

**Student Activism in Barak Valley: An Analysis in the context of
Pre-90s and Post-90s Era**

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Abstract: *Barak Valley comprising three districts of Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj is strategically located in the southernmost part of Assam, India. But in spite of its strategic location, the region is quite underdeveloped in comparison to the Brahmaputra Valley. The people of the region have a long tradition of struggle- struggle for language and culture, struggle for University, Broad Gauge rail services etc. Study reveals that students of the Barak valley were very much alive on various issues affecting the interest of the greater section of the society. The interesting fact is that they were not only active in their movements on the roads, but they also kept their footprints in the socio-cultural as well as economic development of the region through various means. It is however found that in the post 90s period, this scenario took a U-turn as no significant student movement, worth the name, in Barak Valley has been visible. The present paper is designed to highlight the student activism in both pre 90s and post 90s era and at the same time, to make an enquiry to the post 90s situation so far as student movement is concerned. However, it is important to mention that the paper is the outcome of a study which was conducted objectively with the help of data collected from different secondary as well as primary sources which included survey and field work through questionnaire and schedule.*

Key-Words: Barak Valley, Student activism, Liberalisation-Privatisation –Globalisation, Market economy

It has been revealed from the study of student activism that students of the Barak Valley, situated in the southernmost tip of the state of Assam, were very much alive on various issues affecting the interest of the greater section of the society during the pre-90s period of the last century. They were not only active and strong in their movements on the roads, but they also kept their footprints in the struggle for socio-cultural as well as economic development of the society through various innovative procedures. But this enthusiasm of the students was found to be deteriorating in post 90s era, i.e. in the era of LPG-Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation. An effort is being made in this paper to highlight the status of student activism in the given period along with an attempt to throw light on the reasons of such deterioration. However, for the sake of the better understanding of the student activism in the Barak Valley in the given period, the paper is divided into three parts— introduction of the Barak Valley, a brief outline of student activism in pre 90s era and the post 90s scenario of student activism.

Part- I: Barak Valley: The Setting

Situated in the southernmost tip of the state of Assam, Barak Valley, comprising three districts of Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj is an important region of the state as it shares an international border with Bangladesh and inter-state border with Tripura, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Manipur. The 'East West Corridor' or the Silchar - Saurashtra super Highway links Barak Valley in Assam to Kutch in Gujarat. But in spite of its strategic location, Barak Valley is a much underdeveloped region compared to the Brahmaputra Valley right from the dawn of independence of the country. Before entering into the main topic of discussion, it is imperative to introduce the region for the clarity of the readers.

Although politically a part of Assam, Barak Valley is distinct in almost every aspect from other units of N.E. India (Choudhury, Sujit, 2005). Throughout the colonial rule, i.e. from 1766 to 1947, the Karimganj district of present Barak Valley formed a part of the district of Sylhet (Census of India, 1921). In the British period i.e. from 1832 to 1947, the districts of Cachar and Hailakandi of present Barak Valley constituted the district of Cachar (Census of India, 1971). In 1874, when Assam was organised as a province by the British, these two Bengali speaking districts of Sylhet and Cachar were carved out of the Bengal Presidency and incorporated in Assam to meet the revenue deficit of the newly formed province. The twin districts were then placed under a Commissionership and came to be known as the Surma Valley division (Choudhury, op. cit.). However, in 1947 the independence of India came with the partition of the country and the Indian portion of the former 'Surma Valley Division' constituted the district of Cachar with three sub-divisions namely Silchar, Hailakandi and Karimganj (ibid.). In the post-independence period, the area came to be known as the Barak Valley signifying the name of the main river of this region 'Barak'. Subsequently, Karimganj and Hailakandi were made two separate districts in 1983 and in 1989 respectively for administrative convenience.

In the study of economic profile of the valley, a few historical facts are of relevance to the socio-economic conditions of the post-independence period. True to the Indian heritage, Barak Valley was essentially a rural area and the people in general were agriculturists, the land was sparsely populated; and being a natural extension of the Bengal plains, it came to be peopled by Bengalis during the later rulers of the Kachari kingdom. Under the impact of British rule, i.e. from 1832 to 1947, the valley underwent radical socio-economic transformation with the increase in the area under cultivation, increase of exports, increase of population, progress of education, emergence of towns and expansion of trade and commerce (Bhattacharjee, S.K., 2014). But hardly had the British rule consolidated itself in the valley when it got involved in the national struggle for independence since Swadeshi Movement and any further economic growth was inconceivable. In fact, nothing was done by the British to plan the economic development of the region, and consequently, after independence, when the era of planned development began in the country in 1951, the economy of the Barak Valley (the then Cachar district) was in a very bad shape, society largely traditional and the people culturally backward. Moreover, the partition of the country isolated this region from its old social, cultural, economic and commercial contact with Bengal, brought in its trail heavy refugee influx that changed its demographic structure and put heavy pressure on the economy (ibid.).

Following are few indicators that will help to ascertain the economic condition of the Barak Valley:

Agriculture: The economy of the Barak Valley is primarily agrarian. Agriculture plays the predominant role in economic life of the rural people who constitute 86.94% of the total population of the valley(Census of India, 2011). It is pertinent to note here that more than 58% of the total working population in the valley are either cultivators or agricultural labourers and 70.7% of its workers earn their livelihood from primary sector activities(Census of India, 1991).

Barak Valley is one of the most economically backward regions in the country. In 2006, the Indian government named composite district of Cachar as one of the country's 250 most backward districts out of a total of 640(Report of Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2009). It is one of the eleven districts in Assam currently receiving funds from the Backward Regions Grant Fund Programme(ibid.). As per the Statistical Report of 2001, the contribution of the Barak Valley to the GSDP of Assam is only 9.32%.

Industry: Study reveals that in the Barak Valley, the planning process could not make any significant impact on the industrial front even after the completion of eleven successive plan periods. In spite of possessing abundant potentialities, in the form of agriculture, forest and water resources, which could have been exploited in a big way to boost up the industrialisation, the valley still presents a very dismal picture of industrial backwardness. In fact, besides the Hindustan Paper Corporation and the age-old tea industry and the traditional cottage industries and handicrafts, no new industry worth the name has been set up so far other than a few small-scale industries. What is more disappointing is that the only large industry of the valley, Hindustan Paper Corporation has come to a closure. Besides, the tea-industry is also facing a lot of technical and administrative problems.

Unemployment Problem: The valley is also suffering from acute unemployment problem due to backwardness in agriculture and industrialisation. The picture of workforce participation of the valley will be clear from the following table which shows the percentage of district wise workforce participation in the Barak Valley.

Percentage of District-Wise Workforce Participation in Barak Valley in 2011

District	Workers			Non-workers		
	Total	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban
Cachar	35.01	28.88	6.13	64.99	52.95	12.04
Hailakandi	32.50	30.08	2.03	67.50	62.62	4.89
Karimganj	32.49	29.54	2.53	67.51	61.53	5.98
Barak Valley Total	33.70	29.32	3.84	66.30	57.62	8.68

Source- Census of India, 2011

The statistics show that only 33.70% people of Barak Valley are workers in different sectors among whom only 3.84% are from urban background while 29.32% people come from rural area. The non-workers constitute 66.30% of the population of the valley which establishes beyond doubt the wastage of human resources. If the agricultural productivity does not improve and industrial activity is not revitalised by helping the cottage and small-scale industries and by setting up new medium and large-scale industries through direct government initiatives, the situation in the employment front is not likely to look up.

Since the dawn of the independence of the country, Barak valley remained underdeveloped in socio- economic and academic spheres and the State government was found to have remained indifferent so far as the development issue of the valley was concerned. This attitude of the government towards the valley enraged the people in general and students in particular as the scope for higher education and employment in the Barak Valley was few and far between due to the lack/ inadequacy of university and professional/technical institutions, industrialisation, irrigation facilities, transport and communication facilities, etc. of this valley. The people of the region have a long tradition of struggle— struggle for language and culture, struggle for University, Broad Gauge rail services etc. It was only in the year 1994, one and only university was established in the region which was the result of a prolonged decade-long student movement. Besides, in spite of being an important international corridor, the people of the valley had to wait for almost seven decades for the introduction of BG rail service in the region that came in operation only in the year 2016.

Part- II: Student activism in Barak Valley in pre 90s era: A Brief Outline

So far as student activism in Assam is concerned, in the pre-independence period, there was no movement called student movement as such although the students of both Barak and Brahmaputra valley participated immensely in the national liberation movement. At that time, their only focus was the liberation of the country. After the attainment of independence, when the ethno-linguistic dichotomy became very important issue in the state, the students of both the valleys seem to undertake an active role to make the issues popular among the masses. To have a better understanding of the history of student activism in both the valleys, two studies may be referred here — one is '*Middle Class Hegemony and Student Power in Assam*' by Apurba Kumar Baruah of NEHU, Shillong while the other is '*Student Movement in Barak Valley with special reference to Language Movement*' by Arunima Bhattacharjee of SS College, Hailakandi.

In his Study, Apurba Kumar Baruah has drawn up a conceptual framework for studying student movements in countries with colonial experience. In the student activism of the Brahmaputra Valley, as he feels, the views and ideas of the ideologically dominant class in that society are reflected. In the Brahmaputra Valley, Baruah finds that the views of the educated middle class coming from the culturally dominating section of the society are reflected in the activities of students of this region. However, while explaining the student movements in the Brahmaputra Valley, Baruah has given emphasis on some determinate factors like colonial rule, linguistic diversity of Assam, partition of India, etc. As he feels, all the above-mentioned factors are important in respect of the socio-political developments of the Brahmaputra Valley in the post-independence era and as such he has applied his concept of 'Middle Class Hegemony' to understand the role of these factors while studying the

student movements of the Brahmaputra Valley after 1947(Baruah, 1991).

Similarly, in the context of the Barak Valley as well, Arunima Bhattacharjee, in her study '*Student Movement in Barak Valley with special reference to Language Movement*' shows that student movement, in this region also, had originated from some determinate situation. She undertakes the study from the historical perspective and opines that student movements of the Barak Valley is to be studied in the context of certain elements, e.g. the early history of the region during the pre-colonial and the colonial rules, partition of India in 1947, the linguistic composition of the state of Assam in relation to the socio-political developments in the Brahmaputra Valley in the pre-independence and post-independence periods. Following the line of argument of A.K. Baruah, Arunima Bhattacharjee also feels that these factors are equally relevant to the Barak Valley situation. And, as she feels, the above-mentioned socio-political features are common in the Barak Valley also, the concept of cultural hegemony coming from the dominant section of the society can be accepted to understand the student activism in this region as well.

Thus, when in the Brahmaputra Valley, the students along with the elites organised two mass movements centring round the Official language issue in 1960 and the Medium of Instruction issue in 1972 (Bhattacharjee, A., 2011) supporting the governmental effort to make the state a unilingual one, the student-folk of the Barak Valley didn't seat idle. Opposing these repressive measures of the government, people of Barak Valley raised vehement protest and, in this respect, students of this region were also found to share the views of the leaders of the valley. They are seemed to have undertaken a very important role in mobilising counter movements all over the valley with their demands on the official language and the medium of instruction issues in 1961 as well as 1972 respectively(*ibid.*). Thus, after the independence, the student movement also changed its character. Its focus slowly turned towards the preservation of linguistic identity of the people of this valley which reached its climax in the language movements of 1961 and 1972 causing the death of eleven people (among whom 2 are students) and 1 person (student) respectively. In these two movements, students acted as the main pressure group in the Barak Valley to compel the Government to stall the decision to introduce Assamese as the only state language of Assam and to make Assamese as the only medium of instruction in the educational institutions of the state(*ibid.*).

Since the movement on medium of instruction issue in 1972, student activities in the Barak Valley turned towards a much broader perspective relating to the promotion of general socio-economic condition of the region in the form of demands like 'Education for all' and 'Job for all', although preservation of cultural and linguistic identity was still a potent factor which was reflected in the language movement of 1986 and ACKHSA's movement for setting up of a Central University in Barak Valley. So far as the promotion of general socio-economic condition of the region is concerned, some of the important issues for which they fought were- arresting inflation, improvement of roads and communication, education through mother tongue, provincialisation of venture schools and colleges, pension for college teachers, increase of the budgetary allocation on education, fixing of appropriate price for the agricultural products of this valley, provision of patta for land to the agriculturists, etc(Personal interview with Nishith Das, former MLA, Karimganj dated Karimganj, 25th January, 2015; Dulal Mitra, CPM activist, Silchar dated Silchar, 13th September, 2012, 20th October, 2012, 31st January, 2013).

The student movement of Barak Valley during the phase had a unique character of its own. It had three dominant dimensions. The first dimension may be exemplified by three movements--the first is an ACKHSA-led movement to set up a Central University in Barak Valley, second one is a movement demanding withdrawal of the controversial SEBA circular while the third one is a silent movement for the preservation of the language and cultural identity and reacting against AASU's Anti-foreigners' movement by staging cultural performances, publishing more and more little magazines and by making short length films. This dimension may be characterised as a unique feature of cultural and linguistic distinctiveness of the people of Barak Valley. The second dimension relates to the parallel ongoing student movement, largely led by pan-India organisations like SFI and ABVP which had an enlarged perspective of the promotion of general socio-economic condition of this region apart from the promotion and improvement of education system as a whole. Another manifestation of this dimension is reflected in their movement against age-old irrationalism and superstitions. The third dimension is manifested through the student movements in different campuses. Thus, it has been observed that student movements of the Barak Valley had taken varied forms ranging from the preservation of linguistic and cultural identity to the setting up of a Central University, from simple campus issues (such as movement for the improvement of academic environment at Ram Krishna Vidyapith, Ramkrishna Nagar leading to the death of two students of the said school and movement at Silchar Medical College & Hospital on various issues) to the broader form of anti-authoritarian movement (such as movement that led to the arrest of some students under MISA Conduct Rule). It is also evident from the study that in the activities of the students of Barak Valley, the views and ideas of ideologically dominant class is largely reflected. In other words, it is mostly the educated middle class, coming from culturally dominant section of the society in Barak Valley that spearheaded the movement (Bhattacharjee, S., 2022).

Part-III: Student activism in post 90s era: An Analysis

Study reveals that since the establishment of Assam University, Silchar in 1994, no significant student movement worth the name has been visible in the Barak Valley. An enquiry to this situation leads one to rethink about the issue primarily from the ideological point of view. During the cold war period in international arena, the support of the erstwhile USSR for the cause of enhancing socialism as well as its continuous confrontation with the capitalistic US-group gave a boost to the leftist student movement in India. The emergence of the strong left front government in West Bengal in 1977 also inspired the students of the Barak Valley having leftist ideology to involve themselves in the movements over various issues. In the international perspective, the events like Cuban Revolution (1953-58), assassination of Che Guevara in 1967 by CIA, Vietnam War (1955-1975) also fuelled the urge for movement by intellectual and idealistic youths and students even across the developed nations. It is also found that those idealistic and intellectual youths and students have mostly come from the middle-class family background. The situation in Barak Valley was also no exception. However, after the disintegration of Soviet Union followed by Gorbachev's liberal policies of Perestroika and Glasnost, this very element of inspiration which was one of the support bases for sustaining leftist student movement in India began to be subsided. All of a sudden, a vacuum was created at the inspiration level which de-

motivated the SFI movement. This was one of the dominant reasons for which left student movement was subsided to a great extent in post 1989 period (ibid.).

Besides this ideological factor, growth of market economy or consumerism has also been found to be a potent factor for which student movement got subsided to a large extent from 90s decade. In the international arena, according to some Marxist and some neo-Marxist thinkers, a new style of imperialism started to appear after the Second World War. The industrialised capitalist countries might have lost their so-called empire politically, but they continued their process of exploitation of the third world countries using new methods of exploitation and domination. Thus, there evolved the system of 'neo-colonialism' the essence of which was imperialism without colonies. According to the aforesaid political thinkers, imperialistic control now depends more on economic domination rather than on political domination. This new method or technique of exploitation or domination is the policy of LPG--liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation. In the name of this LPG, these industrialised capitalist countries which are popularly known as 'first world' countries started to dominate over the 'third world' countries economically by using, to their advantage, giant agencies like World Bank, IMF etc. In order to making rapid socio-economic developments, the third world countries have been forced to take huge amount of loans which was very difficult for them to repay in their ongoing closed economic structure. Thus, the third world countries were slowly and gradually destined to introduce the policy of LPG in the name of economic reform and better livelihood. Moreover, as hinted earlier, the cold war between the two blocks also came to an end by 1989 with the disintegration of Soviet Union which symbolised the victory of capitalism over socialism. The era of bipolar regime came to an end and a unipolar regime emerged with omnipotent 'corporate America' in the centre of stage to dominate the entire world market. This globalised market economy or consumerism is based on the basic principle of 'survival of the fittest' reflected through merit and qualification. The present young generation has now fallen prey to this system and they know that if they cannot excel in their academic career, they would just be thrown out of track by the system. This hard fact of life has made the present student-folk more careerists in nature. Thus, the talented and intellectual students who used to get involved in student politics earlier, are now not in a position to take the risk of spending their valuable time by involving themselves in the 'student politics' which, they feel, is enough to spoil their future career. As such, there is now no place for ideology in the life of the students. There is only one aim in life and that is to earn money and to secure one's own life (ibid.).

Besides, disintegration of joint family and emergence of unit family is another important social aspect of liberalisation and globalisation which is today highly responsible for restricting the number of children in each family. Study reveals that earlier the number of children in each family was higher than that of today. During those days, parents and guardians were, to a large extent, casual in their treatment towards their children and there was not that urge from the part of the guardians to see all their children equally established. In the employment market, choice was mostly open for the candidates themselves. They were, to a large extent, given freedom to lead their own way of life as the world was less competitive than that of today. Complexities of life were, to a great extent, lesser than what are today and people at large, had the instinct to remain satisfied with normal earnings. Thus,

it did not matter much to the guardians and parents if one of their children preferred to join student politics or get them involved in some creative activities of their own choice. But now-a-days, the competitive world has transformed the area of thinking of the guardians and parents. They cannot take the risk of allowing their children to join the student politics or to be involved in some other areas that carries the risk of spoiling their career. Thus, there remains very remote chance for a large section of the students to get involved in any movement whatever be the issue. The same crisis is found in the case of leadership also. If the quality students at large are not interested in getting involved in any movement, there is very less possibility to emerge good student leaders also.

Further, studies also reveal that the issues against which the students used to raise their voice of protest in 60s, 70s and 80s were somehow related to the 'crisis of existence' for the people of Barak Valley which were reflected in the movement for the cause of linguistic identity of the Bengalis of the State and for the improvement of academic as well as the socio-economic condition of the region. But the present scenario is mostly changed. Most of the present generation students, who are in the rat-race for building their own career, are not found in a mood to take the on-going 'crisis of existence' seriously. Rather, a peculiar tendency has been developed among them that even if there is any crisis in society, they do not feel it their concern, let others fight for it. Interactions with some of the present-day brilliant students in this respect reveal that in the event of any such crisis they are not going to be affected because ultimately they won't settle here. They would settle somewhere else, may be in other states or may be abroad also. In fact, they do not seem to have the time even to think about all those 'silly' things.

So far as the organisations, that spearheaded different movements in the past are concerned, it is observed that some of them have been non-existent with the passage of time, while some of those like ACKHSA, SFI, ABVP etc. though are alive, their activities have lost the earlier momentum due to the factors like lack of proper leadership, ideological crisis, indifferent attitude of the youths towards getting deeply involved in student politics for fear of losing valuable academic years, careerist mentality of the student members, impact of market economy and globalisation, etc.

Thus, it can be said that student activism has subsided to a great extent in the context of the era of LPG. However, the discussion can be wound up with the optimistic view that though the policy of LPG has made the life more competitive, yet it also provides for the opportunity for the merit, quality and creativity. If one has the real quality of creativity, leadership and management, he can commercialise his quality and can generate higher productivity, better marketing and can earn more profit. Thus, the new era of liberalisation has replaced the culture of social service with that of consumerism which compels the young generation to nourish their potentialities not for social service but for earning more and more money.

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