

Krishak Mukti Sangarm Samiti and Its Role Over The Peasant Movement In Assam

Kaushik Chetia

M.Phil, Research Scholar, Department of Political Science

Dibrugarh University, Assam

Email: kaushikchetia2016@gmail.com

Phone- 8753998920

Abstract

Assam, the North Eastern states of India has been facing a numbers of movements at the various points of history and some of them are primarily related with the demands of the peasant class of the state. The peasants of Assam have been continuing their struggle against the undemocratic and inhumane principles of the both pre independence and post-independence governments. But during that there was no strong peasant organization in Assam so all were happened under the banner of the political parties. Peasant Movement in Assam got a new momentum after the establishment of KrishakMuktiSangramSamiti on 2005 by the Peasant leader Akhil Gogoi. Then time onwards KMSS has been demanding the govt. to solve the various problems of the peasants and creating awareness among the peasants about their rights on land and other resources of the state.

Key Words: Movement, Peasant, KrishakMuktiSangramSamiti, land, Right

Introduction:

A commonly heard comment from the Indian politicians belonged to the ruling regime, irrespective of the political parties and time, is that India has developed in recent times, which is also the case in the current government. The rapid growth of the Indian economy, increase of

GDPs, per capital income etc. are some of the factors that are considered as indicative of the development of India. In such a situation, most of states of India are developing and shifting their interest from the traditional agricultural activities to the industrial or technological sector, but the state of Assam is still heavily dependent on the agricultural sector. More than 86 % people of Assam live in the rural areas and are totally dependent on the agricultural sector for their livelihood. But the production of the agricultural sector in Assam isn't satisfactory since many years. The peasants of Assam have to face myriad of problem due to natural calamities, landlessness, lack of knowledge about the modern technology, less number of and fragmented land, heavy reliance on rain-water and so on. Besides, the lack of positive actions or initiatives taken by the government is another major setback. Therefore the peasants of Assam have come out to the streets against the undemocratic and inhuman principles of the state and are demanding various facilities and rights in favour of the peasant class. The peasant organization of Assam, KMSS has also been continuing their struggle on various issues of the peasant class till today.

Theoretical Framework of peasant movement in Assam:

A peasant is one who is deeply dependent on land for his livelihood, labor, wages etc. Peasants work on land and earn benefit from the land by using their own labor, marginal labor or family labor etc. But often peasants of Assam have been facing numbers of problem in doing their agricultural activities because of flood, erosion, landlessness, low crops prices, acquisition of land etc. Therefore, many a times, they have been organizing protest movement both in the pre-independence and post-independence era against the govt. policies to fulfill their demand. This is generally called as Agrarian Movement.

At the initial years of the independence, peasant of Assam agitated against the govt. to protect their interest under the umbrella of political parties like Revolutionary Communist Political Party, Congress Socialist Party etc. They organized the marginal and landless peasant of Assam and demanded wetlands, sor-sapori for the indigenous people of Assam. This movement

was so strong that sometimes even police had to come to collect taxes from the peasants. All these happened under the initiative of political parties and hence, it couldn't be considered as a peasant movement. In true sense, peasant movement emerged in post-independence Assam after DoyangTengani Land Right Movement. Numbers of Tongia and Bongaon were established by the govt. and they were given various facilities such as the right to caste vote, medical and educational facilities etc, but they were deprived of the right over the land. Suddenly the govt. took the policy of eviction to displace them and it paved the way for the continuation of the peasants' land right movement with the help of AASU, CPI(ML) and KrishakSantha etc. But the pace of peasant movement in Assam becomes more effective after the formation of KrishakMuktiSangramSamiti in 2005 by the RTI activist or peasant leader Akhil Gogoi.

Background of Agricultural Movement in Assam

Most of the people of Assam have been depending on agricultural activities since time immemorial. During the Ahom period, there was 'paik system' in which a member from each family had to work for the state and they were provided 2.66 acres of land for their livelihood. No tax had to be paid by them. But in certain occasions, people refused to exercise 'paik system' and the rulers took strong steps against them. Therefore the peasants agitated against the ruthless behaviour of the king. After the annexation of Assam (with?) by the British East India Company through the treaty of Yandabu in 1826, the British established their own administrative and revenue system which harassed the peasant of Assam the most because in the new revenue system, they had to pay taxes through rupees. The British formulated Bengal Forest Act 1870 to conserve the forest land but through the Act, they actually tried to deprive local people of the right over the natural resources. They also took the policy of deforestation to increase their revenue collections. Many timbers were deforested to establish tea garden, rail tracks and other activities. They have also imposed taxes on different new subjects and also increased the rate of taxes. So, the marginal farmers of Assam had to face lots of problem. At that time, various movements were going on against the British throughout India. As a part of India, in Assam saw

numbers of movement carried out by the peasant class against the British among which Phulguri Uprising (1861) and Patharughator Ron (1894) were very important.

During that time, all the peasant movements of Assam were led by rajmel. In 1893, the British increased the rate of land revenue. The peasant protested against the high rate of land revenue and the agitation became violent in some districts of Assam, especially in Kamrup and Darrang. The peasants were assembled at Patharughat to discuss the problem of high rate of land revenue and other problems faced by them. J D Anderson (collector) and Berrington (SP) went there and asked the peasant's to leave the place but when the peasant refused to obey the order, the police fired on(?) the peasants and took away the lives of 39 peasants and a few policemen were also injured. Another historic movement of Assam led by the peasants was the Phulguri Revolt. It was emerged in the Nagaon district of Assam against the imposition of taxes upon houses, garden and paan cultivation by the colonial ruler. The imposition of Stamp Act 1848, Income Tax Act 1860 made the condition of the poor peasants more vulnerable. Soon 17 September, 1861, more than 1500 peasants marched to the magistrate office but they were not given importance by the district authority. So, they organized a Mel or Meeting to discuss their problems and decided not to pay taxes to the govt. The District collector tried to end up the meeting but he was failed. Then, Assistant Commissioner Shinger went there and asked them to leave the place but the peasants were not ready to do which resulted emergence of violent conflict in between them. During the conflict, assistant commissioner Shinger was killed by the peasant named Bahu Dum. Many peasants were injured and shot dead by the govt. officials and it is still remembered as a historical event of peasant struggle in Assam.

Peasant Movement in Assam after Independence

In its true sense, peasant movement in post-independence Assam emerged after the DoyangTengani Land Right Movement. Doyang and Tengani are two places located in the Assam-Nagaland border of Golaghat district and the govt. at the various point of time established numbers of Tangia and Bongaon on it to demarcate the Assam and Nagaland border. Doyang was a historical place; the archeological evidence found in Doyang proved that it was the centre

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of Kachari State many decades ago. The Britishers declared it as a Reserved Forest in 1886 under the Bengal Forest Act. Then they established four forest villages named Merapani, Chaodangpathar, Kashamari and Amguri in 1905. The independent govt. also set up numbers of Forest and Tongia village in that area. They also established half-mile belt to protect the border area from the encroachment. In this way the landless peasants started to move towards Doyang and settled there only through govt.'s initiative. The British Govt. established Tengani revenue village in 1838 and declared Tengani as the 1st reserved forest of Assam. After Independence, the Govt. of Assam also established numbers of forest and Tongia villages in Tengani. These villages attracted numbers of landless peasant from different parts of Assam affected by food and erosion in recent years. In this way, within a very short period, Doyang and Tengani became populated area. In due course of time, the people of these villages got the right to caste vote, electricity, health care facilities, numbers of educational institution, offices were also established there but they were not given the right of land or patta of land by any government. Instead, the govt. has been taking the eviction policy to displace them to protect the reserved forest. The people of Doyang and Tengani launched protest movement against the eviction policy under the leadership of Congress Socialist Party. They were supported by the AASU, CPI(ML) PCC and KhetriyKSantha of Assam. The people of Doyang-Tengani were benefitted from this protest movement in two ways-(1) The Forest Department formulated circular vide no 13.1/90-FP(2) to provide permanent rehabilitation of those people.(2) Then the then Chief Minister of Assam, Sharat Chandra Singha announced that Doyang and Tengani would be reservation free and should open for cultivation. But his announcement did not work till now.

In response to the orders given by the Supreme Court on February 18, 2000, to the various state governments including Assam government to prepare a report on how far the reserved forest and wetlands are free from encroachment, the govt. of Assam also started to carry out an eviction in the different parts of the state - Doyang-Tengani, Guwahati, Nagaon, Morigaon and many other places of the state. The eviction drive was so much aggressive that the govt. even used elephants to destroy homes and crops of the peasant at Doyang-Tenagni. Because of the homeless situation, a mother and her two children did and another gave birth a

child under rain water. During that time, Rupkonwer Jyoti Prasad Agarwala's death Golden Jubilee ceremony was celebrated all over Assam and in Tengani was not an exception in that. The brutality of eviction went to the place of function and some members of the organizing committee went there to understand the situation. By discussing with the local people and realizing the real picture, they decided to organize a protest movement against the ongoing eviction. They formed BrihotorTenganiUnnoyonSamiti and DoyangMiktiSangramSamiti and demanded for permanent "patta" of the land to the local inhabitants. This movement was so strong that on January 29, 2003, then Forest and Environment Minister Pradyut Bordoli went there and announced that no eviction would be carried out at Doyang and Tengani. He also proposed to provide rehabilitation packages to the peasants through Joint Forest Management. But the peasant refused it and urged for Man forest co-existence or GoseManuheJiyaiThokarSankalpa. To increase the popularity and support the BTUSS and DMMS, they started a bicycle rally with 200 activities on June 20, the birth anniversary of Kolaguru Brishnuprasad Rabha of 2005. One month later they gathered at Tezpur and formed KrishakMuktiSangramSamiti in the presence of more than two hundred peasants and socio-cultural organizations. Then the pace of peasant movement in Assam got a new dimension and spread to the various part of the state. Then time onwards KMSS have been working in favor of the peasant and indigenous people of Assam. They have been demanding to provide patta of the land to the tea tribes of Assam and the other tribal communities who live in the reserved forest of Assam by implementing the Forest Right Act 2006.

Though this movement was started only for the eviction started by the govt. in Doyang and Tengani, but at the later phase, the main objective of the movement has changed into the land right (patta) movement for the landless indigenous peasant of Assam who lived in Grazing Reserve, Chapori and wastelands etc. According to the survey conducted by AC Nilesen in sixteen hill settlements of Guwahati on 2009 revealed that around 65,900 households lived in the different hill area of Guwahati. Among them 71% households were living on government land, while 18% households were living on the govt. land that formed part of reserve forest; around 7.3 % households were located on patta land owned by others, while 3.6 % households were

living on patta land under their ownership. During the campaign of the 2011 assembly election, the ruling party of the state Indian National Congress promised to provide patta to the settlers of hills and wetlands of the state including Guwahati. But they started the eviction policy in massive scale after the 3rd consecutive victory in the 2011 assembly election. The govt. of Assam often announced that the eviction was carried out to maintain the ecological balance of the Guwahati city but their goals were to help the businessman and corporate sectors to make housing complexes and private hotels. Eviction was carried out in Gandhi Basti(jube9), Lalmati (June10) and Garchuk (June10) etc. The govt. also stopped issuing Ekasunyapatta in the last few years which frustrated the hill dwellers who were claiming land rights. Then the Brihad Guwahati Mati-PattaSangharshaSamiti, a unit of KMSS carried out a protest movement with the help of other community leaders which enforced the district authority to make an accord with the protesters and decided to stop the eviction until the govt. takes the final decision on this matter. But the eviction didn't end; at many places, the state the govt. carried out the eviction which harassed the common people. On June 22, 2011, under the leadership of Akhil Gogoi, thousands of hill dwellers were launching a protest march to Dispur and asked to stop the eviction and to provide patta of the land in which they have been living for a long period of time. The response of the govt. towards the protest movement was not very positive, instead the police carried out a lathi charge and fired tear-gas, firing which took away the lives three persons including a nine-year old boy and many were injured because of it. Thus, the rally turned violent, police officers and their men were beaten up, and several vehicles were also burnt or damaged by KMSS, the leaders were arrested for a few days.

To deal with the issue of land right; the govt. of Assam formed a committee under Bhumidhar Barman, then revenue minister of Assam. By discussing with the various organizations who worked on this issue,the committee recommended to provide patta for less than 1.5 Kathas of land only for residential purpose to those who occupied revenue land on or before June 28, 2001. They also recommended not to allot wetlands and reserved forest to the landless persons. On the basis of this recommendation the govt. of Assam took a historic decision to allot patta to 62,000 households in February 2014 and at the initial stage, they

provided patta to 500 households. Since the govt. did not provide land to the landless peoples, the KMSS again organized a protest meeting at Digholipukhuri on Feb 18, 2014. The leader of KMSS threatened the govt. if they did not fulfill their demands then the protest movement would be more violent. Even they announced to make mass suicides on the street on Feb 24 of 2014 in which Pronob Boro, a member of KMSS committed self-immolation in front of Assam Secretariat in Dispur. After the suicide of Pronob Nath, the movement spread to the various nock and corner of the state and gained support from all sections of the people. As of November 2015, the government was agreed with the demand of KMSS to grant patta to 64,000 peasant families including those residing in the hills and wetlands.

Since 2007, KMSS has been demanding for modern land reforms. It also demanded for the development of wasteland, abolition of landlordism and distribution of ceiling-surplus land belonging to tea garden, community institution, Satra and other religious institution. On 8th August, 2014 the KMSS submitted a memorandum to the then Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi and agricultural minister of Assam and urged to provide 100 % irrigation facilities to all the agricultural land in the state by 2020 and 12 Bighas of land to the each family of Assam. It was demanded so that the peasant can cultivate three times in a year. Then the total cultivated land of each peasant will be 36 Bighas and it will definitely make the peasant of Assam self-sufficient. According to them, among the 27 lakh hectares agricultural land in Assam, active irrigation supply is available only on 1,59,257 hectares of land. In Nov 2009, KMSS also launched a program of foot march and demanding for conducting a new land survey in each village of Assam regarding the ownership of agricultural land availability of wasteland and other issues related with peasants. KMSS also initiated movement against the transformation of cultivated land to industrial land and the displacement of ownership of land towards the land-mafiya like Suresh Pithani, Koilash Luhia. Ram Avatar etc. from the local peasant. In 2013, 9th May, KMSS along with 50,000 supporter initiated protest rally for working class and indigenous people and also filed case against the handover of 280 Bighas cultivated land to the Brahmaputra Infrastructure Limited in North Guwahati. They also fought against the 100 cr. Rupees land scandal of Suresh Pithani.

The KrishakMuktiSangramSamiti has been demanding for modern land reforms and to make a national land act by replacing the existing Assam Land and Revenue Regulation,1886.According to them, the current land act of Assam is obsolete and irreverent despite numbers of amendments are done to it time to time. In 2013, 9th December, KMSS met in a discussion with the CM of Assam and came to a conclusion that the existing Assam Land and Revenue Regulation made by the British was outdated and irreverent .They decided to formulate a new revenue and land act in Assam. The basic demands given by the KMSS were-

- (1) Resettlement operation will be done on the land of Assam that means Survey will be done on Sor-Chapori, Hola etc.
- (2) Forest Right Act 2006 will be implemented within a short length of time.
- (3) Either land or alternative settlement will be given to the resident of Guwahati
- (4) Prohibition Against the transformation of agricultural land
- (5) Tea garden labour and the people who came after 1971 will be given patta.

To formulate a new national land right in Assam the govt. formed strong committee under the Ret. Chief Justice of Guwahati High Court K N Saikia by the regulation no PRJ6/2014/13. The commission has conducted only two meetings so far which frustrated the peasants of Assam. So, on December 18,2015, the KMSS made public a draft Assam Land Bill, 2016 to replace the current Assam Land and Revenue Regulation, 1886. The proposed bill was submitted to the then chief minister Tarun Gogoi and revenue minister Bhumidhar Barman and demanded to implement it within a short period. The draft bill has classified land in eight categories - agricultural, industrial, commercial, tea industrial, homestead or *basti*, individual fishery, land owned by registered cooperative society and Debuttar, Brahmottar, Dharmottar or Wakf land. They also declared that the proposed bill will provide right to possess, sell and inherit land only to those who have their names in the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and indigenous people.The proposed bill also emphasized that the Xatra land and the fishery land of the state should be encroachment free until and unless xatra gave permission to an individual to stay there.

The govt. should make a land board and to conduct a land survey in every two years. They should provide land to the victims of natural disaster and eviction carried out by the govt.

The KrishakMuktiSangramSamiti has been also working on various issues which are related with the interest of the common people of Assam including the peasant class. It is accused that the peasants of Assam never get actual price of the commodity that they have produced; the govt. also doesn't determine the maximum supporting price of the commodity. So, the peasants have to sell their commodity at a very low price. It was only because of the continuous demand and protest movement carried out by the KMSS, the Food Corporation of India was compelled to buy rice from the peasants of Assam from 2010. At the same the other business also increased the price of the rice which benefitted the peasant of Assam. KMSS also established numbers of shops in the different places of Guwahati to provide minimum requirements at the lowest rate which helped both the common peoples and the peasant by providing a platform to sell their commodity.

Findings of the study:

If we try to analyse the nature of the peasant movement carried out by the KMSS, then it will uncover that it is actually a land right movement than a peasant movement. The basic goal of this movement is to achieve right over the land or patta of the land by the marginal and landless peasant of Assam. It is more important because in Assam, most of the peasants are marginal farmers and they possess less number of lands and so they are unable to use modern technology in the agricultural land. Fragmentation of land in Assam is also responsible for the lagging of agricultural production in Assam. Therefore KMSS has been demanding 12 bighas of land to each and every landless peasant of Assam and 100% irrigation facilities to every field of Assam so that they can cultivate three times in a year which will make the peasant of Assam self-sufficient.

The basic reason for the growth of agrarian movement in Assam both on pre and post independence era is the ruthless behaviour of the govt. and their policies towards the peasants of Assam. In colonial era, the British established a new revenue system which imposed taxes on

various sectors and also increased the rate of taxes on land and were depriving the local people of their own resources. But in Post Independence era, peasant movement emerged because of the feeling of insecurity among the peasant and by demanding some rights or facilities like permanent patta of land, compensation for acquired land by the govt. irrigation facilities, security from natural calamities.

Since 2007, KMSS has been demanding the govt. of Assam to conduct a modern land survey in Assam which will benefit the people of Assam in two ways. First of all it will help the govt. to rescue the encroached lands of xatra, wetlands, Sor- chapori areas of Assam which will pave the way for the maintenance of the balance of the ecology. Secondly, the govt. of Assam will get proper information about the ownership of land or ceiling surplus land of the landlords and they can allot this land to the landless indigenous peasant of Assam. It will help to fulfill the demands made by the KMSS at the various point of time.

In response to the various demands made by the KMSS, in many occasions the govt. of Assam also announced to provide myadipatta of the lands to the peasants and hill dwellers of Guwahati and other places of Assam. It is the one of the biggest achievements of the land right movement of Assam carried out by the KMSS in different places and time and till 2016, more than 64,000 landless peasant and hill dwellers of Assam get their myadipatta of the land on which they have been living for many decades.

Another significance of the peasant movement of Assam is the formation of a strong committee under the Ret. Chief Justice of Guwahati High Court K N Saikia by the regulation no PRJ6/2014/13 to make a New National Land Act in Assam. The commission has conducted only two meetings so far which frustrated the peasants of Assam and hence the KMSS published a draft Assam Land Bill on December 18, 2015. The formation of K N saikia committee to deal the issues, it actually proves the relevance of the demands of the National Land Act made by the landless peasants of the Assam.

Response of the state towards the land right movement is not in favor of KMSS and other hill dwellers of the state. KMSS and other hill dwellers of Assam have been carrying out a massive protest movement since 2007. The govt. often breaks down their promises given to the landless peasant and imposed lathi charge and firing on the protesters which took the lives of many peasants and many were injured also. Some time even it is also seen the leaders of the movement are arrested in non-bellable cases or even in cases of sedition. It actually signifies the undemocratic and violent nature of the state towards the protest movement.

Conclusion:

Movement in Assam isn't a new phenomenon. Almost in everyday Assam, different organizations are carrying out movements against the state and they are demanding various rights to the common people of Assam. KMSS, the leading peasant organization of Assam, also carrying out its struggle in favor of the peasant class of the state since its inception. Though it is a peasant organization but now a days, they have been leading various popular movements of the state like –Anti Big Dam Movement, Overwhelming corruption in different govt. programs and recently the Anti CAA movement etc. It is the first organization in the history of Assam which has demanded patta of the land to the tea tribes of Assam and because of their continuous support and demand of the SahMuktiSangramSamiti, more than 10,000 people of tea tribes got the permanent patta of their land.

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