

Contemporary Economic Issues and Reflections in the Assamese Periodical “Awahan”

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ABSTRACT: The publication of “Awahan” was a great landmark in the history of Assamese literature and also in the history of journalism in Assam. the Assamese periodical “Awahan” was published from Calcutta under the editorship of Dr. Dinanath Sharma from October 1929, eight years after the non cooperation movement. It had a deep impact on the minds of younger writers of Assam. The economic issues and reflections of “Awahan” were very noteworthy. There were various economic problems in Assam during 1930s and sectors like agriculture and industry deteriorated under the British rule. The land revenue policy of Assam was against the interest of the common people of Assam. Assamese people did not show any kind of interest towards trade and commerce and even for petty businesses. On account of such reluctance, the sense of entrepreneurship did not develop in Assam. Meanwhile, unemployment became a very serious issue for the people of Assam. “Awahan” appealed to the youths to involve in petty businesses for the prosperity of Assam.

KEYWORDS; - Deteriorated, Entrepreneurship, Landmark, Noteworthy, Reluctance,

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I INTRODUCTION

The print media played a very crucial role in the growth and development of our socio-political and economic order of a country. In 1846, “Orunodoi” marked the beginning of the print media in Assam and since then, there had been a great effort made by the leading intelligentsia of Assamese middle class to publish vernacular newspapers and journals. After the golden eras of “Jonaki” and “Banhi” in 1929, “Awahan” was published with a progressive outlook. The journal brought a new dimension in the economic aspect of Assam. Sectors like agriculture deteriorated under the colonial rule. The economic condition of the peasants was not at all sound and they lived by hand to mouth. Moreover, the high amount of land revenue created huge problem for the peasants. Except this, Assamese people did not like to treat trade and commerce as an honourable work. Instead of trade and commerce Assamese people preferred official jobs like clerk, peon, choukidar etc. due to such traditional perception unemployment also increased in Assam. Due to the lack of interest in trade and commerce of the Assamese people, almost 21 lakhs people migrated to Assam and started to take the advantages of the situation. “Awahan” appealed to promote the khadi programme among the people of Assam.

II OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

The objectives of the paper are:-

- (a) To analysis the agrarian crisis of Assam during the colonial period.
- (b) To assess the perception of Assamese people towards trade and commerce.
- (c) To evaluate growing unemployment and migration problem in Assam.

III METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The paper is descriptive and analytical one, primarily based on primary and secondary data. The eight published volumes of Assamese periodical “Awahan” is used extensively. The secondary sources are consulted from the published materials in the form of books, research journal papers and the materials available in the internet. The details of the books, journals and other materials are given in the reference part.

IV LAND REVENUE AND AGRICULTURE

Land revenue statement was a major aspect of the ‘Awahan’. In 1925, Assam settlement bill was enforced. Meanwhile the rate of new land revenue was indeed very high. The legislature too reacted sharply to the enhancement of land revenue rates in 1927 and 1928. It voted thirty one to twelve to adjourn the house in order to discuss the arbitrary reassessment in Kamrup.⁽¹⁾ Soon after the relevant resolution of the governor

published land revenue report on 16th February, 1927. It refused grants for the continuous resettlement operations. The land revenue policy of the government was deeply criticized by leading and educated Assamese youths. It is said that the census of land and revenue policy of the government, though various proposals and resolutions were passed in the "Reformed Councils". The government, in order to fulfill their interest at any cost, decided to enhance land revenue. But it was a total injustice because the imposition and hike of land revenue was an arbitrary decision of a British officer. The amount of land revenue was determined by a settlement officer. The new system of revenue turned in to a big blow for the Assamese society⁽²⁾. It has been stated that the total amount of revenue was increased in the Assam province, but practically it was not as expected. In comparison to the revenue of Brahmaputra Valley, the total amount of revenue in the Barak valley was nominal due to some unknown causes. Though Brahmaputra Valley experienced severe flood in recent times but government revenue is not turned into deficit. Meanwhile, Sylhet caused huge problem for Assam to handle the revenue affair. Due to the incorporation of Sylhet to Assam, the people of Assam had to face big burden of revenue. Other districts of Assam had to pay excess amount of revenue to run the office of Sylhet. At length, it was urged to the government to do something with the matter of Sylhet to solve out the issue⁽³⁾ Excise was another source of revenue generation in colonial Assam. Excise department was established in Assam to deal with the issue effectively. In 1920-21, the total amount of excise revenue was 75.3 lakhs. The excise revenue reached at the highest peak due to the increasing opium addiction of Assamese people. But gradually the excise revenue started to decrease due the impact of mass movements like non-cooperation and civil disobedience. In 1920-30 the total amount of excise revenue was 66 lakhs.⁽⁴⁾ But in the subsequent year revenue came down. In the annual excise report it was stated that in compare to the previous year, almost 9 lakhs was deficit. During 1930-31 the total amount of excise revenue was 57 Lakhs rupees⁽⁵⁾.

Government believed that gradually the amount of opium addicted people came down in Assam. Yet opium and ganja were illegally imported to Assam by the people and a huge amount of money went outside of Assam for opium and ganja. It was a great loss of revenue for the Assam government. In 1930-31, 329 cases came to light of illegal opium trade in Assam, 51 *seers* of opium were rescued approximately in this process. Illegal opium trade was going on Assam since long but government failed to take bold and stern measures to check the opium trade in Assam. Due to this, a kind of moral degeneration also started in Assam among the people. It was urged that this system would promote illegal opium tread in a more effective manner .On account of this; the amount of opium addicted people would increase in Assam. It was regretted that, government adopted only the means of opium to enhance the revenue of the state. It was ultimately a short sighted policy of the government to cripple the Assamese people. Excise became the main source of revenue generation in Assam and one third revenue of Assam came from excise which was not a positive sign for Assam's economy because excise can't be taken as a mere source of revenue⁽⁶⁾. Revenue was a big concern for province like Assam because though various taxes were imposed or revenue was collected but the development of Assam was very slow. The governor of Assam Sir. Lorrie Hammond once said in the Assam council that two third of Assam's revenue spent as salary of the British Officials. Except, heavy taxation economic crisis prevailed in Assam due to the annexation of Sylhet to Assam. 36 Lakhs rupees had to spend only for the Sylhet and its administration. Moreover, Assam government had to bear the expenditure for the maintance of armed force in North-Eastern frontier province. Hills districts were also supervised by the Assam government Thus, the collected amount of revenue was not sufficient for Assam to meet up with all existing demands⁽⁷⁾.

Agriculture was a very important area which can also be placed in our discussion. Due to the increasing amount of land revenue, common people had to suffer a lot. Severe economic crisis prevailed in India and the agriculture sector suffered a lot and the condition of peasants in Assam deteriorated day by day. The economic conditions of the peasants were not at all sound and they lived by hand to mouth. But due to the high land revenue, the people of Assam decided to give up to take commodities like oil and Salt⁽⁸⁾. It was indeed a very burning question of Assam. But common people even did not know how the land revenue is fixed or determined. Basically Ryotwari system was followed in Assam except Sylhet, and one tenth or one sixth of the total annual production was supposed to be taken as land revenue. Meanwhile due to the inflation, the peasants had to face worst experience regarding the price of various goods. Government revised taxes on commodities like sugar, salt and oil but at the same time the price level of locally produce goods started to fall. For instance, the price rice falls down from 2 rupees to less than one rupee per '*mun*'. This system would paralyze Assamese peasants and they occasionally raised their grievances or protest against such imposition⁽⁹⁾. The economic condition of peasants deteriorated day by day. In order to analyze the condition of peasants, *Banking Committee* was formed under the chairmanship of Bhupendranath Mitra. It was said that the annual income of per peasant was just 42 rupees. It was one of the major consequences of the colonization in India. Economy and agriculture was stagnant in agricultural output, productivity declined, food supply became scanty⁽¹⁰⁾.

The committee finally opined that government should adopt agriculture. Government decided to shrink the amount of growing expenditure, but the condition of the peasants did not improve but government introduced certain taxes on various items. Even the railway fare was increased. It was quiet clear that the newly

adopted system of the government was not at all fruitful for the ordinary people. Its entire benefit goes to the rich section of the society⁽¹¹⁾. Regarding the existence of agriculture department in Assam, It is said that common people didn't receive any benefit from this department. Agriculture department was a sound government department and except this, the condition of Assamese peasant was pathetic and gradually it deteriorated day by day. Thousands of cattle were died due to some unknown disease. It was a bolt from the blue on the peasants, because no advanced mode was introduced in agriculture. Excise amount of land tax and the death of the cattles improvised the peasants a lot. But beyond all these hurdles, no one else visited to analyze the causes⁽¹²⁾. The report of Assam Banking enquiry committee was published in 1929 and in the published report of the committee, it was written that agriculture department, Veterinary department and cooperative department benefitted the common people and emphasis was also laid on its expansion in Assam. But in the editorial pages of '*Awahan*' this consideration was not at all summed profitable because, this had indirectly harassed common people and the pressure of tax increased on people. Haladhar Das, One noted scholar of Assam criticized the newly appointed agricultural offices for their western style of dress⁽¹³⁾. During the colonial period; Common people did not receive any benefit from the agriculture officers. Actually they were not at all interested to improve the agricultural sector. The department failed to attract the young educated youth towards the agricultural sector. Thus, well educated youth of Assam preferred government jobs over agriculture. Agriculture department should take proper steps to solve this stagnation by changing their perception and mentality. It was argued to employ the unemployed youth in the agriculture sector⁽¹⁴⁾.

V PERCEPTION TOWARDS TRADE AND COMMERCE AND THE PROBLEM OF UNEMPLOYMENT

The arrival of the British destroyed the feudal structure of the economy of Assam, so the economic crisis emerged among the Assamese aristocratic class. The aristocratic section did not treat it as an honorable work. Mainly, the Europeans, Marwaris and Bengali people involved in this process. The Marwari traders were found in almost every important village. They supplied salt, cotton twist and piece goods, brass, vessels, undrained sugar etc, and exchanged these commodities for money, but more generally paddy, rice, mustard silk cocoons, silk thread and silk cloth. When required they made advance to the cultivators and the rate of interest changed is usually one *anna* per month or 75 percent. But these advances by no means common as the Assamese prefer apparently to borrow from each other⁽¹⁵⁾. Except this contradictory thinking a few leading educated elite such as Rokheswar Baruah, Dinanath Bezbaruah, Jaganath Baruah, Manik Chandra Baruah, Radhakanta Handique, gradually interested to expand tea plantation in Assam but from the government they had to face certain troubles. Though Assamese people like Laxminath Bezbaruah and Bholanath Baruah involved in timber business, it is noteworthy that they involved in some pretty business of timber under the British businessmen. They even made request to the British government for getting facilities⁽¹⁶⁾. The middle class of Assam failed to give birth to an independent business class in Assam on account of their loyalty to the British capitalists. Though Assamese people experienced poor economic harassment from the government but they strongly believed that only under the British rule the prosperity of Assam would possible. But actually colonial rule and exploitation served as a major cause behind the growth of entrepreneurship in Assam⁽¹⁷⁾.

Gyanath Bora, a graduate of contemporary Assam analyzed the limitations and scope of trade and commerce in Assam. It was said that due to lack of capital, instead of big shops, Assamese people could establish small shops like the outsiders such as *Marwaris*. Many small foreign shops were established in Assam which could make money for them. The foreigners established small shops with the help of the small capital. But gradually with their effort and dedication they extended their business and earned huge profit. Even the interested Assamese people could take inspiration from these people. This happened before the eyes of the Assamese people and by degrees, they could enable to occupy entire country in the name of trade and commerce. Pretty Business like rice, sugarcane, cotton etc was undertaken by them. They made investment for the extension of business in Assam and in return received huge benefits⁽¹⁸⁾. Assamese people should invest their capital for the cause of business. But he expressed his regret that Assamese youth did not show their minimum interest to set up small shops. They liked to start huge business because according to them, small shops can't be considered as shops and these are not granted as business and for them it's a matter of big shame to involve in such activities. They deserved big building and thousand of rupees along with clerk to start a Business. So, these were a big difference in the perception of Assamese people regarding trade and commerce. He did not blame the Assamese youth but condemned the prevailing perception of Assamese people. Assamese always preferred government jobs such as clerk, which treated as an honorable job. But in terms of pretty business like rice, Assamese people underrated these businesses and not treated a work with good honor⁽¹⁹⁾.

Meanwhile, unemployment was a major problem in Assam during colonial periods. But educated youth of Assam hankered after government jobs but not like of start individual business. They did not hesitate to make prayer, petition etc. to get a government job. It was a matter of shame very for the Assamese people that in spite of such shameful situations, they had to face humiliation and mental harassment from the British officers. But

except, these they did not feel it a shameful work, rather they were ready to face the worst. It was treated as shameful task to start a pretty shop. Assamese youth failed to realize that it was not an easy task to be a big and established businessman in a single day. It was only possible due to the supreme dedication of a man. It was argued to study about of well set up businessmen and their hard work⁽²⁰⁾. Assamese people tried to be a billionaire in a single day and so they ignored small business like started a shop. But it can't be taken a positive sign for the Assamese people and Assam. There was no need of huge capital for small shops. One hundred, two hundred rupees could make the difference. Capital can be generated only through the means of business. Appeal was made of the youths to cross all their outdated perceptions and barriers and to do something with the system. Educated youth should take proper initiative in promotion of local entrepreneurship among the people of Assam. It would change the mentality of the people towards trade and commerce and people would realize the importance of business. There were many educated employed people in Assam and if they adopt business as a means of livelihood than any other means, then it would save Assam⁽²¹⁾. But although, capital is supposed to be key factor behind trade and commerce but along with this hard labour and dedication is also essential. Businessmen should always ready for ups and down but should not loss-hopes and patience because in order to face any problem they should always be courageous, by removing fear. But Assamese people were always worried about the loss in business. Profit and loss are the two sides of the same win and everyone should ready to accept it. None should give up business after sudden loss because these things are part and parcel of a business. Mutual trust and faith is another one area to achieve success in people failed to get success in business. But due to the lack of such belief, Assamese people failed to get success in business. But mutual trust is the main key to success of the British and the *Marwari* people⁽²²⁾.

The *Marwari kayas* were very trustworthy people and they trusted each other and never tried to cheat each other. Entire core of business is depended on mutual trust and healthy business developed that sense among these people. It is supposed to be a matter of big concern for the Assamese people. Along with mutual trust, mutual cooperation is also very essential among the Assamese people. Only with the help of an Assamese people one could attain success in business. There was a need of a movement to awake the entrepreneur mindset among the people of Assam. Everyone should inspire and motivate those who started a simple business. After all, people of Assam should take proper initiative to promote the sense of trade and commerce and entrepreneurship. A business can also run jointly along with indigenous people. Small retailer business would be useful for the people. It was argued that economically sound people of Assam, the middle class people, Assamese educated youth could engage themselves in activities like life insurance. According to '*Awahan*' the foreigners gradually undertook all business potentialities of Assam and appealed all people of Assam to take seriously the issue for their future existence⁽²³⁾ Indian bourgeois class was self dependant and did not depend to the British Capitalist. They were excited about political independence. But the Assamese middle class totally gave up their political and economic independence before the imperialist and due to this a well organized independent capitalist class failed to make its appearance in Assam⁽²⁴⁾. Regarding the weakness of Assamese people Gyananath Bora wrote an article '*Asomiyar Swraj*' where he expressed that business or trade and commerce is the key of a nation. Countries like England, France etc. expanded their power and influence only with the help of trade and commerce. But only the involvement in trade and commerce would help Assamese people sustain in the ongoing period of crisis⁽²⁵⁾.

Due to the lack of intention of the Assamese people in trade and commerce, almost 21 lakhs people migrated to Assam and started to take its advantages. Cores of rupees drained aboard for this. Yet the Assamese youths went for government jobs, but not for business. Meanwhile, emphasis was laid on *Swaraj* but according to Gyananath Bora, without trade and commerce, it would impossible for the Assamese to get *Swaraj*. Outsiders totally dominated the business of Assam which crippled entire Assamese people to get freedom or *Swaraj*. Outsiders totally dominated the business of Assam which crippled entire Assamese race. It was expressed that it would not be lasted for long time and in near future Assamese lesson would disappear. It was also opined that Assamese people should learn how to carry out business⁽²⁶⁾. Finally, it was suggested that there were great potentiality for the Assamese people to involve them in trade and commerce. Ruhini kumar Baruah also asked the educated unemployed youth to engage in business and to utilize their best potentiality. The youth should come forward with a positive attitude for trade and commerce. Absence of business, trade and commerce was supposed to be a prime cause behind the economic backwardness of Assam. He asked them to come forward willingly to involve in trade and commerce. He hoped that common Assamese people should offer their best contribution in terms of cash to start pretty business. Besides this, lots of exportable items were produced in Assam and also had a terrific demand outside Assam⁽²⁷⁾.

VI ISSUE OF KHADI

Khadi issue was an important socio economic aspect of colonial Assam. The famous non co-operation movement emphasised on the promotion of *Swadeshi* goods which included items like boycotting of foreign goods, mainly foreign cloth and garments. It was resolved that the demand of foreign cloth should be replaced

by hand spun and hand woven. Spinning and weaving were originally intended as an economic programme as a means of uplifting the masses⁽²⁸⁾. One of the major aims of Gandhiji was to improve the condition of ordinary people by introducing *Charkha*. The utilization of foreign cloth deteriorated the condition of poor ryots in Assam. One leading elite of contemporary time, Padmadhar Chaliha was very critical about the pathetic condition of Assam. He analyzed that due to the utilization foreign made cloth crores of rupees drained from Assam to abroad and stated that in place indigenous cotton *Paat*, *Muga* and *endi* cloth, people of Assam went for foreign made colorful cloths. It was nothing but a kind of stupidity of the Assamese people. Work culture such as weaving disappeared from Assam for good. But during time of non co-operation movement, the common people of Assam showed some interest and intention towards spinning and weaving work⁽²⁹⁾. The appeal of Mahatma Gandhi also worked like magic in this regard. It was stated that *khadi* was a sign of simplicity and patriotism. It firmly regarded that one should be treated as untouchable who does not possess *khadi* cloth. Meanwhile the ideology of *swadeshi* became very strong in India and even in Assam. It was asked to bring cotton, *charkha* and other weaving devices for spanning and weaving cloths. Moreover request was made to revive indigenous cultures like rearing *pat* and *muga* silk. Marketing of *khadi* cloth was another one very distinguished aspect behind promotion of this sector. Advice was given to sale *khadi* and home spun cloth among the people in the market⁽³⁰⁾.

Leading feminist figure of Assam Chandraprava Saikiani was the chairperson of the first *kachari* women annual conference where she offered deep stress on the role of women in the promotion of *khadi*. She appealed all women that they should concentrate themselves in handicraft and handloom activities. She asked women to check the flow of money from Assam to abroad by avoiding foreign made or machine made cloths and instead this. It was argued to buy cotton and to make handmade items. She also stated that due to the negligence of Assamese people as well as women the *khadi* or handmade cloth started to lose its significance. She made certain references like Japan and England and concluded that both countries received outstanding achievement on account of its great cloth industry. Country like Japan enables to make great progress because almost 95% women had involved in the industry. She also confessed that due to the sound cloth industry the British could rule over India. Thus, she portrayed cloth industry as the key of success of British in India. By citing these instances, she tried her level best to inspire and motivate the women to engage in the cloth making and weaving industry not only for self independence but also for the independence of India. She asked all people of Assam particularly the women section to revive the lost glory of handicraft and handloom industry. It was believed that, *charkha* could do everything in India but it needs selfishness dedication and patience. It was also earnestly requested the women to offer best support to the ongoing civil disobedience movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi. According to her, it was not possible for women to directly participate in the freedom struggle but they could offer their terrific support indirectly by strengthening the base of *khadi*⁽³¹⁾. Gandhiji treated spinning and weaving not only as an economic programme, but also as a weapon for the mass mobilization for *swaraj*. It was the *khaddar* activities which attracted Gandhiji in the annual session of Indian National Congress in Guwahati. With the civil disobedience movement, this was a fresh appeal from the congress to the people to boycott foreign cloth and resort to hand spun and hand woven yarn. When Gandhiji visited Assam in 1934, in connection with the programme of the *Harijan Sevak Sangha*, he assured the establishment of a *Khadi Sangha*.

VII FINDINGS

The publication of “Awahan” periodical was a significant milestone in the history of colonial Assam. Along with other issues, it encouraged common people of Assam to think about their own economic condition and also talked about its improvement. The periodical severely criticised and discussed problem like migration and also to promote the sense of local entrepreneurship of the Assamese people. Emphasis was laid on the concept of self dependence through the promotion of *Khadi* among the women of Assam. At length, “Awahan” tried its level best to raise and develop a progressive and updated outlook towards all economic issues of contemporary times with a nationalistic view.

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