

Asom Sahitya Sabha

Retreat from Populist Politics

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RELATIONS between the Assam government and the Asom Sahitya Sabha, the premier literary-cultural organisation of the Assamese-speaking people, have hit an all-time low. It's been more than two years now since the Sabha fell from official grace when, on the eve of its forty-ninth session at Diphu, the government decided to stop all grants to the organisation on the plea that the Sabha was no longer a cultural organisation but had turned highly political through its involvement in the anti-foreigner upsurge. At that time the Sabha leadership had reacted with courage and confidence born out of its involvement in the mass movement and had refused to be cowed down by the government pressure. It refused to oblige the government by giving an undertaking that it would desist from "anti-government and unwanted activities" and it declared that if would try to do without governmental assistance. Ambitious plans were also announced of starting a one-crore rupee 'national fund' with subscriptions from the people. Even while taking such a stand, the Sabha leadership had hoped that once a popular government was installed (those were the days of direct Central rule), the Sabha's confrontation with the government would end and the grants resumed. The Sabha was obviously too big an institution for any state government to ignore. But this was not to be. The February polls brought into power a government whose legitimacy the Sabha could by no means accept. Any overtures by the Sabha towards the Saikia Ministry were bound to be looked upon as an act of gross betrayal by large sections of the Assamese masses on whose goodwill the Sabha was even more dependent now. Hence, the deadlock continued. On the other hand, the Sabha's relations with the other members of the Gana Sangram Parishad, of which the Sabha was an active constituent had started cooling especially after the February bloodshed which clearly unnerved the Sabha's leadership and led to serious doubts being raised about the Sabha's direct participation in the anti-foreigner movement under the All Assam Students Union (AASU)-All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) banner.

Constituents such as the Purbanchaliya Lok Parishad and the Jatiyatabadi Dal came to view the Sabha with suspicion, especially because of the latter's resistance to the militant tactics preferred by the former. Just prior to the Diphu session, one of the Sabha's leading representatives in the Gana Sangram Parishad was expelled. The Sabha, however half-heartedly, continued to be a member of the AAGSP.

The Saikia Ministry, for its part, refused to make any attempt to befriend the Sabha and instead, started patronising its rival, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha. Thus, two years after the stoppage of government grants, the Asom Sahitya Sabha now finds itself in a serious financial crisis which has compelled it to abandon or keep in abeyance most of its publication programmes and annual activities such as writers workshops, seminars, lecture-programmes and literary awards. Every year the Sabha comes out with an impressive list of Assamese and tribal publications and apart from conducting language orientation classes for non-Assamese government officials, the Sabha has also been going ahead with plans to establish an Institute for Research in Assamese Studies. Since the seventies, government assistance in the form of *ad hoc* grants and project-bound aid has ranged well over a crore of rupees. Over and above this, the government has been assisting the Sabha liberally in its building programmes as well. In a recent letter addressed to the government the Sabha's secretary has stated that withheld government grants amounted to Rs 9.67 lakh, the publication assistance to Rs 8.89 lakh. Over and above this, the government owed the Sabha nearly Rs 5 lakh in the form of building assistance already promised. Thus, the backlog amounted to well over Rs 20 lakh. These figures show that the Sabha has come a long way from the days when it first received Rs 1,000 as financial assistance from the British government in 1927. This grant was discontinued in 1930 and restored in 1941 when it was raised to fifteen hundred rupees. Today, the Sabha's activities are so tied up with government assistance that all the rhetoric of

Independent functioning notwithstanding, the Sabha would be reduced to a non-functioning body if such assistance was permanently denied. Hence, the need to mend fences with the government.

Right from its inception in 1917, the Sabha has stood for government patronage in the field of arts and even in the days of fierce anti-British struggle, the Sabha stood out for its loyalty to the government. Taking advantage of the non-political character of the Sabha, as laid out in its Constitution, the Sabha office-bearers, who were mostly loyal government servants, kept the organisation scrupulously free from Congress politics. Occasionally, however, Congress leaders like Tarun Ram Phukan were associated with the Sabha as individuals and Phukan even chaired an annual session. The Sabha's loyalty to the British government even during the Civil Disobedience and Quit India Movements made it suspect in the eyes of nationalist writers and intellectuals and this is admitted by Maheswar Neog, several times the Sabhas President and one of its most illustrious members. Discussing the Sabha's total subservience to the British, Neog writes:

"A small batch of government servants was at the helm of the Sabha's affairs all through the beginning. A note of loyalty to the British regime may not, therefore, escape the year of the annalist.... We cannot say that the Sabha was considered as the forum only of people loyal to the British regime; but we cannot, at the same time, rule out the existence of a reservation lurking behind the minds of the nationalist leaders and workers of the country insofar as the Sabha was concerned. Not many of them were to be seen actively participating in the Sabha's Conferences, which never adopted a political resolution, having in the constitution of the Sabha decided it should not discuss 'any political or communal matters'. This hiatus between the nationalist and the writers (representing the Sabha) continued its subdued existence till the dawn of India's Independence." (*Annals of the Assam Sahitya Sabha*, by Maheswar Neog; Jorhat, 1976, pp 43-44).

With Independence, the Sabha naturally shifted its sympathies in favour of the Congress government and succeeded in involving leading Congressmen and Ministers in its activities. This was revealed in the first annual session of the Sabha held after Independence in Shillong in 1953. The Shillong session was blessed by the entire Assam Cabinet and the Assam Governor played a leading role in it. From then on, it has been smooth sailing for the Sabha and gradually the dividing line

between the Sabha and Congress tended to disappear on several important issues facing the region. The Sabha's strength grew and it emerged as the only such organisation in the entire north-eastern region. Asom Sahitya Sabha functionaries were eagerly courted by the government and the Congress Party, and in 1958 the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee felicitated the then President and all living ex-Presidents of the Sabha at a public meeting at Gauhati. Meanwhile, the government grants to the Sabha kept on multiplying. It was during this period of direct government patronage that the Sabha shed its 'non-political' stance and got increasingly involved in issues which proved to be of great significance to the entire North-East. As the Sabha elaborated its stand on the language issue and the economic backwardness of the region, it was involved in mass movements. During the popular agitation in 1956 over the demand for a refinery in Assam, the Sabha played a major role in mobilising public opinion. Then came the demand for the recognition of Assamese as the official language of the then undivided state of Assam. The language movement of 1960 was the Sabha's major baptism in populist struggles and, since then it has never looked back, it must be said here that the popular struggles in which the Sabha gave a lead were confined mainly to demands directly linked with the Assamese-speaking population concentrated in the Brahmaputra Valley.

It is evident that the Sabha's language policy had the support of the Assamese Ministers of the Assam Cabinet. As way back as 1950, the Sabha had raised the demand that Assamese be declared the official language of the State and that barring the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Mizo Hills and Garo Hills, all schools should switch over to Assamese. In 1959-61 a strong movement was geared up primarily under the Sabha's leadership (the students of Assam did not have any powerful organisation like the AASU at that time) throughout the Brahmaputra Valley and this eventually led to the adoption of the Assam Official Language Act of 1960 which declared Assamese to be the official language of Assam. The Sabha was also upset over the policy of the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) administration which was gradually trying to replace Assamese with Hindi in the schools of the Centrally administered territory. In 1956 the Sabha observed

"Assamese Language in NEFA Day" and delegations were sent to the NEFA to convince the tribal leaders of the need to retain Assamese as the link language. The Official Language Act of 1960 gave rise to serious misgivings in the minds of the different hill tribes of Assam and was one of the factors accelerating the formation of Meghalaya. The Sabha's rigid stand on the question of Assamese being recognised as the sole official language of the State went a long way in alienating the Khasis, the Pnars, the Garos and other hill tribes. Even after the emergence of Nagaland and Meghalaya, the Sabha persisted in its demand that Assamese be accepted as the link-language of the region. While the Sabha, in advocating the cause of the Assamese language, was acting within its rights as an organisation devoted to the development of Assamese language and literature and the all-round development of the Assamese people, it was certainly not aware of the serious and devastating backlash that was to follow. A more imaginative language policy of the Sabha could, perhaps have slowed down the alienation of the hill tribes from the Assamese people.

The Sabha's language policy also prepared the ground for the emergence of organisations like the Bodo Sahitya Sabha. Earlier, the plains tribes of Assam like the Bodos had largely identified themselves with the Sahitya Sabha either because they thought that the Sabha platform was wide enough to accommodate them as well or because they did not have any independent organisation of their own. But the Sabha's stand on Assamese and the emergence of the small but influential middle class among the plains tribals speeded up the process of separation of sizable sections of these people from the Assamese mainstream. Even today, while the Asom Sahitya Sabha greets the Bodo Sahitya Sabha as a fraternal organisation, the former has serious reservations about the latter's demand that Bodo be accepted as an associate official language of the State. It was mainly because of the unimaginative language policy pursued by the Asom Sahitya Sabha that the plains tribals of the Brahmaputra Valley came to view the Sabha as an organisation solely of people who had Assamese as their mother tongue. The Sabha failed to see the negative consequences of its language policy and instead credited itself with having guided the mass movement over the language issue in 1900.

The language movement was not without its communal overtones and in several parts of the State violent incidents occurred. Widescale disturbances broke out all over the Brahmaputra Valley after the death in police firing of Ranjit Barpujari, a student of the Cotton College of Gauhati. In many senses, the language riots of 1960 were a foreboding of what was to come in the wake of the movement over the foreign nationals issue. Discussing the role of the Sahitya Sabha in getting Assamese accepted as the official language of the State, irrespective of the sentiments of the hill people who then formed a substantial part of the population of Assam, Neog says that this gave the Sabha a new image in the eyes of the Assamese people.

"Whether or not it could be said that the Sabha in spite of itself was infiltrating into the political arena, as alleged in certain quarters, these events have raised the institution in the general esteem and marks the start of another phase, when the Sabha began attracting crowds like the National Congress sessions and other political festivals." (*op cit*, p 44).

In 1971-72 the Sabha led yet another powerful mass movement in the Brahmaputra Valley demanding that Assamese be made the sole medium of instruction at the college and university level. Once again, under the stewardship of the Sabha, students built up a mass movement, which turned violent at several places leading to deaths in police firings as well as communal violence. Both the Gauhati and Dibrugarh Universities subsequently adopted Assamese as the medium of instruction. But in the process the fears and apprehensions of the plains tribal peoples were further aroused. From them came the demand that English be retained as the medium of instruction and that they be given education at the primary levels in their own mother tongues. The over-zealous language policy of the Sabha was clearly going against the concept of a broad Assamese nationality and helped to sow the seeds of discord and suspicion which eventually grew to full bloom in the early eighties, when the anti-foreigner movement was at its peak. The Sahitya Sabha was taken aback when literary organisations of the plains tribals started securing government patronage and eating into the one-time strongholds of the Sabha. It was only when the Sabha realised that these organisations led by the tribal middle classes were eroding its spheres of influence among the Assamese

tribals, that it tried to set things right by emphasising the need for the growth and development of the tribal languages and literature. But the trust between the Sabha and the plains tribals had dearly been greatly affected and although the Sabha is today doubling up its efforts to woo and assuage the tribal population, the move seems to have come a bit too late. Learning from the experience of the Asom Sahitya Sabha, government-patronised tribal literary organisations have started replacing the Sabha in many plains tribal areas. The just-concluded session of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha was graced by most of the members of the Saikia Cabinet and had all the appearance of a Asom Sahitya Sabha annual meet. The Asom Sahitya Sabha's vague generalisations about a composite Assamese culture encompassing all the tribal communities cannot cover the fact that its sphere of influence has been severely narrowed.

The Sabha finally bid goodbye to its non-political stance when in 1980 it joined the AACSP the organisation which along with the AASU was spearheading the movement on the foreign nationals issue. During the first two years of the agitation which was marked by massive satyagrahas and bandits, the Sabha through its more than 500 branches played an active part in mobilising the people. But it also played a moderating role and its presence in the AACSP was viewed with some sense of relief by the government. As the agitation lingered on and chances of a settlement receded, the Sabha's relations with its partners in the AAGSP began to sour. Its policy of both leading the movement and remaining in the goods books of the government was not acceptable to its partners. It may be mentioned here that during the entire duration of the movement not a single important office-bearer of the Sahitya Sabha was detained by the government. Even at the height of the agitation the Sabha's representatives participated in government committees doling out literary pensions. A -stage, however, arrived when in the face of severe government repression of the movement, the Sabha, however much it would have liked to dissociate itself from the AACSP, could not possibly do so. This eventually led to the stoppage of government grants to the Sabha. The Sabha was unnerved by the extent of the February poll violence and it is known now that the Sabha's representatives were not in favour of

mounting a boycott to the polls.

Today, the Sabha is in a dilemma. This was evident in its last annual session of the Sabha held at Bongai-gaon in August last. The Presidential speech which emphasised the need of Constitutional safeguards for small nationalities like the Assamese, also emphasised the need for a return to peace and goodwill among the different communities of the State. The resolution on the anti-foreigner movement stated that the Sabha's participation was fully justified and that the movement was democratic, non-violent and secular in character. But while affirming this, the Sabha took an important decision. It decided to set up a 'Karma Parishad' to take its own decisions regarding the Assam Movement. This Karma Parishad would be directly responsible to the President and the Executive Committee of the Sabha and would maintain links with the AASU and the AACSP. The setting up of the Karma Parishad signified the virtual dissociation of the Sabha from the Gana Sangram Parishad. Whereas, earlier all decisions arrived at by the Gana Sangram Parishad by majority vote was binding on the Sabha, from now on the Sabha was free to chart its own course. In setting up the Karma Parishad, the Sabha leadership was guided by the realisation that the Sabha's direct involvement in the anti-foreigner movement as a part of the

AAGSP needed to be reviewed.

The decision was also obviously prompted by the desire to mend fences with the State government. In a recent letter to the government, the Sabha's Secretary while stating that the government decision to withhold grants would remain an indelible stain on the national life of the people, at the same time called for the removal of difficulties created by possible misunderstanding. In practice, the Sabha is adopting a low-key approach to the agitational programmes announced by the sponsors of the movement and on several instances the Sabha remained indifferent. It has shifted its emphasis to matters like the preservation of Assam's archaeological sites etc. Till the outbreak of the movement on foreign nationals, the Sabha was functioning like a government department, though with a large measure of autonomy. The movement changed everything. Now, once again, the Sabha is trying to set matters right for itself. It was inevitable that the Sabha, led by a handful of Assamese middle-class intellectuals, would retrace its militant steps. Its official stand on the foreign nationals issue notwithstanding, the Sabha, for all practical purposes, abandoned populist politics for the time being and is retreating into fields of 'socio-cultural' activity. The government is taking its time to read the signals. But they are there for everyone to see.

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