Topic-Factors responsible for the growth of Nationalism in Assam

Class-B A 6TH Semester (General)

Paper-6.2 ( History of Assam (1826-1947)

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The annexation of Assam by the British brought Assam with other parts of Company's dominion in India. The sweeping administrative changes along with the political, economic and social changes had enormous and far reaching consequences. Under the impact of British rule, numerous forces developed within the Assamese society and in course of time , the increasingly growing feeling of being exploited by the colonial government resulted in the emergence of a strong political consciousness in Assam.  
  
**Discontent among the Aristocracy**  
          The political changes of Assam after the establishment of British rule did not affect the peasant cultivators who had formed the bulk of population in the province. But the nobility who had deprived of the benefits and magnificence of Ahom rule were the first to resist the British rule in Assam. But their resistance was confined to isolated and localised uprisings. large section of nobility, and greater section of their dependents, had been thrown out of employment. This feeling of being deprived increased with the influx of  omlahs (Clerk) from Bengal to work under the British. That was also aggrieved with the introduction of Bengali language in the schools and courts in Assam.  
  
**The Language Issue**           The imposition of Bengali as official language and medium of instruction in Assam I 1836 didn't meet with any protest initially. But as recruitment of Bengalis in government services resulted unemployment among the Assamese people. Along with the linguistic and cultural monopoly of all offices that the immigrants from Bengal irritates in the eyes of local people. A feeling of being subjugated not only by the British but also by the Bengalis started.

**Protest against use of Bengali**-Initial protest against government's language policy came from the American Baptist Missionary. Soon after their arrival in Assam in 1836 the missionaries, Nathan Brown, O T Cutter and later Miles Bronson realised that they needed to vernacular medium to spread Christianity. They saw that books and pamphlets written in Bengali were received with little enthusiasm because they made little sense to the common man.  
**Role of American Baptist Missionary**.-Hence they began to strongly espouse the cause of Assamese language as the rightful medium of instruction. Apart from writing their religious materials in Assamese, they published Orunodoi, first Assamese journal. Moreover they made fervent pleas to the government in defence of Assamese language. Reverend Danforth of American Mission of Gauhati was the first to submit a memorandum to the government on the issue. They raised three crucial points-  
      1. They pointed out that the government's language policy was based on misconceptions about the Assamese language which in reality had a distinct identity.  
      2. The policy of replacing the vernacular with a foreign language was responsible for the slow progress of education in Assam.  
      3. They also argued that Assamese was the common medium of intercourse between the people of the plains and hills and by imposing Bengali, the government was attempting to dislodged Assamese from its rightful place.  
        The Missionaries received whole hearted support from Anandaram Dhekial Phukan,  the Assamese intellectual.  
**Role of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan**-Anandaram wrote a pamphlet using the pseudonym 'A Native' where he strongly defended the Assamese language refuting every argument put forth by the government and even appended a catalogue of books in Assamese to justify his points  
          The initiative taken by American Missionaries and Anandaram Dhekial Phukan was followed by a number of petitions and memoranda to the government on which basis Moffat Mills included government's language policy in his report, Mills Report. Eventually in 1873 Assamese was accepted as the official language in the schools and courts of Assam.  
  
**Agrarian Unrest**- The bulk of the Assamese population or the peasantry was not concerned with the language and cultural dominance. They were concerned with the increase of land revenue and other taxes levied by colonial government.  
**Phulaguri Uprising:** The Phulaguri uprising of 1861 was the first instance of determined resistance by the ryots through the institution of the ***risemel*** (village assembly). In 1860 the government banned the cultivation of poppy and this bad shattered the domestic economy of the tribal areas and infringement on the social habits and customs of the people. The scheme for the introduction of licence tax were also alarmed the people. Matters worsened when the rumours were rife that the Tiwa and Kachari communities in Phulaguri near Nagaon. Around 1,000 ryots were gathered at the Sadar Court on 17 September 1861 to register their protest. When Deputy Commissioner, Nagaon Sconce failed to the gathering arrested some for their 'riotous and disorderly conduct'. About four weeks later the ryots again gathered against the prohibition of opium cultivation and the proposed new taxes. Lieutenant Singer, the assistant commissioner was sent to deal with 3,000 people who were armed with clubs and sticks. In the scuffle Singer was beaten to death and thrown into the Kalang river.  
             The Phulaguri uprising was neither a premeditated, organised peasants uprising nor an ordinary riot caused by a few disgruntled Ties and Kachari peasants. It was the culmination of deep rooted grievances against deputy commissioner. The uprising inaugurated a new era of peasants awakening in Assam.  
  
**Uprisings in Kamrup and Darrang-**  
           Despite the growing discontent among the ryots, land revenue assessment continued to be increased, which increased around 70 percent and in some cases 100 percent in 1892 by deputy commissioner William. A vigorous non-tax campaign was launched by ryots of Patharughat in Darrang, Rangia and Lchima in Kamrup. The peasants resolved in their respective ***mels*** not to yield to government's demand. The government ordered the forceful collection of revenue or confiscation of property. People filed petitions against the hike, when failed uprisings occurred in several places where the focus of attack was the government officials. Agitated crowds, armed with clubs, sticks and clods of earth, were fired upon by the police leaving many wounded and dead. But the ryots had been successful in making their point. Eventually the government reduced the revenue taxes.  
           One far reaching consequences of these peasants uprisings was the establishment of a commonality of purpose among the masses on the basis of the consciousness that colonialism was inherently exploitative and its victims had an innate mandate to resist it.  
 **Immigration**-Closely allied to the agrarian problem was the question of immigration, especially in the tea district was so high that by the beginning of the 20th century, a distinct demographic change had taken place in Assam. For the expansion of industries and for development of trade and commerce businessmen from Rajasthan came to Assam. With the improvement and development of communication network petty traders included Punjabi carpenters, cobblers from Bihar and United Provinces, people from Afghanistan and graziers from Nepal started their entry in Assam. At the official level, the Bengali omlahs replaced the erstwhile Ahom Aristocracy. Less permanent than the above was the European population. Thus the last three decades of the 19th century saw the population of Assam increase by almost seven lakhs.  
          But the increase population did not result in increased production. The Assamese ryots cultivated only as much land as he needed for his subsistence, which resulted in growing dependence on imported food grains, which came from Bengal. So the price of rice in Assam was abnormally high.  
            The demographic and economic changes resulted in popular discontent. During 1828-30 found a number of anti-British resistance movements led by disgruntled nobility. When the reforms of David Scott and Robertson failed to improve the situation, popular discontent found expression in the memorandums of Maniram Dewan and Anandaram Dhekial Phukan to Mills.  
  
**Public Association and Popular Protest-**The popular ***raismels*** were soon converted into more representative and more broad-based organization called ryot sabhas. They were formed with the active support of the Assamese intelligencia. When the land revenue was enhanced in 1893, a very well argued memorandum was sent to the chief commissioner of Assam and also the Viceroy urging the government to lower the assessment. The peasants would not have been able to write such petitions so received support from the educated section of the society, the emerging intelligentsia who advocated constitutional agitation through prayer, petitions and memorandum instead of aggressive policy hitherto followed by the raijmels. Thus political awareness among the people be aroused. Thus the ryot sabhas were more leadership oriented unlike the ***raijmels*** where popular sentiments dominated.  
             Newspaper and public Associations made their appearance simultaneously. The association advocated social reforms, inspired the youth of the province to qualify themselves for higher positions and work for all round progress of the society.  
 **Jorhat Sarvajanik Sabha**-The Sabha was founded in 1884 under the initiative y of Jagannath Barua. As educated in Presidency College of Kolkata he was inspired by Atmiya Sabha, Bengal British Indian Society, Patriots' Association, Sadharan Janaparjika and others in Bengal. He wanted to creat similar association in Assam for the socio-economic development of Assam. The object nof the association was-  
        1. To represent the wishes and aspirations of the people to the government.  
        2. To explain the policies of the government to the people  
        3. To ameliorate the condition.of the people.  
          The founder president of the Sabha was Raja Narayan Singha while Jagannath Barua was its Secretary. Like most other organisations of the time, the Sabha did not believe in direct confrontation with the government but espoused the cause of Assam.

**Major activities of the Sabha were**-Protest against the arbitrary introduction of Assam Land andb Revenue Regulations bin 1886, Solidarity with the ryots who were protesting government's financial policy, Submitted memorandum to Royal Commission of Opium in 1893, Demanded adequate employment opportunities for Assamese youth and Demanded improved salaries and prospects.  
        The Sabha took its lead from the Indian National Congress and strongly opposed partition of Bengal. It contributed to the social and political awakening of Assam and paved the way for democratic movement in Assam.  
  
**Assam Association**-The Assam Association was formed in Gauhati in 1903 on the initiative of Manik Chandra Barua who was the Vice President and Prabhat Chandra Barua the President. The first session was held at Dibrugarh in 1905.  
          The Association played a significant role in the development of Assam in the early 20th century. Although the Association had been initially formed to focus on regional issues, it gradually merged into India's mainstream politics. Under the leadership of people like Nabin Chandra Bardoloi, Chandranath Sarma, Prasanna Kumar Barua and Tarun Ram Phukan the organisation became more and more assertive.  
 **Growth of political Awareness in other Areas**-The Surma Valley, comprising the districts of Cachar and Sylhet was also active politically for its close ties with Bengal. Most of the public organizationd formed there were moderate but a few like Suhrid Samiti, Anusilan Samiti Suhrid Sevak Samiti were more radical. In the anti partition movement the valley was active.  
          The close of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century thus saw a new awakening in the province. The common bonds established by the British rule , common sufferings with other fellow Indians, common aspirations, a uniform administrative set up, improved means of communication, the impact of western thought s and ideas and above all, shared discrimination and frustration at every step, induced the people of the region to establish a commonality of purpose with mainstream India. The Indian National Congress provided the common forum. Thus it was in this backdrop that Assamese nationalism merged with mainstream Indian nationalism even while maintaining a distinct Assamese identity.

References-

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