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## **Growth of Public Associations: Its Impact and Importance in Colonial Assam**

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### **Abstract**

*The British rule led the Indian society on a new and different path of development. It initiated some basic changes in the social, political cultural and economic life of Indian people. The new wave of changes resulted in the growth of various, religious intellectual, social and cultural movements in Indian. The British rule itself was responsible for the growth of national consciousness in India. The public associations played a significant role in arousing public opinion and focusing the views on political, social and economic matters all over India. Exploitation of the British Government resulted in the emergence of a strong political consciousness in the province. In Assam the public associations had played an important role in bringing national consciousness among the people of Assam. The organizations advocated social reform, inspired the youths to qualify themselves for the government job and worked for all round development of the society. Under the leadership of numerous public associations the people of Assam joined in the freedom movement of India. With the spread of English education, the Assamese, like other the pioneers of other parts of India, came into contact with the nationalist and liberal ideas of west. The rise of political consciousness and political integration on modern lines were essentially the product of the Western impact.*

**Keywords:** *British Rule, National Consciousness, Middle Class, Public Associations, Western Education.*

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**Introduction:** The British rule had created certain socio-political and cultural circumstances which resulted in the emergence of regional sense in different parts of India. India emerged as a unified country with multi –ethnic, multi-lingual, multi- national country under the British rule. It is also noted that the colonial rule could not destroy the distinct identity and culture of a particular ethnic community. Instead of it the British rule helped them to stand at the doorstep of modernization. Indian society became familiar with modern means of transport, communication and education set up<sup>1</sup>. But it is important that all these changes were bringing by them to suit their colonial interest.

**Objectives:** An attempt is made here to show how far the public associations were successful in expressing the grievances and various needs of the common people during the

British rule. It also examines what role did the organization play in creating national consciousness among the people of Assam.

**Methodology:** The methodology of the paper is descriptive. Mainly secondary source materials have been consulted in this paper to achieve in the objectives.

Nationalism or National consciousness emerged in India among the middle class section of the society. They began to organize the people and tried to give a platform in which people can express their grievances, their needs and safeguard their interest. The newly educated middle class of Assam took the leadership of formation of sabha and samities. From socio-cultural and economic point of view these organizations have far reaching impact upon the common people. Some important public associations during the British rule were in Bengal the Calcutta Unitarian Committee the Calcutta Parliament the Brahmo Sabha, the Academic Association, the Landholders Society etc. Bombay education Society the Manab Dharma Sabha, the Sarvajanic Sabha of Poona, the Bombay Association the Deccan Education Society, were some prominent organizations in Maharashtra in Madras, Madras Native Association, Madras Mahajan Sabha were established as mouthpiece of the people of Madras<sup>2</sup>.

In Assam after acquiring the political power of the state after the Yandaboo Treaty, the British introduced a new administrative system which was unfamiliar to the people of Assam. The new administrative system drastically changed the whole socio-economic and cultural aspect of the province. They utilized vast tract of uncultivable land for their economic benefit. The tea plantation which was inaugurated by the British administrations became the backbone of the economy of Assam. To promote administrative efficiency and exploit the local resources they developed transport and communication system of Assam. As the local people were not familiar to British administration so they brought Bengali bureaucrats and clerks, lawyers and doctors who were trained in British administration. Since the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, the public association played an important role in creating political awareness among the people of Assam. The associations also reflect how the people of Assam were exploited by the British colonial rule. The Assamese middle class grew under colonial patronages had inaugurated a new era of cultural movement which was totally isolate from the political issue of the day. Impact of Bengal renaissance in this sphere also cannot be denied<sup>3</sup>. From the late 1850 onwards, the new awakening was becoming strengthen. The first direct negative effect of the British rule in Assam was the replacement of Assamese language by Bengali language in 1836<sup>4</sup>. This was considered as a serious threat to the linguistic identity of the Assamese people. so the educated youths continued the movement to place the Assamese language in a rightful position besides language, the economic policy specially the land revenue policy was responsible for the emergence of public associations in Assam. The British land revenue system was vehemently criticized by the public meeting. The common masses were organized under their village headman or the respective personals of a particular areas such as Gossains, Dolois, Mahantas etc.

The Rajmels had functioned very effectively during the early 35 years of the colonial rule. In order to render service to the society the middle class people organized a number of associations. Numerous socio-political organizations in the 19<sup>th</sup> century failed in fulfilling or servicing the interests of the common masses. But these experiences helped them in giving concrete organizational shape to some important associations.

The public associations of Assam during the colonial rule generally focused three social evils of then society such as prohibition of widow remarriage among the high caste Hindus, polygamy and widespread addiction to opium<sup>5</sup>. In 1852 the earliest efforts to express public opinion were started. The inhabitants of Guwahati organized a group of representatives praying for the introduction of municipal administration under provision of the Act. xxvi of 1850<sup>6</sup>. The public associations during the British rule can be divided into two categories. (a) Literacy association (b) socio-economic associations some important literary associations were (1) Gyan Pradayani Sabha (2) Asamiya Chatra Sahitya Sabha (c) Asomiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha (d) Assam Sahitya Sabha etc. Some important socio-cultural and economic associations were (1) Assam Association (2) Jorhat Sarvajanic Sabha (3) Upper Assam Association (4) Ryot Sabha Tezpur (5) Barpeta Hitasadhini Sabha (7) Assam Desh Hitaishini Sabha (8) Assam Samrakshini Sabha (9) Assam Jatiya Mahasabha (10) Kamrup Hitasadhini Sabha etc<sup>7</sup>.

Besides these there emerged public organizations among the tribes /ethnic group of Assam. These were (1) Ahomsabha (2) Koch raj bongshikhatriyasanmilan (3) Borokacharimahasanmilan (4) Assam chutiasanmilan (5) Assam mirisanmilan (6) All Assam multaksanmilan etc.

The aims and objectives of the associations were in general as follows:

- (a) Maintenance of the rights over the land which they had been holding over traditionally
- (b) Establishment of right over the new economic field introduced by the British government.
- (c) Preserve the linguistic and cultural identity of the Assamese people<sup>8</sup>.

**Literary Associations:** Like any other parts of the country the students of Assam were also not untouched by the freedom struggle. For cultural advancement of the Assamese nationality the students had played a pioneering role. But the then circumstances of the state forced them to engage in politics. The colonial government introduced English education in Assam to produce English educated persons to help them in administration. Students from Assam studying in Calcutta were deeply influenced by these developments. The educated section of the Assamese people had to carry on several protest actions for the restoration of Assamese language to its legitimate position. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan was the pioneer in establishing Assamese language in a rightful place. The foreign Missionaries also added strength in this sphere. Ultimately on 9<sup>th</sup> April 1873, Assamese language was introduced as court language in Assam. It encouraged the educated class to continue their efforts for further advancement of the language and literature<sup>9</sup>. The beginning of the student involvement into freedom movement can be traced back to the formation of the Assamese

Literary Society in 1867. It was founded in Calcutta by a group of Assamese student led by Anandaram Barooah, Madhab Chandra Bordoloi, Junur Ali Ahmed and others But the organization did not exist for a long time<sup>10</sup>. It was replaced by Assam Student Literary Club or Asomiya Chatrar Sahitya. It was established in 1872 under the leadership of Ganga Govinda Phukan. Though it was established in Calcutta by the students of Assam for general improvement of Assam particularly its language but in real sense it was a socio – political platform of them rather than a literary society because side by side they developed a sense of national consciousness. Jagannath Barooah, Manik Chandra Baruah and other of Assamese Literary Society submitted a memorial to Lord Northbrook (Viceroy of British India) to improve communications between Assam and Bengal in order to develop internal resources of the province<sup>11</sup>. Establishment of the Asomiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha in 1888 gave rise to a literary movement in Assam. Prominent members of the organization were Chandra Kumar Agarwala, Lakshminath Bezbaruah etc. The Sabha was successful in creating an environment of literary culture in Assam. It became a source of inspiration for creative thinking in Assamese language, literature and culture during the period<sup>12</sup>. Jonaki was the mouthpiece of the association. The Jonaki age created a new formentation of ideas and generated a new sense of patriotism among the peoples. Soon, the Sabha established numerous branches at different parts of the province. Earlier in 1857 under the auspices of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan and Gunabhiram Boruah Gyan Pradayini Sabha was established at Nowgong. Its objective was to spread advance knowledge among the people. The Sabha held regular meeting on Sunday<sup>13</sup>. Ekata Sabha at Uzanbazar (Guwahati) was established by the students in 1905 to serve the cause of literature. But the organization was local in character and it had no regional branches in other parts of the province<sup>14</sup>. To preserve the religious and cultural heritage of the Khasis in 1899 the Seng Khasi (Khasi association) was established in Shillong by Jeeban Roy, the pioneer of Khasi renaissance. The year 1917 by itself is very significant because in that year Assam Sahitya Sabha was established. Its prime objective was the protection as well as development Assamese language and literature. But in course of time it came to the naturally engaged in various interest of the state other then literature, language and culture<sup>16</sup>.

Establishment of Assam Chatra Sanmilian in 1916 is a landmark of student activity in Assam. It was organised by Chandranath Sarma and others. For the first time students of schools and colleges of Assam were invited to attend in such a Sanmilian. Some prominent members of the association were Laskshminath Bezbaruah, Ambikanath Bora, Heremba Prasad Borua, Jagannath Bora, Sarbeswar Sarma Kakoti, Umesh Choudhury etc. Persons from various field such as acknowledge political leaders, scholars, public figures were invited to preside over various sessions of the Sanmilian. It not only unified the student but also brought to light many common problems of the people of Assam. The Sanmilian in course of time naturally involved in practical interests of the state<sup>17</sup>. Main objectives of the Sanmilian were improvement of the condition of the student community in possible ways by providing opportunities to engage them in welfare activities of the common masses and development of the cultural condition of the state.

It shall have nothing to do it with any political movement, but it actively joined in freedom movement under the leadership of Indian National Congress<sup>18</sup>. In 1940 it got affiliation from all India Student Federation and came to be known as 'Students Federation'. The Assam Students Federation started agitation from February 1940, against the decision of the Government to set up a University at Shillong and continue their agitation till the establishment of Gauhati University in 1948. The Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) was successful to channelise the student movement in Assam along with national line. Meanwhile the Assam Student Union which met in 1946 under the presidentship of Bijay Bhagawati resolved to form branches of students Congress all over the province and publish a student's Congress organ. 'Muktir Abhijan' and organize Congress Volunteer Corps in the districts of Assam<sup>19</sup>. At the time there were in existence, the Muslim Students Federation supporting the Muslim league, Ahom Students Federation, Assam Students Tribal Union. All these associations were involved inspread of education and social progress within their respective communities. But these were communal in outlook<sup>20</sup>. The Chatra Sanmilian acted as a bridge between the students community and the people. Its conferences were attended by the common people. Till the rise of the Congress in the province this student union acquired the status of National Organization of the common people<sup>21</sup>. The Chatra Sanmilian became platform for the political leaders in where they could adopt the basic knowledge of politics.

**Socio-Cultural Organization:** There were numerous organizations in the province through which the Assamese middle class began to act in terms of valley wide political organizations. It was believed that only through the constitutional method through prayer, petition, memories and public meetings etc. the needs and grievances of the common people could be brought to notice to the British government. The early nationalists also believed that this was the only way to create national consciousness among the people of Assam. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan was the pioneer in creating political awareness among the common people. He pointed out the shortcomings of the British government and also made constructive suggestions for improvement throughhis memorandum 'Observation on the Administration of the Province of Assam' submitted to Mofat Millls in his visit to Assam.He opposed the ideas of disposal of the ryots lands with collectors on long leases fearing that it would place the ryot tender mercy of the collectors loss their existing rights and privileges. He supported the prevalence of ryotwari system which recognized the ryots as proprietors of their respective holdings<sup>22</sup>.

At the close of 1855 the Assam Desh Hitaisini Sabha was established by Priyalal Barua. On every Saturday the organization held weekly study circle. Its aim was promoting welfare of the modern Assamese language and literature. On 1856 Purnaram Sarma Deka, a mohri in the criminal court became the president of the Sabha.Through a circular he asked the people of Assam to express their greivances<sup>23</sup>. The Raijmels had functiond very effectively during the early colonial rule. The Tezpur Ryot Sabha was another popular organization formed mainly for protesting against the increaseof land revenue and focusing attention on the sufferings of the peasants. It was founded in 1884 by Haribilash Agarwala. Besides him

some prominent persons associated with the sabha were Lombodar Bora, Lakshmikanta Borkakoti, Jaidev Sarmap and it etc. It was a well-organized body in comparison to the former ryotsabha. The Sabha build the Tezpur Town Hall by collecting subscription from the peasants to hold regular meetings of the sabha in 1887. This is the first hall of its kind and this sabha was successful in generating political awareness among the peasants of Assam<sup>24</sup>. By 1886 there appeared numerous popular associations such as Nagaon Ryot Sabha, the Upper Assam Association, the Sylhet Association, Habibganj People Association and Assam Conference. The aim of the Upper Assam Association was to represent the grievances of the people and of course to protest against the enhancement of land revenue and imposition of new taxes. After the peasant movements government increased the suppressive measures to all the local organization to loss their identity<sup>25</sup>

Under the auspices of Ambikagiri Raychoudhary, Asom Sangrakshini Sabha in 1926 was established. The aim of the sabha was to protect the rights of the indigenous people over their soil in which they traditionally enjoyed. His ideology was based on the historic past of Assam. He advocated the ideology that Assam would be remain within Indian union with full freedom for the Assamese nationality. He said that the people of Assam was capable enough to maintain its individual identity with honour among different nationalities<sup>26</sup>. He is an ardent supporter of the principle of national self –determination right.

**Jorhat Sarvajanik Sabha:** The foundation of Jorhat Sarvajanik Sabha can be regarded as a landmark in the history of political organization of the state. The sabha was established in 1884 at the initiative of Jagannath Barooah. The founder president of Jorhat Sarvajanik Sabha was Raja Narayan Simha<sup>27</sup>. Its main purpose was to represent the wishes and aspirations of the people to the government. Devicharan Baruah was secretary of the sabha for a long period for 1884 to 1890. Jagannath Baruah himself was the vice president of the sabha. The organization also served for the cause of the peasants. It vehemently opposed the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation of 1886 and favoured the gradual abolition of poppy cultivation. The organization also had given support to the agrarian movements during 1893-94<sup>28</sup>. The Sabha demanded employment of the natives of the province in a larger scale and emphasized the need for the improvement of their pay and prospects. During Lord Curzon visit to Assam in 1903, Jagannath Baruah on behalf of the sabha presented an address to him. Land reform measure found importance among his various memorial. Stress was also laid on the urgency of completion of the Assam –Bengal railway line which was constructing. The most significant demand of him was the right of representation of the Assamese in Imperial Legislature. In Assam there was no Legislative Council like the Central Province. So, he demanded a permanent seat for Assam in the Legislative Council<sup>29</sup>. But Curzon argued that the question of a permanent seat in the Legislative Council could not be conceded in the absence of substantial community of interest. Although the Sabha could not maintain its existence for long but it served as a useful forum for exchange of views and expouse of the national issues. The sabha proved to be the forerunner of the Assam Association. Prior to the establishment of Assam Association, the sabha was the only association capable of expressing public opinion irrespective of caste, class and

community. The sabha could recapture the spirit of the Raijmels and held public meeting with huge gatherings at Jorhaton 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1886 to protest against the land reforms and forest laws of Colonial government. The sabha went out existence around April 1907 due both to internal discord and the death of leading member Jagannath Baruah<sup>30</sup>. But a new association had already been formed in 1903.

**Assam Association:** Assam Association was the first provincial political organization in Assam. It emerged as a mouthpiece of the Assamese middle class society. It did not aim at any kind of protest action against the government. Its aims were to secure more jobs for educated Assamese youths in the government department, establishment of educational institutions to propagate the ideas of trade, commerce and industries among the Assamese youths and to champion the cause of improvement of language and culture. The initiative of establishment of the Assam Association was taken by Manik Chandra Baruah. Raja Prabhat Chandra Baruah was the President and Jagannath Baruah was chosen as the Vice President and Manik Chandra Barua was General Secretary of the association. Two other founder members of the Assam Association were Radhakanta Changkakoti and Kamalakanta Bhattacharyya. The association had three categories of members-ordinary, honorary, corresponding<sup>31</sup>.

It had several branches in different parts of Assam. It did not pursue any policy of confrontation with the authorities. It adopted the path of constitutional agitation. It tried to redress the grievances of common people through resolutions, prayers and petition. Only after a few months of the emergence of the Assam Association the entire country was rocked by the proposed scheme of partition of Bengal and the creation of the new province of the Eastern Bengal and Assam association which believed in constitutional methods felt the need of constitutional representation in the Provincial Legislative Council<sup>32</sup>. As a result, Manik Chandra Barua was elected as a member of the Legislative Council of Eastern Bengal and Assam. After his death in 1915 Phanidhar Chaliha was elected in his place.

Assam Association took a leading role in the protest action against the partition of Bengal. It argued that it would change the historic name of Assam and its language. It is important to note that the moderate section leaders of the Assam Associations extended constitutional support to the plan of partition of Bengal. Despite its failure to emerge as a leader of the protest actions, continued to stand for the unity and integrity of Assam. The association also tried to make the local boards and municipalities as real self-governing bodies. The association also opposed the demands of Zamindars Association of Goalpara to transfer the district of Goalpara to Bengal. Thus it is seen that Assam Association always stood for the maintenance of regional identity of Assam in conformity with language, art, culture, racial and ethnic diversity. The Association vehemently opposed the opium trade of the Government<sup>33</sup>. It also demanded the gradual abolition of tax. Gradually, the association began to move to the way of more repressive thoughts.

During the First World War the members of the Assam Association became more moderate to the British government. Many volunteers even worked for the British war

efforts, including collecting funds and provisions recruiting personal to the British armed force. Assam contributed Rs. 25000 as war loans. In addition to this donation amounting to Rs. 50000 were collected from the province<sup>34</sup>. The First World War had a great impact upon the political scenario of the state. As the British government did not keep the promises which were made before the world war so the ideology of Assam Association also changed from loyalty to confrontation with the British government. The world war brought immense misery to the country. The British drained the wealth of India to meet the war expenditure of the first world war. The growing political situation even extended great impact on the moderates and British loyalists like Nabin Chandra Bordoloi, Tarun Ram Phukan.

The association also supported the Home Rule Movement to Annie Besant. According to the organisation at first the people of India would be fit for self government. During Montford reform, the stood of the Assam Association was Assam should be included in the reforms as Governor's province. During the non-cooperation movement, the younger section of the association led by its Assistant Secretary Chandranath Sarma immediately gave their response to the movement. In a special session of Assam Association at Gauhati on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1920, it adopted the non-cooperation resolution with objective of attainment of Swaraj<sup>35</sup>. It was the Assam Association not the Indian National Congress that brought the message of Non-Cooperation to Assam. The declaration of Montague Chemsfordreform led to the development of a series of political events that gradually brought the leaders of the association to the close of the ideas and programmes of the Indian National Congress. So, they saw no useful purpose in maintaining its independent existence<sup>36</sup>. Gradually in 1921, the Assam Association merged with the Assam Provincial Congress Committee in 1921. So, it is seen that the Assam Association played a significant role in serving as the mouthpiece of the people of the Brahmaputra valley during the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Like the Brahmaputra Valley in the Surma Valley numerous public associations were formed by the educated middle class. The people of the Surma Valley were highly impressed by the Bengal renaissance as they had close ties with Bengal. Most of the associations were moderate in nature except the Suhrid Samiti, Anusilan Samiti and Suhrid Sevak Samiti<sup>37</sup>. Surma Valley Political Conference was the most prominent organisation of the Surma Valley. This was established in 1906 under the eminent leaders like Bipin Chandra Pal and Kamini Kumar Chandra. The Conference from its beginning advocated the establishment of national schools, swadeshi and physical training for the youths. In the annual session of 1908, its president Radha Binode Das opined that its aim was Swaraj. He asked the members to move from village to village to propagate the idea of Swaraj. So under the leadership of the association the people of the Surma Valley joined in the Swadeshi movement. 40 students left the Government schools in the response to the call of Bipin Chandra Pal. To fulfill the need of such students who boycotted the government schools, the Sylhet National School was established in 1907 on voluntary contributions. Similar schools were subsequently established at Habibganj, SrimangalBanaichang, Lakhai, Kaimganj, Silcharand others places. The success of the national or Swadeshi education



inspired the Conference to pursue to Swadeshi movement more vigorously. The national schools were used as centres for spreading the movement among the masses<sup>38</sup>.

The Mahisya Samiti of Surma Valley and Muslim associations like Anjuman-i-Islamia, Silchar Muhammedan Association, Moulabi Bazaar, Anjuman-i-Itehad of the Habibganj propagated in favour of the partition movement. On the other hand, the Indian tea association of the Brahmaputra and Surma Valley supported Curzon's plan of partition of Bengal<sup>39</sup>.

**Conclusion:** From the above discussion it can be conclude that by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a new wave of liberal and nationalist ideas reached various sections of the people in both the Valleys and led new type of political and economic movements in Assam. The process of growth of new social consciousness was introduced by the educated section of Assam who were during that time studying at Calcutta. Though the student organizations were not political body yet they were inspired by the spirit of national patriotism. They became aware about popular grievances and raised demands for social development and reforms. The socio-political organizations were successful in preaching the idea of Swadeshi and exposed the real motive of the British imperialism and used their mental and physical courage to make the country free from the grip of foreign rule. All these organizations focused the growing tide of discontentment against the colonial rule. Different literary associations were successful in preserving the cultural identity of the Assamese people. The student associations strengthened the student unity and took an active role in the freedom movement led by Mahatma Gandhi stirred the young generation to a new phase of national life.

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