodo majority areas. Similarly, he was also trying to raise the plights experienced by immigrant Muslims of char areas through his writings. In the evaluation of Parag Kumar Das’s views on nationalism, these few points are of high importance for the following fact – he was of the belief that tribal nationalism, despite having few limitations, is sufficient and necessary to fight the expansionist forces. Therefore, ignoring the class issues within a tribe, he was putting more effort in highlighting only the demands of their political rights. At the time of awakening of ethnic nationalism which was resulted from the aggressive nature of Assam movement and Bodoland political movement which was being continued from 1987, these parallel viewpoints of Parag Kumar Das was of extreme importance.

In regards to the concept of Assamese nationalism formulated by ULFA, few points have already been presented here. Referring the perspective of Parag Kumar Das towards ULFA, his colleague journalist MonoramGogoi wrote – “Till the publication of ‘Budhbar’, Parag Daa’s views were not at all transparent” (Gogoi, 69). Under such circumstances, Parag Kumar Das organised ‘ULFArMejmel’ at the office of ‘Budhbar’on 21st May, 1989. Edited portions of this table conference (Mejmel) was published on ‘Budhbar’ on 31st May. His doubts in regards to the aims, objectivesand work-plan of ULFA was fully cleared in this conference and he accepted a positive and transparent perspective about ULFA from thereon.

In the beginning period of his time as the editor of ‘Budhbar’, Parag Kumar Das was confident about the Indian Constitution. Although later he got convinced by the proposal of Independent Sovereign Assam. Probably the realisation about the failure of the ongoing Indian political system to value the rights of deprived Assamese people inspired him to consider the struggle of ULFA as a political alternative.

On the basis of two books written by him in the nineties decade, Parag Kumar Das’s viewpoint about nationalism can be evaluated more clearly. He got fully convinced that the inner colonial nature of the Indian state was the main obstacle in the road of progress and development of Assam and Assamese people and this system was gradually converting Assam to a backward state. He was a sharp critic of Centre’s limitless colonialist exploitation in the name of decentralised governance. While discussing the context of Assam’s secessionism or sovereignty, in his book ‘RastradohirDinlipi’ (1991) he pointed out that – abhorrence towards the constitutional system is the root cause of birth of secessionist tendency at various corners of India. He wrote, “Whether we will be separating from the Indian nation is completely dependent on the system’s way of considering our basic expectations and aspirations” (Das, ‘RastradohirDinlipi’, P - 43). ThoughParag Kumar Das’sbrand of nationalism sometimes supported the demand of secessionism, he did not present only the context of Assam in that regard. Instead he was also analysing the justifications of other secessionist movements that were growing at various other parts of the nation. Despite acknowledging the differences among these movements, Das was expressing his desire of seeing a united struggle in the pages of ‘RastradohirDinlipi’. His nationalism was mainly based on the ground of independent economy. While discussing the context of
Assam’s sovereignty, he was emphasizing on both inner colonial nature and cultural differences. Besides logically raising the ULFA’s complaint of exploitation of Assam’s resources, he was also opining that at the active co-operation of Indian state, numbers of multinational business organisations were using Assam as a hub for colonial nature loot.

Based on historical facts and real-life experiences, Parag Kumar Das discussed the context of independence of Assam for the first time in his book ‘SwadhinotarProstab’ (1913). He wrote, “Based on ethnic or other historical facts and reasoning, it can be proved that indigenous tribes of Assam like Bodo, Karbi, Rabha, Mising etc have no real connection with the Indian culture. And that is why it is impractical to engross in false bondage of emotions like ‘My India is Great’.” (Das, ‘SwadhinotarProstab’, P-11). In regards to the context of ethnic conflicts, he stated that while the Caucasian immigration from the north-west was the main basis of the demographic variation in rest of India; in case of Assam, it was only the ethnic immigration of Mongolians. Alongside his opposition to colonial exploitation, he was also interested in uprising of cultural identity and uniqueness. Hence he wrote, “Well-planned cultural aggression under the guidance of Indian governance system is gradually subrogating our unique characteristics, but there should be no question of supporting them thereby forgetting our own existence” (Das, ‘SwadhinotarProstab’, P-28). In this book, Das quoted many instances of independent aspirations inherited in the minds of Assamese people right from colonial era and discussed the unique, ancestral and historical basis and aspects in the demand of sovereignty of Assam.

The nineties decade of Assam was introduced to a new political demand by the Parag Kumar Das’s viewpoint of nationalism. He wanted to construct a stronger human right movement against the state sponsored atrocities. During the time of ‘Operation Rhino’, he published a series titled ‘SamoyikSontashorDinlipi’ in ‘Budhbar’, where through his investigative journalism, he presented numbers of instances of human rights violation at various parts of the state. On this very premise, ManabAdhikarSangramSamiti (MASS) was formed under his leadership on 2nd November, 1991. His intention was to raise the scenario of terror bruised Assam in international platform through his human right movement.

In raising ULFA’s nationalistic questions in intellectual platform and in establishing the controlling nature of Indian state as the main enemy of Assamese community, role played by Parag Kumar Das was truly fearless, rational and uncompromising.

**Conclusion:**

In the analysis of the history of Assamese nationalism, Parag Kumar Das, the person himself, and the time represented by him is quite important for the fact that – he was an advocate of the progressive and liberal front of Assamese nationalism. Although the birth of Assamese nationalism is language-based, Das made elaborate explanation about the relation of economy with nationalism. Although not covered in this paper, his book ‘SwadhinAsomorOrthoniti’ can be referred in this context. Besides stating about the overall development of the greater Assamese community, he was also highly vocal and cautious about the rights of small indigenous tribes; which is highly relevant in the current context. In the present scenario, where aggression of north Indian Hindi lobby is overtaking the culture and language of smaller communities, Assamese nationalism should seek solace in the thinking of Parag Kumar Das. Similarly, to find the real enemy of Assamese community and to understand how the inner politics of Indian nation and its controlling nature is damaging
the self-respect and rights of small communities, Parag Kumar Das and his writings are obviously dependable and trustworthy sources.

Bibliography:


